

Mahasattva Fu Expounds the Scripture

By Padmavajra

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Talk given at Padmaloka Retreat Centre, 2004

01 A first sesshin; Sangharakshita and Zen; Mr. Chen

Thank you very much, Padmadaka. Good morning to you all. Good to see a nice gathering in the shrine room. Now, I have to admit that when I was first getting into Buddhism, getting into the Dharma, I have to say I didn't find Zen at all attractive. Very early on in my involvement, so when I was about 17, one of the first retreats I went on was a day retreat – what was called a *sesshin*. This is a Japanese word, I think which means something like “searching the heart.” This was a day of silent meditation and silent walking in the shrine room. Never leaving the shrine room except to answer the calls of nature. Held in a house in Brighton, where I was first going along to things. And the teacher was a Japanese Zen monk who regarded himself as a Zen master. In fact, he regarded himself as a Buddha. He was quite up front about that – he was enlightened. And he sat in full lotus, in a purple robe, in front of the shrine – which seemed a bit odd to me - with his shaved head. Looking very severe, sitting very erect, like a mountain. Very wonderful posture, very powerful. And there was no instruction at all. We just had to sit, and the master would occasionally say, from time to time, “No need to do anything.” We just had to sit, apparently, and for me that meant sitting in a lot of discomfort, trying to sit in full lotus. There was no instruction in posture or anything like that. And at lunchtime we had a formal lunch, sitting cross-legged in the shrine room. And unfortunately, the people who were running the weekend had not really thought about the lunch perhaps as much as they could have, because there were a lot of crisps and celery. [Laughter] And the room was made of wood. And the friend I was with, we were young and foolish, we really started to get the giggles, because we were feeling a lot of tension. And as we crunched [loud crunch sound] into our celery and crisps, with people eating very mindfully, it was perhaps one of those Zen moments.

But, I couldn't relate to this retreat at all. It was too severe and too plain. Probably, in fact, just too subtle for me. And it really put me off. I was much more attracted to Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, which seemed to be very full and rich, something you could really engage with. And, well really, just simply Buddhism. The Dharma. The kind of non-demoninational ecumenical Buddhism, based very much on the teachings of the Buddha that I was learning from Sangharakshita and his disciples. I found that much more attractive, something I could really get to grips with, really engage with. In a way, it was quite ordinary and straightforward. There was clear instruction, you could do something, there was something to practice. There was a notion of growth and development, and of service of the Dharma and of Buddhism. Zen seemed to me like cold tea leaves and clever words. I did read, early on, Sangharakshita's book *The Essence Of Zen*, which I'd recommend actually, which shed some light on the subject. And I noticed in his lectures, his taped lectures which I used to listen to a lot, there were lots of references to Cha'an

and Zen, mainly in the form of stories, as well as teachings. Very vivid stories. And he tells them very well. One story in particular had a very big effect on me, “The Chess Game.” Well worth checking out “The Chess Game,” that’s a great Zen story. I won’t tell it again, because I’m sure most of you know it, but check out “The Chess Game.” Very good story. And it really made the point - about the necessity for concentration and loving kindness/compassion – very, very well.

I noted as well that Sangharakshita himself was obviously deeply inspired by the Zen tradition. He said that his first Buddhist texts, which he came across when he was sixteen, were *The Diamond Sutra*, an Indian Buddhist text which had a huge impact on Cha’an and Zen, and *The Sutra of Hui Neng*, the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, a hugely important Chinese work which gives the life and teachings of the great Hui Neng. When he read these at sixteen, when he read the *Diamond Sutra*, he realised that he was a Buddhist and had always been a Buddhist since the beginningless beginning – not his phrase, but that’s what he meant. And when he read the *Sutra of Hui Neng*, he said that he read it in a kind of ecstasy whenever he read it, just delighting in this text. It really is a very delightful and very profound text, the Sutra of Hui Neng, telling the story of how the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, came in contact with the Dharma and how he became a great teacher. Very naturally and spontaneously.

So, Sangharakshita obviously had this feeling for Zen, and part of it was when he was in India, up in Kalimpong - practicing and teaching and studying – he didn’t just study with Tibetan Lamas. He also had a teacher who taught him a lot about meditation and Buddhist philosophy who was a Chinese hermit named Mr. Chen, who lived in a tiny room above Kalimpong bazaar, spending most of his time, most hours of the day, meditating, just with a little break to give some lectures to Sangharakshita and a friend of his. Just two people at the lecture. And a little break to write books, twenty minutes a day. And he wrote quite a lot of books, doing twenty minutes a day. Mr. Chen’s book *Buddhist Meditation, Systematic and Practical*, is a fabulous survey, an unsurpassed survey, of Buddhist meditational practices and methods and disciplines throughout the whole of the Buddhist tradition. And there is indeed a chapter on Ch’an/Zen. And he communicated a lot of that to Sangharakshita, that teaching about the different kinds of Cha’an/Zen that I mentioned last night - Tathagata Ch’an, Patriarchal Ch’an, Offspring Ch’an – that comes from Mr. Chen, his teacher. There’s a deep feeling there in Sangharakshita for the Ch’an/Zen tradition.

02 A seminar, a squat in London, and Hakuin

The first seminar that I went on with Sangharakshita there was a reference to Zen which kind of aroused my interest. We were studying a very basic, very popular early Buddhist text called *The Mangala Sutta* or *Auspicious Signs*. In this sutta, the Buddha is asked, “What is luck? What is a lucky sign? What are the signs of someone who has luck, who has auspiciousness, who has a *mangala*?” *Mangala* just means “luck” or “blessing.” The Buddha goes through what the signs of a lucky person really are, and of course what he lays out is the spiritual life and spiritual qualities. And one of these, he says, is to dwell

in a pleasant place. That's an auspicious sign, that's a sign of luck. Sangharakshita started to talk about that as a place which is good and supportive for spiritual practice. That's a pleasant place to dwell.

Now, at that time, I was living in North London. And all of us in this particular group were living in North London in squats up in Archway with our first North London Center, which was an extremely rough area – very rat infested, and (there were) junkies and thieves and IRA and all the rest of it all over the place. We had to go there because we didn't have any money. We had to start somewhere, and we got the cheapest possible place we could. So we were in these kind of semi-legal squats. This was the era when Ken Livingstone was running Camden Council, so you know, you could kind of take over these places quite happily. It was an incredible area, actually, very lively. But it was very rough.

The Order member – I wasn't ordained then - who was kind of our spiritual friend or Kalyana Mitra, Lokamitra, he said in relation to this point how important it was to get away from London and away from the Center from time to time, to go into the country and just feel more at ease and more at peace. Sangharakshita just jumped in, just leapt in – which is quite a thing to do with somebody like Lokamitra, he's quite a forceful character, but Sangharakshita's more forceful – but he just jumped in and said, “Hmm... I've been reading Hakuin recently. I've been reading some letters of Hakuin,” (This is the great eighteenth-century Japanese Zen master, a great reviver of the Zen tradition in Japan) “and he says the best conditions for spiritual practice are when it's difficult. The best times for practice are when you're ill or when times are hard. When you're living in a rough and dirty place, where there's lots of noise, then you can really develop something. Then you can really do something.” So he went on and on about this in the seminar, which was a little bit irritating, I must admit, because my fantasy was to go off into the mountains and just meditate all the time. But he was really hammering the importance of practice in difficult circumstances. Then you really bring something forth. The spiritual life is not about getting away from things.

Later on, when I really looked into Hakuin myself a bit, I discovered two brilliant sayings, which kind of relate to one another. One of them is actually an incredible calligraphy he did, which says:

“Meditation in the midst of activity is a billion times superior to meditation in stillness.”

Reflect on that, discuss. And:

“The lotus born in the fire is superior to the lotus born from water.”

03 A review of 'The Blue Cliff Record'; Kung-an; commentaries; two poems on 'The Blue Cliff'

The kind of comment that Sangharakshita made in the seminar about Hakuin kind of started to change my attitude to the Zen tradition. I thought, “well this sounds interesting, this sounds well worth looking in to.” And sometime between 1976 and 1978 - it was after I was ordained, I’d only just been ordained - something else happened to change my attitude. In those days, we didn’t have the really fancy *Dharma Life* that is nicely produced and beautiful and all the rest of it. We had what we called the FWBO newsletter, that was our periodical, which used to get typed and printed very roughly. Bhante went through a period in this very humble journal of ours - which mostly included news of sales and sponsored walks and things like that, because that was the way we raised money – he went through a period of writing reviews for it, which were actually long articles. Fantastic reviews, some of his best writing, I think, was in some of these reviews. They are actually collected in a book now. And these were reviews that were sent to us on different Buddhist texts. Not just Buddhist texts, sometimes he’d do a review on D. H. Lawrence, for example, or something on Blake. Whatever took his fancy, but he was really into writing reviews. And sometime between 1976 and 1978 he wrote a review on some new books on Zen that had come out – a whole bundle of them – mostly by modern teachers. But most important of all in this review was Thomas and J. C. Cleary’s translation of the great Ch’an classic from the Tang Dynasty in China, *The Blue Cliff Record*. And Sangharakshita was obviously very inspired by this text when you looked at the review. And he said, when I was talking to him about it, he used it as a sort of touchstone to assess the other books he’d be reviewing – books by Rajneesh, Thomas Merton, and others – a kind of touchstone. He kind of compared them with a Ch’an/Zen classic. And they didn’t brush up too well, it has to be said.

The Blue Cliff Record is a collection of anecdotes, mostly describing the communication between a great Chinese Ch’an master and his disciple, or another master. And these anecdotes are quite short, and they’re often quite strange. Indeed very strange. They describe a rather esoteric communication between those who are deadly serious about Buddhist practice. These people are mostly monks – foot-going Ch’an travellers, called “patched-robe” monks, who would wander from place to place to do a kind of “Dharma battle” with the great masters of the day. Or they’d involve hermits or very serious laypeople, lay practitioners. As Sangharakshita pointed out in his review, the masters and disciples in this great classic for the most part are only interested in one thing. They’re only interested in “the great matter.” Awakening. Enlightenment. Nothing else. Most of the anecdotes are from the Tang Dynasty – the golden age of Ch’an, as it’s called – although there are some earlier anecdotes and even some little pieces from the Indian Buddhist scriptures. And the anecdotes are called in Chinese “kung-an” which literally means “public case.” It’s a kind of legal term. They’re a sort of precedent, holding up an example for exemplary communication between masters. So they become therefore, for later generations of Ch’an and Zen practitioners, subjects of meditation and contemplation. You have to probe into these stories to understand them. Of course, the understanding is not an intellectual understanding. You penetrate them in order to attain awakening.

And the *Blue Cliff Record* doesn’t just give these anecdotes, it also gives a verse commentary by somebody named Hsueh Tou, which is very strange. And both the story

and the verses are commented on and prefaced by the book's compiler Yuan Wu. And the commentaries kind of do a little bit of explanation, they do shed some light, but what they're really doing is pointing you in directions, pointing into areas to contemplate, and trying to disrupt facile interpretations. So when you read the explanations you say, "Oh, yeah, yeah, I can get a feeling for that," and then the next line just trips you up, throws you, disrupts you.

Anyway, Sangharakshita was very taken by this book. For him, obviously, a whole world was evoked – a world of masters and disciples, a world of mountain monasteries, a world of foot-travelling patched-robe monks, a world of Ch'an travellers. He was obviously really inspired, because he felt moved to poetry in that old FWBO newsletter. He inserted into the review two poems evoking the spirit of the *Blue Cliff Record*. So, I'll just read them to you:

*The Blue Cliff rises high into the air;
Below it is wrapped in mist, above it is shrouded in cloud.
What use is a path up the sheer side,
If, however far you climb, you can never reach the top?*

*A hundred peaks behind, a hundred peaks before;
All at once, the Blue Cliff rises in the distance.
Birds disappear into the mist, monkeys' cries are lost in silence;
Darkness gathers, and there is still a long way to go.*

04 Padmavajra's experience of 'The Blue Cliff Record'

When I read Sangharakshita's review of these poems of the *Blue Cliff Record*, I felt very moved, strangely moved. Here was something very different, very strange – a kind of Buddhism that I hadn't really imagined before, something that had real spiritual vitality to it. Not long after I had read the review, I was up here for an ordination and was having a cup of tea in the garden with Sangharakshita out in the garden by the pond. There were a few of us around, and I told him how inspired I was by his review. I said (I was young), "Bhante! Maybe you could do a seminar on the Blue Cliff Record." He used to do seminars in those days where he'd take you through a Buddhist text. And there was a pause, and he smiled and looked straight at me and said, "Well, you would have to be ready for anything." [Laughter] And I said, "Oh, yeah, yeah, right." I must admit I found it really disconcerting. For me it was starting to get a bit real, a bit dangerous.

Looking back at those times, being around Sangharakshita, who was a much younger man in those days, it could feel a bit dangerous. You did feel as if sometimes anything could happen. You did feel as though you were going into the tiger's cave when you met him, and that you might not come out with much intact. It was a bit like that. So, maybe that little exchange, that little glint of steel, that little showing of the point of the sword, made me fear the *Blue Cliff Record* because it took me many years to actually look into it. I did pick it up a few times, but I just didn't connect. In fact, I found it rather

irritating. You know, when you read something where someone goes to a monk and says, “What is the Buddha?” And the answer is, “A pile of rat shit.” Or something like that. Well, what are you supposed to do with that? I obviously couldn’t see what Sangharakshita saw.

In 1996 I was leading our ordination course out at Guhyaloka in Spain, in our beautiful valley in the mountains, and I took the *Blue Cliff Record* with me. I’m not quite sure why, but I took it along. I got hold of it, the three volumes of it, in one. And I began to read it intensely. Usually late at night, in my hut after a day of meditation and puja and silence, particularly during the times when we were doing a lot of meditation and silence. A day of looking at the great cliffs that ringed our valley, and maybe walking in the mountains. And things started to happen through reading this text. I didn’t try to work everything out. I just kind of read it intuitively, I suppose. I started to feel a connection and a feeling for what this great Buddhist text was about. Just before, I said a bit about that. Some years later, I was very taken with the life of Hakuin, this great eighteenth-century Japanese master, and I spent several weeks of the summer looking into Hakuin, which turned into notes for a talk on Hakuin.

So, the Ch’an/Zen tradition has inspired me. I’ve had no formal Zen training. I follow Sangharakshita. I follow his total approach to Buddhist tradition, firmly based on the teachings of the Buddha. But, I’m inspired by Ch’an and Zen, and more recently, the Seon tradition of Korea. I discover things when I look into that tradition that make me want to practice more deeply, more intensively. Even though I can’t hold a candle to the masters of that tradition. There’s no point in pretending that one’s anywhere near them. But I find it incredibly inspiring.

05 Mahasattva Fu Expounds the Scripture; Emperor Wu and Master Chih; Mahasattva Fu’s biography; shaking the lectern

What I want to do for the rest of the morning – well, up until the tea break – is to look into some of the material from the *Blue Cliff Record*. I want to start there and see where it might take us. As I’ve said, I would read the *Blue Cliff Record* when I was on retreat at Guhyaloka, late at night. And one night I read the story, the *kung’an*, the public case, entitled *Mahasattva Fu Expounds the Scripture*. And that night I had strange and disturbing dreams. I had dreams as though I was breaking up, that the world around me, the valley I was in, was breaking up. It was a very, very strange and disturbed night, and I awoke with the phrase “Mahasattva Fu Expounds the Scripture” ringing through my consciousness. As I went to the toilet, as I went to wash, as I went to the shrine room, there was just this phrase, “Mahasattva Fu Expounds the Scripture.” And if you think I sound a bit nutty, well, you may be on to something. [Laughter] And it just kept turning over in my mind. It was as if itself, that phrase, was what they call “a turning phrase” in the Zen tradition, a pivotal phrase. Penetrate this phrase and you get to the way things are.

So, let me tell you the story, the kung'an, of *Mahasattva Fu Expounds the Scripture*. And this is a story taken from the earliest days of Ch'an. It comes from sometime in the sixth century. And it concerns not only Mahasattva Fu, but great Master Chih, and the Great Emperor Wu of Liang. Now the Great Emperor Wu was a very pious Buddhist. He built monasteries, temples, stupas. He'd supported the monks, he'd had sutras translated and copied, and he was very interested in the Dharma, of course. He liked to hear Buddhism being taught, especially the more abstruse Buddhist teachings – teachings on the Perfection of Wisdom, which just went on and on endlessly about *sunyata*, emptiness, voidness. He loved all that. And one day he asked his teacher, Master Chih, to expound one of the most famous sutras, scriptures, on Perfect Wisdom. The Perfection of Wisdom that cuts like a diamond, *The Diamond Sutra*.

And Master Chih, just to say something about him, he was a man with great accomplishment. He was staying in the capitol of Liang and he was a man of great attainment who would just appear and disappear in different parts of the city to teach Buddhism, to teach the Dharma, and he had such a strong effect on people that it was kind of having an effect on society. People were really taking up Buddhist practice through the teaching of Master Chih who would come and go like a sort of Buddhist ninja, I suppose. And it was kind of having a subversive effect. So he was locked up when they managed to catch him – they locked him up in prison. But every so often he'd just vanish from the jail, they'd go in and he wasn't there, because he'd somehow got away into the city to go among the people and to keep teaching them the Dharma. And Emperor Wu though, "Hmm, I'd better keep him close. He's a great teacher. He can be my teacher." So, he had Master Chih released and appointed him as his teacher.

Anyway, so one day he asked Master Chih to expound the great *Diamond Sutra*, the Perfection of Wisdom that cuts like a diamond. But Master Chih said no. He said "No, because there's a much greater man in the city just now visiting. There is one who can really expound this scripture – really bring you to its ultimate depth and meaning. There's one in this city who's realized the essence of the Diamond Sutra and can really communicate that essence. He is the man we should bring to teach."

So who is this man? This was none other than Mahasattva Fu. "Mahasattva" means "the great being." It's another word for bodhisattva, someone who's gaining enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. So this is Mahasattva Fu, Bodhisattva Fu, and Mahasattva Fu's story is very interesting. He wasn't a monk, he was a layman. He had a wife and two children. He was a small-time farmer, had his own little farm. But in his middle twenties he retired to the mountains with his family to practice the Dharma. In the day he would work, farming. And in the night, all night, he would meditate, read deeply of the scriptures, and penetrate into the Dharma. And he was obviously a man of considerable attainment, because at various times in his life he sold all of his possessions, he just sold everything. And with the proceeds he gave to the poor and needy, of which there were many, because these were times of famine. He would even hire himself out as a day laborer to earn money to give away, but still do his practice at nighttime. He was so saintly, so good, that he attracted many disciples and they would work with him so there was more money being generated by their labouring work and more money to give to the

poor and needy. So, he was so saintly that he was regarded as none other than Maitreya, the bodhisattva of loving-kindness and compassion. Sometimes he would go to the capitol of Liang, to the city, to teach the Dharma to more people whilst selling the produce of his labours as well, just to make a bit more money. He cared deeply about the poor and would write letters to the Emperor telling him how he should practice and how he should live. In one letter he tells him, first of all, how he should dwell in the non-dual state, in emptiness. That's the highest form of practice. The next form of practice, the expression, that is to govern well. And he said, the most basic form of practice is that you should protect and nourish living beings. You should overcome cruelty and abolish murder. And you should have all the farmers receive free food six times a month. This is what he wrote in a letter to Emperor Wu, which was quite a thing to do in ancient China, to tell an Emperor what to do – this peasant farmer. So Mahasattva Fu is a kind of Dharma revolutionary. Internally, doing the internal revolution, and externally bringing about a change in the world around him. The Emperor never responded to Mahasattva Fu's letters.

But, anyway, Mahasattva Fu – this simple laborer, this hidden Ch'an master – was on one of his visits to the capitol city, and Master Chih found this out, and he told the Emperor to invite Mahasattva Fu to come to the court and expound the Perfection of Wisdom that Cuts Like a Diamond. So, we can imagine the scene in the court. There's Emperor Wu in his silk and brocade seated on his great imperial throne, and maybe there are courtiers and court officials and Buddhist monks all around. It's a beautiful scene. There's Master Chih there in his simple robes.

And at a certain point in comes Mahasattva Fu, dressed in peasant's labouring gear. He's got pajamas on, a rough shirt, he's got short cropped hair, a beard maybe. He's very simple, very unpretentious. There are no airs and graces, but he has great dignity and purpose. So, he's invited to come up to the podium, the lectern, the seat of the Dharma where he has to expound the great *Diamond Sutra* for the edification of the Emperor and his court. And of course, the Emperor is incredibly expectant. This man, as Master Chih says, really knows the essence of the *Diamond Sutra*, he's really going to bring it out. So, Mahasattva goes to the podium, and this is his lecture: [Loudly shakes the podium with no talking]. And then he just walks out of the court. He walks out of the court, out of the city, goes back to the mountains, back to his people, back to his work, back to his meditation. And the Emperor is utterly astonished and shocked and disconcerted. And his teacher, Master Chih, says, "Does your majesty understand?" And the Emperor says, "I do not understand." And Master Chih said, "The Mahasattva has expounded the scripture, thoroughly." [Laughter]

Extraordinary teaching. Don't you feel the chill of this teaching? Don't you shake when you hear this teaching?

06 The Perfection of Wisdom that Cuts Like a Diamond; sutra and text in Ch'an – Reality Reading; how to live the Dharma

Let's look into it a little. I shouldn't be wordy. If Mahasattva Fu was here, or Master Chih, or any other of the great masters, they would cut me down for saying anything. But let's try to pry open this kung'an, this exemplary communication.

So, I've told you about Wu, and Fu, and Chih. But what about the sutra? That plays a part in this communication. What about the *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita* – the Perfection of Wisdom that Cuts Like a Diamond, that smashes like a thunderbolt? What of that? For Chinese Ch'an, this sutra is probably the most celebrated, the most important of all, especially in early Ch'an. The sutra, which of course came from India, is regarded as the word of the Buddha. And it was read and recited and studied by the early Ch'an masters. Some of them recommended its recitation as the main practice, the main practice is reciting the *Diamond Sutra* and sitting in meditation.

Sometimes you get the impression when you read Ch'an and Zen literature that it's anti-text and anti-sutra. This isn't actually so. Sutras and texts are not to be turned into dry, academic study. A lot of time, when you get a kind of iconoclasm in relation to text and sutras, the Chinese masters are attacking the kind of *literati*, which was a whole class in Chinese society. They regarded sutra reading and text reading not as a way of adding to knowledge, but you read in order to intuit reality. There's a whole notion in this kind of Buddhism of "reality reading." When you read a sutra you do "reality reading." You're not trying to nut it out, you're not just skimming – you read to intuit reality. You read with spiritual intuition. Indeed, the *Diamond Sutra* came to be employed as the means by which the Ch'an master would transmit the Dharma to his disciple directly, mind to mind. In the story of Hui Neng – this is many years after Mahasattva Fu – the sixth patriarch, who was an illiterate woodcutter, when he hears the Diamond Sutra just being recited by somebody he awakens. Later, when he's studying and practicing with Hung Jen – which seems to consist of a lot of rice-pounding and working in the kitchen – when Hung Jen takes him in private to his quarters at night, the patriarch hands on the mind transmission of the Dharma, the mind of Enlightenment, to Hui Neng by reciting the *Diamond Sutra*. When Hung Jen came to the lines in the Diamond Sutra,
“A bodhisattva should produce an unsupported mind. A mind unsupported by sights, unsupported by sounds, unsupported by smells, unsupported by tastes, touchables, or by the mind itself. A bodhisattva should produce a mind unsupported by mind.”

When Hui Neng heard this, he was fully awakened.

So, the *Diamond Sutra* is hugely important for early Ch'an and Zen. But what does it teach? What does the *Diamond Sutra* teach? You get perhaps a glimpse from that little verse of what it might teach, but let's just try to say a bit more.

The *Diamond Sutra* is about how to practice the Dharma. It's about how to live the Dharma. It's actually a book about living. Particularly it's about how a bodhisattva practices the Dharma. How a bodhisattva lives. In this sutra the Buddha teaches those people who have dedicated themselves to enlightenment for the benefit of all. He teaches them how they enter into the path, and how they should view and regard whatever arises on that path. How they should view other people. How they should engage in different

practices. How they should view great beings. How they should cultivate and view different states of mind. How they should view and practice in relation to all experience whatsoever. That's what the *Diamond Sutra* teaches.

And at the beginning, the Buddha teaches and tells the basic attitude. So he says someone who's set out on the path of the bodhisattva should produce, should create, should invoke in his being an incredible – it's not a thought, I don't know what you call it, a mind, will, energy – what's called the *bodhicitta*, the enlightenment heart. In other words, he produces an aspiration to gain enlightenment for every single kind of being there is throughout the entire cosmos. And the Buddha goes right through every kind of possible being there is, from the smallest microbe right up to the most refined level of consciousness. The bodhisattva forms this intention, "I will lead them all into Nirvana, I will lead them all to a place where they find peace." But, the Buddha says, he also has the thought (not the right word), "Although all beings are led into Nirvana, no being exists. No being is led into Nirvana." If the bodhisattva sees beings as existing, as leading beings into Nirvana, he is not a bodhisattva. Yet he leads all beings into Nirvana. He really does lead people, he really does relate to people, teach them, help them out, but no being exists. All beings, apparently, are there and they're not there.

Later the Buddha talks about a particular practice of a bodhisattva, probably the most important practice, that of giving or generosity. The bodhisattva is the supreme giver. If you want to make any progress in spiritual life you need to become a greatly generous person. A bodhisattva gives money, food, clothing, time, energy, gives himself, gives the Dharma – the liberating teaching, like Mahasattva Fu. He's totally involved in the welfare of others. To give like this, of course, he has to practice all the other Perfections, as they're called, all the other practices. He has to practice Ethics, Patience (you need a lot of patience), Vigor, Meditation, needs to practice Wisdom as well. But the Buddha says, the bodhisattva gives without any support, any sign. He's not supported by sights and smells, he's not supported by mind. In fact, there's no notion of giving, no notion of self, of other, of gift give. But he gives continuously. So, he's giving, but there's no notion of giving.

Later, the Buddha talks about the great attainment. He talks about the attainment of Stream Entry – the one that we all want, where you're irreversible from enlightenment, where you've got that one-way ticket to Nirvana, you're not coming back, you're just on that stream. I know a lot of people get worked up about this. "What can I do for Stream Entry?" Because we all want to be saved, so we're very concerned about this. But, the Buddha says, a true Stream Entrant doesn't regard himself as having attained anything. That's why he's a Stream Entrant. If he had a notion of attaining anything he wouldn't be a Stream Entrant. So, it goes on like this.

So you have to imagine this – imagine a teaching like this. Imagine that you're sitting with the Buddha and you come in and you sit down to meditate and he says quite strongly, to you, because he's your teacher and the Buddha and you have great feeling for him, to meditate on the breath – to really apply yourself to your breath and your practice. But then he says, "And realize that there is no breath, and there's no one breathing.

That's why it's breathing, because there is no breathing." Well, imagine that. It really sort of would have a very powerful effect.

07 The effect of the Diamond Sutra; the Great Death

To read the *Diamond Sutra* properly, in the context of meditation and devotion, is to be constant disrupted. Your understanding and your assumptions are continuously tripped up, broken up. You think you've got it, and it takes it away, and when you think it's been taken away, it gives it back. It's irritating, frustrating, in fact it's humbling. When you read a text like this and you really go into it deeply you have a moment, maybe, a glimpse of the sublime – that the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, is sublime. That reality is sublime. It really does tower up like a great cliff. It's not going to conform to your ego-centred understanding. It's not something that you can possess, that you can own, that you can put in your pocket. Buddhism isn't something that you can adorn yourself with. And you just begin to bow your head and open up.

And this is, of course, what the Zen masters are particularly concerned to do. This is what Mahasattva does. In shaking the podium, he demonstrates the *Diamond Sutra*. He doesn't give Emperor Wu any hand-hold. There's nothing that Emperor Wu can hold onto. There's no way that he can incorporate the *Diamond Sutra* into his rigid modes of thought, and his kind of literary understanding and commentary and exegesis. He can't incorporate the *Diamond Sutra* into his attachment to position and status. He can't incorporate it into his Buddhist piety. Emperor Wu will not go to the tiger's cave. He will not go to Mahasattva Fu. He will not go into the great emptiness. But unwittingly he invited the tiger into his court. And that tiger would not be stroked and tamed. He roared the great silent roar, leaving only an astonished silence.

Now this way of talking about spiritual life, about Buddhist life, might come as a bit of a shock to some of you. We're used to having the spiritual life, the Buddhist life, presented as something gentle and pleasant and soothing. You know, you see all those colourful books on Buddhism in the bookstores, next to the "mind, body and spirit" section or just opposite, and it's all very soothing. It seems to be something that can stroke us and make us feel good. Buddhism seems to be a part of the growth movement – the general growth and improvement movement. And of course, Buddhism does have a very good effect. Meditation and so on helps you to relax and become peaceful, and get on better with others, and you have that sense of growth, which is gradual and gentle. And that's a wonderful thing, that's a really good thing. It's very, very good that people can take up these things. But we mustn't forget that where there is growth there's decay. Where there is life, there is death. Where there is spiritual life – real spiritual life – there is spiritual death. For a beautiful flower to grow the husk of the seed is broken, broken out of and rots to the ground. For any change, no matter how beautiful and wonderful, there must be death. So the movement towards enlightenment in the Ch'an and Zen tradition is spoken of as the Great Death. The death of everything conditioned. That's going into the tiger's cave. That's emptiness. That's the *Diamond Sutra*. That's where the Zen masters live. That's where Mahasattva Fu lives.

And the response to that is not cowering fear, but awe and reverence and a sense of the sublime. When you really encounter the Dharma it rears up, towers up, like a great blue cliff, shrouded in mist. You feel very small, but you feel filled with exhilaration. You can move into those mountains.

08 Where is Mahasattva Fu? Enlightenment as experience & non-experience; pseudo-spiritualism projection, exoticism, technism

So where is Mahasattva Fu now? And how do we practice now, in light of all that? I was wondering if I'd ever seen Mahasattva Fu when I wrote this. Sometimes in these *kung'an* texts they say, "Realize this and you will be with Mahasattva Fu right now."

And when I was thinking about this I remembered a time when I was presented with the majesty of the Dharma and how it shook me root and branch. It really was like a lectern shaking, and the whole auditorium. This is 1974 I have to go back to. Very early in my involvement. I was about seventeen. And I was at the Caxton Hall in central London, where Sangharakshita was giving a lecture. A lot of us had gone up from Brighton, where I was living - a whole group of us, to hear Sangharakshita lecture. And it was a lecture with the fascinating title, "Enlightenment as Experience and as Non-experience." Whoa, Zen, great. Sounds good. We're really into the metaphysical here. This was a lecture organized under the auspices of the Buddhist Society with Christmas Humphreys in the Chair. And there were a lot of people in this big hall. It's a lovely hall, the Caxton Hall. And I can remember it was quite formal. Mr. Humphreys led Sangharakshita through the sort of crowd of people that were all lined up to the podium, a very formal introduction. And Sangharakshita got up to speak.

Well, it was an incredible lecture, and I can't paraphrase it, but I do want to say some things about it because it had a very powerful effect on me. It's one of his teachings that has stayed with me to this day very strongly. It must have been very formative indeed. So, he took hold of this word "experience." You often hear this when you talk about Buddhism and Buddhist practice, that it's all about experience. Enlightenment is an experience, a direct experience. That's the way we talk. I use that word all the time. "Enlightenment's an experience. You experience reality face to face." Sounds reasonable. But Sangharakshita pointed out that, well, in fact, there's no Buddhist word in the scriptures that corresponds to the word "experience." Enlightenment is never described as an experience. So he started to dig into that. How can it be an experience? If enlightenment transcends the distinction between self and other, between subject and object, how could you possibly call it an experience? For an experience there has to be a subject and object. There's a self experiencing an object, an other. So how could enlightenment possibly be an experience? Enlightenment is beyond experience.

So then he kind of dug into that. So why, he said, do we place so much emphasis on experience? Even on having experiences? Part of this was a whole kind of survey of the crisis of modern western civilization. I won't go into all that. But basically he concluded that one of the problems that many people have is the feeling of being empty – not in the sense of realizing *sunyata*, but feeling a kind of inner poverty. A kind of inner impoverishment. I suppose that's a very basic kind of *dukkha* or suffering. We feel an inner emptiness. We feel alienated, out of touch – from ourselves, from other people, from our world. The effect of industrialization, technology, the atomization of society and all the rest of it. So we need, we want, we crave, strong experience. Anything to try to get rid of that feeling of impoverishment. As he said, “from the sublime to the sordid, from Beethoven to bingo.” It's even more extreme nowadays, the ways we can gratify ourselves. Anything to get away from that feeling of impoverishment.

Even religion, even spiritual life can be like this. We take it up because we crave an experience, a spiritual experience. He talked about people coming to Buddhism trying to do a “smash and grab raid on the absolute,” as he put it. You know, trying to grab meditation experience, grab *dhyana*, grab insight, grab insight into the Perfection of Wisdom. He said with somebody trying to grab something like this, you can kind of admire that. You sort of have a grudging respect for the bank robber.

But there's something much worse, and that's a kind of passivity where you're expecting to be fed, expecting to be given experience by other people - expecting a Buddhist teacher or Buddhist friends to give you something, to pump something into you. Because of this we bring certain attitudes to our practice, to the Dharma, which can really be unhelpful because they're all to do with trying to “get” an experience. So there's what he calls “pseudo-spiritual projection.” It's not real spiritual projection, it's pseudo-spiritual projection. This is where you have to get the big experience from some fantastic authority – an enlightened master. Preferably a Buddha, a Guru, a Lama, a Rinpoche, a Roshi, anybody. God incarnate, if possible. You've got to get it from the Big Cheese.

Then there's “pseudo-spiritual exoticism.” Where does the pseudo-spiritual authority come from? Well, he comes from the mystic East. You know, with all the robes and the rest of it. And then there's “pseudo-spiritual technism.” You don't just have the authority, you don't just have the authority dressed up in wonderful robes, very exotic. You have to have the one and only true way that will bring you to realization. Pseudo-spiritual technism, this is called. The Meditation. The Initiation. You get this sometimes. You can see adverts in Buddhist magazines for initiations that are being given by Lamas, and “This is the shortcut to enlightenment! Have this initiation and you are propelled instantaneously into Buddhahood!”

They're still around, these syndromes, these attitudes. They're still around and still prevalent. But they're all, he said, a coming out of a fundamentally flawed approach - of wanting, of craving experience to get away from our existential situation. Well, you can imagine, as he went through this lecture – and he was a younger and more vigorous man in those days – the place was shaking. I was quaking. Because what was being brought

home to me - because I had these attitudes even to him - was how serious and how down-to-earth spiritual life really is. So it was very sobering.

09 Growth; work; duty

Then he presented the positive alternative. Of course, it wasn't just cutting through the confusion of the times. He talked about alternatives to these three syndromes or attitudes. He talked about spiritual life in terms of growth. That's a bit hackneyed nowadays, using the language of growth, but in those days it was quite refreshing to hear of Buddhism not being spoken of as a sort of smashing through and breaking through, but of growing. And he evoked the images you get repeatedly in Buddhist texts of spiritual life as unfolding of beautiful lotus flowers. Growth, he meant, was having a genuine sense of your spiritual potential, which Buddhism calls faith. You've got a genuine sense of what you could become and unfold into. A genuine sense of enlightenment. You have a genuine sense of your spiritual commitment, which is a kind of longing and aspiration for spiritual transformation. You're not craving to get something, you're aspiring to transform yourself – to really look at yourself. Rather than trying to get something into you to make everything all right. You're not trying to add onto yourself with experience. Spiritual life is transformation. It's growth. And growth means not only an unfolding, the beautiful emerging flower, it also means a dying away, a leaving behind, a dropping away of certain things. If you talk about spiritual life in terms of growth, you're talking about continuous spiritual death and spiritual rebirth. Spiritual rebirth and spiritual death. An emerging and a dropping away.

The second thing he talked about was work. By work he meant doing what you actually need to do to bring this process about. The work of practice. And by practice he didn't just mean sitting on a cushion meditating, he meant total life practice. Practicing ethics, practicing meditation, practicing deep study of Buddhist texts and Buddhist literature, engaging in spiritual friendship and spiritual community. He meant *work* as practice – actually working for the Dharma or working to improve the world. A great, important Zen teaching says, “A day of no work is a day of no eating.” I think we can include other things in this great work. Participation in the arts, things like yoga, the martial arts – properly engaged in, all sorts of things. But it's your *total* practice in your life. That's the work, the great work, to bring about spiritual transformation. Death and rebirth.

And thirdly he talked about duty. Very dirty words, talking about work and duty – terribly dirty word, isn't it? And by duty he said what he meant was the claims of the day. The wider day, the wider spiritual day. Meaning the whole world. Doing your bit, playing your part in the whole process of awakening for the benefit of all beings. It's not just you doing that, you're doing it with other people. Following the bodhisattva path un-self-consciously, naturally. Ordinary men and women doing what needs to be done in order to awaken, and to help others to awaken.

Have a look at the lecture. Better yet, listen to the lecture. You'll feel the sublime flooding in, sweeping away falsehood and revealing the true. Well, you might not, but I did.

We practice, we awaken. In this time and this place. In what is actually happening here in twenty-first century Surlingham. There's nothing exotic about it. It's actually all very, very ordinary. And that is what is so miraculous and potent. When it gets ordinary it becomes miraculous and potent. When it's exotic and highly technique-based it isn't so potent, it isn't so miraculous. There might be a big hit, but it isn't really doing anything in the end.

10 Master Yun Men; what is everybody's light?

There was a great master of Tang Dynasty China named Yun Men. "Master Gate of the Clouds," that means. And he would often come to his assembly of monks - and he had a lot of disciples, he was a great teacher - and he would pose a question to them. Sometimes he wouldn't answer the question at all. Sometimes the answer would come after a long time of posing the question. On one occasion he came in and he said:

"Everyone has a light. All of you, right where you stand, each and every one of you has a beam of light, shining continuously. Now and forever you have had that light, which transcends seeing and knowing. When you look at it, you don't see it. When you are asked about it, you don't understand. Isn't it dark and dim?"

For twenty years he would ask this question. He would come in and he would ask this question without answering. And then one day he said, "What is everybody's light?" And you can imagine the expectations of the Ch'an monks. They were very intense practitioners in that monastery, doing a lot of meditation and work in the fields, and studying for days and days. Maybe this is the big moment. He's going to tell us what this light is, the light which we have, where we stand - the light that shines forever, this miraculous light that's going to transform and transfigure everything. What is everybody's light?

And then he said, "The kitchen storeroom. The main gate." Just that. Very weird. Very strange. We don't know if it was disappointing for the monks. You take a big risk commenting on anything, Yun Men says. But I will take it to mean that the light - of faith, of practice, of awakening, of Buddha nature - is to be found in places like when you work in the kitchen or when you clean and replenish the storeroom. It's to be found in sweeping the leaves at the main gate of the monastery. It's to be found, it's to be lived from, in the day-to-day activity of practice, of work, and duty. It's to be found in the marvel, in the miracle, of the everyday.