Entering the Buddha's Realm

by Vishvapani

The Buddha said that his teaching was both ‘strange’ and ‘wonderful’, and the word ‘realm’ suggests the same. A ‘realm’ is a region presided over by a ruler, a kingdom, and it’s an archaic word, suggesting something romantic and mysterious, like ‘the realms of gold’, through which John Keats says he passed in his journeys through literature.

On the one hand the Buddha and the Dharma are very down to earth. The Buddha continually reminded people to be alert to the present moment and what is actually happening. His key insights were into things you can easily verify by observing the world around you: that everything is impermanent, for example. But on the other hand it would be a mistake to think that the Buddha is just like you or me, and that the state of enlightenment he describes is just like our ordinary experience minus the anxiety and grumpiness. The Buddha also comes from another world, a world which is very strange and quite beyond anything we already know. The Buddha has been described in the West in many ways: as a philosopher, a psychologist, a social reformer, and a religious teacher like the other teachers who we think we understand. Sometimes descriptions like these can suggest useful points of comparison, but if we take them literally they are just as likely to mislead us. We might be better off thinking that the Buddha is a mystery: not a muddle and not an enigma, but something that we cannot understand through concepts alone.

Perhaps a key to reconciling these two perspectives on the Buddha and the Dharma is in the experience that you can have when you connect strongly with Buddhist teachings. If you become deeply engaged with meditation you can feel that you are connecting with yourself more truly than you have for a long time, even that you are able to experience yourself – to be yourself – more fully than you ever have in your life. When you have such an experience you also feel that it is just the start: that if only you could say connected to that way of being it would unfold more and more fully. Or sometimes a truth, such as the teaching of impermanence, can strike you with a stunning force – for example if a relationship ends or someone you love dies – and along with the pain is a sense of touching something more real and more true than your daily life. And you sense that this is something you have always known somewhere deep down, and perhaps you have forgotten. In the Buddha’s teaching we could say (as the American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it) ‘we recognise our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.’

The realm disclosed by the Buddha’s teachings is wonderful for the same reason: because it tells us something that we may have always known and forgotten, but which we

certainly don't know in our present experience. But there is also a sense, when we engage deeply with the Buddha's teaching, that we are being told something that is absolutely new – not because it is novel, but because its truth is as fresh and penetrating now as it has ever been. This is the sense in which the Dharma is wonderful. Plato says that philosophy begins with wonder, and the same is also true of the spiritual life. It grows from the sense that the universe we inhabit is vast beyond imagining, and the possibilities of our human lives are similarly incalculable.

Returning to the quotation from Emerson, the question arises, if these really are our own thoughts then why should we have rejected them. Emerson himself says that it is because we are fooled into thinking that other people's thoughts are more important than our own. This is conformity, the tendency to think that others know best and that we should keep quiet and fit in. Emerson's antidote to this, which is also very Buddhist, is to 'learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across the mind from within'. These insights do flash into our mind, only we do not have the habit of noticing them, and they offer the opportunity to discover our selves in their glow.

But perhaps there is another reason as well. Perhaps we turn from such understanding because we are afraid of what our deepest understanding tells us: afraid of the challenge it poses our habits, the thousand ways we have found to make our lives comfortable. And perhaps we also sometimes have the same response to the Dharma itself, the Buddha's reminder to us of what we might be.

The Buddha's teaching does not come down to concepts such as the eightfold path or the four kinds of emptiness; it isn't about stories or symbols or rituals or the other things we associate with religion. Perhaps it is best to say that it comes down to an orientation. This doesn't mean becoming oriental, it means a direction we can take in our lives. Following the Buddhist path means becoming more kind and more aware, but we can go further than that. It means travelling more and more in the direction of truth, and away from ignorance and concealment about the real nature of ourselves, our lives and our connectedness with others. And it means travelling more and more in the direction of freedom. So not only is the Buddha described as being awakened, wise and compassionate, he is also described as being free, and the Dharma is the path of liberation.

Siddhartha's Going Forth

But what are we freeing ourselves from, and what are we freeing ourselves for? An incident from the life of the Buddha tells the story of the start of his journey to freedom, when he was known as Prince Siddhartha. The well-known legend of the Buddha's

upbringing describes how he was protected from ugliness and suffering, and surrounded only by the young and beautiful. But his dream of pleasure was interrupted by what came to be known as the Four Sights: travelling outside his palace he encountered an old person, a sick person and a corpse, and he understood fully and finally that these were parts of life. Maybe, we can imagine, he had seen such people before, but this time he saw them afresh and realised that they challenged everything he held dear.

But there was a forth sight in addition to the old person, sick person and corpse. Siddhartha also saw a wandering monk or sadhu, a yellow-robed spiritual seeker who had left behind the worldly life. The sight of this person affected Siddhartha just as deeply as the others and seemed to suggest a way forward. He would have known that in the forest lived other monks, who devoted themselves to seeking the meaning of life through meditation and philosophy. There were rumoured to be great masters who could dwell for weeks in a blissful trance, or go for months without eating. Perhaps, he may have wondered, he could find among them a teacher who would help him answer his questions. One thing was for sure, a life in which one did not try to find a way to overcome human suffering was not worth living. It was a lie or an evasion.

So it was, the legends tell us, that In the middle of the night Siddhartha quietly rose from his bed, and the Palace was asleep as he stole through its noiseless corridors to where Chanda, his charioteer, was waiting. They rode into the night, and even the hoof-beats of their horses seemed muffled. On the brow of a hill they paused to look back on the sleeping town while the night-sky glittered above them like a thousand gods offering their blessings. At dawn they crossed the border to the neighbouring kingdom of Magadha and rode on to the edge of the forest. Siddhartha drew his knife from its sheath and knelt down as he cut away at his hair. It lay on the ground like the past he was leaving behind.

This episode has become known as the Going Forth, and the image of leaving behind the world and its pursuits has inspired Buddhism ever since. Siddhartha went forth from one lifestyle into another, a life of renunciation and intense practice. We may not be in a position to follow him all the way into the forest, but he was also leaving behind a set of attitudes and attachments that fettered him spiritually. Whatever lifestyle we adopt, if we are to follow the Buddha at all, we need to ask what holds us back, and how we can let go.

This connects with the question, what is freedom? America describes itself as the ‘land of the free’ and the Declaration of Independence speaks of the ‘unalienable Rights’ to ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’ Leaving aside the equally thorny question of what really makes us happy, this leaves us asking, what is liberty? The Buddha’s key insight

was that true freedom is not to be found in free speech, free trade or even free love, fine though these may be. It is to be found within, in freedom from what the English poet William Blake called 'the mind-forged manacles': the tendencies that cause us to constrain and limit ourselves, and which lead to the world's other oppressions. As the Buddha endlessly repeated, 'All things proceed from the mind'.

The Three Fetters

Following his Awakening the Buddha described the spiritual path in numerous ways and one of these formulations speaks of breaking ten fetters: or we might say the chains and shackles, the constraints and impediments that bind us to our limitations. The fact that there are ten of these suggests that our tendency to restrict ourselves goes very deep, but it is traditionally said that we can focus on just the first three, because if these are broken we 'enter the stream' meaning that we have liberated within ourselves powerful spiritual forces that will surely continue to carry us forward.

The traditional formulations of these fetters are: having a fixed view of self; doubt and indecision in regard to the Dharma; and attachment to rites and rituals as ends in themselves. These may sound a little abstract, but I want to look at them in the way Sangharakshita, our teacher at this centre, has reformulated them. He translates the traditional terms into three tendencies that are very down to earth and relevant, whoever we may be. These are habit, vagueness and superficiality.

Habit

Habit means our tendencies and dispositions, and we would all accept that we have some habits. We tend to notice habits most when we attempt to change them or when circumstances change. The New Year always seems like a good opportunity to try to shift some habits, like giving up smoking, or losing weight, or taking up exercise or maybe setting up a meditation practice. Resolutions are excellent, but often when we make them we discover unsuspected regions of resistance. If you try to lose weight you will become aware of your eating habits. And if you try to get up earlier in order to meditate, you will probably become aware of your habitual desire to sleep in and be comfortable.

To speak of habit as a fetter is not to say that all our habits are bad, though some may be very harmful. It means that they constrain us from being free to act in the ways we want to and in accordance with what is best in us. Another example, which suggests how deep our habits go, is the experience we often have when we sit down to meditate. If we look carefully at our experience, we can identify certain impediments to meditation. These are tendencies in the mind that rebel against our efforts to be focused, calm and positive. The

mind goes chasing after stimulation; it pushes away thoughts that are unpleasant; it gets agitated and restless; it wavers in uncertainty; or it gives up and we find ourselves falling asleep. These 'five hindrances' are habits of thought. They don't start when we sit down to meditate, they are there all the time, its just that when we try to alter our state of mind through meditation we become aware of them.

In the story of Siddhartha's Going Forth, when he sees the Four Sights the young prince becomes aware of his habitual views of the world as pleasant and comfortable. And from these views arose a lifestyle – habitual ways of living and operating. In going forth from the palace life he was leaving behind everything that was known and familiar and the habits of seeking satisfaction from the material pleasures.

Siddhartha in the story had been brainwashed by his father, who wanted to seclude him from the harsh side of life so that he would become King after him, rather than following the path of renunciation. That may seem the stuff of fairy stories, but our own culture, we could say, brainwashes us, influences us to accept certain values and the behaviour that follows from them. Entire industries, abetted by advertising, are devoted to turning us into consumers, who will keep the economy growing by desiring and purchasing their goods. We come to believe that we need to have a certain income, drive a certain kind of car, dress a particular way or get stimulation from this week's package of entertainment. And even if we don't respond, our children probably will. Advertising aims to instil consuming habits in us, and pretty soon, we're sold.

So one of Buddhism's teachings that is more relevant now than ever before is the emphasis on contentment and leading a simple life. We may not be about to walk off into a forest, but we can look at how we spend our money and what we do with our time and, rather than searching out more of everything, we can ask how we can be more content with less, and how we can simplify things.

Overcoming the fetter of habit means being open to our experience: what our life is really telling us, not the old story we have pre-packaged. This is why the traditional formulation says that we overcome our 'fixed self-view'. We get away from the idea that are stuck with ourselves exactly as we are. But saying that we have no fixed self view doesn't mean that we have no character. As Sangharakshita puts it: 'It is not so much that we never have a self as that we always have a new self. And if each new self is better than the last, then we can say that spiritual progress is taking place. The opposite of habit is creativity.

Vagueness

Habit is really the fundamental fetter, and all the others could be seen as aspects of this overarching tendency, so I will deal with them a little more briefly. Vagueness, or doubt could be seen as another kind of habit: it is the persistent wish to avoid making decisions, forming definite views and opinions, or knowing who we are. This is different from the uncertainty that comes with critical thinking: if we cannot genuinely be sure about something then we need to be aware of that. This is an emotional predisposition to be unclear and uncommitted.

Why should human beings do that? Well, if, as I suggested earlier, we really do already have an intuitive sense of the truth, even if that is deeply buried, then the reason for us to remain vague is obvious. If we were to become clearer we would have to act, we would have to change our lives so that they were more in keeping with our ideals. So the antidote to vagueness is clarity: having the courage to see when we are failing to act and prefer to remain in a comfortable state of indecision, protected from outside influences. We can develop this for ourselves, or be shocked into it by circumstances, as Siddhartha was when he saw the old man, the sick man and the corpse, but when clarity comes we betray only ourselves if we fail to follow it.

Superficiality

The third of these fetters is superficiality, or in the traditional formulation, ‘attachment to rites and rituals as ends in themselves’. The traditional form sounds as if it is referring to a religious context but, as ‘superficiality’ suggests, its implications go much further. This is our tendency to stay on the surface of our experience without putting ourselves into anything fully or wholeheartedly.

In any aspect of our lives, whether it is our career, social life, our love life or our spiritual life we find that we achieve most when we are wholehearted. But often our ideas are telling us one thing while our emotions are saying something quite different. We think we want to lose weight or take up meditation, but our emotions haven’t signed up. So our engagement is with the surface of things.

Superficiality also means taking the means for the ends. Perhaps we take up meditation for straightforward reasons to do with wanting to be calmer and kinder, but if we make a little progress we can get excited, and imagine that it will make us more attractive and advance our career, or subtly flatter the sense that we are special and better than others. In the history of religions this tendency to make spiritual practices into props for the ego is very evident.

The antidote to superficiality is commitment: developing the capacity to engage with the whole of ourselves and see through our engagement. It also means staying faithful to our truest motivations and aspirations. The image of the Buddha leaving behind his comforts and heading into the unknown for the sake of what he believed to be most true and valuable captures the quality of commitment. He wasn't interested in having a role, not even that of a holy man. His search was for liberation.

Breaking these fetters of habit, vagueness and superficiality and developing the qualities of creativity, clarity and commitment may sound daunting, but it can be a gradual process. It can be painful to give things up, to go forth, but it is also exhilarating. With each step in the direction of these qualities we enter just a little more into the realm of the Buddha, and discover a little more fully just how strange it is, and just how wonderful. And as we do so, step by step we will follow the Siddhartha into that great forest.

Picture the scene. Chanda turned the horses, shaking his head, and rode away. Siddhartha turned to look at the path leading before him into the forest. The trees loomed, and their soaring branches looked to him like arms opening to greet him. The cool, green light within the woods seemed a refuge. And the whisper of the wind in the leaves seemed to call him to a new life away from the world.

He was no longer a prince, no longer a husband; he was nobody, and he had nothing. It was the greatest adventure he had ever known.