

## **Tales of a Free Spirit – 45 Years of the Buddha’s Life**

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So the thing about those batteries is that you never know when they are going to give up on you. So let’s hope I make it through to the end of this retreat. So I’ve got the enjoyable task of telling you about 45 years of the Buddha’s life in about 45 minutes, and before I even go any further I’d like anyone at the back to wave if you can’t hear me. The exciting thing about this is, of course, I can choose exactly what I like because I inevitably can’t cover everything. So I’ve just chosen my favorite bits and that suits me fine.

So last night we heard from Maitreyabandhu a little bit – something anyway – about the Enlightenment, about what happened to the Buddha under the Bodhi tree all those years ago, and the ramifications of that. Now, rather than list one of the many lists that Buddhism goes into – the teachings come in a range of lists of three, four, five, six and so on – I thought I won’t go into that. I thought I’d focus on some of his encounters, the manner of those encounters and some of the teachings that came out of the numerous people he met during that time.

For a start, he carried on living very simply, he carried on sleeping outdoors under trees, he travelled from village to village – always on foot – and he met a huge range of people. Some of them were very interested in spiritual questions and some of them not at all. But, before long, he had as his disciples kings, murderers (sometimes both), playboys, lunatics, laborers: the whole gamut that was around in northern India the Buddha seemed to encounter. And he seems to have had an incredible impact on people: it seems to have been his being, as much as what he said, that affected people; his presence, his level of consciousness, his kind of disarming compassion - even when people came to challenge him or test him in verbal combat (which seemed to have happened a lot).

It is not, in fact, that he was always popular – he wasn’t – but he had an impact. And partly anything which is unconventional is not going to be popular in all quarters. Because what he was teaching was revolutionary and very uncompromising in some respects. It challenged the customs of the day – it challenged caste, it challenged animal sacrifice, and many of the other customs. And you could say, in a way, that Buddhism is not for the conventional, even today – particularly today perhaps – because it is challenging our conventions, our habits, our assumptions and asking us, in a way, to ditch them if they prove limiting. He was offering a viable path, a path which is definitely relevant today, but it was to everybody - to men, women, householders and full-timers. And although the scriptures really emphasize homeless wanderers we know for sure that a number of his lay disciples became enlightened, and that is very encouraging for those of us who are not interested in a homeless or monastic life today.

There are many stories of the Buddha's encounters and lots of them reveal his compassion. One I thought I'd choose is an encounter he had with a man called Sunita. And I think this shows not only his kindness but in a way an outrageous challenge to the status quo. Sunita was an outcast – what was called an Untouchable in those days – and what that meant was that his job, his lot in life, was to shovel shit, to do all the menial tasks which no one else wanted to do and he had to make sure he did not “contaminate” higher caste people, particularly holy men. If he saw one coming he would make himself scarce. So, one day he sees the Buddha coming along the road, and the Buddha sees him. So, Sunita scuttles into the next lane and the Buddha follows him. He nips down a side street and the Buddha keeps on coming. He turns the next corner and the Buddha keeps on following. And soon Sunita has nowhere else to hide. Apparently he flattens himself against the wall and as the Buddha approaches he puts his hands together in respect. He's dismayed when the Buddha comes right up to him and says, “Friend, would you like to give up this horrible life and follow me?” Sunita is dismayed, astonished and appalled and says “Sir, no one has ever spoken to me in such a friendly way. If you're happy to have a dirty scavenger like me then I'll gladly follow you.” It seems as simple as that. The Buddha ordains him on the spot and says “Come brother.” (or something like that) and there it is. He had no aspirations whatsoever to become spiritual and was probably reeling in shock, but in a flash the Buddha spotted him, knew that he had a retched life and just went for it, and knew that – like all beings – he had potential.

This exemplified his kindness as well as his daring, his audacity and it also gives a good view of the breadth of the Buddha's vision. It was truly egalitarian in that every being - no matter what race, what gender, whatever - has that potential for enlightenment. And it was very radical. Those of the higher castes, particularly the Brahmins at that time, were outraged. They felt that spiritual matters were their preserve and didn't like it at all. But the Buddha was strongly against that. He said it kept people fixed and degraded people and so he carried on ordaining Untouchables, ordaining all sorts of people that wouldn't have imagined that they would have spiritual potential.

But this was irksome to some Brahmins. So we have an example here of the Buddha on his alms round – going out with his begging bowl – and he comes across a Brahmin landowner who scoffs at him and says, “Look, Gautama (Gautama was his family name), I plough and sow, and having done so I eat. Now, you plough and sow and then you too can eat.” And the Buddha replies, “Look Brahmin, I too plough and sow and then I eat.” The Brahmin says, “Well, I don't see your plough. I don't see your oxen.” And the Buddha says to him, “The seed I plant is faith, my harness is self-mastery, my plough is wisdom, and its course is secured by conscience, the rope I firmly hold is mind, and my goad is mindfulness. And, ever watchful of word and deed, I eat only when I need to. My oxen are unfaltering effort, and this leads to the end of sorrow and regret. So this is my plowing and its end is freedom.” The Brahmin is silenced by this, and in this way the Buddha explains that while his life might look passive and dependent on others for his food and so on, actually it demands continual work, continual inner work. Anyway, the proud landowner was convinced and offered him food from his golden bowl.

I think this meeting is typical of a number that you read in the scriptures. It shows the

Buddha meeting like with like. Whatever comes towards him, he meets it but turns it around. So he addresses people in the way that they are best able to hear, using farming metaphors or whatever, as well as flexibility – it's known as skilful means in the Buddhist tradition. He taught people in their own language – literally and metaphorically – he was very keen that his teaching was communicated in the language of the people, not the elitist language that usually religious doctrines were taught in. He didn't want to exclude less educated folk. He also used similes and parables to illustrate his point and very much timeless imagery, so it is still relevant today.

One story I like is of a monk called Yassa. And Yassa – we all may recognize ourselves in Yassa (I certainly do) – was distracting himself with busy-ness. There wasn't a great deal to do as a monk, they only had something like four possessions, but nonetheless he found his way to fiddle with them. He spent his time mending robes, running errands to the village, fetching and carrying water, chatting with the other monks. Anything, in a way, to avoid the challenging business of being aware of himself. However, the Buddha was onto him. He draws a parallel between Yassa and a nearby hen. One of the hen's eggs has hatched but the other eight haven't hatched and they are abandoned in the nest. The hen, apparently, like Yassa, had wandered off to the village and left her nest. When she returns from the village she starts pecking away at her eggs and there is not much sign of life. The Buddha says to Yassa, "You're like that hen. You want the result but you don't want to do what it takes to bring that result about. How are you going to manage if you wander off to the village, you divide your attention, you don't brood your eggs, you neglect your meditation. How are you going to train your mind?" So, again and again, in these simple ways he's pointing out that actions have consequences, and I'm sure that lots of us can relate to this kind of teaching. We want to train our minds, we want to grow, we want to integrate, but we do not necessarily brood our eggs. We distract ourselves with busy-ness. I know that in some moods, even the Hoovering can seem a lot more attractive than applying ourselves to meditation. So, Yassa and the eggs. Brood your eggs!

As the Buddha gathered more and more disciples, they started finding different ways of practicing. Some of them went off meditating alone into the jungle and others formed small groups – support groups you might say – and there was a group of three monks which we sometimes refer to as the Aniruddhas. Actually, only one of them was called Aniruddha. They come across from the texts a lot like an ideal community. These three, they lived together in a grove and they coexisted, the scriptures say, like milk and water. And they looked at each other only with kindly eyes. So they were rather perfect, and they carried out their daily tasks in harmony and silence, cooperatively and everything. They only discussed the Dharma – they didn't talk about anything superficial – and they were in so much harmony that they could read each other's thoughts. Anyway, the Buddha comes along and he's very chuffed with them, he's very impressed. He praises them and their lifestyle. And I've often studied this text in communities or teams on retreats and it's held up as something ideal which we can aim for. What can we learn about kindness, about mutual support, about rejoicing in each other, communal living, all that kind of thing? So I found it really heartening that a few weeks ago I was reading an account of the Buddha and it tells us a bit about the early life of Aniruddha. He wasn't

born perfectly spiritual. Apparently once the Buddha had become quite well-known and widely acknowledged, it came about that local families took great pride in sending one of their sons to join the Buddha's order. So one day, Aniruddha, who comes from a well-off family, his elder brother came along and said, "Well, it would shame our family if one of us doesn't go off and become one of the Buddha's disciples." Aniruddha, this decorous young man, he's lying on the couch listening to musicians. I imagine he's being fed mangoes or something – he's generally having a very comfortable life, and fairly young I think. He says, "No, no. Not a bit of it, brother, I'll stay here." So they have this little dialogue and his brother says, "No, no, I'll manage the household and you go and join the monks." And then his elder brother goes into quite a long description of the household life - the responsibilities, the onerous tasks, the chores, the effort of the household life - and Aniruddha's going, "Oh my God." Obviously hadn't taken this into account at all. He seems even more appalled by the thought of staying at home than leaving home, very much echoing the point that came up in the Buddha's earlier life, that household life is hard work and narrow. So basically Aniruddha says okay and signs up for the spiritual option, reluctantly. And, like the young Buddha, he found it very hard at times. Apparently, he found the begged food revolting and he missed his soft bed sheets. But he persisted and Aniruddha becomes renowned for his clairvoyance and very much an elder in the Buddha's Sangha, eventually becoming enlightened also. I found that a little bit heartening. From small beginnings...

And sometimes, like the young Aniruddha, I can get into thinking I've chosen the tough option by trying to train my mind, by trying to transform my ethical behavior - that it all goes against the grain in some way, which in a sense it does. All these thoughts I'm sure we've all had. "Couldn't I just relax a bit, lie on a couch listening to music, lead fewer retreats, ease up, take more holidays – that kind of thing?" I know this is called Self-Doubt. But anyway, I was reading Sangharakshita, our teacher, making the point that the spiritual life is not more difficult than the worldly life. We can think it is. I can think it is. He says, "Our tendency is to think that worldly life is easier, less trouble, but there's no objective reason for that. Trying to be happy, find a partner, have a successful career, bring up a family, it all brings a lot of stress and strain, and that plenty of things also upset our plans. However, if one follows a spiritual path, sooner or later success will come." Now I know we've heard a lot about success, and I think Sangharakshita means it in a slightly different way, but he's really pointing out the law of cause and effect - that actions have consequences. If we apply ourselves to growth, growth will happen. And I think also on a deep level it is actually working with the grain of our lives because, well, enlightenment is an active force in our minds that we can learn to be receptive to, that we can learn to cooperate with if we choose. So, in a way, that's quite heartening. We're not really going against the grain, it only seems that way.

So when I crave an easier life or more pleasure I really value the Buddha's teaching that "foolish people seek to have experiences, wise people seek to understand experience." Because I think hankering after experiences is very common, it's almost like something we can add onto ourselves, a good experience. Like "I've had this really big, intensive experience." Often we want that. In a way it's something which makes us feel significant, or makes us feel special – perhaps some of us are hoping for a "big experience" on this

retreat. And in a way, why not? But there is a downside. I think it isn't exactly a modern phenomenon but it is very much emphasized these days – “big experiences,” collecting “intense experiences.” So, it might be sex or sky-diving or celebrities going off to try to survive in the jungle or whatever it is. They seem to be elevated in our culture. But I think what we're all wanting is to feel more alive. But we go for the quick fix. And actually awareness is much, much more satisfying and sustaining than adrenaline. But what we go for is adrenaline - the instant gratification. And, as we know, or have heard, ordinary experiences are enriched by awareness and we can gradually learn to hang loose to those. The teacher, Christopher Titmuss, says that wise people stop clinging to experiences to sustain their ego, and then, left with nothing to feed on, the ego feels powerless and in time it withers away.

There are two distinct strands that make up Buddhism. Theory and practice, you could say, or doctrine and method. The doctrine is metaphysically very subtle. We've heard a little about this conditioned co-production last night – not as much as some people wanted to hear, perhaps more than others wanted to hear. The Buddha said that everything is continually arising and passing away. Nothing stays the same for even a nanosecond. In fact it never really exists at all, from a certain point of view. And seeing this, if we can really see this, we stop clinging to it. And that's it - if we could really see it there would be no problem. The Buddha taught that the doctrine of becoming says that consciousness is not fixed. There is a momentum, there is an energy that flows through life – and even flows from one life to the next – but in a way this cannot be grasped. It slips through your fingers the moment you try and think about it actually. So you can puzzle over the ungraspable and it is probably quite valuable to do so – getting as clear as you can about it – but actually when all that gets too much it's fine just to set it aside and focus on practice, focus on method. And on the level of method it's really quite simple. It is summed up quite famously in the tradition by, “Cease to do evil, learn to do good, purify the heart.” We've all got a fair bit to do just on that lot. I know we could discuss what evil is, what good is, what purity is – although I'm not going into that now – but there is something that is quite simple about Buddhist practice on that level.

So last night Maitreyabandhu talked about wanting and I'm afraid I've got a bit more to say about wanting and that's partly because wanting is so central to what the Buddha is talking about. He says that the cause of all our trouble is craving - craving for food, craving for love, craving for ideas, craving to be rid of things, craving for people, craving to get rid of people and right up to the most subtle cravings. Craving to be alive, or craving not to exist. So on all those levels, we just want, want, want all the time – I'm sure you have noticed. And of course the Buddha was not the first to notice this and nor is he the last. It is the human condition, he was just pointing out the facts. But his path is a very clear path. It's not the only path but it is a very clear path in addressing this problem of wanting. I was reading lately that the Greeks noticed it – I'm not quite sure when – but in Greek myth there's one symbol for the human dilemma. It's the image called the wheel of Ixion. Ixion, apparently, was a king who was very disloyal to the god Zeus, and Zeus, being a powerful chap, punished him by binding him to a fiery wheel that went round and round and round eternally, it never stopped. And this reminded me of the Buddhist Wheel of Life. Vidyajoti, in her talk, mentioned the Wheel of Life - a

Buddhist symbol for worldly existence - in which we too are bound to that wheel. And I could say a lot more about that, but you can talk about that another time. We are bound to it but we can break free, so we are not bound in perpetuity or necessarily. We can break free. The Greeks also had another image that connects with this wanting and it was of a guy called Tantalus. And he also dared to defy Zeus, and again Zeus punished him for his pride. Zeus' punishment for him would be that he would be eternally tempted but never satisfied. Hence, I imagine, the word tantalizing. Again this is just human life revolving around craving, followed by satiation – but are we satisfied? The hell we are, or maybe just briefly. Immediately, or almost immediately boredom sets in, doesn't it? I'm sure you've noticed – and then again we get into wanting. Wanting something else or wanting the same again, all to escape the terrors of boredom.

Why do we want to dispel boredom? Partly, I think – although it's not great fun boredom on the whole – partly it goes a bit deeper than that, because boredom is a distraction-free state that, dig a bit deeper, and what you find are these underlying truths of things like our own insignificance and the fact that we are on an inevitable progression to old age, and sooner or later, death. So boredom is an uncomfortable state. It's a disconcerting state. So we want to be free of it and – yep – a bit more wanting. We're in a tight bind and until we can slow down the wanting, perhaps lead a simpler life, reduce our self-preoccupation, we're going to be stuck. And, in a way, we need to wake up to the predicament of human life.

I find watching people wake up, watching my friends wake up, seeing it on telly, whatever, is very moving actually. I was at a film, a week or two ago, called *Stranger than Fiction* – some of you may have seen it. It was all about this middle-aged tax collector, a fairly blocked man I would say, leading his life on automatic and he has a premonition of his imminent death. This leads to a rapid softening, a rapid opening up of his experience. I think the first thing is he learns to enjoy chocolate cookies, he falls in love fairly quickly, quite soon after that he has sex (probably for the first time) and the bit I found most moving was that he took up the guitar, something he had been longing to do for years. And in a way what we are talking about is waking up, on the first level that Maitreyabandhu mentioned last night - the happy, healthy, human level – waking up to what we could be. And then, obviously, we can move on from that first stage. But even thus far, even on quite a simple ordinary level it was very moving seeing him come alive in this film. I suppose I'm just saying, let's cherish our wake-up calls. His wake-up call came in a rather strange way - from a voice in his head - but, wherever it comes from, let us cherish our wake up calls. We might enjoy life a lot more afterwards!

The Buddha said that our minds create our world. What we feel, what we think, what we intend all determines how we experience ourselves, and the world that we find ourselves in. The fundamental nature of our mind is that it is moving, moving all the time. But we do have choice about how it moves. We can't stop it moving but we can influence how it moves, how we are, how to act. There is one teaching that I have relied on a lot on recently and it is that of the two arrows, the parable of the two arrows. It has really sustained me over the last four or five months because I have been suffering with acute insomnia. What the Buddha says is that when we are suffering it is like being pierced by

an arrow and on that level we can't do much about it. In this case I'm trying to do something about the insomnia, but you can't do much about some of the first arrow. You may in time be able to affect it, you may not ever be able to affect it, you may have to learn how to adapt. In my case I can't just make myself sleep – anyone who has had insomnia will know that quite well. But what we often do, the Buddha says, is throw a second arrow at ourselves, increase our own pain by making ourselves angry, by being resistant or denying the pain of the first arrow. By fighting the experience we double that suffering. So I've been trying very hard not to fight the first arrow of insomnia, not to add the second arrow. For instance, if I've had one or two hours sleep I could think, "Oh no, today's going to be a write-off," and I'd feel really down. Or, on a good day, I can accept feeling rough just as it is and not try to double the suffering. Of course I've been tired, but I've discovered often I can stay positive and manage a lot more than I thought if I don't get into the second arrow. The second arrow, I've noticed, comes along at about five in the morning when I'm feeling at my lowest ebb, perhaps a bit tearful, "Oh God, how long is this going to last?" That kind of thing. And then you can get into all the fantasies of, "This is going to go on for years," or whatever. But that is all the second arrow stuff, I don't have to add that. And I'm sure, not wanting to labor this point with my sleep, but we all have our own particular sufferings and we don't have to make them worse. I think this is a really liberating teaching. I've found it moving because it has really helped me to not be as depressed as I might be and actually manage a lot more, every day, than I would have thought. So, yes, the second arrow is dispensable.

The Buddha communicated in a range of ways. He urged people to open their minds and challenge those who insisted on their own opinions and didn't listen to other people. As I said earlier, many people turned up trying to defeat him in debate, but what he was teaching was pragmatic. He was teaching a path, a means to an end. He wasn't concerned to win any debate. He was just concerned to address people's real concerns, their real issues. Sometimes people would come just really to have a go or beat him in debate but again and again he just invited them to look at the world they assumed they knew, look at it and see, challenge their own assumptions really. Sometimes he did this in silence. People might ask abstruse philosophical questions and he just said nothing. Sometimes, at one gathering, he just held up a flower, nothing more, he just held up a flower and apparently one of his disciples smiled and understood. So he had a range of ways of communicating, and in a way he needed to because what he was trying to teach was beyond reason, it was beyond concepts and, as Maitreyabandhu also said, images often communicated where words would fail.

He also taught very much by example. There's a story lots of you will probably know of him visiting a monastery and coming across a sick monk. He's alone in his cell and he's suffering from dysentery. In fact, the text says he's covered in urine and feces, the poor man. The Buddha says, "Why is nobody looking after you?" And the monk says, "It is because I am old and of no use to the other monks." So, the Buddha and his attendant wash him. They clean him up, wash his robes and put him on the bed to make him comfortable. And later the Buddha gathers together the other disciples and he rebukes them. He says, "Don't neglect your fellow companions. He who attends the sick attends me." He was unfailing in his care, in big ways and in small. His example did easily as

much to communicate his message as his discourses did.

Sometimes people didn't like his teachings, as I said, and so they blamed the messenger. I was remembering times when I've done this myself. Once, quite a few years ago I was talking with a friend about impermanence and I said to him, "Yeah, impermanence, that's the ugly bit of the Dharma," and he said, "No, that's the ugly bit about life." He was making a really important distinction which I hadn't noticed until that point. In some ways, I'd taken the unappealing message – that all things are impermanent and if you get attached to them it will only lead to suffering (I didn't like that message) – and subtly I was blaming the Buddha for it. Of course, I also knew that impermanence can be freeing and all that, but at this point that was where I was, I was blaming the Buddha for it. But actually, the Buddha's only pointing out how life is. If I stop being a Buddhist, things will still be impermanent, so there's no point giving up on it. I think my confusion came because, basically, I'm an optimist and I used to think that if I tried hard enough things might, or would, work out. Things might last or I could make things like relationships work out. So, in the early years, while I broadly appreciated the Dharma, I was still really blaming the messenger for the teachings which really grated – so a bit of picking and choosing going on although I wasn't all that conscious of it, and this conversation that I had here really highlighted that for me. People, I should say, also do this with the FWBO, blame the messenger. So be on the lookout for it. It was really helpful, seeing that distinction for me because actually the Buddha's on our side. He's only trying to help us be free from suffering. We don't have to listen to him, but if we do it might help. It's that simple.

The Buddha was also a living example of fearlessness. There are quite a number of incidents involving threats to his life, in which the Buddha, of course, stays characteristically calm. He taught that all our fears stem, ultimately, from a fear of not existing and if you're no longer attached to the idea of self then you're not going to be bothered. You're going to be cool about that, you've got nothing to defend, nothing to fear. So we see the Buddha boldly walking into frightening situations, or what most of us would find frightening. For instance, there is a maddened elephant that is deliberately set loose on him to try and kill him and it is halted in its tracks, so the legend goes, by the serene figure of the Buddha. In the same way, apparently, he overcame a fire-breathing serpent – not sure that these exist – but in that legend he overcame the serpent, again by love. Perhaps the most famous is the serial cutthroat - Angulimala he was known as - and the Buddha's only power over the murderer is his love. His fearlessness lies in his complete surrender of himself. Whereas of course Angulimala, the murderer, crumples. And sure enough he soon becomes a disciple too.

Fearlessness is taken very seriously in Buddhism. The Abhaya Mudra, this mudra, is very common on Buddhist statues. You've probably seen it around the world. And it's not just saying, "Do not fear." After all, it's not quite as simple as that in practice. It's looking deeper. The teaching is there's nothing to fear. There's nothing to fear because there's nothing to lose. Developing fearlessness is a really crucial aspect of Dharma practice. It's not an aspect that Buddhism's widely know for, I don't think. When Sangharakshita was once asked which historical figure he thought was most like the Buddha, he surprised a

few people by saying Julius Caesar. Sangharakshita made the point – and I emphasize this now – that it is not for his warmongering, not for his bloodshed, but for Caesar’s heroic qualities: his boldness, his courage (I don’t know whether we could say he had fearlessness) and his promptitude. Those were the things that Sangharakshita mentioned. I think it is important just to say that, because Buddhism is not just about quieting the mind. As Maitreyabandhu mentioned last night it is also about liberated energy, it is also about heroic qualities - developing strength as well.

I think we don’t generally regard fear as that bad - not nearly as bad as, say, hatred or malice. But the Buddha classifies it as a deep-rooted negative state of mind. He says it saps our energy and spawns all kinds of defenses. I’m sure we know that in ourselves. Fear underlies restlessness – plenty of us have that on the cushion – and anxiety, which is a daily feeling for many of us, and also, when we feel threatened it increases and can easily lead to spite, malice, hatred and so on.

Fearlessness is also said to be one of the fruits of deep meditation and you do hear these amazing tales of monks and nuns in the far east – well, in all sorts of places actually – braving all sorts of dangers, torture, persecution and so on. So how do we develop fearlessness? I think partly we develop fearlessness by sitting with the things we don’t like on the cushion, particularly the things that frighten us. In the west, we can’t, obviously, just head off into the jungle but we do need to face our fears and experience aloneness like the early monks did.

In the FWBO, there’s the practice of solitary retreat where we take ourselves off for a week or two or three somewhere peaceful and we just spend time alone, getting in touch with ourselves without the ordinary mix or froth of thoughts, distractions, negativities, whatever it is, daydreams. In a way it might sound a breeze, particularly for introverts – you might think, “That doesn’t sound particularly challenging” – but very often fears do arise, fears that you wouldn’t imagine you’d have if you had a companion there. I certainly know that for myself. Often when we are alone we can feel quite naked, quite uncomfortable, quite reluctant to sit with our own experience. Certainly I’ve found coming eyeball to eyeball with myself on solitary really quite sobering, quite challenging. And also, being an extrovert, I never would imagine that I would look forward to a fortnight on my own, but actually I’ve had some of my happiest times on solitary retreat. Not the first solitary, that was pretty tricky, but once I got the hang of it, in a way, a subtle level of tension that I’m hardly aware of in ordinary daily life seems to fall away when there’s nobody else around - different even than being on a retreat with other people. Something definitely changes. And, you know, the ante is up. So there’s both the relaxation, the tension release and the “woo... the axe man may cometh!” kind of feeling. You learn a lot by taking yourself off to do something like that. And in a way, solitude is a chance to feel most fully yourself, I would say.

Moving on to probably my favorite Buddhist teaching. One of the things that’s always appealed to me about Buddhism is that it doesn’t offend your reason. You’re not asked to believe anything that you can’t sooner or later check out for yourself. So there’s no question of blind faith. And what is or isn’t Buddhism or the Buddha’s teaching is

basically experiential. We learn this from the Buddha's advice to his foster mother, who turned up, and she wanted a pithy teaching - she wanted to go off to the jungle and "enlighten herself." She just said, "Give me the pith," and the Buddha said, "Right. What is Dharma you alone can judge. Whatever the teachings be aware whether they lead to peace and not to anxiety, to freedom and not to bondage, to wishing for little and not to greed, to solitude and not to superficiality, to sincere striving and not to laziness, and to contentment and not to complaining." Not particularly metaphysical, not particularly complicated, quite difficult to practice. But I really love that teaching.

So what is the Dharma? It is not settled by logic, it's not settled by the scriptures, but in our own experience. You alone can judge. So the Buddha, again and again, urged people to test things out for themselves, not just to take his word for it. There is a little caveat here because what helps us grow may only become clear in time, maybe over quite a long time, and wishful thinking can easily creep in I think. We should consult our own experience and also a teacher, or other people who've been at it a bit longer, with a bit more Buddhist training under their belt. I find this teaching - that the Dharma is whatever helps us wake up, and you alone can judge - well, it's very broad isn't it? It helps to see the spiritual as a way we can approach anything. It's not just what's in the Buddhist scriptures, it's anywhere, it's everywhere in a sense. And it also emphasizes personal responsibility.

Not long ago I was at an exhibition of the sculptor Rodin and I was very affected by this exhibition - I think I had seen his work a few times. But I kept noticing at this exhibition the truths of Buddhism, the truths that the Buddha was pointing to - particularly suffering and change. These bronzes - to me anyway - seemed very vital and expressive and often bittersweet. There's nothing idealized, with one or two exceptions. I was very much feeling my age that weekend, very aware of wrinkles and bags under my eyes from no sleep, a range of unpleasant things, and obviously not eager to look any older, but also aware that that sort of vanity is just convention. Because, also, in another mood, I'm determined to look life full in the face. I'd actually rather let life mark me in a certain sense. I want to be affected, I want to let life to change me through adversity, I want to open my heart to compassion borne of difficulties because, in a way, how else can we learn? What are our options, actually? Looking at Rodin's busts of famous people, they had really lived-in faces. They were etched with worry, with love, with laughter, work, life. And I was thinking - I got quite moved at this exhibition - who wants idealized beauty and no wrinkles? There was one sculpture in particular - it's called *Man with a Broken Nose*, it's a fairly old guy - that really choked me up. There was something in the look in his eyes. He was definitely ravaged by time, but he was so alive, or at least that's how it seemed to me. So, in a way, the fact of suffering is everywhere. And I can't say I like it - I'm sure none of us like suffering - but actually I don't want to whitewash it. It's there and I'd rather look at it. Most of the time, anyway, I'd rather face it. It's how life is on this Earth and if we're lucky suffering will help break open our heart. In a way it's the crack in our beings that lets the light pour through.

One of Rodin's most famous works, which probably lots of you will have seen because its beside the Houses of Parliament in London, or one of them is. It's called *The Burghers*

*of Calais* and that had a very strong affect on me. There are these huge figures, towering figures – six of them – they’re medieval martyrs and they’re roped together on their way to be executed - very strong stuff. Actually they’re giving up their lives for their whole town. They’re from Calais and the British have surrounded Calais, and they’re going to their death, and one of them is carrying the key to the city. So it’s very moving work actually. Well, if you’re in a certain mood that is, which I seem to be. And there were some people beside me - a couple - and one of them said, “Look at them, they don’t look too happy do they?” and then they wandered off. I was outraged! I stood there thinking, “No, they don’t look happy and why would they?” They’re off to give up their lives to save their city, surrendering to the enemy, noble self-sacrifice (I was kind of indignant). Why would they look happy? And who cares if they’re looking happy when you’re doing the ultimate human thing? Acting on their deepest values, presumably. Hopefully, they had the satisfaction of doing what they felt was right, or was honorable anyway.

The historian Simon Schama was saying in his recent TV series on the power of art that art is to instruct us in the obligations of being human. And in a way I felt that obligation of being human, I felt it while looking at Rodin’s work. I’ve felt it loads of times actually but I felt it very strongly that day. I think spiritual practice is all about what makes us more human. I don’t want to wince when I read that famous line of Mary Oliver who says, “Listen. Are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?” It can make you wince, can’t it? But I don’t want to wince when I think of that.

Finally, to return to the Buddha, we’ve heard a whole range of his teachings. Like his message, he had no fixed approach. He was always adapting to whatever situation he found. He taught sensitively, he taught compassionately. He was radical and willing to be provocative when necessary. He taught in people’s own language and he met them on their own terms, on their own territory. He taught by example, he taught fearlessly, and he urged people to learn from their experience and realize their potential. His great refrain was “to wake up and live in the moment.” We’ve heard that many, many times. And I think by following his example we will become wiser, warmer and more alive.