

## **Here Be Dragons Disasters, Dilemmas, and Dead Ends On The Spiritual Quest**

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*(N.B. This talk was aimed at its specific audience, but others, especially those preparing for Ordination into the Western Buddhist Order, may find it of interest.)*

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### **Introduction: the knights reassemble**

Last summer I took time out from my year's sabbatical to attend, and partly lead, the Tuscany Reunion Retreat at Il Convento. Il Convento is for me an archetypal place. It's where I spent 18 months on retreat in the '80s, on six ordination courses, and saw 101 men ordained. It's also where Bhante gave his papers on *The Journey to Il Convento* and *St Jerome Revisited*, discussing symbol and archetype. So naturally I tended to see the retreat in archetypal terms.

During those weeks last summer, Il Convento became in my mind not an old monastery, but a kind of Camelot, a Dharma castle from which, over a 6-year period, 101 men had ridden forth on the quest of the Holy Grail of Enlightenment. Now 15-20 years later, we were reassembling, from all points of the compass. I had brought with me photos from those ordination retreats, of those mainly absurdly young and fresh-faced knights riding out, full of enthusiasm for the quest. Now we were returning to Camelot, all older and wiser. Some, whilst still continuing on the Quest, were unable to join us. A handful had left the Order and, if they were still questing, were doing it in their own fashion, no longer in contact with the rest of us. One, sadly, had died by his own hand.

So I looked around me at the assembled company. We were all much older, we had all been on the Quest for 15 years or more, and we all had tales to tell, adventures to recount. Some had enjoyed the Quest; perhaps a few had even had glimpses of the Grail. But there were also those who had fought dragons and been badly singed, some who had been imprisoned by evil wizards or enchantresses, and there were those who had had periods of being separated from their brother knights, and had wandered long in barren landscapes.

And the King himself had aged. He was now 75, and his, external sight was failing him. Though it was clear, from the equanimity with which he dealt with the partial loss of his sight, that his inner vision was still bright, perhaps brighter than ever, and his certainty that it was possible for each of us to succeed on the Grail Quest was as strong as when he had witnessed our setting out, all those years ago.

I spent some time during my year's sabbatical at Guhyaloka reflecting on this experience

at Il Convento, thinking about the ups and downs and struggles that people had gone through. And when at times I began to forget this train of thought, it would often be restarted by reading *Shabda* [the order journal]. In each month's crop of reporting-in, there are always a certain number of Order members 'going through it' - men or women in crisis, not sure why they are practising the Dharma, unsure about the Order or the FWBO, depressed, etc. etc.

So my experience at Camelot/Il Convento and my reading of *Shabda* prompted me to want to give a talk about spiritual crisis and difficulty. I'm sorry if it doesn't appear to be a very inspiring topic, though personally I often find Order Members' struggles very inspiring. I am not planning to discuss other Order Members' crises, and I shall probably not be handing out much general advice. I shall of course draw on my observations of Order members over many years, but often I shall be drawing on my own rich and varied experience of spiritual crises: doubts, difficulties, and downfalls. If you find any of this helpful in your own situation, then all well and good.

### **Is the Path well mapped?**

Before I do talk more personally, I want first to mention something about maps. The first part of my title: Here Be Dragons comes from inscriptions on old maps, from the days long before just about every square metre of the planet had been surveyed, explored, or at least photographed from the air. I want to start by talking about maps because accurate maps of the spiritual terrain are crucial for the spiritual quest. Obviously we need to know the direction in which Enlightenment lies, otherwise we could search forever.

In a sense we have no real problems in this regard, as the Buddha has laid out very clearly the nature of Enlightenment, and the general path of ethics, meditation and wisdom that leads to it. However, to be confident on the journey, we also need as clear a map as possible of the terrain through which we are likely to pass. And it seems to me that here we as westerners need to start doing some new mapmaking. All too often we are working with traditional maps, descriptions of the Path that seem not to fit our experience. These traditional maps include the Spiral Path - in which in dependence upon suffering arises faith, then onwards and upwards: from joy to rapture, rapture to calm, calm to bliss, bliss to concentration, and from concentration to knowledge and vision. There is also the Buddha's account in the Samannaphala Sutta of the fruits of the life of a recluse. He describes how one who has gone forth into the homeless life practises the precepts, this gives him a basis for the practice of contemplation; that enables him to guard the gates of the senses; this enables him to develop sati and sampajjañña; this leads to contentment, overcoming the five hindrances, and then cultivating the dhyanas, this gives birth to insight, the development of supernormal powers, and so on, until one arrives at liberation of the heart and the certainty that Enlightenment has been gained. It's not that these maps are false, but rather they are too idealised to meet our needs as we strive to follow them. They tend to give a very rosy picture of the spiritual life. They're a bit like aerial photos of terrain to be covered, which are taken from too high up to show the peat bogs, rocks, etc. that a walker will encounter. It is easy to compare one's own spiritual life to these ideal accounts, and become disheartened and feel that one is a

completely useless Buddhist practitioner.

It is clear from reading Buddhist literature that even for most of the greatest Buddhist practitioners, life was not so straightforward. In the Pali Canon one reads many accounts of monks who become dissatisfied with their Dharma life, who totally lose their inspiration. In the Mahayana tradition you have figures like Asanga who meditated for 12 years, giving up at regular intervals because he seemed to be gaining no results. Or there is the tantric siddha Virupa who, after many years of practising tantric visualization was so disenchanted that he took his mala and threw it into a cess-pit. There are also cases of burn-out, such as Hakuin, who in his *Yasenkanna* describes how he pushed himself so hard that for a while he became a mental and physical wreck.

And in the Pali Canon the Buddha also gives descriptions of the spiritual path that make it sound less straightforward than the account in the *Samannaphala Sutta*. For example, there is a sutta in the *Majjhima Nikaya* in which the Buddha says that some people find the spiritual life easy to start with and easy in the later stages as well. Some find it difficult and then easy. Others find it easy and then difficult. And then there are those for whom it starts off difficult, and carries on being difficult until the end - when of course all the difficulties are finally seen to have been worthwhile!

Even if we manage to put together realistic maps from traditional sources, we are still faced with the fact that as an early generation of Dharma practitioners in the West, although the general principles of the Dharma will be the same, some of the doubts and difficulties, and some of the psychological mechanisms involved in practising those general principles will be different. Perhaps in 500 years' time, Western Buddhist teachers will be able to guide their students along well-plotted routes, well aware of the likely pitfalls and difficulties. But we have to pioneer, with all the risks of venturing into unexplored territory: the spiritual equivalent of falling into crevasses, or being eaten by bears.

To take one example of what I've been talking about, if you follow the traditional maps, getting into dhyana is followed by more dhyana, and then by the development of insight. However, I had an interesting conversation last year at Guhyaloka with Bodhananda, who has led a lot of meditation retreats at Vajraloka and elsewhere. He said that in his experience of leading retreats and doing many meditation interviews, it was almost invariably the case that people who got into dhyana found themselves within two or three days falling into a bit of a pit.

This was also my experience in the first years of my practice. It was as if I had managed to integrate the tip of the iceberg of consciousness - the parts of myself of which I had some awareness. This integration took me into dhyana. But the positive spin-off from that achievement was that more unconscious material was then drawn up into consciousness. That was progress, as more energy became available, but it would have the effect of destroying the harmony of my mental state, and precipitating me out of dhyana, and often into some quite dark realms. Even these days I often find that a day of dhyanic meditation is followed by a night of 'shadow dreams' - full of dark forces and primitive swamp

creatures.

So we need to be modifying our maps of the spiritual life in the light of experience. Yes, there may come a point at which one is integrated on a deep level, really well established in dhyana, and for us real insight is then the next natural development. But we also need to understand that earlier dhyanic experiences may be followed by uncomfortable experiences. If our map includes such things, then we shall be prepared for them, and we shall not give ourselves a hard time, or regard ourselves as spiritual failures when we experience them, telling ourselves 'This isn't supposed to happen'.

When first planning this talk, I thought I would share with you some of the varied crises and difficulties that I have gone through over the years, in the hope that my experience would help your own map-making for your spiritual quest. However I soon realised that there wouldn't be time for me to describe all the crises that I've gone through, and all the Vessantara traps into which I've fallen over the years - we'd be here for days. So in the end I decided to pick out four crucial situations that I have observed Order members getting into on their spiritual quests over the years, and of which I have a degree of experience myself. To help us gain a little perspective on them, and because I started talking about the Grail Quest, I am going to describe them in terms of four critical situations that a knight in search of the Holy Grail might experience and, just possibly, we shall find that they have some similarities to what some dharmacharis have gone through, or may even be going through right now.

### **1. A crisis of belief**

So let us start with the case of a young knight, quite newly-dubbed. He spent quite a few years as a squire, always looking towards the day when he would finally join the chivalric order, and would be permitted to embark on the Grail Quest. In fact he has been rather carried along into becoming a knight, surrounded by friends who also had the same dreams. Now as he rides out on the Quest for the first time he finds himself alone in a dark wood. The wood seems to go on forever, he is short of food and hungry, and the rain beats down on his helmet. At a certain point, some way off through the trees he sees the unmistakable outline of a dragon. It is moving away from him, and for better or worse, there is too much undergrowth in the way for him to be able to ride after it and challenge it. Our young knight isn't entirely sorry about this because, although he is keen to make his name as a knight, he cannot help noticing that the dragon is even larger than he had imagined when he used to sit with the other squires listening wide-eyed to the old knights' tales.

At this point, the young knight shocks himself. From out of nowhere, he finds himself wondering if the Grail exists. He had always more or less taken its existence for granted. And he had been so caught up with the excitement of preparing to become a knight that he had not thought the issue through very deeply for himself. Of course he has seen the King and other knights, stars of the chivalric world, who claim to have had visions of the Grail. But somehow, alone by himself in this sombre, dripping wood, their testimony no longer seems so compelling. The security he gained from them seems very far away. He

dismounts and sits under an oak tree, and begins to think for himself. Who is he? What is he doing out here? And what does he really know about the Grail?

So this is our first crucial situation. It is, we might say, a crisis of belief. In practising the Dharma, to start with we inevitably take a lot on trust. Our views are a mixture. There are a few things that we know directly, from our own experience of life. Then there are some that we do not know to be true directly, but in which we believe in - either logically or intuitively they make sense to us. Then there are aspects of the Dharma, of Buddhism, of the FWBO, (and of course the three are not completely synonymous), of which we are not convinced, but which we either take on trust or provisionally accept on a 'let's try this out' basis.

It is important that we know into which of these three categories our different views fall. Often we are not clear. With me, I found that from time to time the second and third categories would 'fall over'. I would be forced to come back to what I fundamentally believed, for myself, without any intellectual or emotional support from the FWBO or anyone else. The first time this happened, as my card house of views lay scattered all around me, I was left with only two solid foundation stones. Firstly I believed in awareness: that, however painful, it was always beneficial to work to be aware. And secondly I believed in love (and in that crisis state I didn't want to call it 'metta').

After a while, having come back to what was solid in myself, I would slowly and laboriously begin picking up the playing cards again, and laying them edge to edge, and one on top of the other. Then, maybe a year or two later, another inner storm would blow the aces and queens, the clubs and hearts in all directions. This time, in the midst of much uncertainty, I found that I believed in awareness and, all right, let's call it metta. And I was also sure that everything conditioned was impermanent.

This process repeated itself several times over the years, and after a while my attitude to it changed. From feeling bewildered and distraught when my faith in Buddhism seemed to be coming apart, and hastening to put it back together as soon as possible, after a while I almost invited these crises. Doing so showed that my confidence in myself had grown. To start with I needed some certainty and security in my life, and gained it from belief in Buddhism. But later what was most crucial for me was to find out the truth, and if that meant living in an uncertain universe, well so be it.

In my earlier practice, I had treated the Dharma reverently, like some beautiful but fragile crystal vase. Later, wanting only the truth, I picked up my Dharma vase and began trying to smash it. I beat at it with the hammer of reasoned argument; I scratched at it with the diamond of experience. When it emerged from these tests unscathed and as beautiful as ever, I at last felt true reverence for it. And having been prepared to risk everything, I found much deeper certainty. My Dharma vase was actually made of vajra.

So this is our first crucial situation. Traditional Buddhists appear at least often to find it relatively easy to take the Dharma and their teachers on trust and just get on with their practice. Westerners may well find that part of the Buddhist path may involve

periodically asking ourselves whether we are a Buddhist.

Obviously one doesn't want to do this too much, or it would be like Bhante's image of the gardener regularly pulling up a plant to see how the roots are doing. But if we find it happening from time to time, we should not feel bad or disloyal, but simply take it as an opportunity to search more deeply and intensely for the truth. To do so is good Buddhist practice.

## **2. Falling into the heart centre**

For our second crucial situation, let us consider the case of a youngish knight of the Round Table. He was dubbed a knight a few years ago. He was very proud to join the fellowship of the Round Table, and he has started out on the Grail Quest brimming with enthusiasm. Every day he practises swordsmanship and anti-dragon manoeuvres, and every day he prays to be granted a vision of the Grail. He also faithfully attends all the gatherings of the knights at Camelot, at Christmas, Easter, and so on, and he is surprised to discover that all knights do not do the same. Of course, some are lost on the Quest or recovering from wounds, but there are others who are staying close to Camelot who, he cannot help observing with a certain haughtiness, it seems cannot be bothered to attend.

Occasionally in his early years our young knight has times when he loses his sense of himself and his mission. But he comes through these difficulties well.

However, after a few years of adventuring, and even making a bit of a name for himself as a model knight, something very strange happens. It almost seems to happen overnight. He has been single-mindedly adventuring, focused only on the Grail Quest. In fact, to be honest, he has tended rather to look down on the common people with whom his mission brought him into contact. Now, all of a sudden, as if a trapdoor had opened under his feet, he is precipitated into a whole range of emotions that he has hardly known before.

Indeed, all of a sudden he is much more emotional in general. He finds himself laughing and crying easily. He feels much more empathy for the other human beings that he meets. Indeed he starts to wonder if dragons have feelings too, and feels uneasy about trying to rid the country of them.

Before he started on the quest, our young hero used to love music, but he had given all that up as a distraction when he became a knight. Now he finds himself wiping the dust off the lute that he used to play. Tentatively he starts playing and singing some of the love songs that he wrote when he was younger. Sometimes too he goes off and joins in the dancing at village festivals.

And he feels very confused. For none of these things have any obvious connection with the Quest for the Grail. Yet he feels suddenly much more human, more openhearted, more himself. From this new emotional perspective, the person that he was up until very recently - the knight who prayed and fasted, who was obsessive about sword-practice,

and who never missed a meeting at Camelot - seems a rigid, narrow and unappealing character. His Quest seems too driven, too goal-oriented.

At times, he now realizes, he has been quite cold, leaving out his heart, his humanity. His heart and his humanity beckon to him. In fact they are beckoning to him strongly – personified in the form of a young country girl he danced with at a harvest festival a few days ago. Before he became a knight he had always been shy and unconfident around people to whom he was attracted, but being dubbed a knight and his subsequent adventuring have given him a new-found confidence. Why shouldn't he settle down in the village? The villagers need a knight on hand to deal with the occasional bandit and foraging dragon.

He could still spend a week or two here and there, doing some questing for the Grail. Our young knight feels torn. Part of him feels that what has happened to him has been a breakthrough. He feels more alive than ever before. Yet he also feels a guilty awareness that he pledged allegiance to his King, and to finding the Grail. Although he hasn't given up the Quest, and believes that living in the village he can still practise knight-errantry, in his heart of hearts he has an unexamined feeling of guilt that he has somehow compromised himself. He has lost the purity of his previous questing.

But the thought of going back to how he was before, who he was before, fills him with a kind of dread. From his current perspective, even if he could give up the village and its local beauty, his previous approach to things now feels alien. To go back to it feels as if he would be putting on a straitjacket.

So he does not go back. This leaves him with his sense of unresolved unease, and that makes him very sensitive. He becomes concerned that other members of the Round Table may start to look down on him. They may say that he has given up the Quest. He starts to find it painful going to Camelot, being amongst his brothers-in-arms and hearing them describing their adventures. And even though the King and others always seem pleased to see him, somehow he feels that he is not a proper knight. And the speeches, the words of counsel and advice that the King gives to those on the Quest, that our knight used to find so inspiring, somehow no longer move him in the same way. The account that they give of the Grail Quest seems somehow too idealised and unrealistic. The words do not seem to be speaking to him.

So our knight visits Camelot less and less. He keeps up some contact with a few brother knights who are old friends, and he does a bit of questing now and then. And at times on winter nights when he cannot sleep, he has visions of a seat at the Round Table in Camelot, an empty seat with his name written above it, a seat being faithfully kept for him.

This is our second crucial situation, and although it is very hard to generalise about these things, aspects of it are very common on the men's side of the Order. What typically happens is that someone has been a 'good Buddhist'. They have meditated regularly, and practised right livelihood (inside or outside the Movement). If they are an Order member

they have regularly attended their chapter and Order events. Then, at a certain point, something happens. As I described the case of the young knight, it is as if a trapdoor opens under them, and they are precipitated into a whole range of emotions that they have never experienced so strongly before. They begin to question the whole way in which they are living their life. They start feeling free, in a way they had not done before, and that freedom is also the freedom not to meditate, not to attend a chapter or Order events, and so forth. Often they begin reviving interests or friendships that they had before they became a Buddhist, which they had discarded as ‘unspiritual’.

I tend to think of this phenomenon as a kind of falling out of the head and into the heart centre. This naturally feels good, and it does represent spiritual progress, but there is often a problem. There is frequently a considerable sense of discontinuity between the new and the old self. The new more feeling self often has a sense of revulsion at the earlier version. The old self is now dismissed as narrow, cold, willed, naively idealistic, and not very individual.

There is, of course, truth in this assessment. However, there are dangers here. This crisis is a breakthrough, and can be very productive and fruitful. However, if its meaning is misunderstood and mishandled it can lead one into a spiritual cul-de-sac. The danger is that in leaving behind the old, narrow self one also leaves behind everything associated with it. One doesn't just leave behind how one was; one also feels like leaving behind everything associated with that narrow, less individual self. In his willed, less individual way, the old self practised meditation every day, always attended Order events, etc. These activities all become associated with the old self from which one is trying to break free.

However, there is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. After all, how did this breakthrough into the heart happen? Like everything else it arose in dependence upon conditions. It was brought about by the practices that one was doing before. Presumably all that dutiful meditation and attending Order weekends provided the conditions for a now more human and feeling person to emerge.

Although it may have been a bit rigid and mechanical, all that meditation and slightly forced spiritual friendship had the effect of gradually developing deeper awareness - of moving awareness from the head centre to the heart centre. It enabled the breakthrough to happen, and it should not be dismissed.

For many years now, I have used alchemical images of spiritual life. For me, the discipline of meditation, study, ethics, attending chapter meetings, etc. is like an alchemical cauldron in which the energy of one's emotional life is transformed. These disciplines provide a container. They keep the energy focused, so that an alchemical reaction can take place.

In the early stages of spiritual alchemy, we don't know ourselves very well, and we apply spiritual methods in a rather mechanical way. This is like applying heat to a very small and rigid cauldron. Sooner or later there is an explosion, the rigid cauldron cracks, or is



even blown to pieces, and energy pours out. The resultant release of energy is liberating or frightening, depending on how much understanding one has of what is happening. So how should we try to work with the crisis when we fall into our heart centre in this way? Well, firstly we should just take an interest in the process, in the new feelings that appear, in the material that comes into consciousness. There is usually so much happening that to start with we may not need, or be able, to do very much formal meditation. We may just need to sit and witness, to experience who we are turning into. Also we may feel quite sensitive for a while, and may need a bit of a break from large gatherings and events. So it may be enough to keep in good touch with one or two good friends who can help the process along.

But after a while we need to go back and rebuild the alchemical cauldron. It needs to be a much more flexible and larger cauldron, with more sensitive heat controls, but if the energy of our previous breakthrough is not to leak gradually away, we need to reengage with the formal practices that we were doing before. We need to recognise that there was nothing wrong with the methods, indeed they brought us to this point, it is the way that we were using them that needs to change. We need to make them our own.

We also need to bring all of ourselves into our Dharma life. We need to come to chapter meetings and Order gatherings open-hearted, with all the messy imperfections and complexities of our humanity, and to communicate that in the light of the Dharma. Indeed this is the key to dealing with this crucial situation; we need to find ways of healing the split, which seems so common among westerners, between the real and the ideal. It seems very hard for us to hold the two together - fully acknowledging our ideals and also where we are actually at. (This difficulty for many westerners may have something to do with traditional Christianity, but I don't have the time to unpack that now.)

In the early stages of spiritual life we tend to idealism - in rational terms this can mean, as we have seen, taking on views without testing them very fully. In emotional terms it involves narrowing down our interests and often repressing certain aspects that do not fit with our Buddhist life. At a certain point we widen out again emotionally. Our heart opens, but we often feel thrown as we have lost something of our previous idealistic approach to the Dharma. So we need to bring all of ourselves into the light of our ideals. If we do that, then we shall begin to heal the split between our idealism and our consciousness of our everyday human reality.

I find it interesting how many great western mythic stories contain an idealistic, striving hero who finds himself accompanied on a great adventure by a more down-to-earth everyday figure. The down-to-earth character often doesn't want to be on the adventure at all, and is only there through seeming chance, or out of devotion to his idealistic master. Yet it turns out that the down-to-earth character is usually essential to the success of the adventure. Often, in searching for food and drink, or running away from the dragon, these everyday characters stumble upon something lucky, something valuable.

To give three examples in different languages, there are Cervantes' Don Quixote and his

servant Sancho Panza; there is Papageno, who follows the noble knight Tamino in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, but just wants to settle down with a pretty little wife; and to take a popular example in English, there are the Hobbits - the folk from the Shire, who love eating, drinking and dancing. They form part of Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* along with noble characters such as the wizard Gandalf and the princely Aragorn. Indeed it is a Hobbit who must be the bearer of the One Ring.

So there is psycho-spiritual truth for us here. Spiritual life does not involve jettisoning our humanity, but transforming it in the light of the Dharma.

There is much more that I could say about all this, but I still want to look, more briefly, at two other critical situations in spiritual life.

### **3. At odds with others views**

Let us look at the position of an experienced knight who has been questing for some time. He has gained his own definite experience of the Quest, and in consequence he also has his own opinions about the best way to go about it. Listening to some of the speeches at Camelot, even those from Arthur himself, he finds himself unconvinced by some of the points being made. Not only that, the fellowship of the Round Table is changing around him. (Some people are even arguing that the name of the fellowship should be changed, as the whole idea of a round table, with its democratic associations, plays badly in some of the barbarian borderlands from which the fellowship hopes to recruit.)

So what is our knight to do? Does he argue, and perhaps cause trouble and bad feeling? Or does he quietly go his own way, leaving those with whom he disagrees to get on with things?

Of course the answer is neither of the above. In the early stages of spiritual life one tends to assume that one's spiritual teachers are right, and it is often easy to suppress one's doubts and disagreements. Later, as one becomes more individual, the tendency is to assume that we are right, and that those with whom we disagree have got it wrong. Thereby we save ourselves the bother of having to argue our case. But if we are right then we have a responsibility to argue for what we believe. If the others are right, we need to take their arguments seriously enough to be able to hear what they have to say. In these difficult situations, we need to find a middle way, in which we give weight both to our own views and those of those with whom we disagree. We need not put anyone, ourselves or others in the wrong. It is simply a case of carrying on a dialogue.

We explain the truth as we see it, and we allow others to express the truth as they see it. There is no need to fall out, we can engage in a cooperative exploration of how things are. Sometimes the issue is clouded by the fact that, in the early stages of our Dharma life, we may have relied on our teacher or leading Order members in an unrealistic way. There is always a tendency in life to feel that if we can just find the right person and follow what they say, everything is guaranteed to turn out well. In a sense this is true. If we just follow the Buddha's advice, then all will

eventually be very well indeed. But inevitably there are misunderstandings.

Our teacher or preceptor may not understand some aspect of our character; we may misunderstand some aspect of their advice. If our reliance on our spiritual friend is a naive one, then sooner or later it will be disappointed. The response of naïveté to disappointment is usually a sense of betrayal.

This is another common spiritual crucial situation in which many of us western Buddhists are likely to find ourselves at some point. It seems to me that the response to this still has to be a middle way. One extreme is to take the fault upon ourselves, feeling that the advice we have been given must be right, and if it has not worked for us, we must somehow be at fault. The other is to blame our spiritual friend for the fact that things have not turned out how we hoped.

The middle way is still just friendly dialogue. When things have gone wrong in this way, an openhearted discussion with your spiritual friend about what has happened can take your relationship onto a new spiritual level.

#### **4. The endgame looms**

Now it is time to move on to our fourth crucial situation. Before, we saw a young and relatively new knight. But some members of the fellowship of the Round Table have been adventuring for many years. Let us follow one knight who is now into middle age. He has ventured far in his quest, over many lands, fighting many battles on the way, but there is still no sign of the Grail. And his noble steed is getting old and lame. His reflexes are getting a bit slow for fighting dragons, and his arthritic right knee sometimes gives way as he is rescuing a maiden from a tower.

And at times he worries about the future. How will he support himself when he is too old for adventuring? In his ragged cloak he looks like a vagabond. It is only his belief in the knightly ideal that distinguishes him. What will become of him?

If success in the Grail Quest depends on purity of mind, then he knows that his mental states are a mixed bag. There are some positive habits that are well-established; but there are also some negative tendencies that he has never got around to dealing with, and he knows that they too have become deep ruts.

While in the early stages of the Quest he could see changes in himself almost week by week, now he struggles to make progress, like an army fighting uphill against an enemy that is well dug in. Every yard has to be gained by intense effort.

And he lives in a world that has changed greatly since he was part of that early handful of knights who set out to quest together, believing that it would only be a few months, a year or two at most, before they were all living permanently in the presence of the Grail. When he started out there seemed to be a whole movement in society, young starry-eyed people all full of idealism for a new world. Now the knights are barely respected. People

are only interested in improving their material lot. As he rides slowly along on his old mount, he passes long queues of farm wagons on the roads as peasants go to buy new log seats, and sticks to patch up their dwellings, from Hovelbase.

When he returns to Camelot, though glad to see old friends, he is tired of the new young knights full of gung ho energy for the Grail Quest. He finds it hard to relate to them any more.

What is he to do? Should he push on, continuing to follow the Quest to which he has given the best years of his life? Or should he start looking to the future, give up questing, and do something that will ensure that he will be provided for in his old age?

One can easily sympathise with the ageing knight's plight. Middle-age brings another shower of reality, which can easily dowse whatever is left of the idealism of youth. In the early days of the Order there was quite a sense that the spiritual war would be all over by Xmas. The FWBO would make a major impact on the world. Not only that, but many of us in the UK came out of a benign period both economically and socially. Economically, there were full student grants for those who wanted to go to university, and it was easy to sign on as unemployed and receive a basic amount of support. And we were part of a wider movement in society - an alternative, radical culture. In the late '60s and early '70s, it did seem possible that there could be a major social revolution.

Nowadays capitalism and consumerism are dominant, so there is less emotional support for the spiritual life. Economically, times are tougher, and there is an increasing awareness that those who have not provided financially for their old age may be left with very little.

So one can understand people who feel the need, or even see it as their responsibility, to provide for themselves as they grow older. Even if it means that they have less time and energy to put into spreading the Dharma.

Personally though, I made a decision about this long ago, and I see no reason to change it. I decided that there were basically two possibilities for my old age – if I lived that long, (and of course now is the only time that we have for certain). Either I would have got somewhere with the Dharma, in which case the fact that I was starving in a garret somewhere would not bother me very much. I would feel that my life had been worthwhile. Or when I was old I would feel that I had not really got anywhere with the Dharma, in which case the pain of that would haunt me, and the fact that I was also starving in a garret would only add insult to the real injury.

I have always believed that the Dharma protects those who practise it. A Tibetan lama – Pabongka Rinpoche - once claimed that no sincere Dharma practitioner had ever starved, and I cannot think of any case that disproves his statement. And in the West, even though times are harder economically, I still do not think, unless you have dependents, that there is really any reason to divert major amounts of energy from more direct spiritual practice in order to bolster your living situation in old age.

I would like to see lots of us going for broke. Yes, we may end up having to live at a subsistence level. We may not be able to afford the best health care, or to travel as much as we would like, but we are very unlikely to starve. Indeed, we are likely to live in conditions that most serious Buddhist practitioners down the centuries would regard as pretty comfortable indeed.

I spent most of my recent sabbatical year in a wooden hut in the Spanish mountains, and I have to say that my life and my Dharma practice were much easier under those conditions than they are now that I have come back to a nice little flat in Birmingham.

A mid-life crisis is often the product of a whole complex of conditions. But to the extent that our knight is thinking of compromising his quest, of playing safe, I must say that I hope he will find the courage to carry on. Doing so, it seems to me, depends on finding a measure of renunciation born of insight.

A mid-life crisis is often partly caused by intimations that life will leave us with nothing. We start to be able to picture ourselves sitting in the ruins of our health, our vitality, our virility. In response we begin to look for comfort. Also, we are at a stage in our spiritual lives where we are struggling with deep, intractable habits, samskaras that perhaps have been there for lifetimes. So the tendency can be to get discouraged, to head for cover, to settle for comfort.

In his old cloak on his ageing steed, surrounded by people busy feathering their nests, it would be easy for our knight to feel that if he carries on with the Quest he will be left with nothing. But hopefully he will realise that it is worldly life that will always leave him with nothing. Even if he stops his questing and starts providing for his old age, old age will still gradually strip him of all happiness, and at death he will have to leave behind possessions, family, friends, loved ones.

So actually mundane life is guaranteed to leave him with nothing sooner or later. The only thing that he will take with him into death is whatever he has made of himself. If he has had a vision of the Grail then he will not care if he is dying in some lonely cave.

## **Conclusion**

I am well aware of some of the limitations of this talk. I have had to make some very large generalisations about westerners and the spiritual life. There may be some of you to whom nothing of what I have said applies - because your cultural conditioning is different; or because you are a different kind of character; or because you have a lot of faith and good karma. So I apologise to those of you who don't see the point, and would have liked something more obviously inspiring than a talk about spiritual difficulties and crises.

However, even if you feel none of this applies to you, I suggest you file away what I have said, either so that you can help other Order members or mitras who are going through the kinds of difficult time I've described, or because one day one of them might happen

to you.

Personally I do find considering these topics inspiring. Bhante refers in a poem to spiritual life not being like a broad highway, but more like hacking a rough path through the jungle. I believe that this is especially true for Western Buddhists. I find it inspiring to think that we are pioneers. Our maps and charts of the spiritual life are only rough and approximate. We are still learning what the spiritual life is like for westerners. I would like us to be working to improve our maps. This can partly be done by continuing to explore our eastern Buddhist heritage - coming to know the tradition better, so that we find more and more that is of relevance to our own Dharma life.

I would also like to see us continuing Bhante's work of exploring our western heritage - including western religious literature. It can be easy to think that as we have the Dharma we shall not be prey to any of the difficulties documented in Christian literature, such as the Dark Night of the Soul, or accidie (a kind of spiritual sloth, indifference, or depression common to monks and others living ascetic lives in the Middle Ages). But we are a cross-breed generation. Yes, we have the Dharma, ably translated for us by Bhante. But we also have psyches deeply influenced by western culture and traditions, so we can perhaps expect our spiritual lives to be a mixture showing aspects of both the Dharma and western conditioning. So we need to make new maps of what we find as a result of that mixture of influences.

As people who go for Refuge, we are all the time gathering information about the spiritual terrain. We can all contribute to the task of making improved maps. For instance it is important that when we as Order members go through hard times we shouldn't assume that we are not proper Order members and skulk off to lick our wounds. Our experience, good or bad, is valuable to the Order. We need to share our experience with others so that we and the Order can learn from it - so that more detail can be added to the Order's chart of the spiritual life in practice.

And when we find ourselves in crisis or in crucial situations as Order members, it is vital that we trust our basic sincerity. If we are off track, it is not because we are bad Order members and bad people. We are off track because we have put ourselves into too difficult conditions, or because we have not understood ourselves or the Dharma deeply enough. All these things can be remedied.

Also, as we have seen, sometimes we misinterpret our experience. We can feel that we are coming apart when actually what is happening to us, approached in the right way, can be a breakthrough. On the other hand, there can also be times when we perceive nothing wrong when actually we are in serious trouble spiritually. A case in point might be one where we have managed to get into a position where nobody is actually witnessing our Going for Refuge. We are still around, but we are not in sufficiently deep communication with a preceptor, a senior Order member, our chapter, even another good friend, for anyone to be really tracking what is going on with us. Often having semi-consciously manoeuvred ourselves into this position, we feel rather free, individual, and not answerable to anyone. But frequently this is a disastrous state of affairs, which slowly

shows its negative effects as time goes on.

So I hope that we shall all work together to make more and more accurate maps of the spiritual life as it is lived out in practice by members of the Order. And I hope that we shall include in those maps what we have learned about crucial situations such as the four I have outlined:

1. A Crisis of belief;
2. Falling into the heart centre, in which we find our idealism and our humanity in conflict;
3. The crucial situation of finding ourselves at odds with the views of our teacher or our spiritual friends;
4. The crisis that often comes upon us in middle age, when we have to begin to work out a strategy for how we shall play the endgame of our spiritual lives.

### **PostScript: the end of the quest**

I have probably said enough, but in preparing this talk I found a rather odd and eccentric postscript to it coming into my mind. It insisted that it was part of the talk, although it seems a very odd note to end on, and my first instinct was to leave it on the cutting-room floor. But, as this part of my consciousness was very insistent, I shall read you what it wanted to say, and you can make whatever you will of it. It was this:

And at the end of the Quest, you ride up at last to the Grail Castle. Its moat is full; its drawbridge raised; its portcullis lowered. You blow a note on your horn, and after some time a face appears at an upper window of a tower. As the face is hidden in shadow you cannot tell if it is young or old, male or female. But from it a voice calls out: "We're closed for repairs. Come back for our grand re-opening on April the 1st. The tea rooms are open though. And you can view the grounds. You'll need to buy a ticket from the kiosk next to Sir Galahad's gift shop."

"But I've come for the Grail!" you cry.

"Oh that", says the voice, "you'll have to go round the back." And the face vanishes.

As the face has disappeared, and the drawbridge is still raised, and the moat is just as full as it was ten minutes before, there is no alternative. You ride round the back.

Behind the castle is the kitchen garden, and a large wooden shed, full of tools, where the gardeners make their tea. You dismount to explore the shed. Inside it you find a man whom you recognize - an old retainer from Camelot, who was a servant of your family when you first set out on the Quest.

“What are you doing here?” you ask.

“I’ve been working here for years,” he replies. “The climate’s better for my joints than Camelot. And I prefer a quieter life. There was always too much going on at Arthur’s court. Though once they open the theme park here next spring, I’ll be thinking of moving on again. What brings you here?”

“I’m questing for the Grail. I believe it’s here somewhere.”

“Oh, that. Well if you came on horseback it’s here now, though it wasn’t before.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, all those years ago, when you suddenly got fired up with this knight-errantry business, and wanted to leave in a tearing hurry, I was told to saddle your horse. You were in too much of a rush, babbling on about the Quest, and being a perfect knight, for me to find out what you were questing for. But I thought the Grail might come in useful for you. So I slipped it in the bottom of your left-hand saddle-bag, under that copy of Conze’s translation of the Large Sutra of Perfect Wisdom that you wanted to take along.”

“Oh, that. I never got around to reading it.”

“Ah, I might have known that you probably wouldn’t...”

“So are you trying to tell me that I’ve been riding round the country all these years, starving, fighting battles, being nearly baked alive by dragons, and all the time the Grail was within six inches of my left leg?”

“That’s right.”

“So all that questing was a complete and utter waste of time!”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. If you hadn’t spent all those years searching, you wouldn’t have ridden round the back of the Grail Castle this afternoon. You wouldn’t have met me, and I wouldn’t have told you where to find the Grail. Anyway, take a look in that saddlebag. It should be there right enough.”

“But how did you come to have the Grail in the first place?”

“Well, that’s a long story. And there’s no time for it now. I’ve got to get back to my turnips.” And with that he wanders off back into the garden.