

# SPIRITUAL REBIRTH

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In this series of talks, we come tonight to the stage for which Bhante has given us the term spiritual rebirth, and which he associates, primarily, with visualisation practice. In our movement particularly there are so many meditation practices. Potentially, the whole of Buddhist practice is available. So with all this choice, what becomes important is that we understand, in essence, *what it is we are trying to do*. If we understand this essence, all practice really boils down to one practice - the practice of realisation. But if we don't have this essence, we will just be lost in the supermarket of endless choices.

We need to recall our spiritual purpose as strongly and as continuously as we possibly can. This is the essential practice which holds together the whole system of our practice. Progressing through Bhante's stages, we first integrate our self, and secondly create an emotionally positive self. Thirdly we see right through this concept of self - we see the illusory world we've been creating all this time *around* that illusory idea. And what our fourth stage is about is letting this realisation of non-self right into our lives so that 'we' no longer get in the way.

In the past I've given a number of talks just on visualisation, but I think tonight I need to range a bit more widely than that. I'd also like to make a disclaimer and say that whatever I say will be quite exploratory. We are talking about more advanced stages of spiritual experience. It seems to me that the waters are not well charted and can never be described or understood easily.

Spiritual rebirth must first be distinguished from ordinary rebirth. We are all subject to unpredictable changes which just go on, on and on forever. It's the familiar world of impermanence, change, and endless varieties of suffering. That is the familiar - the ordinary - kind of rebirth. *Spiritual* rebirth is when we start seeing outside all this karmically conditioned change. We poke our heads through the shell of ignorance, we actually see the boundless spaces of nirvana, and we even start stepping out into those spaces.

There is no real difference between spiritual death and spiritual rebirth. There's just a back and a front end. Chittapala's booklet picturesquely describes spiritual death and spiritual rebirth as going hand in hand, inseparable, like a pair of lovers. On the one hand, spiritual death is the essential experience that makes spiritual rebirth happen; on the other, spiritual rebirth is what makes sense of the experience of spiritual death.

I feel it's very important that we *use* this idea of spiritual rebirth. I don't know why, but it seems to me that in our presentations of vipasyana we've tended to place the stress on spiritual death. The term itself is accurate enough, but our associations with the word death can be... let's say, a little discouraging. When we teach the Dharma, we tend to find ourselves explaining that what's at the end of this long demanding spiritual journey is spiritual death. The impression of death rather sticks in one's mind.

We are probably all familiar with Bhante's words on this: "What is the next step... what is the next step...? The next step is *death!* The happy, healthy individual which you are now... must *die!*" When I was in my twenties, this radical kind of talk greatly appealed to me. I too used to give talks in this vein, and impressed my listeners with devilish, Bhantoid chuckles. But I was really just showing my ignorance. It was not even a proper reflection of Bhante's teaching, because he used also to speak in terms of spiritual rebirth. I just didn't understand the notion of spiritual rebirth, so I couldn't include it in my picture of Buddhist liberation.

And since what stuck in my mind was death, and since death is something one fears, I tended to see *vipashyana* as something to be afraid of. This made it rather unlikely that I would try very seriously to develop any *vipashyana*.

It seems reasonable for us to be afraid of actual death, though from the perspective of Dharma, fear is actually a quite unreasonable and counterproductive response to the positive opportunity that the dying process offers. But I don't think that is all that prevents our realising spiritual death. Something that also puts us off is a kind of fear of the life on the other side. We can imagine it to be a no-fun place: dull, worthy, cooped up without outlet for our colourful passions and interests. I think that's sometimes how we come to see spiritual transformation. Maybe some of this feeling is natural enough, considering how passionate and how interested we are in so many things. But as an attitude to spiritual transformation it is not reasonable or useful.

It's worth looking more deeply at the relationship between our passions and the dharma. As most of you know I have recently been on a long solitary retreat, and during all the months that I spent in my little hut, I was made very aware of my interests and passions. I was made very aware of my samskaras. Samskaras like greed, hatred and delusion - of course - but those are very general labels. In a situation like that one's mind can become very fresh and ready to learn, and we may uncover unseen threads of interest, and certain obsessions that we'd not noticed.

The day I left my retreat I got into my car and I drove from Tipi Valley in south-west Wales to Tunbridge Wells, which is just south of London. It's quite a long drive, and I took it fairly slowly as you can imagine, since it'd been eighteen months since I'd driven - or even walked for that matter - on any kind of road, let alone a motorway. So I made several stops at roadside cafes. It was a hot sunny day, and I found myself standing by my car, drinking tea out of my big plastic bowl, and gazing wide-eyed at all the people and the strange ways they were behaving. Especially I remember watching maybe a dozen policemen and women, all joshing around with each other and tucking into a lunch of baguettes and sandwiches. I was touched by seeing them somehow. I was fascinated, in fact; they completely drew my interest.

They were so incredibly unhealthy looking, so pasty faced and ugly. Their physical movements were so jarring - they jerked their ungainly bodies along as though they were in plaster. At the same time, you could see they were basically good people. I always feel a bit sad about police because they are hated and distrusted, and sometimes no doubt that's for a reason. What touched me was that a lot of them must originally have joined up for altruistic motives, but I wonder how much of that lasts. It must be a difficult life.

As these thoughts floated around in my mind, I became aware of myself standing there. What an oddball I must look, with my plastic bowl of tea, my unshaven face, and my soiled clothes. I had holes in my trousers. I'm a bit dirty, I thought. (I'd just seen myself in the mirror in the gents'.) I looked down at my hands... there was dirt under my fingernails. Then I realised 'no - that's *not* dirt. It's the earth, it's the earth' and I started weeping. It was the thought of the elements, who had been like close friends to me. Tears came up at the memory of where I'd been for so long, of all the depth I'd been in touch with, and at the contrast with this life out here which was so completely out of harmony with that.

Now I like to think that I wouldn't confuse some vague emotional experience with insight into dharma. But clearly this was *some* kind of reminder about an important dimension of things. I really had felt that the elements had somehow been my friends - the idea means something very tangible to me. Anyway, whatever its significance, this little incident seems to illustrate how our interest, our passion if you like, is always there; it is always strong, and it is that which we channel and experience more deeply through our Buddhist practice.

When we look at Bhante's 'system', we see two great stages. The first is preliminary to transcendental insight, the second comes out of insight. Integration and positive emotion are necessary as a foundation. After the illumination of spiritual death, there is a fundamental change, and life is never as it was before. This what Bhante calls spiritual rebirth, or in Yogachara terms we have the paths of vision, transformation, and no more learning or completion. Clearly, that's where we all need to go. We all need to get on to those pathways of further human development. I think it is what we really want. I think our passion, our deepest longings, have more to do with *that* than with the substitutes we generally pursue. The problem is that we're so often out of touch with what we really want.

Spiritual death is when we have a real glimpse of nondual reality. We see, even if it is just for a moment, the insubstantiality and the vastness of everything. We see for a moment at least, that we know nothing at all about what is happening. That all our ideas are just empty. That even what we think is our actual experience is really just ideas, assumptions and concepts that we superimpose on ... on... an indescribable reality.

Whatever we reflect upon in a sunyata like way, it all leads to the same realisation. We might look at the elements and see that even basic elemental experiences like earth and water do not really exist like that, they are just experiences which cannot fully be described. Any experience includes a subject that we assume is real, that we assume has some real substance - but when we look, it has no substance at all. Any experience includes an object that we assume is some kind of thing - some form - but if we actually try to find it, the form is empty. There is no actual thing. So all the little judgements and conclusions and feelings and emotions that take place in between this empty subject and this empty object - they have no substantial meaning, because they are based on a fundamental mistake. So when we see emptiness, both subject and object just drop away and there is just peace, and space, and depth of understanding.

Spiritual death may be frightening, it may be blissful, it may be awe-inspiring, whatever - it may be anything - but the main thing is that once it happens, there is a profound change. This isn't easy to understand unless you have actually had some of this experience. Because even though what has changed is so fundamental, it is something subtle. It's not as though there's something new - it's that something has been revealed as *not being there*. So nothing changes, in a way. Everything in your world carries on pretty much as normal. It's simply that you've seen, for a moment, that it is insubstantial and *not* anything. You just know that it's not really there in the way that you still, most of the time, assume that it is. This is subtle, so that if you haven't had this experience, all this kind of talk can sound abstract. But on the contrary, it is very much a direct experience, and it now becomes the centre of your mandala. This centre is what is radically different. You are guided by it, even though you don't understand it. You are guided by the dharma, because you have seen the dharma. And this

guidance leads you on a new path, the path of transformation. Some of your life, at least, now takes place there, on this path of spiritual rebirth. In Bhante's 'system' it's called the *stage* of spiritual rebirth, but it is also a path. It is a life, a way of life. It is a life in which we are much more influenced by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

It is this experience that gives meaning and confidence to our Buddhist life. It is something we all have a spark of - it's a case of using that spark to light a fire. It is a case of really wanting to look and to try to see what is really happening. We need to apply that perspective to our everyday experience, so that it can work its magic. It's a question of remembering the *vision* that nothing substantially exists, saying constantly: 'Now look, Kamalashila: that applies to *this* situation as well', and letting ourselves feel it more deeply.

I try to do this as much as I can. I dedicated my whole retreat to Prajnaparamita, the Perfection of Wisdom. And doing that, I noticed that pretty much all the time my mind is obsessed with some idea or other so that I cannot fully relax, cannot fully experience reality as it is. There is always some nub, some centre, some sticking point - and I stop short there. It'll be some conclusion I come to, like for example 'I'm cold' or 'I'm tired.' Or else there'll be something I want - maybe something quite complex. And that will dominate my mood. But if I take the time to be mindful and relax into awareness of this, then I see that somewhere I'm sticking to some assumption or desire that is central to every other thought. I realise I am not even aware of this centre, let alone applying the realisation of emptiness to it. That's why it's a sticking point. But if I can see this central idea, I can remember that it doesn't exist - I mean, that it doesn't exist *as such*. Nothing exists as such. Everything is always a mixture of perceptions which themselves are empty, too. To say 'I'm cold' is always a distortion of the actual complex reality, in which there is no substantial me to be 'cold.' Of course *something* is going on, but it is certainly not a *thing* that is going on - the reality is far more mysterious and far more interesting.

We come to these conclusions, these full-stops, about reality, under the influence of craving and hatred, and the mechanisms we have built up to protect our craving and our hatred. We are ruled by them. So to notice is to begin to undo them, to undo the habitual view that they are concrete things. We can see these sticking points especially when we have strong negative emotions - say of fear or panic or disgust.

Disgust is quite a good example. One thing that happened to me on my retreat was falling into my toilet. My toilet was just a trench dug in the ground, and at the time of this incident it had been happily fulfilling its function for about nine months. One day it was a bit wet on the plank, my foot slipped - and in I went, up to my knees.

You should have heard me shout. It was something I deeply did not want to happen. I did not want my clothing, my shoes, my socks, to become covered with the worst kind of poo you can imagine. You know, I never want that to happen. It is a feeling which we all share, I am sure, and for some minutes I found myself flipping through an interesting range of emotions. I first tried to deny that it had happened at all - I just could not believe what had just happened. I tried to laugh it off, to pretend that I was a great yogi and it didn't matter and I didn't really mind. For a while I felt hurt and depressed at how foolish I felt, and how unfair it all seemed.

After a while I began to notice how none of these emotions was getting to the real spot. They didn't do justice to the situation. It was absurd to feel hurt, as though I had no power to act. It was also absurd to deny anything had happened... but actually, what *had* happened? I wasn't looking at that. Yes, it was funny, but not because I didn't mind. I did mind. But *why* did I mind? What *was* it I actually minded? I wasn't looking at that.

Eventually I saw that my basic feeling was simply that this hadn't been what I wanted. But what *was* it actually that I did not want?

Well, you might say, simply, that I didn't want to be covered in excrement. But that didn't seem really enough... because *why* not?

Of course, I had *time* to go into such crazy questions. I wasn't expecting to be seeing other human beings for another whole year, so I could sit there in my pit for days, if I wanted, asking this. And the answers are not really so obvious, if you are prepared really to address them. What is it about excrement that makes us resist having contact? The sight, the idea of it? If you say, 'No, Kamalashila, it's the smell', I say, OK, what is it *about* the smell?

Our typical response to such analysis is to throw up our hands and say 'Enough, already - this is way over the top'. But we say that because what we *really* want is to change the subject. But the notion of 'I' who cannot stand it and wants to change the subject, is just that - a notion. It does not really exist. It really does not. It can clearly be seen not to exist. Shouldn't this fact change the situation rather radically?

You may think that I have chosen rather an extreme example to illustrate how to apply the perfection of wisdom. But extreme moments happen - worse ones happen, actually. In fact wherever there is a situation that we find extreme, our ego will step in - our passions will step in - and they'll say 'OK, hold it right there, I'm taking over!'

and they'll take complete control of our mandala, so that we lose interest in awareness of reality, until the crisis is over.

Our ego, our passionate involvement in self-serving interests, is like a controlling, over-protective mother that wants to conceal the real world from the child. The perfection of wisdom is like the happy mother that wants to introduce the child to the real world. And in that way, all moments are like our mothers - of either one or the other sort. Every moment - this side of spiritual illumination - is dominated by our clinging to an illusion of our self, and protecting it. That clinging is right at the centre of everything. Spiritual death exposes the clinging. Then, with spiritual rebirth, comes an increase in the times when we are able to relax clinging, because we have seen how this basic illusion is what causes all our suffering.

We've started to see that, at least. That so many things, so many of the things we get upset about, really don't matter. In my example just now, for example, in a sense it really didn't matter that I was covered in shit. From the point of view of dharma, it doesn't really matter even if we're dying. Doesn't really matter at all. Embarrassing or disgusting situations, the life and death situations we are all afraid of, are all just samsara. Things like that are going to keep happening forever. They don't really matter, not from a dharma point of view. The only thing that really does matter is the going for Refuge. All the reactions that we get caught up in - they just don't really matter. Samsara can get better and it can get worse, like your investments. But there can be no real satisfaction even when we're winning.

If we're going for refuge at the time, the more extreme situations can help us to see through samsara. When I fell into my toilet I couldn't ignore it, or pretend it wasn't happening. I had to try to see what I was actually doing. And what I was actually doing was based on a very strong, outraged, sense of self. I saw that so clearly, and through seeing that, I could let it go and see how our feelings that 'that is dirty' and 'this is clean' are just our concepts. Our feelings that this is pleasant and that is disgusting are so strong and immediate that we don't notice the underlying wrong idea that there is a *real* 'clean', a *real* 'dirty', a real 'pleasant', and a real 'disgusting'. Really things just don't exist like that, they never have. The world does not consist of these things.

As Purna pointed out so eloquently the other night, the revelation that everything is empty introduces the blue sky in our visualisation meditation. To the degree that we can cultivate a genuine experience of emptiness, we can fully practice the sadhana. The visualisation sadhana rehearses again and again how that realisation extends into our lives, so to the degree we have the realisation, it will actually affect our lives and we will be spiritually regenerated.

We don't have to do visualisation to achieve that. We can simply continue to meditate on emptiness - perhaps using the six element practice - applying the awareness to everything we do. This can work just as well as visualisation; it is the same kind of work really.

What visualisation meditation does is to connect with our imagination of the world. It works rather like breath awareness in the *anapanasati*. Giving attention to a process connects us to that process. So when we start visualisation, we notice how all the time we're looking at things. Seeing another person, as I have seen hundreds of thousands of people over the years, I now start to see that what is going on is really quite mysterious. Especially if I am also reflecting on insubstantiality: there's no one here doing this... so what IS happening then? How mysterious it all is. The way our entire experience rests upon our perception. That everything is awareness; that there isn't anything else, nothing outside awareness, that even our sense of being 'someone' takes place in awareness. How amazing, yet how very very simple, this is.

So that's one aspect of visualisation sadhana - that link into the ultimate view of dharma - right into the dharmakaya. This aspect is developed further in the pure awareness practice, in which we learn to sit and simply appreciate the true nature of awareness. It's a shame there's no time to go into this kind of practice in detail, but it really needs at least one whole talk to itself, and I don't want to give it a superficial treatment. All I feel I can say tonight is that pure awareness practice seems, to me, to belong in particular to the stage of spiritual rebirth because the essential practice, if one could do it, is simply to sit in pure awareness, that is awareness of the nature of awareness, that is awareness of the unrestricted, empty nature of things. That nature of things is there all the time, indeed there isn't anything else going on - so if we can learn to see it, by undergoing spiritual death in the fires of sunyata, we will eventually find a way to rest in that pure awareness. Most of the time, to say the least, we can't do the practice at that level, but we can at least learn to understand what we are trying to do and gain confidence in simply experiencing the mind as best we can. Simply being mindful and aware, with little or no awareness of the real nature of the mind. Perhaps we could call this the impure awareness practice.

Anyway, that's a superficial treatment of the awareness practice. At each level of Bhante's system there is the opportunity simply to sit in awareness, simply to absorb what has happened, and I think this way of meditating is extremely important. Meditation is not just about making an effort, it is also about awareness, and sometimes it is very helpful just to stop doing anything. Sometimes when you stop you also see. So there's a bit of a process

there - effort, stopping, seeing; effort, stopping, seeing. Anyway, that's a superficial treatment of the awareness practice.

But another aspect of visualisation has been interesting me over the last couple of years, and that's the link into the sambhogakaya. There's an overall context, an imaginal world that all the sadhanas connect in with, a world that reflects our existential situation. That is that we are all, actually, in the cremation ground. Each of us is literally surrounded by the multitudes of beings in the six realms of samsara. We are also reminded that we are practitioners of the Mahayana. Samsara is displayed as something that needs to be transcended, not only for our own sake, but for the sake of the whole of existence.

That sounds impossibly heroic... until we remember that we haven't just placed ourselves in relationship with all living beings. We have also placed ourselves in relation to all the Buddhas. And this resolves the whole problem. It is possible to *become* a Buddha; it is therefore possible to resolve the issue of samsara.

So we sit in the centre of a double mandala - we're in the centre of endless samsara, and we have the influences of all our teachers, all the Buddhas, continually focused upon us. I suspect we don't appreciate this second mandala so much. We appreciate very well indeed that we are surrounded by the forces of samsara, but we don't find it so easy to appreciate the forces of Enlightenment which also surround us.

I think this is a crucial issue in relation to sadhana. Where are the Buddhas? Even if your sadhana does not involve imagining the form of a Buddha, it seems to me that there must come a stage, sooner or later, in the life of any committed Buddhist, when a doubt arises. 'If so many men and women have progressed along the path and gained Enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, where are they all now? If they really wanted so much to benefit all beings, and that aspiration was really fulfilled, where is that benefit now? What form does it take? How can I get some of it?

It seems to me that if we ourselves are ever going to become real, to any degree at all, we have to engage - somehow - with the nature of reality, with its emptiness, with its complete insubstantiality and complete timelessness, its complete transcendence of any idea we might have about it. And if I accept that reality is as extraordinary as that, well, I might as well be open to the possibility that the Buddhas are not just abstract potentialities, but present in some more magical way - even though I cannot expect to understand, with my ordinary mind, how that is.

To me it makes a certain sense that Buddhas exercise compassion after their parinirvana, even though my logic is a little shaky. And to me it makes complete sense that I have a connection with particular Buddhas, in particular with Sakyamuni, since I have actually heard his teaching. This issue of the connections we make, helps me make more sense of that double mandala.

The present moment in which we sit isn't just a piece of time - time is only our idea that we put onto the present moment. The present moment, you could say, is the point where influences of every kind come together, and we think of this momentary coming together as 'me'. There isn't really anything else *but* influences going on... there's this shifting web of connections with others and the shifting influences of those back connections upon whatever we are.

Just consider all the connections with others that you have made over your life so far. However fleeting they were. First, all those thousands of people you have actually met. Then all the many thousands that you have heard about or read about. And then all the many, many thousands - millions perhaps - that you have simply seen for a moment in a crowd. Now all these events, however fleeting they were, all actually happened. They are historic facts which cannot be undone. And they happened to 'you' - not, in quite the same way, to anyone else. Each one has made some kind of impression. If you want, you can pick just one out, and draw out with it a whole world of memories. You place your finger just for an instant on the surface of the ocean, and when you withdraw it, you draw up from the depths an enormous net. All the events of your life are connected. Each event has added its own unique colouring to this 'thing' that we call 'our life', though we have no idea what it really is.

So this is also why we are in the centre of the cremation ground. Of course, it's the basic Buddhist viewpoint: sitting in the midst of samsara, trying to put into practice what the Buddhas are teaching. It is also the viewpoint of sadhana meditation. A visualisation sadhana uses imagery to bring to life the reality view of dharma. This is the case, for example, in the Chöd practice. In the Chöd, this isn't just implicit, we are explicitly in the cremation ground. All around we see the vicious, self-destructive aspect of vast samsara. That everything that is born must inevitably pass into the hands of death. That there is no real satisfaction to be had anywhere, that no one has ever experienced complete happiness.

And recollecting that that is where we must always sit establishes a kind of integration. It's an integration at quite a high level; it's both a horizontal and a vertical integration. Horizontally we integrate with samsara; vertically, we integrate with our potential nirvana. Bhante's 'system' of meditation is a spiral path, and here, in

the sadhana practice, our integration is not only something that happens within our ordinary mind. It's not just our ordinary faculty of attention coming together, not even coming together in dhyana. Here we integrate with our realisation: whatever, over the years, we have realised of the dharma. Our conviction that samsara is a vicious circle; our confidence that we really do aspire to nirvana.

Sadhana, perhaps we can say, is practice that brings together all the elements which Bhante has systematised into one single body. It is, you can say, simply 'our practice.' But it takes place at *this* level of commitment, that of both the effective and the real going for Refuge. However out of touch we get from the dharma, however much an Order member thinks he or she has lost it, the commitment is still there in their heart, because somewhere, still, their commitment remains effective. They can tell it's there, because when they've lost it they really *feel* the loss, they feel it strongly; and in their heart of hearts, what they want more than anything else in the world is to be back in touch with that awareness. That feeling in the heart never really goes away. And that feeling we all have reflects the degree to which we have actually realised the dharma. It is this realisation that defines us as Order members; indeed, this is what defines any authentic spiritual practitioner in any tradition.

If the heart is involved like this, in this Bodhicitta-like way, at that point we are getting in touch, again on a higher level, with Bhante's second level of practice, that of positive emotion. When we really become aware that all around us are the denizens of the six realms, who are suffering, we spontaneously feel metta and compassion for them.

It's at the next stage that the real magic starts to happen. When on the basis of seeing, even just for a moment, that our very existence is totally insubstantial, just an infinite network of influences shared with others and inseparable from others - then, there is that first moment of real magic. That precious notion of *existence* that has always been so central to our sense of validity and confidence, into which we have invested so many powerful emotions - we see it was actually never like that at all. Not at all! It never was like *that*, not even for a moment! At this point, we might just laugh out loud and embarrass everyone! It is incredible that we made such a mistake! No, it is something indescribable, something magical, something far more interesting and far more enjoyable. In that moment when we see the magical display, the vast play of reality, as it really is - it's then that the old self ceases, and something new comes into being. The snake sheds its old worn out skin and emerges as a bright shiny new beast. This is spiritual death, as Bhante calls it; this is also our spiritual renaissance, or at least, a bit of it. There are levels and levels of this process, boundlessly, no limit.

In the Chöd practice you express this by making an offering of the worn out skin. That is, of your old body. You imagine yourself as having died and that you are already shiny and new, spiritually reborn. You are now in a magnificent dakini form, and in front of you is the corpse of your old body, looking rather grey and crumpled and forlorn, as bodies do. So you think - well, don't just stare at it - do something with it. What is this thing anyway - essentially? It's my energy. It's my activity. And not just in the past: the body also represents all my future existences, in which I aspire to be a Bodhisattva. My body is willingly dedicated to others. So the obvious thing to do, in this essential moment, is to express this aspiration to the whole world.

So we make our offering. We think, may I be nourishment for all beings. The nourishment that we can offer is obviously our example and what we can do. But we know there is a danger of taking all this very literally, and that we really cannot conceive the vast scope of what we are really doing. We don't want our ignorance to limit what we offer. So we make it unlimited - we say well, I'll include myself as literal food if that is what will help anyone. Because we don't know the reality there, either. So we say, all right, let the animals eat the flesh and suck the bones. It'd be good for them, and it's good for me too, really, spiritually - really, it's a win-win.

And for the ghosts, let my energy become nectar satisfying their unwholesome desires in a wholesome way. For the denizens of hell, may I relieve their sufferings so that their minds can quickly turn to the dharma. For the devas, may my example communicate the limitation even of heavenly happiness. May it cool the speedy obsessions of the asuras. And may my example benefit, somehow, the complex needs of this troubled human race.

So it's in this kind of spirit that we offer our body. It isn't some kind of masochistic, self-destructive, suicidal thing. It is a joyful thing. We don't think, 'Oh my god now I'm cutting off my LEG, this is my arm, my bones... and now... I'm... decapitating myself.' No, none of this was ever mine, so the spirit of the offering can be happy and relaxed, it's more like preparing a meal, or decorating a shrine with flowers. So we cut it all up nicely, and arrange it - like a salad - so that it's quite obvious that we are, in fact, offering it up (and not secretly hoping that it won't be noticed).

Of course we are so attached to samsara that we're likely to resist even giving away a dead corpse. But the effect, we'll find, is quite delightfully liberating. The Chöd offering is like a prayer for the benefit of all beings. It is incredibly meaningful. If we are in touch with the meaning of the sadhana, we shall be in touch with the reality of every life situation. In touch with the fact that we are quite literally always surrounded by all beings, that they really are all suffering from their craving for the wrong kind of nourishment, that the Buddhas have transcended this suffering, and that all the Buddhas are right here helping us all the time with their example. If we are in touch with this vast reality, then the offering of our life and future lives will be deeply meaningful, and

we will have no difficulty making our offering with the whole of our hearts. In our heart, it is what we have always wanted to do.

'My life' is of course a mega concept, powerfully coloured by our habitual, ego-based concerns. But there is a second kind of offering in the Chöd. This is our offering to the Buddhas infinitely ranged in the sky above. The Buddhas don't actually need anything, so this is a more subtle offering. It's therefore more powerful, and even more important as an offering. This offering, essentially, is our going for Refuge. And it has its own very special effect on us, both now and in our future. By going for Refuge *in relation to* the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, by offering our Bodhisattva aspiration, we feel they encourage us in our practice.

We can't do without the encouragement of those we look up to, we can't live without it. If our parents don't encourage us when we're young, we will lack confidence and live stunted lives. We really need their support and encouragement, and it's the same of course with our dharma teachers, with our kalyanamitratas, with anyone we learn from. Without encouragement from those we look up to, we cannot very well do what we aspire to do. It doesn't matter if we don't get any encouragement from those we *don't* look up to. We don't care two hoots about that. But the blessing of the Buddhas, and the encouragement of our teachers, makes a tremendous difference to our ability to put their advice into practice. This is why it is important to practice in relation to the Buddhas. This may well be part of the reason why someone might want to practice visualisation meditation, though you can get this same feeling of encouragement and authenticity simply by recalling that you are part of the living dharma tradition.

The living tradition is an emphasis at this stage of spiritual rebirth. Whether it's the Chöd practitioner visualising the line of teachers above - or the sadhana practitioner imagining Mañjughosa in front of him - or the anapanasati practitioner simply feeling the link with tradition - the practice is done, somehow, in relation to the Buddhas. How we do it depends on how we see the Buddhas, but they are inevitably involved in our development. We can't really ignore them. Development in dharma, as we know, isn't just an increase in good qualities, but an increase in Buddha qualities. It's an increase in awareness of sunyata, of the unrestricted, unbounded, unlimited nature of all things.

It's important for our spiritual renaissance that we accept that Buddhists live in relation to Buddhas. Also we accept that the relationship is quite crucial. It is as fundamental and as basic as that of a parent to a child. If father and mother hadn't come together, we simply wouldn't exist. If Buddhas hadn't gained Enlightenment, none of our Buddhism would exist. It is the same with our teacher. We really are here because of them. And since we *are* here, since we have put ourselves in this interesting position, then our visualisation of the Buddhas being 'up there' in the boundless sky is a true reflection of our essential mind.

What I wanted to do in using the Chöd as a model for sadhana as a whole was to try and illustrate how sadhana is a kind of puja, how puja itself is a model for the whole spiritual life. I believe this model, which we already know very well, could be more useful than we may think. It seems to me that Bhante's 'system' of meditation follows this model: integration, positive emotion, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth are essentially the same stages as we have in the puja. In the Buddhist path, the stages turn up in different ways, and at different levels, but the sequence always seems to be the same.

To be willing to honour and decorate what we love; to make a conscious commitment to full Enlightenment; to seek out and acknowledge our evil and our imperfection; to appreciate all the goodness and extraordinary potential that there is in the world; to wish to receive dharma teaching, with the intention of benefiting others - these things in particular are what set us up for realisation.

If what we really want is to get something just for ourselves; if we hold reservations about giving; if we aren't ready to make a commitment, if we don't want to be open about how we really are, if we take no delight in goodness, and if we aren't prepared to ask for teaching - then there's no possibility that anything can be received, there can be no vision of emptiness, no realisation, no compassion.

It is these attitudes that make realisation possible. These virtues that can help us to do a very difficult thing - to actually practice the dharma. This is the real art, the real discipline, we need to cultivate. To actually practice is so difficult. I don't think this is just me. To break through from going through the motions to doing actual practise is so hard. It's so hard to get through our fear of diving into real practice. Above all, it's very hard to see through our self-view. For these reasons, real practice occupies a tiny percentage of our time. The gravitational pull of samsara is so strong and our discipline is so weak.

Discipline is the art. It isn't just a matter of making an effort. It's something more intelligent, and more emotional. We can all psyche ourselves up now and again, but often we just get a reaction. We need to find a way to a sustainable practice whose aim is real liberation rather than just being in a good state. To do that we need to nourish these sadhana qualities: generosity, commitment, self-disclosure, appreciation, receptivity. These virtues themselves require our appreciation, we need again and again to recall their crucial value for us and for all beings.

It is a serious matter. When we neglect these things, when we do not really practice, others do not get the

benefit, and they suffer to that extent. We get no benefit either, and we also feel that - we suffer too.

These qualities are not different to the precepts. They are our training ground in the art of getting ourselves really to practice. Real practice is what make us ready to receive the real teaching. Nor are the precepts any different from our sadhana. It's all the same really. If we really do it, it's all essentially the same practice, all the same purification of self and purification of the world we have created.

I find it helpful when I do my practice to rehearse all these virtues. I first clear my meditation space - that's part of my offering, tidying up. Tidying up becomes a prayer for integration. Offerings encourage positive emotion. Then I chant the refuges and precepts, and when I do this on my own I'm more aware of the meaning. I'm able to consider how I'm practising each precept, and it's a preparation for confession. Then before chanting the confession and the rejoicing in merits, and before asking for the teaching, I recite, in English, just the three mind precepts. I like the way the three mind precepts summarise everything in one concise teaching that points directly into the purpose of the meditation.

So let me end my talk by briefly explaining how these mind precepts accomplish the purpose of our sadhana and the whole system of meditation.

*Abandoning covetousness for tranquillity, I purify my mind.*

This is Bhante's stage of Integration. What we are doing when we do the mindfulness of breathing is tranquillising the mind and relaxing our craving, our tendency to fasten on to thoughts, our lust for thinking and planning. Our lust for doing things. All this is covetousness. Living in the so called real world involves a great deal of covetousness. We feel we have to do things all the time, fill our time... get something out of everything... I'm not talking about someone else here, it applies to pretty much everyone I know in the Order. Seeing this covetousness, and starting at least to want to let it go - to give it away, give it up, and go for refuge to something better - this is the stage of integration.

Then,

*Changing hatred into compassion, I purify my mind.*

Or I would purify it if I could... that's my desire. I confess that I do not. Yet I wish to appreciate what I still do not appreciate. If only I could relax my tendency to ignore, sideline, and disrespect. My thoughtless deprecations and criticisms... here, it's the subtle hatred and covetousness that is the problem. Gross hatred and covetousness we can't easily ignore. But we easily allow subtle hatred and craving, which builds up and comes out later. So this is Bhante's second level, that of positive emotion. It's melting with compassion even the subtlest unease that we might have with others, and also our self-unease. First impressing on ourselves what existence is like for people. Secondly remembering that people don't really exist in the way they think they do - seeing the unavoidable tension in the illusion we are all so worked up about. Relaxing any dislike, distaste, disgust because somewhere it must be wrong. The pain we're feeling must be about something else... so looking deeper, relaxing our aversion, trying to understand what is really going on. In this way, we purify our minds.

And finally,

*Transforming ignorance into wisdom, I purify my mind.*

If we can enter into this precept, we can traverse the entire path in one single moment, and it won't even be a moment that anyone experiences. Our entry into that non-moment will be our spiritual death and the start of our real spiritual life.