General Introduction to Sangharakshita's Seminars

Hidden Treasure

From the mid-seventies through to the mid-eighties, Urgyen Sangharakshita led many seminars on a wide range of texts for invited groups of Order members and Mitras. These seminars were highly formative for the FWBO/Triratna as Sangharakshita opened up for the still very young community what it might mean to live a life in the Dharma.

The seminars were all recorded and later transcribed. Some of these transcriptions have been carefully checked and edited and are now available in book form. However, a great deal of material has so far remained unchecked and unedited and we want to make it available to people who wish to deepen their understanding of Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma.

How should one approach reading a seminar transcription from so long ago? Maybe the first thing to do is to vividly imagine the context. What year is it? Who is present? We then step into a world in which Sangharakshita is directly communicating the Dharma. Sometimes he is explaining a text, at other times he is responding to questions and we can see how the emergence of Dharma teachings in this context was a collaborative process, the teaching being drawn out by the questions people asked. Sometimes those questions were less to do with the text and arose more from the contemporary situation of the emerging new Buddhist movement.

Reading through the transcripts can be a bit like working as a miner, sifting through silt and rubble to find the real jewels. Sometimes the discussion is just a bit dull. Sometimes we see Sangharakshita trying to engage with the confusion of ideas many of us brought to Buddhism, confusion which can be reflected in the texts themselves. With brilliant flashes of clarity and understanding, we see him giving teachings in response that have since become an integral part of the Triratna Dharma landscape.

Not all Sangharakshita's ways of seeing things are palatable to modern tastes and outlook. At times some of the views captured in these transcripts express attitudes and ideas Triratna has acknowledged as unhelpful and which form no part of our teaching today. In encountering all of the ideas contained in over seventeen million words of Dharma investigation and exchange, we are each challenged to test what is said in the fire of our own practice and experience; and to talk over 'knotty points' with friends and teachers to better clarify our own understanding and, where we wish to, to decide to disagree.

We hope that over the next years more seminars will be checked and edited for a wider readership. In the meantime we hope that what you find here will inspire, stimulate, encourage - and challenge you in your practice of the Dharma and in understanding more deeply the approach of Urgyen Sangharakshita.

Sangharakshita's Literary Executors and the Adhisthana Dharma Team

DISCLAIMER

This transcript has not been checked by Sangharakshita, and may contain mistakes and mishearings. Checked and reprinted copies of all seminars will be available as part of the Complete Works Project.

for it to be associated with or connected with. So it can then (as it were) proceed infinitely outwards, not finding any line of demarkation, not finding any sort of material body with which it is identified. So in order to help this process you can (as it were)' think of your consciousness extending as far as the other side of the universe, if you can imagine such a thing. But, you know, your consciousness extends as far as that, it's not limited. But the essential thing is to have sort of sensation or the experience of (sort of) indefinite or infinite expansion of your consciousness. It is not that, say, a drop literally slips into, or merges into, the sea, shining or otherwise. Because there's a limitation, of course the sea is horizontal, whereas here there is expansion in all directions, your not limited in that horizontal direction in the way that the sea is. So don't take this image of the smaller consciousness (sort of) merging inot the greater too literally - maybe drop that image altogether, thinking simply in terms of barriers removed in the sense of lines of demarkation removed.

Prasannasiddhi: In the lecture, when you're describing that, I think you say it's unenlightened consciousness merging with Enlightened consciousness. So is that universal consciousness - is that Enlightened?

S: Well, when one speaks of unenlightened consciousness merging with Enlightened clearly there's no actual merging. It's that the line of demarkation between Lhe two has been removed.

Prasannasiddhi: So if you were to practise that practice, try to have that experience, then you would become Enlightened?

S: Yes I wouldn't make a literal distinction between consciousness and Enlightenment. I would say the infinite consciousness is the Enlightened state. Though of course one must also bear in mTh'nd that that infinite consciousness, the consciousness which, as the Madhyamikas would be careful to add, was a Void consciousness; it's not a sort of entity, it's not a thing.

Kamalas'ila: It's more an infinite consciousness in the sense of the sixth dhyana. It's more an infinite consciousness in that sense?

S: Yes. Yes, one could say that. Although of course beyond that consciousness one has got other higher dhyana states. I'm not sure that one should really regard those as higher states so much as unfolding dimensions of the so-called lower of the higher dhyanas. That's something I won't go into now because I've been having all sorts of thoughts about that recently. Something to which I've given attention for a number of years, and I'm gradually coming to certain conclusions, but I'm not quite ready to talk about them yet.

Vessantara: In the last stage of that practice, with the removal of barriers, would that ... doing the practice, trying to imagine yourself into the experience, would you imagine your experience as encompassing all kinds of dimensions of experience including the physical universe.

S: Well, the physical universe wouldn't be excluded, but it wouldn't constitute a barrier. It's as though your consciousness would go through it, rather like mutual intersection of the beings of coloured light that the Avatamsaka Sutra talks about. It is not

that literally something isn't there that was there before, but it is no longer seen as an obstacle or as a barrier, it becomes (as it were) transparent, so that you can go right through it. So difference is not negated, but difference is seen as not constituting any hindrance.

Prasannasiddhi: It almost seems to contradict what I'd understood - it's like you go to the (sort of) top of the dhyanas and you come back and you sort of look at the world...

S: Well, that is true in a manner of speaking. But as I've pointed out before, it's not that you (sort of) literally come back in the sense of leaving that dhyana, you leave it more in the sense of a determinate experience, it's more that you add something to it, or you use it in a certain way, to see things in a certain way. It's not that you literally are no longer in that dhyana and no longer experience it. But it certainly is modified by the fact that, say, mental processes start up again and you start, as it wre, thinking. But it's as though your thinking then becomes transparent, it is no longer a sort of hindrance, it's an aid to Enlightenment rather than an obstacle to it.

Abhaya: We usually do the stupa visualisation as a sort of warm-up practice for for the visualisation. And in the lecture you link up stupa visualisation with the six elements, somehow. I was wondering if one could do the stupa visualisation as a (sort of) six element practice, if one includes the sky as consciousness, and thereby that will be a form of the six element practice...

S: That's true.

Abhaya: . ..which would be an Insight.practice. Is that possible?

S: How would it be an Insight practice then?

Abhaya: Well, I assume the six element is a vipassana practice, so you..

S: O.K. The six element practice is an Insight practice by virtue of the fact that a certain kind of understanding is developed. That is to say that you understand that the earth, the element composing your body, doesn't belong to you, you have to give it back, so that is a direct negation of one's usual grasping ego- based tendency. But if you simply visualise the element earth, simply visualise that yellow cube, there's no element of under- standing, and of Insight, in that mere - that simple - visualisation.

Abhaya: So could you then possibly do the visualisation, and as a sort of stuti just repeat a (sort of) phrase like "there is in me the element earth" while you're visualising ... "I must give back that..."

S: You could do. I mean, I don't know that that was a traditional practice, but there's no reason why one shouldn't practice in that way. One could only try it and see whether one did in fact... found it helpful. In that case of course the concentration on the visualised yellow cube, for instance, would help one in developing concentration, so that one could then reflect undistractedly that

the element earth, which is in my physical body, does not belong to me. But personally, I've always found the repetition of those words sufficient, because the words are like a sort of mantra, and the words themselves do enable you to concentrate the mind by repeating those words and really (as it were) thinking about them you develop (it seems to me) the requisite degree of concentration. But if that was difficult for you, and if you found visualisation easy, there's no reason why you shouldn't also visualise the element about which you were reflecting. If you were able to do it it would be in some ways a fuller and richer practice. And some people of course might find it too much, might find it quite enough to actually remember those particular words and repeat them reflecting in that particualr way.

Abhaya: I was thinking for people who can't visualise, usually they might find it takes them a bit of time to ...

S: That may well be so. Not having tried that I can't say, but some people might find it did help. In which case there'd be no reason why one should see it in that particular way.

Vessantara: Devamitra had a follow up question from last night, about obedience.

S: Ah.

Devamitra: From what you said last night it seems clear that as virtues, obedience and the ability to take the initiative are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, many people who are chronically lacking in initiative, either because they're unwilling to take the initiative or are incapable of doing so, are possibly equally equally unwilling or unable, of doing whatever they might be told to do by someone else. They may adopt the position that to do something that somebody else had told them to do would inhibit their own latent capacity for taking the initiative (laughter) and it would have a stultifying effect on their growth. Would that be justified?

S: I was thinking about this last night after the session finished and a thought which came to me was you can only obey if you've got quite a strdng will. Hmm? (laughter) It's almost as though you've got to have something to obey with. Another thought which occurred to me was more in the form of a recollection, a little incident that took place not so long ago at Padmaloka - I have already talked about it though at Padmaloka. I had some visitors, and they were from Nepal, and along with them they brought a boy of about - how old was he? - about ten it might have been. And some- thing which was quite interesting happened. Ratnaprabha was doing the honours - bringing tea and coffee and so on - and he was trying to persuade this boy to have something and he was saying, "Well, would you like some coffee?" So the boy said "Nah, nah" (a bit shy) and then "Well, would you like some tea?", no. Ratnaprabha was trying to .... no he didn't want any tea "Well, some milk?" no, "Some orange juice?" no. So then his uncle I think it was (he was Nepalese) said "We never ask children what they want, we just give them". So this really struck me and I was thinking about this. A child very often just doesn't know what it wants, yeh? If you give it a cup of tea, it'll drink the tea, or as much of it as it wants, you give it milk it'll drink it. It's not bothered so to speak, usually, you know, a healthy child. But if you ask him to (sort of) make up his mind - well, in a sense he doesn't have a mind to make up. Well, what can he do? He can only say no. He's

not even thinking about it. He's in a rather sort of dreamy state perhaps. And if you put something in front of him he'll take it. So that's what they do in the East more, they don't ask children: "Well, would you like this Johnny? 11 or "Would you like to do that Mary?" and "How about such and such?" If you do this to children what happens? It's confusing, and they have to develop the sort of whim in order to respond to your particular question. So if a child is brought up - and this was the sort of thought I had, which I'm sort of in process of exploring, I'm not coming to any definite or very concrete conclusions - but if a child is brought up always being asked what it wants, always being forced to say what it wants to do, what it would like to do, what it doesn't wantTho do, what it doesnW like, well, you1re not going to find later on that thaUchild (or even at the same time) that that child is going to find it very easy to do what he is told. One does find this is Indian families. Again another Indian couple came to see me, friends of mine bringing the three children, and it was really quite noticeable, as it always is with Indian families, how obedient the children are. But it's not that the parents are heavy, it's not that they're tyranical. There's a very great deal of warmth and affection between the parents and the children, a quite human sort of relation. But nonetheless, when father says "Come on, we're going now." Yes, the child is quite ready to go, he doesn't burst into tears and say (imitates) "No, I wanna stay" (laughter) like an English or American child would do, no, he's just quite happy to go. Do you see? So perhaps because we bring up children (with this idea of being able to be)? asked what they would like, and all that sort of thing, and be treated as individuals. Well, they're obviously not individuals and not going to be so for a long time to coome, you're just creating

trouble for the child, at that time and later on, and for yourself. So perhaps this has got something to do with the fact that we find it so difficult to obey. Sometimes I almost wish I had dozen or two children of my own so I could carry out a few experiments (laughter). 'Cos I don't like to sort of take things on trust from other people. (laughter continues) I'm not making suggestions but those of you who happen already to have children you could perhaps just observe them and just see whether this is borne out.

Pete Dobson: You're always welcome to come to the farm.

S: (chuckles) Well you see, the occasional experiment is not enough you've got (laughter) ... daily experiments over a long period, and just observe very carefully. So perhaps it~~~he best way of treating children: always to ask them what they want or what they'd like. Just give them, just firmly and in a natural sort of way, and they'll just get into the way, accepting, doing what they're asked to do. I've also noticed among Indian children: they like to do what their parents ask them to do. They d~feel it's an imposition or being ordered, no. That just is not the feeling. They're happy to do something. If father says "Go and get such and such a thing for me" well, the child will happily just trot off and get it just pleased to do something for father. So that's the way Indians usually, on the whole, bring up their children. So they do have a more happy family life, and all that, than is often the case in the West. And usually, I think, the children grow up to be more positive and happy individuals.

Jonathan Brazier: But doesn't it follow that those children would grow up unable to make decisions, unable to take the initiative?

S: No. Because I think a time comes when~they naturally do that. And I think they're all the more able to do it if it hasn't been forced upon them prematurely. Because if it's been forced upon them prematurely, well, it only seems to develop a certain amount of reactivity and uncertainty which eventually gets in the way of a genuine taking the initiative.

Padmavajra: So would it be right in thinking that one of the reasons we find ... (3 words unclear) ... is because we have too many choices? That actually we need to reduce the number of ...

S: Ah! Yes, yes. It's as though reducing the number of choices strengthens the character. If you see what I mean. I've talked about this sort of thing quite often in recent years in the form of commenting on the fact that people within the FWBO often like to keep their options open. They don't like to undertake something or promise something or commit themselves to something because if they did so it might exclude some other possibility that might come along. So they're so concerned sometimes to keep their options open, out of fear of missing something, or losing something even better, that they don't actually do anything, or don't even win or achieve anything.

Pete Dobson: You never commit yourself.

S: Yes. And if you never commit yourself, what sort of character do you develop? You don't develop any sort of character at all, you've no more character than a jellyfish. (laughter) Before you can have character you've got to have some sort of backbone, and a jellyfish doesn't have a backbone, (laughter) a jellyfish is just a mess (laughter) eventually, you know, it1s washed up on the beach and just stinks (laughter), and that's all one can say about it. So, yes, if you've too many choices and keep your options open too much, and don't take a decision, well, how can their even be a question of initiative? How can there be a question of commit- ment? And therefore how can there be any character? How can there be any will? So it's as though by obeying, or having someone to obey, you narrow the range of choices. Within a sense you've no choice at all. So that's why perhaps you develop

the strongest character of all, until the time comes when it's your turn to (so to speak) give the orders, because then you're able to do that, you're in a position to do that, you're mature enough and wise enough to do that. I mean obviously I (sort of) have in mind all the reservations I made the other day about it being necessary to do all this in the love mode and not the power mode. 'Mean because the parent doesn't want to boss the child, not if the parent himself or herself is healthy and positive to begin with. The fact that the parent tells the child what to do doesn't mean that the parent enjoys (you know) ordering the child around in a neurotic sort of way, that's not the situation at all. The parent is concerned for the well being and growth of the child, and knows better than the child, very often, what is good for the child, and what it ought to do.

Pete Dobson: They do seem to definitely need a line.People are like that also aren't they? They actually like to know what they're doing.

S: Yes. Well, they like to know where they stand.

BI 4 20

Padmavajra: Going back to Buddhist tradition, is there anything w~ich you could see as obedience? Is not the term sasana related to it? In a sense ...

S: In a sense . Sasana is often translated as "message". The Buddha sasana : the message of the Buddha. But it's more than that, it's more like "command", or I've sometimes translated it as "imperative". Or it's more like the promulgation. It's interesting that in modren Indian languages "sasan-karuna" is "to govern", it's from the same root, the same word. Sometimes sasan is used for "government". So it suggests - the word Buddha-sasana - conveys that sense of binding-ness. It is that which is to be obeyed; you recognise it as it were of your own free will as being that which simply is to be obeyed and that is the way in which you respond to it. You respond to it as a sort of ethical-cum-spiritual impe~tive, which is not in the ordinary power-mode sort of sense - I think that is a point which is very difficult to grasp. You see the situation so clearly that you just have to act in that sort of way, it's not the situation that is compelling you to act, it is your sense, your own understanding, your own perception of the situation that is compelling you to act in that particualar way. There might be nobody else around at all to compel you anyway, there's only you. But none- theless you experience it as 'a situation in which you cannot but act or behave in a certain way, you've no choice.

Devamitra: So that's the latent truth or the latent

S: Yes, one could put it in that way. This is sometimes what people say when they ask for ordination. They say, well, T don't see I have any choice, there's just one thing to do, there's no alternative really~ They're not keeping their options open any more. They see really there's only one option. So it's a very strange sort of state to be in, especially if you're an Order member, that of trying to keep all your options open, even if it is only on the level of whether you should engage in this particu- lar activity or that particular activity, or spend time with this mitra or that mitra - if you wait long enough a better or more brilliant mitra might come along, who knows? It is like the young girl who rejects all her suitors, because she's got this idea of Mr Right, you know, a real Prince Charming, but the chances are if she keeps her options open in that sort of way, well, she'll find that she's an old maid and is left on the shelf. And this is often what happens with people in a general sort of way. You've all heard of the brilliant young man just down from university who can do anything, he could be a great politician, a great writer, a great actor, a great mathematician, a great musician, he's so brilliant he could be any of these things, they're all open to him. Twenty years later he hasn't done anything. And what sort of character, again, do you develop by not doing anything?

Pete Dobson: Is that because people want to be a success? Or they don't want to be a failure?

S: No. It seems to me that they're afraid of missing something. It's an almost preta-like quality. You want to keep your options open because something better may come along. It's a sort of dissatisfaction you experience with the existing situation.

Devamitra: So what's the way out of that dilemma?

S: Well one might say, well, to actually commit yourself to some particular issue or activity, but then that isn't really an answer because how are you to bring yourself to this point? Well perhaps your spiritual friends, if you've got any left, have to intervene, and point out to you what you are doing. That the years are passing by, you're not getting any younger, your jelly- fish-like qualities are developing. (laughter) You're not being evident, you're becoming a bit of a laughing stock among your peer group. But others among your peer group, they've done this and they've done that , they've achieved this and they've achieved that, and what have you achieved? Nothing. Perhaps such people have to be spoken to in that sort of way.

Devamitra: I was just wondering, in a way, if literally they did need to be told what to ...

S: Sometimes they're very conceited. Because they may think the openings that do present themselves aren't good enough for them, they're cut out for something better. Sometimes it is just conceit. But you can tell them, you can give them orders, but then they may not obey, they may even resent the fact that you are, as it seems to them, trying to order them about and tell them what to do as though they didn't know what was good for them to do. So such a person is really in a quite difficult position. It's quite difficult to help such a person. Well, there's the old English proverb: A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. But some of these sort of people have a hundred birds in the bush and not a single one in the hand. (laughter) And they don't want to have a bird in the hand because they think: Well, there might be a much bigger and better bird in that bush, and if I wait long enough I'll get that. That sort of bird if it's good enough for me it's got to be a real phoenix, a real golden eagle. I don't want just some wretched sparrow. They might think like that. So again, yes, this keeping of one's options open sometimes associated with a too big an idea of oneself, in other words associated with conceit. You don't realise that option will leda to another, one opportinity will lead to another, a small responsibility leads to a big responsibility. Certain people have said to me (not so much within the FWBO, but outside on other occasions, before I started the FWBO) : Give me something very big to do, I don't want to just bother with some footling little job, give me some really big responsibility, some big job. And you can see they're not just fit for that, they're not ready for that, not qualified for that. But that's what they're looking for. It's very difficult to teach someone obedience who was brought up, and they were actually taught (so to speak) to disobey, almost on principle. There's a lot of harm, a lot of mischief, to be undone, and it isn't easy. If you just have to obey you can be very single minded. It saves you an awful lot of trouble, an awful lot of worry.

Devamitra: And conflict.

S: And conflict, yes. No conflict. Because if there are no options, well how can there be any conflict? Well, human nature being what it is sometimes there are conflicts. So if whoever is giving the orders, say if you're a teacher asks you to go and do something, or tells you to go and do something, and that means you miss something you'd been looking forward to, well yes you may obey, but it may be, human nature being what it is, with a sort of twinge of regret.

BI 4 22

Anyway, any further questions?

Vessantara: There are a few. It's now a quarter past nine.

S: Is it?

Vessantara: Yes. That last question lasted about twenty-five minutes.

S: How many questions have we got left?

Vessantara: I think about six.

S: Do they lend themselves to brevity of treatment or not.

Vessantara: There's some I'm not well aquainted with enpugh to know.

S: Just try one anyway.

Vessantara: Dave Living.

Dave Living: It's in connection with the second vow, in the lecture, on eradicating the passions. In the lecture you speak of it more in terms of poisons. Is it just because you're dealing with beginners or can one translate the word as poison instead of passion when one reads about it generally in Buddhist literature?

S: I think I was dealing with the asravas, wasn't I? And that is usually translated as poisons or intoxicants. The term defilements is also sometimes used. But it covers all mental states of an unskillful nature. perhaps in talking to the general public "poison" is too strong a term. perhaps one could use more the expression unskilful mental states

Abhaya: What's the original Sanskrit or Pali term?

S: I'm not sure whether here it would be asava or asrava. Or whether Tt would be kilesa or kles'a. It could be either.

Abhaya: Because it seems to cover a much wider field than the klesas, which you define as 11pas~ional" or "emotional obscurations", leaving out, say, miccha-ditthis. But in the lecture the terms you use for passions seems to cover the whole gamut. So I just wondered...

S: There may be no (sort of) consistency in my own usage. I think perhaps there's no consistency in traditional Buddhist usage even. But one could perhaps speak in terms of ... well, tradition does speak in terms of unskilful mental states which are rooted in greed, which are rooted in aversion, and which are rooted in ignorance. So unskilful mental states which are rooted in ignorance aren't exactly passions in the ordinary sense, because passions connote something, it would seem, more of an emotional nature. Perhaps unskilful mental states is the broadest term. Klesa means not only defilement but an affliction, because you afflict yourself, you trouble your own mind with these negative states. Because while your mind is subject to these states it's not a happy mind. It's not a mind that is at peace or at ease with itself. So perhaps we'd better leave it there and I think we can have the remaining questions at the beginning of our next scheduled question and answer session.

Session 5 24.9.1984

(questions from lecture 67)

Kamalasila: I have got two sets of questions. One was about myths generally, and the other one was about the FWBO myth. You said in a lecture that the pattern of development for the Dharma has been for it to appear firstly in mainly rational terms and only later, in contact with larger masses of people, did it began to speak the language of myth . How did it learn to speak that language? People nowadays are generally more disconnected than ever before with the realrn of myth. In these circumstances, what can we do to engage the unconscious myths within them?

S:

- If you would like to run through it again, taking each

point separately.

Kamalasila: You said that the Dharma had developed firstly by speaking in rational terms and then, later on, engaging mythic elements, speaking the language of myth, and I wondered how that process...

S: There's two points there so let's just take the first point first, that the Dharma that is to say presumably the Buddha, had spoken first of all in...how did you phrase it?

Kamalas'ila: mainly rational terms.

S: ...mainly rational terms and then, er, after that in terms of myth. It depends to some extent on what exactly one means by 'myth'. Perhaps it depends to what extent you

take myth , as it were, literally. To what extent you regard myth as representing something real, even being something real, not so much standing for something real, but being something real.For instance, what I'm thinking of is this, and this relates to a subject whichhas been occupying my mind for some time past. It' well known that Buddhism sees existence as, so to speak, stratified intoanumber of different levels. 'Psychologically' - single inverted commas - we can think of these as the kamaloka, rupaloka, arupaloka. But what about the cosmological counterparts of those states, that is to say what about the devalokas and the brahmalokas? Are they mythology. because it would seem that the Dharma, that the Buddha, from the very beginning, as far as we can make out from the existing records, spoke in terms of devas and brahmas and devalokas and brahmalokas, as well as in terms of... as well as in more rational terms. I mean, for instance, at the very beginning of the Buddha's career as Buddha, one has that appearance of Brahma Sahampatti,according to one of the surviving accounts. So does mythology, so to speak, you know, make its appearance before the Buddha has even begun to speak. Brahma speaks even before the Buddha speaks in this particular episode. So if one regards all this use of the language of. .. .... if one regards all these references to devas and brahmas, deva- lokas and brahmalokas as constituting a mythological language, it would seem that that mythological language was present in Buddhism, you know,

from the beginning to some extent, so that it was not that to begin with you had a purely rational language and that was gradually replaced by, or supplanted by, a sort of, you know, mythological language. It is as though the element of the mythological was intervowen from the very beginning. Er.. nonetheless, I did say, I believe,. ..what did I say ? (laughter)

Kamalasila: You said that - this is my wording of it - that the

pattern of development for the Dharma has been for it to appear firstly in mainly rational terms and later speak the language of myth.

S: When one speaks of rational terms, one is thinking of all those very important(historically, and spiritually important) doctrinal formulations. One is thinking of the Four Noble Truths, The Eightfold Path, The Five Spiritual Faculties, the three lakshanas, the four viparyasas, there are dozens and dozens of them. And if one, you know, looks through the Pali Canon, if one looks through even the Sutta Pitaka and the Vinaya Pitaka, not to speak of the Abbidharma Pitaka, you certainly find a predominance

of that rational language, even though the mythological element is certainly there. So I think that when I spoke of the use of rational language being (as it were)replaced by mythological language, what I had in mind, I think, broadly speaking was the transition from the Hinayana to the Mahayana, from the Classical Hinayana to the Classical Mahayana, because one has these three well-known stages in the development of Buddhism in India, as represented by the Hinayana, Mahayana and the Vajrayana. So usually I have treated the development of Buddhism in those terms. But in more recent years I have been thinking that that is not completely accurate. I would like now, just to make things a little more difficult, actually to distinguish four stages, which means that I would like to posit before the Hinayana, the Classical Hinayana, a stage which I would like to call Archaic Buddhism. Archaic Buddhism isn't a very good term but it'll do. You probably understand what I have in mind. By Archaic Buddhism I mean the Buddhism of the Buddha and His immediate disciples, which means that I regard the Hinayana, the Classical Hinayana, as in a sense later development though at the same time based on, even growing out of, Archaic Buddhism. Now, Hinayana Buddhism, Classical Hinayana, very definitely uses predominantly a rational language in explaining the Dharma but if we go, as it were back,behind the Classical Hinayana - and of course we have no separate scriptures for the stage of Archaic Buddhism, we have to dig into the Pali Canon itself, and the surviving fragments of the Sanskrit counterparts of the Pali Canon. If we dig into them, if we read a bit between the lines, we do find, or at least I find, certainly I have come to the conclusion that Archaic Buddhism was much more given to express itself in terms of myth than was the Classical Hinayana. I'm not saying that the Buddha originally... I'm not saying that Archaic Buddhism or what I call Archaic Buddhism expressed itself predominantly in terms of myth, but I think I'm prepared to say that it expressed itself as much in terms of myth as in terms of reason. Yes? So that during that Archaic stage or period, in the development of Buddhism in India, as represented by the Dharma as taught by the Buddha and His immediate disciples, one had much more of an even balance as between the language of myth and the language of reason. And one of the things that I am at present in sort of investingating, looking into, is among others, this whole question of the devalokas and brabmalokas but especially the brahmalokas and their spiritual

significance. So one could say that one has first of all a stage lasting, by the way, I think, about a hundred years~ let us say) when the language of riyth and the language of reason were used equally. Then a period, the Hinayana period, lasting for about 500 years when language of reason definitely predominated. But then with the Mahayana, you have a period not

I would say when the language of myth predominated, though it certainly does in some Mahayana texts, for instance the Saddharma-Pundarika Sutra, the Sukhavati-Vyuha Sutras, we have a period in which there is again something more like a balance of the language of reason and the language of myth, to use those expressions. The language of reason is used much more in works like, let us say the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, there's very little sort of myth there , as well as in, say, the Lankavatara Sutra, there's hardly any myth there at all except perhaps in the opening chapter, but in the case of the Saddharma-Pundarika, the Gandhavyuha,and a number of other Mahayana sutras, there's often very little other than myth.

Of course, with the Vajrayana,~myth,and various other related features, entirely swamps the rational element. Although of course eventually the Vajrayana itself developed its own sort of scholasticism. So therefore my original statement that, you know, in the case of the history of Buddhism, the language

of reason was replaced by the language of myth, requires some modification and some expansion. Is the general picture sufficiently clear? In other words, I think that the Buddha's original teaching was formulated much less in exclusively rational terms than people think, especially than the Theravada thinks, especially than scholars in Pali Buddhism think. I think therefore th~t we have to sort of) re-activate that mythological element, which is not mythological simply in the fairy-tale sort of sense but in the arehetypal sense, in the symbolic sense, which means that it does communicate in its own way what are essentially spiritual realities.

Kamalasila: How can we...

S: Ah, yes, one further point, in the~Survey, I have spoken in terms of 'original Buddhism'. Hm? The term original Buddhism, within the context of the Survey, comprises - one must be careful to bear in mind when reading that work - comprises both what I've called Archaic Buddhism and what I've called the Classical Hinayana. In the Survey I have not made the distinction between these two. So that was the first clause.

Kamalasila: Well, I can canbine the first and second clauses into one

by saying: How was it then that the later

followers of the Buddha learnt to speak the language of myth and is this desirable for us in the West?

S: How does one learn to speak the language of myth? One might even say: Is it something that one can learn? When you ask 'how', but that how' itself, in a way, represents an assurnption that it can be learned. I mean, does one ever speak the language of myth? If so, how does one learn it?

Kamalasila: I was thinking in a manner of speaking.

S: So, I mean, how does one come to speak the language of myth? Does one ever oneself speak the language of myth? Can one think of an example of people, let us say people nowadays, contemporary people, speaking the language of myth? What makes one speak that language? Can anyone think of an example of people or someone speaking the language of myth, as it were spontaneously, one might say?

Prassannasiddhi: Some forms of poetry.

S: Some forms of poetry.

Prassannasiddhi: When you have a dream, you have archetypal images that pres~nt tylemselves

S: That's coming a bit nearer.. .a dream is not usually shared whereas a

myth usually is.

Phil Miller: Storytellers?

S: Storyteller.. .it depends upon the nature of the story It's

not necessarily a myth that has been told.

Kamalasila: Perhaps when you are communicating you re just conscious of a communication which seem to be touching on something which one could only call mythic.

Devamitra: It happens when one is trying to present~or make clear

... some kind of Ideal?

S: Not necessarily, at least it can be a distorted ideal.

Devamitra: Well, I mean thinking in terms of some kind ofUtopia.

S: Hm.

Padmavajra: Do you as it were'plug into something'? What I had in mind. .1 mean, I would have thought that someone like Milton spoke the language of myth in Paradise Lost.. .you'd sense

S: perhaps at least He didn't so much speak the language of myth, he worked on an existing myth. I mean, he was in touch with that sort of language, one might say, well, in those days everybody was in touch with that sort

e)

of language. Of course, they took the Christian myth, as it appears to us, very, very seriously. It wasn't a myth in the colloquial, modern sense of the term. I was just trying to think of a sort of modern myth. I am afraid I could only think of negative ones, which is a bit significant, but they might give us a sort of clue. What about that myth of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion? Hm? (silence) You must have heard of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, eb? (laughter) You've all heard of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is a very unpleasant sort of mental state which has had in this century all sorts of unpleasant consequences, but it's based upon certain beliefs about the Jews, beliefs which cannot be rationally substantiated. Hm? So that anti- Semitic sentiment created a myth and that myth found embodiment 2'n a document, a forged document, as is now known, called the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. These Protocols are supposed to be a report of the discussions and resolutions which took place at a meeting held somewhere in Europe by various influential Jews. The myth goes that, I think it was towards the end of the last century, there was a gathering at some secret place of a number of influential Jews and their topic of discussion was how to'enslave and dominate the entire Gentile world. And this document, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion - Zion meaning Jewry - purport to record their discussions, decisions and so on, and copies of this particular work in the form of a little book are still available, it has gone into scores and scores of editions. It's still in print in Britain and it is still being circulated by anti-Semitic groups. But this was their myth! So do you begin to see how it works? So why did they produce this myth? They spun this myth out of their fear and - hatred of the Jews. So their fear and hatred projected itself into this pseudo-historical form in order to justify, you know, their feelings about the Jews. So one might say - I mean, this is a negative example from modern times, no doubt there are positive examples that we could find - it would seem to be that you produce a myth when you have very, very strong feelings about something but those strong feelingsare not adequately supported by the existing state of affairs, by the existing facts, but you project them in such a form that they are or they seem to be supported by the existing state of affairs. Do you see what I mean? So, bearing in mind that this is a sort of negative example and that there are many positive exanples, go back to the time of the Buddha, go back to those Mahayana Buddhists, what do you think that they were doing? What was happening?

o

f)

Vessantara: It suggests that out of their sheer positive emotion... or that positive emotion wasn't adequately expressed in the rational teaching that had come down to them, therefore they felt...

S: Ah, yes, yes, yes,Yes, they fel a need to create a myth, but in their ease, this myth reflected not only their own emotional state but that it also was able to reflect something of the higher truths of Buddhism itself. Hm? So therefore one might say that it wasn't a question of, you know, the Buddhists learning to produce myths, it wasn't a rational process. Not that it was an irrational process in the really-modern sense, but they created the myths out of theirowninner emotional and spiritual needs. They simply had to believe in t~ sort of Buddhism that was represented by those myths,...had become a sort of spiritual necessity for them, they couldn't nourish themselves, so to speak, on the aridities of the Abbidharma, as they saw the Abhidharma. So one isn't to think of the Mahayanists as deciding on sort of, you know, purely rational grounds that'It was about time we had a bit of myth in Buddhism', no, they created the myths which... don't forget that the myths were not created out of thin air , they had something to go by, there were elements even in existing traditions, there were elements even in the Hinayana itself, as they understood it, perhaps there were oral elements, you know, going back to the time of the Buddha himself and the Buddha's own teaching, from which they were able to create and enlarge, you know, their own myth. So this is the sort of thing, I think, which happened.

Mike Shaw: Sounds almost like a process that almost happened of its own accord.

S: Yes, it is certainly a process in which a number of people took part. I think one is not to imagine individuals as producing myths. It does seem that a number of people,(so to spea~ collectively produce myths, if 'to produce' is the right word.

Prassannasiddhi: Do you think that the Mahayana produced those myths sort

of at the end of the Hinayana phase?

S: I don't think you can think in terms of a Hinayana phase sharply ending and then a Mahayana phase abruptly beginning, they did overlap~- and no doubt, I mean, there were sort of, you know, semi-Mabayanists in the midst of the Hinayana and so on. If one looks at the history and the development of the Buddhist schools which exhibit sort of Mahayanistic features and are clearly pointing in the direct~on of the Mabayana. But anyway, this is how it happened, which answers your point number two but there was the third point, what was that?

Kamalasila: Well, I think it has already been answered , as well: 'How do

we engage in that process?

S: I think the answer is: We don't know. We don't know. But it is quite clear that it all starts with, or at least is very closely bound up with a strong feeling which is not, you know, satisfied by our current experience or the existing situation. A myth suggests - and I'm using the word 'myth' in the way that we have been using it - the word myth suggests something which a number of people, sort of need to bring into existence, the creation of a myth, itwouldseem, is the way in which a number of people enable themselves to bring or ':o start bringing 'something into concrete existence which is not as yet there.

Pra sannasiddhi: I wonder if you could say that inasmuch as the... I mean, we have the Pali Canon as the Theravada Canon but, you know, that first split hundred and forty years after - the Buddha's Parinirvana, you know, the Mahasanghikas were actually there and perhaps they had that mythical element was present in their tradition, you know, right from that point.

S: We do know that the Mahasanghikas had a Canon oftheir own, coeresponding to the Pali Tipitaka, not that they had their own Abbidharma Pitaka, they certainly had traditions corresponding to the traditions of the Sutta Pitaka of the Theravadins and the Vinaya Pitaka of the Theravadins. We have some portions of that literature actually surviving in the original Sanskrit. It may be that the Mahasanghika Canon did contain a larger proportion of mythic elements than the corresponding Canon of the Theravadins, we don't really know that. Though there are traditions that there was current among the Mahasangbikas, a text dealing with wisdom which may have been a precursor of the Perfection of Wisdom texts, that's all that we really know. But again, adding to that, there are for instance the Lokottaravadins. The Lokottaravadins are regarded as an offshoot or sub-school of the Mahasanghikas. We have their Mahavastu, and that is a work which consists almost entirely of legendary and mythic material. That'maybe of some significance, but how significant, we don't know, because we have so little, you know, surviving Mahasanghika literature.

Vessantara: Supposing that an incident takes place and that incident is then recounted again and again and again from one person to another over a long period of time and it follows two chains, one is a chain of lawyers who are concerned to preserve the evidence of things, of events, exactly

as they happened~but the other is a chain of storytellers, who feel quite free to embellish and add to the story and to change it for their audience . Could it even be that some of the Mahayana Sutras, - started from descriptions of incidents in the historical Buddha's career, but then got embellished and added to and transposed to...

S: That is quite possible. One can go even further than that becau~e one can see this sort of process actually happening within the Pali Canon itself, because the Pali Canon consists of material of apparently of different dates or at least of a different strata of material. For instance, one has got the Mahaparinibbana Sutta; in that Mahaparinibbana Sutta there is an episode in whieh'Ananda asks the Buddha if he is really going to die, or you know, gain Parinirvana, in this little wattle-and-daub township of Kusinara, could he not attain his Parinirvana in somewhere more distinguished place? Then, what does the Buddha say? i{e says'Don't say that, Ananda, formerly this was the capital of a very great kingdom, a great king lived here' etc, etc, etc. So in that same Digha Nikaya in which you find the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, you find a sutta called the Maha-Sudassana Sutta, which is quite clearly an expansion, a greatly amplified version, almost along~Mabayanistic lines with lots and lots of imagery, of that single paragraph in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta. So you can see the process beginning in the context of the Theravada Canon itself. So, yes, it is very likely that tiat process did, you know, happen with regard to the Hinayana and the Mahayana. I cannot think of any actual instances that we have in the form of actual texts where this happens,though, yes, you could say the Sukhavati-Vyuha Sutras carry on from the Maha-Sudassana Sutta, because, you know, their imagery is very similar. There are references to these rows of jewel trees and so on and so forth. Where all that imagery comes from, that is another fascinating question, indeed! It doesn't seem it comes from India, but that

would take us too far afield. So these are really the sort of things one needs to go into if one is going to study Buddhist literature and especially the Pali Canon, not only critically but also with a feeling for its real spiritual import. A modern Theravadin, if you asked him, you know, 'What about the Maha-Sudassana Sutta?' - he would say: "Ah, well, that's just a bit~of legend, you can't take that too seriously", and wouldn't give it a further thought. but it isn't really, you know, as simple a matter as that. You could say tha~5'the Digha Nikaya itself is quite

interesting in this connection because there is a certain amount of mythical or a sort of legendary-cum-mythical material in the Digha Nikaya of the Theravadins themselves. But they don't exploit that material, they don't utilize it, they are not particularly interested in it. And they are certainly, in the case of the modern Theravadins, at least, far from realizing its spiritual significance, they are interested more in what I've elsewhere called 'the rational bits'. So did you have something after those three points?

Kamalasila: I had a question about Western culture but maybe I should skip that and keep on the myth-question, quite a bit of which you have probably answered already, but nevertheless, just in case I'll go through

it. In your lecture "History versus Myth in Man's Quest for Meaning" you refer to the realm of myth as the whole realm of undefined meanings...

S: I must say, I have completely forgotten this lecture, so I'd have to refer...

Kamalas'ila: It is in the Vimalakirti Nirdesa series.

S: Ah, you'll probably have to refresh my memory about it.

Kamalas'ila: It's about the dialogue between Manjushri and Vimalakirti.

S: Ah, right, yes, OK.

Kamalasila: Yes, you refer to the realm of myth as the whole realm of undefined meanings...

S: - That is to say, meanings which are not exhausted by

rational definition, because there are emotional overtones, you know, which

are ~s it wer~ left over, which rational definition cannot capture.

Kamalasila: The idea of the FWBO-myth seems to refer to the kind of indescribable pattern, which is nevertheless clearly felt and understood by a number of individuals. Is this how you see it, if so, would you say that for us to tune in to this is essential for the living survival of Buddhism. If so, is there anything specific you can recommend that would make this tuning-in most likely? For example, just how important is knowledge of Classical myth and European culture?

S: There are lots of people who know all about Classical myths and European culture, but they know about them in a purely academic way, so clearly it is not enough to know about them, one must be moved by them and one must, you know, start actually to enter into that world, you know, in the sense of becoming a part of that world and living in that world. And I think it is quite difficult to explain in (as it wer~ rational terms exactly how one does this.

I~

Kamalas'ila: This has already been answered...

S: I mean, one of the difficulties that we have in these modern times is that we know the theory of everything so well. And sometimes the fact that you know the theory gets in the way of your actually practising or experiencing something, because the fact that you know the theory

interferes, you know, with the actual experience of whatever it is that the theory is a theory of or a theory about. (pause) But nonetheless, I am not, you know, hopeless that.. well, yes.. .1 won't say that 'an FWBO myth will be created' - I'm quite sure that an FWBO myth is being created, and I think it sort of peeps out, as it were, you know, here and there - but I wouldn't like to say what it was! (1a~;ter) I think the most important factor and the most important element is,or would be~that people have very deep feelings, very profound aspirations, which go bQ~ond their existing situation, in the widest sense, the existing, if you like,world situation. If they do have, well, there will eventually be a need for those feelings and those aspirations to be projected (as it were) ~utwardly in an objective form as a myth~and that myth, or the consciousness of that myth~0r the feeling for that myth,

on the part of all the people involved in the FWBO, will no doubt contribute to the actual embodiment in the world in which we live of whatever it is that that myth represents.

~ssantara:Where can you see that myth peeping out?

S: Well, for instance, when some people speak about Sukhavati and Sukhavati clearly has sort of overtones, you know, not just of that particular, you know, brick building in Fast London but of something else. Do you see what I mean? Anyway, perhaps we have spent enough time on that unless there is an actual different question there.

t~ I

O&A on the Bodhisattva Ideal, Tuscany 84, Session 5 continued, 24.9.1984, questions from lecture53~~

Padmavajra: I have a question on myth and merit. On a seminar some years ago you spoke of the punya-sambhara or accumulation of merit. In that seminar, you suggested that perhaps the Sambhogakaya was formed by this accumulation of merit. From this, can some connection be made between the accumulation of merit and myth, or the creation of myth? If there are any connections,would they help us to a truer and better way of understanding what merit is and, for that matter, what myth is ?

S: We seem to be getting this year a lot of complex questions, complex in the sense in which one speaks of a complex sentence in grammar, it consists of quite a number of clauses which have to be unravelled. So perhaps here also we could take the clauses one by one. So what was the first one? (l~gh;ter)

Padmavajra: On a seminar some years ago you spoke of the punya-sambhara or accumulation of merit. (pause)

S: Yes, yes, a bit more. (%aughter)

Padmavajra: In that seminar, you suggested that perhaps the Sambho~akaya was formed by this accumulation of merit.

S: Yes, this actually is traditIonal Mahayana teaching.that the Sambhoga- kaya of the Buddha, one

could even say 'Sambhogakaya of a Buddha', comes into existence as a result of his extraordinary merits, produced of course by the cultivation of the paramitas, but especially the first five. The Dharmakaya comes into existence, or His Dharmakaya comes into existence, or he realises the Dharmakaya as a result, so to speak, of his jnana-sambhara, His accumulation of knowledge or awareness. So that's the first point.

Padmavajra: From this, can some connection be made between the accumulation

of merit and myth, or the creation of myth?

S: I'm not sure that it can, because, yes, you could regard the Sambhoga- kaya as myth. Not in the sense that it's something unreal or fictional or that it has a sort of story-like character but Sambhogadaya, you know, represents a spiritual reality in the form of, or in terms of1 light and colour,and the light and colour which represent the Sambhogakaya have what we can only describe as a sort of spiritual significance, and, you know, we are told by tradition~that Sambhogakaya has come into existence as a result of the merits accumulated by the Bodbisattva over, you know, a period of kalpas. But bcrc, merit is part of the myth. Do you see what I mean? Here the concept of merit, as one might also call it, is being