

## SANGHARAKSHITA

INTERVIEW WITH J.O.MALLANDER as a basis for the Finnish TV programme "*In the Realm of the Lotus*"

Padmaloka 1992

(Side one)

**J.O.Mallander:** Sangharakshita, we know you as a Buddhist scholar, a very learned man and a very prolific writer and teacher and reformer if I may say so, many, many sides in your sort of almost encyclopedic mind stream but today I propose that we take up a line in your mind-stream which deals with art and symbols and visions. So what we would like to know is where does this stream come from?

**Sangharakshita:** Well the ultimate origin of the stream, I don't really know but I can say something about the origins of the stream from a more limited point of view. We have to go back to my childhood. We have to go back to when I was about eight years of age because then I was diagnosed as having heart disease and I was confined to bed and I was not allowed to move. I just had to lie in bed and I was in bed for two, three years and the only thing I could do was read and my parents and friends of my parents supplied me with literature and especially our next-door neighbour supplied me with a copy of "Children's Encyclopedia" in twelve very big, thick volumes. And in that "Children's Encyclopedia" there were a number of articles illustrated

about art, Eastern and Western. So as far as I can recollect that was my first experience of art and a few years ago in fact someone gave me a set of "The Children's Encyclopedia" so I was quite interested to turn to them and see what it was had interested me. And I remember in particular I was very interested in ancient Egyptian art though I never had the opportunity of following up. But the ancient Egyptian art was very, very fascinating to me.

But I also happened to read in this same encyclopedia a little bit about Buddhism and I think that must have been my first contact with Buddhism as a teaching because there was some article, a section on the wise men of the East. And the wise men were the Buddha, Zoroasta, an oriental sage and Confucius and there were pictures of, for instance, the statue of Buddha at Karmakura in Japan. So from "The Children's Encyclopedia" I had my first experience of art, both Eastern and Western and also my first acquaintance with the teachings of Buddhism. So from the age of eight to ten or eleven

"The Children's Encyclopedia" played a very important part in my life.

And after I became a little bit better and I was allowed to walk - I had to learn to walk for a second time - when I was about twelve, thirteen, fourteen I started going to museums and art galleries in London and I have very vivid recollections of my first experience of art, that is live art, not just reproductions, but live art in that connection. I remember that I went with my mother, I couldn't have been more than I think thirteen, to our National Gallery, in London which as you know has a very fine, very beautiful collection of Western art and I walked around. But there was one painting in particular which impressed me or struck me or caught my imagination more than any other and that was the Bacchus and Ariadne of Titian. And afterwards I wondered well, why was that? Why was I so attracted by that picture? Why did that picture make such an impression on me? And I came to the conclusion it was simply because of the colour, the very, very vivid colours, and I think that that was the case partly because not long after that I became very interested in the art of the pre-Raphaelites. That is to say of Millet, the early Millet, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and others, and of course in their paintings colour, very vivid colour, does play a very important part.

But at that time I didn't forget Oriental art and I remember that I visited the Victoria and Albert Museum and I don't know whether the actual painting was there but I got a picture postcard. Yes, I got a picture postcard of a Persian miniature and this particular painting, though it was only a reproduction, also impressed me very deeply. It was a Persian miniature painting of the Ascent of the Prophet Mohammed to Heaven which is a very important theme of Sufi mysticism as well as of Persian/Islamic art and there are also angel figures in this particular painting, and angel figures did become quite important to me at about this same time. Maybe I have something to say about them later on. But that was my, as it were, early introduction to art. First of all, through "The Children's Encyclopedia" and then through the National Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum. But it does seem that the feature of art which attracted me most in those days was colour. And .... Hm?

**J.O.M.:** Bhante, of course art is all about painting, it's all about colour, but what else?

**S:** Well in painting there is also design, there is composition, but it was the colour I think that struck me more than anything else.

**J.O.M.:** Consciously or was it some kind of ....?

**S:** At that time it wasn't conscious, I didn't know what it was. I didn't realise what it was that was attracting me and fascinating me but afterwards I realised it must have been principally the colour because this theme, as it were, re-emerged when I found myself some years later in Kalimpong. When I was fourteen, of course, the war broke out. I was conscripted and I went in the Army to India and after the war I stayed on in India and eventually I went up to Kalimpong in the Eastern Himalayas. It's a place about four thousand feet above sea level not far from Darjeeling, and from Kalimpong we

can see Tibet and we can see the snows of the Eastern Himalayas. So I lived up there, I lived in Kalimpong for altogether fourteen years and I was able to see those mountains every day. Not always the snows. I didn't see the snows every day. I mean, they didn't always come up but saw them quite often and there were very remarkable sort of colour effects at sunrise. Because first of all you'd see the snows just glimmering in the dawn, just white against this grey-blue background and then as the sun rose, though you couldn't see the sun, they would first of all become a sort of pink and then they'd become a sort of fiery red, a sort of crimson, just like a heap of glowing embers. And then they'd become pure gold and after that they'd become pure white. So one would see these chromatic changes and they were really very impressive. And by that time if it was a clear day the sky would be a very, very deep vibrant, rich blue ....

**J.O.M.:** It doesn't seem that you did nothing but look at the mountains! (Laughter)

**S:** So I sometimes felt like doing nothing but look at the mountains and I not only looked at the mountains, I did of course other things, I studied, I meditated, I taught and of course I also wrote some poetry and some of my poetry was concerned with mountains, so maybe I will read just two or three. They're only very little poems. I wrote a lot of poems at that particular time and several of them are concerned with the mountains. So this first goes like this. It's called simply "Mountains" and it has a sort of, you may say, moral, because I used to feel sometimes, well, one, it's not enough just to write poetry. There must be some meaning. If you like even a moral, something inspiring, something uplifting. So this first poem is of that kind and I called it simply "Mountains".

*'Golden in laughing sunlight.  
Silver in mist and rain.  
I see thee, mighty mountains,  
Tower heavenward from the plain.  
And pray my heart unmoved by  
Sweet joys and sufferings dire,  
Like thee through cloud and sunlight,  
May upwards still aspire.'*

And of course there were sometimes poems which were just poems, so to speak. I was very interested at that time in the haiku, the Japanese haiku form, so this is a haiku called Kanchenjunga. Kanchenjunga was the principal mountain that one could see from ...

**J.O.M.:** Kanchenjunga. What does it mean?

**S:** Kanchenjunga means the 'Five Treasures of the Snow'. This is according to Tibetan myth and legend. The Five Treasures, as far as I remember, were gold, silver, crystal, grain and some said books and some said weapons as the fifth. But the name Kanchenjunga means 'The Five Treasures of the Snow'. So Kanchenjunga, Mount Kanchenjunga was the principal peak - actually it was a double peak - of the mountains that we could see. So this of course is very short. It's a haiku. It's just a picture, an image. And I call it just 'Kanchenjunga'.

*'One white wave of snow  
Towering against the blue sky  
With clouds below.'*

So that's the picture. The picture I used to see and yes, then there's another one, the last one I'll read. This is called simply 'Study in Blue and White'. I call it a 'Study in Blue and White' just to suggest it's purely pictorial though there is a meaning to. So 'Study in Blue and White'.

*'Though depths of perfect azure invest the sun on high  
The hills with haze in the distance show darker than the sky  
Save where as though disrupting the blueness of the real  
Shine in their absoluteness the snows of the ideal.'*

So I used to write poems sometimes about the mountains as well as about many of the other sights and sounds of Kalimpong. And I ...

**J.O.M.:** Your autobiography, the second part - 'Facing Mount Kanchenjunga' as are your other books also. They are very rich in structure, very rich in language and very well write and almost ... Tremendous artistic sort of tendency in all of them.

**S:** I can remember very vividly the incidents of those days though now it's, thirty-five, forty years ago but when I finished writing those memoirs last year, that volume, 'Facing Mount Kanchenjunga' everything was really quite vividly present to me. And I remembered so many of the things that happened. And of course one of the things that happened, I think it was in 1951 was I had a visit from Lama Govinda and I'd been in contact, I'd been in correspondence with Lama Govinda for some time. I'd been reading his writings and he'd read some of mine and we realised that we were really quite close to each other. We thought alike as regards Buddhism. We both accepted the whole Buddhist tradition. We didn't want to identify ourselves just as followers of Theravada or followers of Mahayana.

**J.O.M.:** In your second part of your great epic about your wandering years in Kalimpong you tell of very, very many events in a very rich and varied language, and you also meet many extraordinary people among others some who are maybe, like you. I see you as a very solitary figure in the Western world, at least at that time but apparently you found some kindred spirits whom you describe in this book also.

**S:** Yes. After I'd been in Kalimpong a few months I started up a little magazine. A Buddhist magazine. And I started sending copies all over the Buddhist world and that made me many friends. In fact some of the early Zen Beat people in America received copies of this little magazine, including Gary Sneider and just two years ago in America we met actually for the first time and we reminisced, you know, about those days and that contact. But one of the most important friends whom I made through that little magazine was Lama Govinda. We corresponded for a while and we found that our ideas about Buddhism were very similar because he had had experience of several different forms of Buddhism and he did not wish to identify himself exclusively with any one particular form and my own attitude was very similar even though I had been ordained as a Theravada Buddhist monk, I accepted the whole Buddhist tradition in all its richness, Theravada, Mahayana, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Shin. In principle I accepted everything.

So some time in 1951 Lama Govinda came to Kalimpong and spent some time with me and I was very happy to make his acquaintance and a very definite friendship did spring up between us which lasted for many years. In fact lasted until the time of his death. The last letter he wrote, four days before his death was written to me. So it sort of set the seal on a very long friendship. But when we met in Kalimpong we talked a lot about Buddhism and art, about spiritual life and art, about meditation, and also of course we talked about the trip that Lama Govinda had made with Li Gotami his wife to Tsaparang in Western Tibet just a few years earlier. So I heard from Lama Govinda and from Li Gotami many of the things, many of the interesting experiences which afterwards were embodied in Lama Govinda's book, 'The Way of the White Clouds'.

And I remember Lama Govinda particularly talking about the atmosphere of Tibet. He seems to have been very much impressed by that. He was very impressed by the clarity of the atmosphere and the fact that colours showed so vividly in that atmosphere. In fact he wrote about of this in 'The Way of the White Clouds' afterwards in the chapter called 'The Living Language of Colours' and he says for instance:

*"At the same time I realised the tremendous influence of colour upon the human mind. Quite apart from the aesthetic pleasure and beauty it conveyed which I tried to capture in paintings and sketches, there was something deeper and subtler that contributed to the transformation of consciousness; more perhaps than any other single factor. It is for this reason that Tibetan and in fact all Tantric meditation gives such great importance to colours".*

I think this is a very important and very significant point and we can certainly see that awareness of colour and sensitivity to colour reflected in Lama Govinda's own paintings, especially perhaps in his painting of a lake on the caravan routes from India to Lhasa.

**J.O.M.:** Manusarava?

**S:** No, not Manusarava, it was another one on the other side of the Himalayas though he did of course paint also the Manusarava Lake. But his work shows very great sensitivity to colour. We also at some later date when we met, talked about his use of oil pastels. He didn't use oil paints. He didn't like that medium particularly. Also it was more cumbersome and he was travelling, he was wandering around. He was very fond of the oil pastel medium and most of his work is in that medium and he mentioned that through the medium of oil pastel you can produce colour effects which you cannot produce even through the medium of oil painting. So we talked quite a lot about those things. But, yes, he emphasises the importance of colour in Tantric Buddhist meditation and visualisation and this is very true because as you probably know in Tantric meditation, in visualisation, one usually begins by just seeing a vast expanse of blue sky, symbolising in a way the Void, sunyata. Now if you've never seen a really blue sky it's not easy to visualise that blue expanse and of course people in England usually see a grey sky and grey clouds. We don't very often, (Laughs) (?) Protestants or Lutherans or whatever, but we don't often get that rich blue sky. But in Tibet you get it all the time and the colours stand out so vividly.

So Lama Govinda believed, as he wrote in the book, that this factor contributed to the development of Tantric Buddhist visualisation where against the very rich vibrant blue background he visualised the figure of the Buddha or Bodhisattva, whoever it is you wish to visualise and, visualising very brilliant, radiant, jewel-like colours.

So these sort of reflections led me, not just to develop certain interests but, you know, also to understand why I had certain interests because I've always been, you know, very interested in semi-precious stones, not on account of their commercial value but just on account of the beauty of their colours and I have accumulated quite a small collection of these. For instance. Yes so I've always had this interest in the semi-precious stones, not because of their monetary value but just because of the pure beauty of the colours, you know, like this green agate. You don't get very many green agates. I forget where I got this. I think it was in America. But I appreciate these very beautiful luminous sort of colours and there's also this green jasper. No, not jasper, malachite. Sorry, malachite. I appreciated this particular piece, not just because of the beauty of the various shades of green but because of the figuration of it. It looks almost like the scales on the back of some animal or reptile. Or even like feathers on a bird. So one gets all these sort of impressions.

And then of course there's what they call peacock stone. I think this piece came from Australia but there's a whole variety of colours in that. And I think Aldous Huxley in one of his writings has suggested that precious stones, semi-precious stones, jewels, are valued not because of their monetary value but because, in a way, they give us a glimpse of some higher sort of archetypal realm and we find in many scriptures, in many mystical writings, descriptions of higher worlds in terms of very brilliant beautiful, jewel-like colours. We find this in Buddhist scriptures. We find something like it in the

'Book of Revelations'. I remember when I was about sixteen I went with my grandmother to church. I mean I was not a Christian at that time. I ceased to be a Christian when I was fourteen but my grandmother liked me to go with her to church so I went and one Sunday there was a sermon on a verse from the 'Book of Revelations', from the Apocalypse and the text was "And every gate was one pearl". So I was quite interested in this sermon. Not so much in the content of the sermon from the Christian point of view, but the imagery, that "every gate was one pearl" so the preacher, the clergyman, he spoke just about that. That "every gate was one pearl". So this stuck in my memory. I didn't remember anything else of the discourse.

**J.O.M.:** The name of Nicholas Roerich sooner or later comes up here and you met his son and wife in Kalimpong.

**S:** In Kalimpong there were a number of quite interesting people living, you know, while I was there. One of them was Prince Peter of Greece who was making a special study of Tibetan polyandry and another was George Roerich who was the second, no, the elder son of Nicholas Roerich and who had accompanied his father on his explorations in Central Asia. I got to know George Roerich fairly well and he spoke about his father. His father, of course, had died by that time. But he was a very fine painter and I saw quite a number of his paintings and reproductions of his paintings on various occasions. In some respects his work was very similar to that of Lama Govinda. Though Lama Govinda specialised much more in paintings of Tibetan landscapes and Tibetan monasteries. Roerich's scope was much broader. He had after all played a fairly prominent part in various artistic movements in the West. He had designed stage sets for Diaghilev in Paris and he had all sorts of connections with the Western artistic world which Govinda did not have.

He was himself a Buddhist and he was very, very devoted to the cult of Maitreya. He wrote a lot about Maitreya and the coming of the Buddha Maitreya and he used to write that he had seen in Tibet many signs to the effect that Maitreya would soon be coming and he illustrated some of those sort of ideas in his paintings besides writing about them. His wife, George Roerich's mother, was also a very interesting woman. I never met her because she didn't meet anybody. She was living with her son George Roerich and she never came out of her room. And she was what they call a spiritual medium. She received spiritual messages which she wrote down in the form of books. And she founded a branch of the Theosophical Movement which was called Agni yoga or the Yoga of Fire about which Nicholas Roerich had also written quite a lot. But I think I've written in my 'Facing Mount Kanchenjunga' that when I went to see George Roerich I was conscious of a sort of very strong downward pressure, a sort of psychic pressure coming from above and afterwards I learnt that his mother, Mrs Nicholas Roerich was living upstairs. So it must have had something to do with her activities as a spiritual medium.

But they were a very interesting family. There was a younger son, Swetoslav, who died I think just very, very recently. He was also an artist and he married a famous Indian film star and I knew the mother of that film star. So in India if one knew one person, well one knew all the people that they knew. India had that very great advantage. In England it doesn't quite happen like that but in India, well, I did make so many different contacts of some

many different kinds including contacts with artists and film stars and so on. The sort of contacts I don't usually have here.

But yes I appreciated Nicholas Roerich's art very much though I'm not sure what its standing is in the West now. Though I do have somewhere a volume of reproductions of his paintings published fairly recently in Moscow. So it could be that in Russia nowadays there is some interest in his work. There should be I think. Though it's very scattered, a lot of it is in India and of course, there is some in America. There is a Roerich Centre in New York.

**J.O.M.:** Do you think our time needs that kind of (?) I mean our time has also shrunk very much in terms of vision?

**S:** Yes, I think in some ways Roerich's vision is much broader in artistic terms than Govinda's. His range of subject matter was very much wider and I think just as a painter he is quite interesting. I think perhaps his colour sense was not so well-developed as Govinda's but he had a much more powerful and dramatic sort of ability.

**J.O.M.:** You have also seen the famous cave paintings of Ajanta and maybe Alora too.

**S:** Yes, yes, I have.

**J.O.M.:** Could you tell us a little about ...?

**S:** Well, I was in Ajanta only a few months ago. I visited there in January and I saw all the caves. There are more than thirty of them and I had the opportunity of, well, examining every one, you know, quite closely. There were not many people there and the caretakers are Buddhists, so it was quite easy for us to see and they were very co-operative in showing the lights and everything and reflecting mirrors. So I was able to see all the paintings but they have, of course, deteriorated very badly, even since they were discovered and they're going to be restored by some Japanese team quite shortly and the caves will be closed to the public for several years while that is being done. But what one ....

**J.O.M.:** You had an experience there probably!

**S:** But what is visible is very, very beautiful and of course especially the famous Padmapani, the bodhisattva figure with the blue lotus in his hand and I especially examined this figure this time and the expression on the face is really quite remarkable. I don't think there is anything comparable in Western art as regards delicacy and refinement of expression except in the work of Leonardo da Vinci. I don't think there is any other parallel. It's a quite



interesting expression. It's compassionate and it's sad. But sad is too strong a word. Even compassion is too strong a word. It's so much more refined and more delicate than that. But I was very impressed by that. I had seen the Ajanta caves before and I remembered this painting from that previous visit about twenty, twenty-five years ago or more, but this time I was still more pleased to see that painting. But of course by contrast the sculptures are very massive, very solid. One couldn't exactly say crude but I think massive is the word as are the pillars, the columns and the whole appearance of the caves generally. The columns are usually very fat, very squat, with cushion capitals, that kind of thing. I took myself some photos which I will show you, just a few. But it was quite a great experience and ...

**J.O.M.:** In your working room you have many statues and picture of Tibetan lamas, your archetypal family and your spiritual mentors. For example these two statues of Padmapani, I believe, and Manjusri, the Buddha of Discriminating Wisdom. Could you elaborate a little about the meaning of these two symbols?

**S:** Bodhisattvas, especially archetypal bodhisattvas are images of particular aspects of Buddhahood or Enlightenment. We may say that Buddhahood or Enlightenment has three principle aspects. There is the aspect of Wisdom or Insight into Ultimate Reality. There is the aspect of Compassion and there is the aspect of Spiritual Vigour or Energy. Avalokitesvara - also called Padmapani which means 'Jewel in Hand' - is the embodiment of the Compassion aspect and of course, the Dalai Lama, as you know, is believed to be a manifestation in particular of Avalokitesvara. The mantra of Avalokitesvara is the famous 'Om Mani Padme Hum' usually translated as 'Jewel in the Lotus' though really mantras can't be translated.

The other bodhisattva is Manjusri and Manjusri is the embodiment of Wisdom, of Insight into Ultimate Reality. There are many, many forms of Manjusri just as there are many forms of Avalokitesvara, or Padmapani. Avalokitesvara popularly has a hundred and eight forms. There aren't quite so many forms of Manjusri or Manjughosa but there are many forms and one of them is the form know as Arapajana and in this Arapajana form he holds aloft the flaming sword of wisdom with which he cuts asunder the bondage of karma.

**J.O.M.:** Illusion.

**S:** Karma is action based upon illusion. He cuts asunder the bonds of karma because he cuts asunder the bonds of ignorance and it's ignorance mainly that prevents us from realising Buddhahood or Enlightenment.

**J.O.M.:** Then you also have some photographs of real human beings who embody these ideas. That is your teachers from both Theravada tradition and Tibetan tradition, lamas and monks?

**S:** Well, this particular composite picture was made because many of my own disciples wanted a picture of this sort for their own shrines and for their own meditation purposes. So here are shown my eight principal teachers.

**J.O.M.:** So here we are. We have your teachers in the same frame. Could you tell us a little about these persons, how their images, what the images represent and what effect they have on you in your day-to-day life, however subtle it might be.

**S:** Of course even without the photographs I do remember them all the time. Some perhaps more than others but they are at the back of my mind as it were, all the time I could say. They all have their different biographies and I have my own history of association with each one of them. First of all there is Bhikshu Jagdish Kashyap who was the first chronologically of these teachers. He is or was Indian and a very, very learned man, master of the Tripitaka and I studied Pali and Buddhist philosophy and logic with him in Varanasi, in Benares. This was 1949 to 50. This photograph was taken by a friend of mine when I visited him in 1966 when he was director of the Nalanda Mahavihara. Here he is feeding his pet peacock and you can just see the peacock in the picture. He was a very kindly man. As I mentioned he was a very great scholar but very kindly, very humble, very unpretentious and I was fortunate in being able to study quite a lot with him.

And then of course, the other corner there is Yogi Chen who was a completely different sort of character. He was a hermit and I knew him when I was in Kalimpong. He lived in a little house on the outskirts of the bazaar and he never came out. He spent most of the day meditating. He saw very few people but I got to know him and in the end I was visiting him once a week. I used to spend, I think, every Saturday evening with him and he was a mine of information about Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, scriptures, doctrine, all sorts of yogic practices. He had a very, very vast experience. He was also a very eccentric person. He would do strange things. He had strange experiences and he was constantly seeing visions and telling me about these visions. A very, very interesting character.

And then of course there is Chetul Sangye Dorje. He was a very remarkable lama. He spent many years in Tibet wandering about and meditating. He wasn't an incarnate lama or rather I should say he isn't an incarnate lama because he is still alive. He's the only one of these eight principal teachers who is still alive at the age of eighty-two. But I received my first Tantric initiation from him into the cult of Green Tara. So he occupies quite an important place in my spiritual life.

And then opposite him is Dhardo Rimpoche with whom I probably had the longest and most constant association. He was living in Kalimpong and I saw him very regularly over a period of a number of years and we had a quite close association. We worked together also and of course I received a number of initiations from him.

Kachu Rimpoche in the middle was the principal disciple in those days of Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche and he was the head lama of Pemi Yangtse Gumpa in Western Sikkim which is the royal Gumpa, the principal and oldest Nyingmapa establishment in the state of Sikkim. And he used to come and stay with me quite often in Kalimpong. I used to stay with him in Gangtok and I also visited him in Pemi Yangtse. He was a very, very staunch follower of the Nyingmapa tradition and a great meditator and he used to have many visions and he would act upon these visions and take guidance from these visions and from him I received the Padmasambhava initiation

And then of course at the very top there's Jamyang Khyentse, supposedly the greatest scholar of this century in Tibet. A vastly learned man and also of great spiritual experience. I received a number of initiations from him. And also from Dudjom Rimpoche who died not so long ago and Dilgo Khyentse Rimpoche who also died, you know, not so long ago, from all these Tibetan teachers I received a number of different initiations. So all eight of them occupy a quite important place in my spiritual life and of course my own pupils and disciples in the West have been very keen to hear about them and to know about them and it was they, some of them who suggested that we should make this composite picture so that they could have them on their shrine and get to know them, as it were.

And as you know Suvajra has recently written a biography of Dhardo Rimpoche and is planning to write a biography of Kachu Rimpoche also and has been collecting material for that purpose. Some of my own disciples have visited Dhardo Rimpoche and some more recently also visited Chetul Sangye Dorje who now lives in Siliguri in West Bengal.

**J.O.M.:** Talking about art we almost inevitably touch the world of dreams and in a larger sense visions and you from your autobiographical books, we learn about some of your dreams and visions but you probably have much more in store. Do you want to tell us a little about your dream world to begin with?

**S:** I think dream-world is very important. As you know we sleep so many hours every night and we dream every night even though we don't always remember, or perhaps we remember very rarely but we live so much of our life in the dream-world and I have very often thought that we have two parallel lives, one a life in the conscious state when we're awake and another life in the dream-state when we're sleeping, and I think that very often we don't give enough importance to the dream-world and the dream-life and the dream-experience. But sometimes we do remember and it's as though that world interpenetrates to some extent with the world of our waking experience and sometimes that can be a very enriching and rewarding experience.

I've also sometimes found that dreams have a certain continuity. Or one might even say that dreams follow certain patterns. One can have the same kind of dream over and over again, over a period of many years. I remember that when I was in India I had a whole series of dreams which culminated in a sort of visionary experience. I haven't actually spoken or written about this before. But for many years ....

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... were two monasteries. One was a public one, a big one which was open to everybody. But somewhere behind the big public monastery there was a very much smaller monastery that very few people knew about and very often in the dream I would be going from the big public monastery to the very small private monastery up some very secret path. Sometimes on my own and sometimes with just very few other people. So I had this kind of dream over a period of many, many years, maybe ten or twelve years. But this series of dreams culminated in what was not actually a dream I think but more a visionary experience, because I have sometimes thought that we reach higher meditative states, higher states of consciousness not just from the waking state, we also can reach them from the dream state.

So it's not that we have those experiences in the dream state but we attain them from the dream state which is rather different matter. So this culminating experience of mine was of that nature and I'll give a description of the experience itself because even though it took place thirty, forty years ago it is still very vivid. The scene seems to be South India and I was in the big monastery or big hermitage for some time and then I made my way up a little path, up into the mountains and I came to the second monastery or the second hermitage and this was of course very much smaller and I entered a sort of shrine room and in this shrine room a man was standing. He was in early middle age one could say, perhaps about forty, forty-five. He was a bit sturdy - stocky as we would say, with long grey hair, long-grey beard and he was clad in white, and in this dream or visionary experience I knew that this was the Rishi Agastya. The Rishi Agastya according to Indian Hindu tradition was the sage who led the Ariyan people down into south India and he's associated in Hindu tradition with many esoteric teachings. And behind the figure of Agastya, immediately behind, there was a Tibetan style shrine, that is to say, a glass-fronted shrine, rather like a sort of cupboard. You probably know the sort of shrines that the Tibetans have in temples, all glassed in with images and Stupas and pictures behind the glass. Well, it was just like that with Buddha images behind the glass and I was thinking in this dream or visionary experience, well, that's quite strange that even though it is this Rishi Agastya who is a Hindu figure it is Tibetan style Buddhist shrine with all these images behind the glass.

But in addition to that I was conscious in this room, in this shrine, there was a very, very powerful atmosphere and at the same time this Rishi figure, Agastya, was giving me various teachings which could not be put into words but there was this very strong sense of transmission, of energy being transmitted, it was a very, very powerful experience and I don't how much time passed but afterwards I went out of the rear door of this second hermitage and I found that I was in an open, sort of, courtyard in between the two peaks of the mountain. There was the peak this side where the small hermitage was, the secret hermitage was, then there was the courtyard and then was another peak. So I went up out into this courtyard and there was a parapet, a balustrade, a low wall. I looked out over that down onto the plains and there was a small town in the distance with factory chimneys and I

looked out at that and after I, so to speak, woke up I had a strong feeling that this was an actual place somewhere in south India which I could actually discover if I searched over the whole of south India. Perhaps I should mention that Hindus have the same kind of belief about Agastya that Buddhists have about Kashyapa. That is to say that he is still living, alive in some mountain, in some hermitage, secretly, even though he supposedly died thousands of years ago. So I had this very sort of powerful experience which wasn't just a dream, which was a sort of visionary experience or experience in some other world or some other plane.

But what I couldn't understand why Agastya, because obviously I was a Buddhist and he's a Hindu figure. So I just couldn't understand this but on my last visit to India I found some connection because Buddhism was known in south India and it's apparently connected with the beginnings of Tamil literature. Tamil is a very ancient language and their oldest books, their oldest literature is of a Buddhistic nature, or influenced by Buddhism and I discovered that there are Hindu legends to the effect that Agastya was taught about the Tamil language by Avalokitesvara. So I thought, Ah! then that means there is some connection between Agastya and Avalokitesvara and perhaps this has some bearing upon this visionary experience of mine.

But as I said it was a very powerful experience and I remember it vividly even today and it was as though I did have a sort of initiation, that something was transmitted to me by that particular figure in those particular circumstances and of course some years earlier I had had what I call my vision in the cave in south India. It was very, this also was interesting, I've written about this in 'Thousand Petalled Lotus' but there's something more I can say. The cave was where Ramanamaharshi had lived for many years.

Yes, in 1949 I spent six weeks at (Avamachal Chivalalomlay) in the ashram, or near the ashram of Ramanamaharshi, probably the most famous Hindu yogi and teacher of this century who is still remembered by many people, and for much of that time I was staying in a cave called the Virupaksha Cave. Ramanamaharshi himself in his earlier days had spent a number of years in this same cave. But it's rather interesting that it was called the Virupaksha Cave for a reason that I shall explain. In Buddhism there are four guardian kings for the four quarters and one of them is Virupaksha and Virupaksha is the guardian king of the western quarter and of course Amitabha is associated with the Western quarter and while I was staying in that cave I had one night a vision of Amitabha so it seemed quite interesting that that vision should have been of Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western quarter and that the cave should be named after Virupaksha the guardian of the western quarter who is associated with Amitabha and I've written about this in 'The Thousand Petalled Lotus' and I say:

*"One night I found myself, as it were, out of the body and in the presence of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light who presides over the western quarter of the universe. The colour of the Buddha was a deep rich and luminous red like that of rubies, though at the same time soft and glowing like the light of the setting sun. While his left hand rested in his lap the fingers of his right hand held up by the stalk a single red lotus in full bloom and he sat in the usual cross-legged posture on an enormous red lotus that floated on the surface of the sea. To the left immediately*

*beneath the raised right arm of the Buddha was the red hemisphere of the setting sun. His reflection glittering golden across the waters."*

And many years later I asked one of my artist disciples to try to paint a sort of thangka of this vision of mine and he did try, though not with complete success. But this is what he was able to produce. And perhaps I should mention that Tibetan thangkas or Tibetan painted scrolls in general have this sort of origin. They're not just artistic productions in the ordinary sense. What happens is that a yogi has a vision. A vision say of the Buddha or a Buddha, a vision of a bodhisattva, a vision of a guardian deity and he paints a picture of it, or he gets a painter to paint a picture of it according to his description and these paintings are the thangkas. So Tibetan thangkas, Tibetan painted scrolls, are a form of visionary art. Of course painters copy thangkas and their thangkas are copied by other artists so very often contact with the original visionary experience is lost but originally the thangkas derive from visionary experiences.

And you also notice that in this description I say the colour of the Buddha was a deep, rich, luminous red like that of rubies and as I mentioned earlier on many writers do make the point that our visionary experiences of this sort are very colourful and have a sort of archetypal quality which we can best express in terms of colour and light and so on. And, well this is why so much of the visionary art in the different religions of the world has this very, rich, glowing luminous jewel-like quality, whether it's Tibetan thangkas or whether it's Persian miniature paintings or whether it's the mosaics of Ravenna. They all have this sort of common characteristic.

But years and years later I found that several of my own teachers had quite a lot of visionary experiences. I just had a few. But some of my teachers had very many visionary experiences. Mr. Chen, for instance, used to have many visionary experiences, sometimes of a very strange and bizarre nature. But Kachu Rimpoche perhaps used to have more visionary experiences than any of my other teachers. He was the lama who was the head lama of (pemayengtse?) Gompa in western Sikkim, a Nyingmapa and a very staunch disciple of Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche and he used to come and stay with me quite often. He was a very free and easy lama. Many Tibetan lamas are very formal and a little stiff but Kachu Rimpoche wasn't like that at all. He was very free and easy, as we say, very informal and very friendly and he took a great interest in me and he used to come down and stay with me from time to time and bringing his nephew who afterwards stayed with me as my pupil for some time. So Kachu Rimpoche used to meditate every morning and usually he'd see some kind of vision. But his characteristic was that he would act on his visions. They weren't just visions. They were, as it were, signs of things he was to do.

Now I remember in particular that one morning when we were having breakfast together he said, "Oh, what do you think I saw in my vision this morning?" So I said, "No, I don't know?" He said, "I saw on the roof of your vihara", that is the place where we were staying, "a banner of victory". He said, "We've got to have a banner of victory on the roof". So straight after breakfast he went into the bazaar, he found a carpenter. He got the carpenter to make the wooden frame. Then he went to the cloth-merchant. He bought different coloured silks and he brought the whole thing back to

the vihara and he very quickly manufactured this huge banner of victory with all the coloured flounces of silk and he put it up on the roof and he performed ceremonies and pujas and blessings and invocations.

So he was always know, doing this kind of thing. He was very spontaneous and he never acted from thought or calculation but always from the visions. He was very much a meditating lama and yes I can tell you some strange stories in connection with him, maybe interesting to you. He came down from Tibet to take up the post of head lama of the (Pemayangtse?) Gompa. And as you know Tibetans have a great belief in astrology so according to the astrology he had to enter the monastery, (Pemayangtse?) Gompa on a certain day at a certain time. So he was camping out in the jungle in a little tent, just waiting for that time to come because he travelled all the way down from Tibet but it wasn't quite the time for him to actually enter the monastery so he was out there in the jungle, just by himself. Just living in a little tent and just meditating. Now at that time in Kalimpong, Dhardo Rimpoche had a French woman as his disciple and in fact, she, he had made her a nun, a sramaneri. But she was a very, very difficult quarrelsome woman and she gave Dhardo Rimpoche a lot of trouble. And after being his disciple for about six months she sort of quarrelled with him and left him and she went up into Sikkhim looking for another teacher and somehow or other she was wandering in the same jungle where Kachu Rimpoche was staying and she came across him, quite unexpectedly and she thought "Oh, this is wonderful. I've found another lama." So they got talking. She knew some Tibetan. So he asked her whose disciple she was. She said, Oh, she was the disciple of Dhardo Rimpoche and then he asked her what spiritual practice she was doing. So she said "Oh, I doing such and such meditation". So he looked at her and he said, "No. You haven't been doing that meditation for six months". And it was true. She told me this herself that she had told him a lie, that she hadn't done her practice for six months and he knew it. And she was very much impressed by this and afterwards I myself had many experiences with him of this kind. He could certainly read people's thoughts. He knew what they were thinking, and once when he was staying with me an American couple came to see me and they wanted to talk with him. I was acting as interpreter and they were asking questions but after a while he was answering their questions before I was able to translate and some of the questions were about Nirvana and quite difficult but he knew what they were asking without my translating and he just gave the answer straight away!

So that was Kachu Rimpoche and so he was very much a meditating, visionary type of lama.

**J.O.M.:** Did he make any art of it?

**S:** He did. He also was an artist. Yes, now you mention it I'd forgotten these things. This was all a long time ago. He was not only an artist, he cast many important images and I went to see him as I mentioned in (Pemayangtse?) when after he became head lama there I went to see him and when I saw him in his room and he was sitting on his bed and underneath the bed there were the portions of a very big silver image of Padmasambhava. So I asked him, "Oh, what is this?" He said, Oh, he is casting this image. He's in the process of casting it. He was an expert caster of images but this one was of silver and it was life-size and it was being made in memory of Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche who had died not very long before. But it's

interesting also that it was Khachu Rimpoche who gave me the initiation of Padmasambhava among with the initiation of Amitayus, the Buddha of Long Life.

But I've mentioned Jamyang Khyentse and he in a way was, you could say, visionary because I received a number of initiations from him and I don't know whether you know this but when the lama gives an initiation of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, he is supposed to meditate on that Buddha or Bodhisattva and visualise him and the same time and as Jamyang Khyentse was ringing his bell, he was just sort of looking up like that and I had the very strong impression that he was looking up and he could actually see the various bodhisattvas whose initiation he was giving me. I suppose Manjusri, Avalokitesvara, Vajrapani and Tara. There was a sort of expression on his face, a smile on his face as though he was just looking up and he was actually recognising them, he was seeing them as he was performing the ceremony and giving the initiation. So I had this impression very strongly at the time.

**J.O.M.:** So, initiation in that way is a kind of taking home the visions and all layers of existence and then ...

**S:** Well Dudjom Rimpoche once explained to me. He said that when the lama gives the initiation of a Buddha or bodhisattva it is as though he is introducing you. He is saying, as it were, to the, say, well in this case it was Tara, he's saying, "Well, Tara. Here is my disciple so-and-so." Yes. And then he says to the disciple, "Disciple. This is Tara." So he introduces you to each other, he creates that connection. But first he must establish his own connection with Tara or whoever is the deity before he can introduce his disciple.

So it's as though he puts himself in contact with that experience and because he's in contact with it, he can be the means of putting you in contact with it. He can't as it were give you what he hasn't got himself. So there can't be any such thing as a purely formal initiation though very often that is the case with an ordinary lama who hasn't much spiritual experience. He just performs the ceremony but not really very much happens.

**J.O.M.:** In Lama Anagarika Govinda's book 'The Way of the White Clouds' there is many stories about the famous Tibetan master, Tomo Geshe Rimpoche, who apparently had very, very large visions and you have met his son and also Tibetans in general. Yes. Can you comment on these kind of visions?

**S:** Yes, in the case of Tomo Geshe Rimpoche it was not so much a question of visions because usually visions are something which are peculiar to a single person but in Tomo Geshe Rimpoche's case it was though his visions materialised and were perceived by other people. And on one very famous occasion hundreds of other people, and I was told - I learned this from Tibetans in Kalimpong before I met Lama Govinda - and they said that Tomo Geshe Rimpoche was once travelling in Tibet and people saw in the sky many figures of buddhas and bodhisattvas and flowers started falling from the



sky, very big, lotus-like flowers fell onto the earth and people could take them up and touch them but they only lasted about half-an-hour and then they sort of melted away. So this was a very famous episode and I was also told that the whole episode was depicted in a fresco on the walls of the Dunkara Gumpa in the Chumbi Valley in southern Tibet where the Dalai Lama stayed for a while, when the Chinese invaded Tibet.

But it seems as though this was an example not just of visionary experience but of materialisation almost. I mean at present, you know, there is, you probably know, a Hindu yogi in India, the Satyasaibaba, who is supposed to materialise things and in this connection I heard a strange story quite recently. Some of my disciples went out to Kalimpong recently and in Kalimpong I used to have a Tibetan disciple called Sherab Nangwa whom I ordained. He was much older than myself but anyway he wanted to be ordained by me so I ordained him and he was living in Kalimpong in a small shrine and he died a few years ago. So just recently, a few months ago some of my disciples went to Kalimpong and they visited this shrine where Sherab Nangwa had lived and on the altar there was a picture of this Satyasaibaba and the local people told me, told my disciples that when Sherab Nangwa, my disciple, was living there this photograph of Satyasaibaba would produce holy ashes but not after Sherab Nangwa had died it seems, and many people said that they saw this. So I just don't understand it but these strange sort of things sometimes do happen. They don't have any great spiritual value according to Buddhism but they do just suggest that, well, the laws of nature are perhaps more profound and more complex than we usually think.

**J.O.M.:** They seems to have better sort of ground in the eastern countries that maybe they're also happening in the west but people don't know how to perceive or don't pay attention.

**S:** They don't pay attention. Just like when small children start talking about experiences before they were born. We just think, it's just the childish imagination but in the east they would be taken seriously as recollections of a previous life perhaps. But subsequently I came to know the new Tomo Geshe Rimpoche, the reincarnation of Lama Govinda's guru. At the time of the Chinese invasion he was in Lhasa and he was arrested and imprisoned by the Chinese because he was believed to , well, he was supplying the Kambaras with Ribus, that is with magic pills to protect them. So he was imprisoned and very badly treated, but he had been born in Sikkhim so Sikkhim was a protectorate of India so the Indian Government applied for him to be returned to Sikkhim and to India because he was an Indian protected person so the Chinese agreed and Tome Geshe Rimpoche eventually came to Kalimpong. And I became known to him and he became known to me. We became quite good friends. He was, I was then about thirty-five and he was about twenty-two, twenty-three and we saw a lot of each other.

But he was a very strange person. To begin with he was very small. Well, Sikkhimese specially (Lepchars?) are often very small but he was exceptionally small and very thin and he had a very quiet voice. He always spoke very, very quietly but people had very great respect for him and he

also had a strange sort of sly sense of humour. He was very fond of pulling my leg. He would do this quite often and sometimes it was difficult to know whether he was doing it or not doing it because it was very, very subtle. It was difficult to make out and though he was only twenty-three or twenty-four he behaved just like a very old man. His movements and his way of speaking and holding himself were just like a very old man. And he was very fond of little animals. He had lots of little dogs and cats and birds. Many incarnate lamas I found are like that. Dhardo Rimpoche was the same. He had lots and lots of little dogs and birds and cats and things of that sort.

**J.O.M.:** So the vision of life is automatically extended over many, many lives. (Pause)

After I believe something like twenty years in India you returned to the West and in many ways rediscovered (?) European art and Italian art. So could you go on from there?

**S:** Yes. When I came back to England in 1964 after being away for twenty years there were many things which were strange to me. People's way of life had changed very much and especially I noticed that people seemed much more prosperous than they had been before and I noticed many new institutions. For instance before the War there were no such thing as supermarkets. There were no such things as laundrettes. All this was a new development so I saw so many changes. But I was very concerned to re-establish my own connections with western culture so after I'd been back in England for about a year and a half I had a sort of cultural pilgrimage to Europe. I went with a friend of mine who drove me around and we went through Belgium, through France, Switzerland, we went down into Italy and we went across to Greece. So I spent a month altogether in Italy and a month in Greece and I saw many of the important cultural sites and monuments and art galleries and churches and cathedrals and temples and so on. And I remember that there were certain things that impressed me very, very much indeed. More than other things.

In Greece I was especially impressed by I think three places. I was impressed by Delphi. I was impressed by Epidaurus and I was impressed by Olympia. I think I was impressed most of all by Delphi and I was very keen on seeing Delphi and I'll tell you why. Shortly before leaving Kalimpong I'd read a book by Henry Miller called 'The Colossus of Marusi' and he gives a very interesting and inspiring description of Delphi to such an extent that I felt I must visit Delphi. So that was one of the places I really wanted to see and I was not disappointed. It impressed me. The natural beauty and the beauty of the archaeological remains. It impressed me very deeply indeed and I remember sitting just on the hillside and looking down at the ruins of the temple of Apollo and reading Euripides' Ion - this is a play of Euripides, the scene of which is set in the Temple of Apollo, Delphi. So I was there reading this play of Euripides and looking down at the very place where the action was supposed to have taken place and it was a very, very inspiring experience indeed.

And then Epidaurus which was the great healing centre, and I really did feel a very, very calm healing influence there. I was not surprised that it could,

well, could have, should have been there. (Whispering) I was not surprised that it should have been a centre of healing in ancient times and then Olympia. Olympia I was very impressed by the archaic sculpture. I saw a lot of ancient sculpture when I was in Greece, in Athens and elsewhere, but I think I was more impressed by the archaic Greek sculpture than by the classical which I hadn't expected, I hadn't really known anything about archaic Greek sculpture before but it did impress me very, very much especially in Olympia.

And then of course in Italy I was impressed by several things that I hadn't expected to be impressed by because I hadn't known about them. I was especially impressed by the mosaics of Ravenna. I was impressed by the brilliance of the colours of those mosaics and also I was impressed by the mosaics in St. Marks' in Venice. And I was also on another note I was impressed by the catacombs in Rome. I went down inside one of the catacombs and that was also quite a profound experience. So I had this sort of cultural pilgrimage. This was in 1966 and that was a means, a very important means of re-establishing my contact with especially the classical culture of Greece and the medieval and Renaissance culture of Italy.

And after the foundation of the FWBO I think it was in, it must have been in 1980 or '81 we started holding Ordination Retreats in Italy, in Tuscany at a place called Batignano and I took the opportunity of visiting various places in Italy again and seeing more of Italian medieval and Renaissance art and culture generally. I visited places of course like Florence, Rome, I visited Venice, I visited Sienna. I became very fond of Sienna and Siennese art and going round the museums and art galleries I encountered certain themes and symbols over and over again. Of course there were hundreds and hundreds of Madonnas and Childs and Crucifixions. They didn't appeal to me very much. But the figure that did appeal to me very much was the figure of St. Jerome. So much so that I wrote something about him. In fact I wrote two essays about him and St. Jerome of course was the translator of the Bible into Latin. He was the author of what eventually became known the Vulgate, the Bible in Latin. The Old and New Testaments in Latin which of course was the Bible as known to people in the Middle Ages.

So Jerome was the figure of the translator and there was so many paintings of him by nearly all the great artists. Usually he was depicted either in his study actually translating with a lion sitting at his feet, there's a legend about the lion, or he was depicted doing penance in the wilderness, in the desert. And as I said, there are so many pictures by artists in this ...

**J.O.M.:** ...

**S:** St. Jerome by Durer for instance in his study and there's also a painting by Durer of St. Jerome in the wilderness doing penance and later on he's depicted by other artists like El Greco just dressed in the robes of a cardinal. But St. Jerome became a quite important symbol for me because he was the translator and I thought quite a lot about what it meant to be a translator. It wasn't just a question of translating from one language to another, it was a question of making something which was unknown known. Bringing something as it were up from the depths. If you like from the unconscious into

the light of consciousness and making it, in that way, generally available. I thought in this connection also of the Buddhist figure of Nagarjuna who receives the teachings of the Perfection of Wisdom from a Naga, a dragon princess who comes up from the depths of ocean and hands him this scripture of wisdom. So this was a sort of translation. Nagarjuna also was a sort of translator.

You can even say the same thing with regard to Asanga because it's not just a question of bringing up from the depths but bringing down from the heights because Asanga is believed to have ascended in meditation to the Tushita devaloka, the higher spiritual realm where Maitreya, the future Buddha, is living and received teachings from him which he brought down to earth. So he also is a translator. So this idea of the translator, someone who makes available ...

**J.O.M.:** So one subject that you also feel very close to, from your writings and artistic explorations is the subject of angels. Why should that be?

**S:** Because angels occupy quite an important place in Western religious art, especially perhaps medieval religious art, and when I was travelling around Italy especially, I did encounter so many paintings of this type. And I came to realise that the figure or the symbol of the angel had quite a significance for me. In fact I started remembering that when I was about thirteen or fourteen I drew many pictures of angels. They were drawings but they were quite detailed and I made a whole series of them and of course, we all know in a general way what is meant by an angel. An angel is a being belonging to a higher sphere of existence. An angel is, as it were, half way between ordinary mundane existence and Absolute Reality. Angels in some ways, very roughly, very approximately, correspond to bodhisattvas in Buddhism. They are intermediate beings. They're half in the realm of Absolute Reality and they are half in the ordinary, everyday world. So they function as messengers and this is perhaps why they are winged. They function as messengers. The word 'angel' in Greek meant originally just 'messenger'.

So the angel represents the messenger coming from the higher world, the world of higher reality, even of ultimate reality bringing a message about that higher reality to us down here so to speak, on this earth. So the angel is also a sort of translator. But perhaps in a more direct sort of way, and this angel figure appears in all spiritual traditions. I've mentioned the bodhisattva as the sort of Buddhist equivalent of the angel figure in Christianity but angels also appear in Islamic art and they're represented in much the same way as in Christian art. They especially appear in Persian Islamic art. They're winged beings. Very often very colourful with very beautifully coloured wings rather like Fra Angelico's angels.

And of course angels also make their appearance in modern literature to some extent. The figure of the angel is very important for Rilke. Rilke, the German poet Rilke. In the Duino Elegies the angel makes a very dramatic appearance and the figure, the symbol of the angel was clearly a very important one for Rilke.

So as regards the Western cultural cum spiritual tradition these two figures, these two symbols are of considerable importance for me personally. The

figure or the symbol of St. Jerome and the figure or the symbol of the angel, both of them translators in different ways. Both of them messengers in different ways. Both of them bringing to us spiritual riches of some kind which perhaps otherwise we would not have had access to.

**J.O.M.:** Is there any image that particularly appeals to you in the Western art - Angels or .....

**S:** I can't recollect any particular painting though perhaps one might say that I do find in many ways Fra Angelico's angels appealing. In later western religious art, later Christian art, the angels have been sort of sentimentalised. One can't really believe in them. They're not very credible. But Fra Angelico clearly did believe in his angels and they are quite credible, one might say, in imaginative terms. And they do have these very beautifully coloured wings, sort of almost peacock-like wings very often which has its own significance. But the later sentimental type of angel that you get in Renaissance and post-Renaissance art doesn't appeal to me at all.

**J.O.M.:** They are not seen very much ...

**S:** Though again I remember, yes, sometimes he appears in modern art and I remember seeing a painting of an angel in your art gallery. Is it the Academy Art Gallery in Helsinki?

**J.O.M.:** Yes.

**S:** There is a painting called the Wounded Angel.

**J.O.M.:** Yes.

**S:** By a Finnish artist. The angel is wounded and his head is bandaged and he's sitting on a stretcher and he's being carried along by two men in dark suits. So this almost, the angel seems here to suggest or to stand for some sort of higher reality, maybe the imagination, which has been very badly damaged in our modern era. So the angel does appear in this sort of way sometimes in modern literature and art ...

**[end of tape one tape two]**

**S:** ..... western, er, English artist who does depict angels in a very, very frequently and that is Cecil Collins. I saw an exhibition of his work not so very long ago and angels played a very prominent part in it. But he depicts angels in a very, well almost abstract sort of way, non-realistic way which is quite

strange but at the same time quite suggestive.

**J.O.M.:** "Stars in darkness, a lamp, an optical illusion, a dew drop, a bubble, a dream, a flash of lightning and a cloud. Thus should we look upon life", says Buddha. So here we sit in the lap of Mother Nature and I would appreciate if you could say something about the Buddhist view of nature and your relation to nature?

**S:** These comparisons are taken from a well-known Buddhist text, "The Diamond Sutra" and they are meant to illustrate the impermanence of all conditioned things because the lightning-flash doesn't last very long. The dew-drop doesn't last very long. The cloud drifts by. The dream comes and goes so all these things are evanescent, they're all impermanent. So life is like that but there's also another thing that we notice about all these comparisons, that they're all beautiful. They may be impermanent, they may be transient but they're beautiful too. The cloud is beautiful as it floats through the sky. The dew-drop is beautiful as it glistens in the early morning sunlight. Lightning flash is beautiful, even the bubble on the stream reflecting so many hues, sometimes quite rainbow-like is beautiful.

So to my mind there is a two-fold message here. That life is fleeting, life is transient but life in many ways is also beautiful and of course we see that beauty in nature. We see it in this garden where we're sitting. We see it in the grass, the trees, the flowers, and I would say that in the early Buddhist scriptures, those which can be regarded as reflecting the historical Buddha and his actual historical teachings, there is a very great sensitivity to, a very great awareness of nature, the natural order. It seems that the Buddha himself and his immediate disciples lived very close to nature. It has been pointed out that the Buddha was born in a garden, in an orchard while his mother was holding on to a tree. It's been pointed out that he gained Enlightenment in Bodha-Gaya sitting underneath a tree in the open-air that is. And again he passed away, he died in the Sal Tree Grove of the (Mandas?), stretched out between two Sal trees. And of course he spent much of his time walking from place to place, from village to village in the open air.

So we don't always realise this, that in some ways Buddhism, we might say, is an open air religion. The Buddha taught in the open air and there's a constant reference to the natural background in the early Buddhist scriptures. For instance I remember there's a set of verses in the Theragatha attributed to one of the Buddha's senior disciples where he describes the beautiful black cloud or dark-blue cloud and he describes how a white bird flies across this dark cloud making a beautiful contrast and this sends him into a sort of ecstasy, just beholding that glimpse of natural beauty.

So this is I think an aspect of Buddhism that is often forgotten especially by scholars in Buddhism. They see Buddhism as just a teaching, sometimes as quite a dry, methodical, analytical teaching. But if we look at the life of the Buddha, or the life of his close companions, we see nature very much there. They lived their lives, they practised the Dharma in the midst of nature. So there is a quite close connection, I would say, between early Buddhism especially, and their natural environment.

**J.O.M.:** And also the very symbol for Enlightenment and different spiritual stages culminating in Enlightenment takes the form more easily of natural phenomena and the lotus.

**S:** Yes. Yes. Because in the case of Christianity the most common symbol is the cross, even the Crucifix, but we could say that the most common symbol of Buddhism is the lotus, the lotus flower. And it's rather interesting that the Buddha immediately after his Enlightenment, when he was wondering whether to teach others or not, looked out over the world and he saw human beings just like lotus flowers growing in a pond. Some were deep down in the mud. Some had just raised their heads above the water and some were standing completely free of the water, opening their petals to the sunlight. So this is how the Buddha saw humanity. This is how the Buddha saw human beings. He saw them as like lotuses. He saw them growing. He saw them expanding. He saw them, as it were, opening their petals to receive the sunlight of truth. So it does seem that the Buddha himself was not just aware of nature, not just conscious of the natural environment, but felt a deep sympathy with it. To the Buddha and to the ancient Buddhists nature was not something dead. Nature was alive and this is why in the Buddhist scriptures themselves we get so many references to Nature spirits. Spirits of the trees. Spirits of the ponds. Spirits of the streams. Even spirits of flowers.

I mean, there is a story in one of the Buddhist scriptures where a monk goes and smells a lotus flower growing in the water and the spirit, the goddess of lotus flower comes out and she says, "Why are you stealing my scent?" So this suggests that one shouldn't as it were take from nature without nature's permission. You shouldn't even smell the lotus flower without taking the lotus flower's permission, after all it is her scent, it is not your scent. So this perhaps does convey to us a sort of environmentalist message about the use that we make of nature, that we shouldn't exploit nature. We should cherish all life, that we shouldn't as much as smell a flower without seeking the flower's permission. So this might seem a little bit sentimental but the underlying meaning, the underlying philosophy, I think is quite far-reaching and has many implications for us today.

**J.O.M.:** There is also, I remember, having read a short Zen almost haiku-like poem that says in a much more strong, natural language that

*"An old pine preaches wisdom,  
the wild crane cries out the truth".*

**S:** Because there is a sort of imaginative identification between man and nature. One doesn't want to be sentimental about it in a pseudo-Wordsworthian sort of way but if one looks at nature, if one reflects on nature, if one is in sympathy with nature, well yes, there is much that one can learn. (Pause)

**J.O.M.:** From love of nature it's almost no step at all into love of art and love of poetry which is your particular realm I think and beauty's also a very

unifying factor and the world is after all a very beautiful place to live. Could you, you have written a small booklet, a very important booklet, about religion of art and the place of beauty and cultivation of beauty in man's life. Could you talk about it?

**S:** Well, nowadays, of course, beauty is regarded as rather an old-fashioned idea. Many modern artists and art critics would not accept that it's very valid to talk in terms of beauty. They have other criteria. But personally I believe that the concept of beauty is a very important one and a very valid one. I think we all are susceptible to beauty. We feel beauty and I think one of the great characteristics of appreciation of beauty is that it is quite disinterested. That is to say if you see a beautiful flower and you appreciate it for its beauty you don't want to do anything with the flower. You don't want to own it. You don't want to possess it. You don't want to take it to pieces. You don't want to analyze it. You just want to contemplate it. You just want to appreciate the beauty. So it lifts you, as it were, out of your usual preoccupations. It lifts you, even one might say, beyond your ordinary, your usual self, into a quite different kind of world where one might say, one is concerned with values rather than with interests. When I say interests I mean interests in the, as it were, economic sense. Unless you're a market gardener you are not going to think in terms of making money out of a flower. You just value the flower for its own sake. So I think beauty is important from that point of view among others.

**J.O.M.:** Then it's more and more possible, the more selfless people are ...

**S:** Yes. The more selfless you are the more you appreciate beauty and the more you appreciate beauty the more selfless you become. In fact in the book you mentioned I quote Kant to the effect that to appreciate natural beauty is a sign of goodness in a man. But of course as I've said quite a few people nowadays would not agree that beauty had anything to do with art but I don't agree with that at all. It depends of course I suppose very much on one's definition of art and in that book many, many years ago I tried to work out my own definition of art which some people have found quite useful. After discussing all sorts of definitions of art and the philosophy of art I say, "Art is the organisation of sensuous impressions into pleasurable formal relations that express the artist's sensibility and communicates to his audience a sense of values that can transform their lives".

So it's as though one goes up and up, stage by stage, step by step, in a sort of hierarchy of experience. First of all, there come the sensuous impressions, impressions of sound, impressions of colour, impressions of shape, because art is mostly concerned with sound and with form and colour, it's not concerned with touch, it's not concerned with smell or with taste except in a very, very subordinate sense. So art begins with sensuous impressions. Impressions coming to us through the eye and through the ear. So what do we do with these impressions? First of all we organise them. To begin with they're usually chaotic. We compose, we organise. And what do we organise them into? How do we organise them? We organise them into pleasurable, formal relations. We...

**J.O.M.:** Harmonious?



**S:** Harmonious. Yes, we can say harmonious. In the simplest way we organise into patterns. But that is very simple indeed. Here there enters the question of composition. There enters the question of form. There's enters the question of what has been called significant form. So it's not just that we have these pleasurable formal relations. These relations also have a relation to the artist himself, they express what I call the artist's sensibility, his awareness, his consciousness perhaps of nature or of other people and more than that they communicate to his audience a sense of values. A deep underlying philosophy and communicate that sense of values in such a way that the lives of the audience can be transformed. So I see art as arranged in a sort of hierarchy. There is some art that simply organises sensuous impressions into pleasurable formal relations. That's the lowest kind of art. Then the next kind of art also expresses through those pleasurable formulations the artist's sensibility. Then a still higher form of art communicates through that the artist's sense of values and in the very highest form of art of all, that sense of values communicated in that way is capable of transforming the lives of the observers or the readers and so on.

**J.O.M.:** Could you maybe mention some names here that we can elaborate later on, artists that come to your mind?

**S:** Well, if I start by say at the very beginning, the organisation of sensuous impressions into pleasurable formal relations, well one can think in terms of the Moorish tilework. I mention that because I saw many examples of it when I visited Spain, the Alhambra and Granada some couple of years ago. So this is an example of sensuous impressions organised into pleasurable formal relations. Patterns. Geometrical patterns very often. This kind of art is very common in Islam.

**J.O.M.:** Impersonal?

**S:** Yes. Because of the ban on the representation of living things though that ban was broken by the Persian artists. But in mosques you don't see representations of figures but you get lots of very beautiful patterns in tilework and calligraphy. So that is, to my way of thinking, the lowest form of art. But then you get also sort of patterns that express the artist's sensibility in some way. The artist's feeling. It's difficult to give names because artists may express themselves in these different ways in different works of art or even in different ways within the context of one and the same work of art. But if I go right up to the top of the list, as it were, straight away, I would say that Michelangelo in his Sistine Chapel painting, in his paintings in the roof of the Sistine Chapel, expresses a sort of philosophy. We're beginning to realise that Michelangelo was quite a thinker and that he wasn't merely illustrating the Bible scenes but those scenes had a certain significance for him that transcended perhaps their immediate Christian connection.

He also had the figures of the Sybils, he had the figures of those Igneudos, those youths, framing those illustrations and the figures of the prophets. So here we get almost a philosophy, a definite outlook upon life which can be very influential and transformative expressed in that particular way through his art. He's not just making pretty patterns. He's not just expressing his sensibility even. He's expressing his vision, his sense of values and expressing

them in such a way as to transform the life of the onlooker. In music I think probably Beethoven in his late quartets approaches this kind of art. I've spoken about the pre-Raphaelites. I would say that very often the pre-Raphaelites don't go very far beyond the first two levels. Yes, there are very beautiful patterns, there are beautiful colours, beautiful formal relations which are very pleasurable and a sensibility is expressed. But despite the medievalism and despite the moralism there's not really much of a deeper communication of values I would say.

In the case of some of the Renaissance artists the underlying philosophy is neo-Platonic as in Botticelli. And also I think in El Greco who of course is not Renaissance, he comes later and he's Spanish. But when I saw a couple of years ago many of the great paintings of El Greco in Spain I became conscious that underlying his work there was a quite profound philosophy of platonic and possibly neo-Platonic.

**J.O.M.:** Now you have written very much in your autobiography of your different experiences which are very many in variety and some of us might sometimes wonder that amidst all of this taking place, where are you yourself or maybe more properly, who is the real Sangharakshita? And here in "The Thousand Petalled Lotus" there is a hint about there being not one Sangharakshita but maybe several aspects of you - Sangharakshita One and Sangharakshita Two. Could you maybe comment on this possibly?

**S:** In that passage Sangharakshita One represented the more, as it were, religious minded, even ascetic Sangharakshita and Sangharakshita Two represented the more aesthetic Sangharakshita who was interested in the arts and literature. Sangharakshita One was the Sangharakshita who wanted to meditate and realise the truth and Sangharakshita Two was the Sangharakshita who wanted to experience life. And I was reminded of all this quite recently because when we had the book launch of 'Facing Mount Kanchenjunga' I was signing a copy for a particular woman and she asked me whether there had been a reconciliation between Sangharakshita One and Sangharakshita Two or whether they were still, as it were, in conflict? So I said, in effect, that they have been having a fruitful interaction because I think that you can't, well, it's not possible for Sangharakshita One to get rid of Sangharakshita Two and it isn't possible for Sangharakshita Two to get rid of Sangharakshita One. They have to coexist and there has to be, it seems, a sort of fruitful tension, or even fruitful conflict between the two as they interact with each other.

**J.O.M.:** Is that the creative spur so to say?

**S:** Well, yes and no because if one thinks of creativity in purely aesthetic terms creativity belongs to Sangharakshita Two, not to Sangharakshita One. So it's as though the tension is not between two different types of creativity but between creativity in the aesthetic sense and something quite different from creativity, and I was reminded of this sort of conflict recently in connection with the Salman Rushdie controversy. I was reminded of it especially when I read one of his lectures which he gave after he was condemned to death by the Ayatollah in Iran and he makes the point that there are, as it were, two absolutes. There is a religious absolute and there is an artistic absolute. The religious absolute takes religious values as being, well, absolute. For

Islam Islamic values are absolute, there cannot be any compromise. So if Salman Rushdie, from their point of view, blasphemes Islam, he blasphemes the Prophet, there cannot be any compromise, he must just be killed. But Salman Rushdie's attitude is different. He represents the aesthetic point of view. According to that point of view the artist, the writer, must have complete freedom to express whatever he wishes to express, regardless of any religious or ethical considerations.

So that is the aesthetic absolute. So you have two absolutes here in conflict. The religious absolute which will not give in to the aesthetic and the aesthetic absolute which will not give in to the religious. Formerly in medieval times it was the religious absolute that had the power, so to speak, but in modern times it is rather the aesthetic absolute, at least in the West, that has the power. So I reflected that in my own case there was this same kind of, as it were, conflict. Sangharakshita One representing the religious absolute and Sangharakshita Two representing the aesthetic absolute and that there had to be conflict between them.

But in a sense this conflict could be considered creative or at least productive though not in the narrowly aesthetic sense. Do you see what I mean?

And then I was thinking further and I was thinking of my role, say in connection with our FWBO movement, because, well, because there are some people in the Buddhist world who are not very happy, not very satisfied with the way in which I'm doing things, but at the same time they have to recognise that we're quite successful, that the FWBO is quite successful. So what I was thinking was that you cannot have nowadays really a religious teacher in the old sense, as say represented by some of the Tibetan lamas. When I was in Spain two or three years ago, I was invited by one of the Tibetan Buddhist groups to speak to them and I spoke to them and we had a discussion afterwards and I found that they were experiencing a great difficulty which was that they were supposed to accept whatever their lama said, without any question but since they were Westerners they found this very difficult. So here is the religious absolute. You have to accept whatever the lama says. Many people in the West, even if they want to follow the teachings of the lama.

So I tend to think that we need, as it were, a sort of synthesis, if that is the right word, between the two positions. We need a person who is not a lama in the sense that he doesn't represent just the religious absolute nor can we simply have the writer or the artist in the old sense as an absolute, breaking all the rules, breaking all the boundaries etc., etc. We need a new sort of person and then it occurred to me that Lama Govinda was a bit like that because Lama Govinda was an artist, at the same time he was a sort of mystic but there was nothing absolute about him. He seemed to synthesise the two very, very well, without any conflict, and he was able to do that by being an artist and a writer and a poet as well as being a Buddhist and devoted to meditation and Buddhist thought and Buddhist philosophy. So I feel that the days of the religious absolute are finished, and we don't really need any longer teachers, whether they are Christian or whether they are Muslim or whether they are Buddhist who stand for a religious absolute. Nor do we need any longer artists, painters and writers who stand for the aesthetic absolute and who refuse to consider moral and spiritual considerations. Do you see what I'm getting at, yes?

**J.O.M.:** I was just thinking about many modern artists and they sort of, they are flirting with art, with spiritual things, are moving quite near it sometimes and sort of, and one can criticise them (?) just how accurate their sense of spiritual truth but when they do and when they get it into sort of communicative form which is quite seducing in some strange way, they can make a song out of a difficult issue or something like that. Really they speak their mind on use their personal symbol, their personal life, a symbol and gives expression to it and in that way it seems to communicate very much these times, this very individualistic, you could almost say hedonistic kind of artistic life, but's it's communicated.

**S:** But also of course, experiment for the sake of experiment and breaking rules for the sake of breaking rules because, I mean, it's not that the artist cannot break rules even from the spiritual point of view, but there's no value in breaking rules for the sake of breaking rules. But many, many artists and writers seem to set out with the idea that they extend the scope of artistic expression in their particular field just by breaking the rules. But in my view that is not the case. (Pause) So one has, as it were, a dogmatic religion in conflict with a dogmatic art. Religion, as it were insisting "The rules must be obeyed" and the art is saying "The rules must be broken". These are two opposite dogmatic attitudes.

**J.O.M.:** How did you feel when you wrote this book that you sort of struggled with these things and brought them to some sort of synthesis. They're marvellous works of art [Pause] You could maybe say something since you are in that sense a very unique writer that you actually meditate very much. How does it actually benefit your own work (?)

**S:** Well, first of all it benefits in a general way because it does make the mind calmer and clearer but some years ago, when I was writing my "Three Jewels" if I came to any point where I wasn't clear myself I very often used to stop and do the meditation of Manjusri, Manjughosa and I used to find that helped quite a lot. Yes.

**J.O.M.:** But the book did not fall down from heaven. You had to write it still.

**S:** I had to write it still, yes.

**J.O.M.:** Do you work from inspiration? I mean, many artists work, they get hold of one line or one flavour of life and then they sort of start to dance. Do you work like that? I mean what is the inspiration?

**S:** I suppose it starts with inspiration. I get an idea. Very often the idea just comes into my head. I don't know from where it comes and then I start thinking and I connect it with other ideas and I connect it with material, whether literary material or Buddhist material, and sometimes I carry all this in

my mind for years and years before I actually write it down. I usually have ... oh yes! ... I usually have a lot of different lines of thought going on in my mind, things I'm thinking about or which I've been thinking out for many years and eventually they get written down at some suitable opportunity. But I reflect a lot.

**J.O.M.:** What would you say is the sort of nourishing or fuelling energy when you actually start writing. You chase some vision or seek for perfection or just wish to express ...

**S:** I think the important thing for me is clarity. I want to make things clear, whether to myself or to others. I think clarity is very important for me.

**J.O.M.:** (?)

**S:** Yes. And I get a little annoyed when people are confused in their thinking and when they use words clumsily. I consider this a sort of intellectual laziness and perhaps a spiritual laziness as well.

**J.O.M.:** I have to relate this story for you just off the record, but when I thought about this situation and then I started trying to remember archetypal stories in the Buddhist literature which I could sort of present here so that you could go on from here, one that I came upon was in "Questions of King Milinda" in the very first chapter they say that for many, many hundreds of lives ago these two, the wise monk Nagarsena and King Milinda, they were ordinary monks and started on their long journey and both were (?) beginners and they came into the same sort of vihara or ashram and started doing practices and one was a little more advanced than the other. He was more responsible and clear maybe - probably Nagarsena - and the future King Milinda was a bit more obese and Nagarsena was annoyed with his way of sweeping the garden, and his way of putting the rubbish into a heap and so he made some reprimand or something on that poor fellow and both had some kind of negative feelings and both made a wish at that moment that in a future life they both strive for perfection and I think whatever Nagarsena wished was, I don't know, probably a (?) that kind of perfection, but I think that it stated that King Milinda wanted to have the ability to speak the right words in the right situation in the right place, the right (?). That kind of ability, that was his dream of perfection and that's, of course, that's the dream of any artist to be able, and then three, four hundred incarnations later they met again and he was King Milinda, the great king who sought for somebody who knew was perfect in wisdom and very learned and he found Nagarsena who could answer all his questions. It's a charming, charming tale of progress. I'm of course still trying to collect rubbish and keep the place clean or something like that. I am still very (?) but you have, at least in my mind, you are one of the wisest persons I have met so. But what sort of energy nourishes your life? What about Beethoven for example? You said that Beethoven at his most popular and most maybe dubious, his will-power trying to masquerade as spiritual insight. This is the kind of, some kind of, (?) and I thought of it as a comment on western culture in general. It's sort of the (?) some kind of energy, very much used (?) like because (?) Beethoven and so on.

There must be some subtler way of doing it. The eastern sense of art is much more subtle and there's not so much will-power.

**S:** Well, a lot of it springs from contemplation. I think this comes out very clearly in the case of Chinese art especially landscape art. There is the well-known story about the man who wanted to paint bamboos and he was told to go and look at bamboos just for seven years. So he just looked at them. So it's as though if you contemplate an object, if you contemplate say a bamboo a sort of, well, empathy springs up between you. You have a contact with the bamboo, you have a feeling for the bamboo and out of that feeling you create. It's as though you and the bamboo come together. It's almost like a sort of marriage and because of the marriage between you something is given birth which is the work of art; the painting of the bamboo in this case.

So art which does not spring from will or which is not an expression of will is very often, or at least sometimes, an expression of contemplation and of the rapport which develops between the artist and his particular object as a result of that contemplation.

**J.O.M.:** In Chinese landscape man's position is very clear and its always subdued or...

**S:** Well, this sometimes happens, of course, in western landscape art. Sometimes one has to look very hard to see the human figure. In the landscape art of Poussin, for instance ...

**J.O.M.:** Poussin.

**S:** Poussin. (Pause)

**J.O.M.:** Did you want to say something about Chinese landscapes in general, you mentioned briefly in our first.....

**S:** I found an interesting parallel. You sent me a little book of - now what was that? - not exactly illustrations though they were Finnish poems and each one was illustrated by some graphics and one of those graphics, the theme of one of those graphics was very similar to a Chinese landscape painting and I thought that the parallelism was really quite interesting.

**(Seems to be a break in the tape)**

Padmasambhava was a great Buddhist teacher living about eight hundred AD, that is to say about twelve hundred years ago and he made a celebrated

historic visit to Tibet. He was invited by the king of Tibet. The king of Tibet was building a huge Buddhist monastery but the walls kept falling down and according to tradition the walls kept falling down because the local gods and spirits were displeased that Buddhism was entering Tibet. So Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet in order to subdue these gods and spirits so that the monastery could be completed. Before going to Tibet Padmasambhava had visited many parts of India and the adjacent regions and according to tradition, according to legends in each of the regions he visited he assumed a particular form suited to the inclinations and temperament and spiritual needs of the people of that particular region. He assumed, in fact, many, many, forms but later on eight forms in particular were recognised and these eight forms of Padmasambhava were often depicted in Buddhist art as they're depicted in these eight thangkas or Tibetan native scrolls as they're also called. (Pause)

This form of Padmasambhava is known as Guru Padmasambhava. This is the form in which he went to Tibet and he's represented wearing the robes of a Buddhist monk and the so-called pundit cap, the cap of the master of the Buddhist scriptures, probably these snow-peaks represent the snows of Tibet to which he journeyed. (Pause)

This form of Padmasambhava is known as Sakya Singha. Actually Sakya Singha is a title of the Buddha himself because the followers of Padmasambhava believe that the Buddha as we call him, Sakyamuni, was a form of Padmasambhava. This is not of course accepted by most Buddhists but the Nyingmapas who are the followers of Padmasambhava believe, as I've said, that the Buddha himself was one of the eight forms of Padmasambhava.

And then we have, as it were, the esoteric form of Padmasambhava. This represents a male Buddha form, and a female Buddha form locked in embrace. The male Buddha form represents Compassion, the female Buddha form represents Wisdom. So the figure as a whole represents the union, so to speak, of Compassion and Wisdom within the Enlightened Mind of Padmasambhava.

Yes, this form of Padmasambhava is known in Tibetan as the Thoughtful Coveter of the Best. Here he is represented as a lay teacher, not as a monk. He's carrying a damaru, a little Tibetan drum and a bowl full of nectar. The drum representing the sound of the Buddha's teaching and the nectar representing the blissful experience that one has as a result of practising the Buddha's teaching. (Pause)

This is a wrathful demonic form of Padmasambhava. He assumes this wrathful, demonic form in order to counteract the negative influence of false teachers, and as you see he's riding on a tiger and he's wielding the diamond or thunderbolt sceptre. (Pause)

And here we have the form of Padmasambhava which is known as Lotus King. Here he's also sounding a damaru or little drum and he has a bowl full of, it's difficult to say. Some representations ...

**[End of side one side two]**

... a moon there but here he represents a righteous king, a righteous ruler, that is to say, a king who rules his country in accordance with the principles of the Dharma, the principles of Buddhism.

And this is another wrathful form. This particular wrathful form is called the Roaring Lion and here too, he assumes a wrathful form in order to subdue the forces of evil. (Pause)

This form of Padmasambhava is rather different from the rest. Here he appears as a yogi. As you see he's just wearing a tiger skin round the waist and a very small upper garment and carrying the kind of staff that Padmasambhava very often is represented as carrying. The five skulls, by the way, represent the Five Wisdoms, sometimes personified as five Buddhas and their skulls because they represent an insight into the Void or sunyata, nature of all existence.

**J.O.M.:** In many of your books and articles you choose to illustrate them with the works of Western artists, particularly of the Renaissance period. What is it in this period that appeals to the Buddhist mind so much?

**S:** I think it is not a question so much of the Buddhist mind as the designer's mind because I have to work in collaboration with the designer of the dust jacket and designers very often have their own ideas. But as you say many of my books, though they are books on Buddhism are illustrated with paintings or motifs taken from Western art and especially from the Renaissance. In a general way this is due to the fact that one wants to try to present the message or the teaching of Buddhism with the help, as far as is possible, with Western images, through the medium of Western culture and, of course, the Renaissance does represent, and Renaissance painting and architecture does very much represent, a sort of peak in Western culture. So it's quite natural, quite easy, in a way, to take one's images, illustrations from that particular source.

**J.O.M.:** Is it because it's one of the most universal periods in the human evolution at large also?

**S:** It is in that sense. It is universal. Just recently I finished writing another book and I was discussing the dust jacket with the designer and we came up with the idea of putting all the dust jacket, either the whole of or part of Botticelli's painting, the Calumny of Apeles. It fitted in with the theme of the book. The theme of the book was Buddhist but in a more general sense the theme of the painting fitted in with the theme of the book, because in the book I am replying to criticism and appealing to the truth about Buddhism and in this painting of Botticelli there is a nude female figure pointing



upwards and appealing to Truth against Calumny.

**J.O.M.:** Against?

**S:** Calumny. That is negative criticism.

**J.O.M.:** Renaissance painting is also very lofty, very subtle, in colour and maybe compared to, for example, Rococo painting or Baroque painting which is messy and dramatic and what we spoke about ...

**S:** It varies of course. I mean the Venetians were the great colourists and I appreciate very much the work of the Venetians. I appreciate Titian, perhaps, above all from the point of view of colour. But I appreciate Tintoretto very much as regards his, in a sense, realistic and dramatic handling of his subject matter which is usually, of course, themes from the Bible, from the life of Christ and so on. And El Greco who spent some time in Venice was obviously very much influenced by the art of Tintoretto and can be seen as in some ways continuing that tradition, though in the case of El Greco, I would say, he has a much more spiritual outlook, a much more spiritual philosophy and a much better colour sense than Tintoretto.

**J.O.M.:** Is it proper to say that he is more exalted and in that way more spiritual ...

**S:** El Greco?

**J.O.M.:** Yes, El Greco.

**S:** Yes. He is more exalted and he is also, I think, more visionary. In fact you could almost say that he's sometimes ecstatic. Yes, he's sometimes ecstatic and this impression of ecstasy is very often heightened by the elongated nature of his figures and very often by their upward movement.

**J.O.M.:** Like heaven, the forces of heaven and the forces of the world uniting as ...

**S:** No, I wouldn't say that there's any uniting of the forces of heaven and the forces of earth or hell. In El Greco's art there is a complete escape from the forces of the earth, or forces of hell. There is an upward soaring motion, from earth to heaven, a sort of movement that very often is associated with Gothic architecture.

**J.O.M.:** I saw that you have this Michelangelo reproduction there hand touching...

**S:** From the Creation of Adam.

**J.O.M.:** Yes. What does it mean to you?

**S:** Well, it's not so much what it meant to me but what it meant to the person who sent it because it was sent to me by one of our mitras and she has written something on the back. She visited Rome and she says, "May this beautiful image of Michelangelo's convey the sense of gratitude I feel for my contact with you. The touch that is not a touch but which is a communication of truth and a setting one back upon one's own inner resources and responsibility". So the mitra who sent me this clearly sees this as a symbol of communication. A communication without actual touch. It's as though some electric current is jumping across that intervening gap. So, yes, one can see it in that way. I've been very familiar with the Sistine Chapel frescoes from a very early age and it does seem that from the finger of the Creator a current of energy is passing into the comparatively inert and flaccid body of the newly created Adam. It does seem to represent a sort of influx of divine inspiration into humanity. Michelangelo does seem to be saying something of that sort. He's not simply illustrating the old biblical myth or biblical legend. Adam is humanity and the Creator represents the forces of inspiration flowing into humanity. I read the painting in that sort of way.

**J.O.M.:** From there it is very operatic to go onto one of your own sort of, so to say, artists very near and dear to you and English visionary, William Blake, in which we find maybe even more dramatic sense of dramatic energy and dramatisation of ... You can probably say very much about Blake.

**S:** I think you can say of Blake, much more truly than one could say of El Greco that there was a meeting of the forces of heaven and the forces of earth. In fact, of course, there is his famous work, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'. But I'm particularly thinking of an engraving of his of the reuniting of the soul with the body where a masculine figure is rising up out of the ground and a female figure is descending from above and the two are clasping each other. That you could say represents much more truly the union of the forces rising up from below and the forces descending from above. And of course in much of Blake's work one gets a very strong sense of line, a very strong sense of linear rhythm. Blake isn't much of a colourist except in some of his works but his line is always very vigorous and very fluid, very expressive and he himself spoke in praise of what he called the wiry, bounding line.

**J.O.M.:** Bounding?

**S:** Which constitutes a boundary.

**J.O.M.:** Boundary, yes. (Pause) He's probably the most inspired artist, visual artist, that England has seen.

**S:** I think art critics have mixed feelings about him. He can be very good indeed but he can also be very bad. He is quite uneven. I think most English historians of English art would probably give the highest place to Turner or to Gainsborough. I don't think they would give the highest place to Blake.

**J.O.M.:** In Turner we see, I admire him very much also and I will certainly go to see the gallery's Turner collection - I've seen part of it before - but there is of course vision even on a larger scale, there's more space, there's more room for the elements. For example, it's a tremendous dramatization of elements, earth, fire, air and water in different dramatic..... As a Buddhist you meditate on these elements in a quite way but how do you experience Turner's enormous dramatisation.

**S:** Well as you say, Turner's representation of the elements is very dramatic. He's very good at representing space, sky, distance, very good at representing mountains, chasms, storms, the sea. He's particularly good at depicting the sea. But to my mind he is at his most interesting in some ways, when he relates the physically insignificant human being to the much more powerful and extensive elements. I'm thinking of, for instance, something like his 'Fire at Sea' where a ship has caught fire and human beings are in peril, not just from the sea but from the fire. They're caught as it were between the fire because the ship has caught fire, and the sea in the midst of which they are. They're between, as it were, the devil and the deep blue sea. So Turner is very good at depicting those sort of situations. You're very conscious of the physical powerlessness of man confronted by the infinitely powerful elements by which he is surrounded and almost crushed. But there's also another side of Turner which I like very much. I like very much his classical and, not exactly mythological but more legendary paintings. His paintings of Rome and Naples and that southern Italian scenery with blue skies and peaceful landscapes and mythological scenes. Those paintings of his I also find very appealing. But Turner is a many-sided artist. A very great genius indeed and a quite remarkable man who cared only for his painting and for nothing else.

There's some quite interesting stories told about him that very often when he was due to exhibit he would paint his picture at the last moment and paint it in, actually in the gallery where it was going to be exhibited even for the Royal Academy and he would just arrive very shabbily dressed, put up his easel, take out his paint and he just scabbled colours on the canvas. Not taking any notice of anybody and people would think, "Well what a mess, you know. What on earth is he doing?" But gradually it would change and develop and it would become a beautiful picture. But he would take no notice of anybody. He never bothered about criticism. He told Ruskin when Ruskin wrote to him once that he never bothered to reply to criticism. He just went on in his own way and he refused to have anything to do with fashionable society. He just lived to paint.

**J.O.M.:** You also wrote an interesting small pamphlet which deserves maybe a little more circulation and it's called 'The Artist's Dream' which tells a story, a parable of an artist who goes through various trials and tribulations and then he sort of wakes up to the vision of painting a new world. That is probably also a self-portrait.

**S:** It could be taken as a self-portrait though the medium is different. The artist can work in some many different mediums. I wrote it quite a long time ago. I wrote it about twenty years ago. So you might say that the artist's dream, in my case, was the dream of the FWBO, this new Buddhist movement. One could look at it like that.

**J.O.M.:** But you didn't have any particular artist, visual artist, painter ...

**S:** No. I didn't. No, and I deliberately laid the scene in Italy in the Middle Ages. If I was influenced by anything I was influenced by a story by Rosetti called 'Hand and Soul'. This is not very much known. It was a prose story written by Rosetti when he was quite young. I read it many, many years ago and I was quite impressed by this and there may have been some lingering influence of this story 'Hand and Soul' on my 'Artist's Dream'.

**J.O.M.:** Can you say something about German and romantic painters. At least for me, for example, after Leonardo da Vinci and Pierra della Francesca maybe and a few others who strangely - Caspar David Friedrich is always there. Fillip (?) also I admire very much and but it's not really my sort of wavelength. But, for example, if you want to speak about German Romantic painters or artists in general. But for example, if we start with Caspar David Friedrich - to me the qualities which I figure could be could be, you could easily, it's the subtlety and the position and also the sense of man in landscape (?) ...

**S:** One could say that Friedrichs is the very quintessentially northern. If you take, say Titian, as quintessentially southern with light and colour and beauty and joy, then Friedrichs is very definitely northern and melancholy and reflective and depicting not bright sunlight but mist and darkness, gloom. So the two are fairly, as it were, antithetical. Nonetheless I find him very interesting and I must mention that I think it was last year when I was in Germany I went along to the art gallery in Dusseldorf and there was a very extensive collection there of nineteenth century German Romantic painting and I was very impressed by this collection. It did contain some of his paintings but there were hundreds of paintings just in this one section of the museum and there were many other romantic, German romantic artists of whom I hadn't even heard. But some of their work also I found very impressive. But it was generally of this same kind. He was a product of the northern forests and the grey northern skies. He wasn't a product of the beautiful sunlit Italian landscape. He was melancholy, reflective and mystical. Do you mean the, you don't mean the Lohans.

**[There seems to be a break in the tape here - although it cannot be heard]**

**J.O.M.:** Lohans, yes.

**S:** Lohans are arahants not bodhisattvas. Yes. Yes.

**J.O.M.:** But to me they embody in a very dramatic and strong way Buddhist ideas (?) Lama Anagarika Govinda.....

**S:** Well, in Chinese Buddhist art in particular you get the arahants represented in a completely different way from the bodhisattvas. The arahants are always old or at least elderly. The bodhisattvas are always young. According to tradition bodhisattvas appear in sixteen year-old forms and they're very beautiful, very attractive. So sometime ago I gave quite a bit of thought to this. Why are arahants represented as old and very often ugly and deformed and bodhisattvas as very young and beautiful. So the conclusion I came to was this - that the bodhisattva or the bodhisattvas represented the spiritual ideal or spiritual ideals. Represented the spiritual ideal in its perfection, as it were in another world, as it exists in another world, but the arahants represented that same ideal but as embodied under the conditions of history as limited by time and space and, of course, time and space are limitations so when it becomes embodied in actual life the ideal cannot exhibit the full perfection that it has in a higher, more ideal realm so I see these representations of bodhisattvas and arahants especially in Chinese art as complementary in this sort of way. The bodhisattvas representing the ideal as it is in its self and the arahants representing the ideal as it is actually realised in history, limited as it is by so many different circumstances, by time and space at least.

**J.O.M.:** I could ask a general question about the sacredness of art or the degree of sacredness that secular and sacred art... how the osmosis takes place and when does a work of art become more sort of sacred or work more on a sacred sort of level of existence? It must always be an amalgam. They are many, sort of, layered as in Caspar David Friedrich or Leonardo da Vinci but one can get this feeling, strange feeling of holiness and sacredness. These are strong words and I quite hesitate to use them even, but feeling of sublime and almost touching holy ground, or holy feeling or (?) spiritual existence. Do you see it?

**S:** Well in "The Religion of Art", in my book, I distinguished between what I called conventionally religious art or conventionally Buddhist art and art which is genuinely religious or genuinely Buddhist. Because one can have a picture of a so-called sacred subject. For instance in Christian art the Madonna and Child, but it can be painted without any real feeling so it is only a religious painting by tradition, and by association, not by virtue of its inner spirit or by virtue of the artist's and realisation. But you can have the same kind of religious painting, say of the Madonna and Child painted by someone with real insight and then it becomes not only formally religious but genuinely religious. But then again you can have a painting that is

genuinely religious, the product of real spiritual insight but not associated with any specific, formally religious imagery or story.

As for instance you may get in the case of landscape painting or say a flower painting, and I think in modern times maybe since the Renaissance, artistic inspiration has tended to flow less and less in conventionally religious channels. Not only as regards the visual arts but also as regards secular literature. There's a very interesting statement by the English literary critic Middleton Murray who says that when Roman Catholicism died in Britain then English literature was born. He means by that those spiritual energies which formally flowed through the Church now flow outside the Church and find expression in secular art, secular literature. So nowadays we find that very often modern man if he is looking for inspiration, let's say in literary terms, leaving aside the visual arts, I mean, unless he's definitely a Christian, he doesn't read the Bible, he doesn't look to religious literature, he looks to the great novelists. He looks to the great poets. He will read James Joyce, he will read Proust. He will read Thomas Mann. He may read Goethe so he will get his spiritual inspiration, his spiritual nourishment from those sources, not from ostensibly religious sources.

So I think we always have to distinguish between art which is genuinely religious in feeling, whether it is formally religious or not and art which is genuinely religious in feeling but expressed in, as it were, secular terms.

**J.O.M.:** Do you feel because something general about these times, what are these times, many people are very confused. I am confused as many others. What is really going on and now that so many worldly systems are collapsed or are heavily in crisis and art itself. Now we, of course, we can feel that there is a very much upsurging attention to spiritual truths. People at least, they are shaking out of their conventional security systems and now they have to face this dimension, this spiritual reality and try to find out their relation to it and do something about it. So at least in conventional terms this means that there is a lot more attention given to religious subjects and issues even in the media and people ask more and more, you can see in TV people debating. In the largest newspaper in Finland for example, now they are sort of debating on the culture of (?) did Jesus maybe have a historical life based on what some Swedish theologian have interpreted (?) It's very secondary, secondary, secondary, but these issues are coming up now in ...

**S:** Well it's much the same in England at present. I mean, one of the English bishops, the Bishop of Durham, appeared in some of his pronouncements to have thrown doubt on the literal truth of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and there was a big discussion about this and even ordinary people were quite interested. But what it really amounts to is very difficult to say because I think most people nowadays in Britain, even those who regard themselves as Christians, wouldn't believe that Jesus did actually rise from the dead. They would take it as symbolical, not to be taken literally whereas traditionally it is taken both literally and symbolically.

So, yes, these sort of discussion are going on and there seem to be very broadly two groups of people, those who are as you say looking for a security system so some just go back or try to go back to the old security system, that is, the Christian religion. Others look for some new security system and

very often are not able to find one and they drift and they find their life, you know, quite meaningless. In Britain as regards Christianity there's definitely been an upsurge in fundamentalist Christianity. The mainstream churches are not doing very well but the extreme, fundamentalist evangelical Pentecostal movements are doing quite well.

**J.O.M.:** But also this, you have also mentioned it in your little pamphlet "The Glory of the Literary World" and also in "The Religion of Art" this possible second Renaissance which would constitute, which already Schopenhauer had sown a seed in some kind of vision and later it becomes more and more reality as eastern teachers came to the West and treasury of their literature became more and more translated and available and now since the Sixties we have witnessed this tremendous sort of revival or new sort of influx or, more and more influx of eastern religions and among young people and seeking people it finds a response and takes expression of movements and people really go into this, but if we stay on the cultural level and try to see that a spiritually, culturally (?). Could we really talk about that as a second Renaissance going on now ...

**S:** I don't think we can yet personally. Also I think many of those who take some eastern religion take them up almost as a substitute for Christianity. They take them up in the same sort of spirit. I mean, for instance, one finds some people taking up Tibetan Buddhism but then they accept everything that the lama says literally at its face value just as the Christian formerly accepted everything that the Bible said or everything that the Pope said. So now some of those who follow Tibetan Buddhism in the west, they just accept everything the lama says. So in principle, there's not much difference. They found refuge in an authority. They have found a security system and that is a quite different thing from Enlightenment or even insight and knowledge. So even though, yes, eastern religions are becoming in many ways better known in the west, very often they're being approached in the wrong sort of way and used for the wrong sort of purpose. So I'm doubtful whether yet there is a real Renaissance comparable to the Renaissance that took place in Europe in the fifteenth century as a result of the rediscovery of classical literature and classical art and culture. Also of course we must say that so far the influx of eastern teachings into the west has not produced a cultural renaissance. There's no great art being produced out of that.

**J.O.M.:** (?)

**S:** Maybe on a very small limited scale perhaps but nothing outstanding, nothing to compare with the great artistic achievements of the Renaissance. Not even to a limited degree.

**J.O.M.:** Should we expect it?, but I mean ...

**S:** I don't know ...

**J.O.M.:** (?)

**S:** I don't know whether we can expect but at least we may hope.

**J.O.M.:** No, but I mean Buddhists don't build a better world and they don't build very much ...

**S:** Well they put up buildings, I mean, we ourselves in India, we are constructing buildings and we have put up some very big buildings and very beautiful buildings in Poona and other places in India, more so than in Britain.

**J.O.M.:** Would you say a distinct Buddhist, sort of, style ...

**S:** Yes, one could say neo-Buddhist style, yes. I hope if ever you go to India you can see some of these especially our Mahavihara in Poona, Dapodi, Poona. But even that is just a very small beginning indeed but we have put up at least four or five buildings of some architectural value I think. The architects, well one of the architects is an Englishman and we employ two architects, there is the Englishman and there is a husband and wife team. They are both Indian. We also employ them as our architects and we give the ideas, they carry out the work.

**J.O.M.:** But since so many millions of Westerners have actually learned meditation (?) so I can easily foresee at least the result of meditation will tune their sensibilities better and make them more sensitive and eventually produce many artists who actually meditate.

**S:** Yes, right. This can certainly be a contributory factor though I think by itself it is not enough. You can be a good meditator but I think the creative impulse is something different. In some ways you may say that the meditation may even inhibit the creative impulse. (Pause)

**J.O.M.:** But meditation is nevertheless, it is a household word (?)

**S:** Indeed. Yes.

**J.O.M.:** And also you can see a new sort of tuning into silence (?) seeking silence is becoming kind of ...

**S:** Well, I mean I have now been back in England for twenty-six, twenty-seven years and I see a very big difference in this respect, because when I arrived in 1964 meditation was known to very, very few people but now it is an ordinary, everyday thing. If you tell your friends that you meditate, no



one will be surprised. Even quite ordinary people are quite familiar with the idea of meditation.

**J.O.M.:** ...

**S:** Yes, yes. (Laughter) And also things like vegetarianism. See, when I was a boy in London there was one Indian vegetarian restaurant in London, just one and now there are hundreds, and then yoga, hatha yoga, that is so widely known now.

**J.O.M.:** (?) ladies (?)

**S:** Yes, yes. Well, they're all aware that there is some eastern connection even if they belong to what we call the health and beauty brigade. They're still aware that yoga comes from the east, it comes from India. They're very aware of that.

**J.O.M.:** Ravi Shankar's music ...

**S:** Yes, indeed.

**J.O.M.:** If all this influence would come through a church there would probably be a lot of obstacles and reactions, but when it comes to music, religious music, there's (?) ...

**S:** Well, with the Beatles were influenced to a small degree by Indian classical music, weren't they and Messien has his Durangalila and, well, that the very title is Indian, Sanskrit, Durangalila he calls it, they translate, transcribe it as Turangalila but it's more Durangalila, the Far-Going Play it means, The Far-Going Play. It's a Sanskrit title.

**J.O.M.:** And of course we have John Cage whose pioneering work. I remember very vividly the sixties because I (?) have told you, my (?) pop art was my revelation and through that I grew into art and into this world, actually I acquired something style which I relate to myself and to my relation to the world, but John Cage was very instrumental there both as a teacher, philosopher, and sort of dramatist (?). For example in the sixties there was this great cultural debate between those socialist-minded people who wanted or said that art should be for the masses, it should be anti-institutional and should not be nationalistic, it should be for the people and so on, Brechtian, Bertholt Brechtian kind of theatre, and then on the other side there may be élitist art, a small fraction who wanted art to be detached, free and sort of elevated (?) and all these things and John Cage was very instrumental there, so when the great cultural debate which took two years and almost everyone in Finland and Scandinavia said something. They had to say. So on one side was

Bertholt Brecht and his theatre and on the other John Cage and his silence, the book 'silence' which became a sort of small comic book but before that of course he had done his famous concert which is called, I don't know, is it called here, but it is, there's this 'four minutes thirty-three seconds', it's called, its name, its title (?) very well known consists of a concert pianist coming into the theatre, sitting down by the piano and then doing nothing, playing nothing, just sitting there for four minutes thirty-three seconds, then very very neatly and pedantically closes the piano walks out and bows and goes out. And that created a tremendous. (?) sort of, in a cultural context it was, it opened up suddenly a new world. It was a kind of, it was a shock, it had shock value - I don't think it has shock value any more (?) but it sort of blew the bank as they say and opened up infinite possibilities. But basically it is, what he sort of dramatised (?) idea of meditation, of insight. But it worked.

This exhibition of Tibetan art has been shown in United States last year during the Year of Tibet festival and now it's coming to London and Robert Thurman and colleagues have produced a very beautiful book.

**S:** Yes, it's certainly a very rich and varied collection which is not only of historical interest but many of the items are of very great artistic interest and value also.

**J.O.M.:** The first time such a large exhibition is shown in the west for.....

**S:** I personally rather like these thangkas with the pure red background and the figures picked out in gold. I'm told that this particular style was especially characteristic of Kham Tibetan Buddhist art. But I think that the contrast of the red and the gold is very effective and produces a definitely visionary kind of impression, a non-realistic kind of impression.

**J.O.M.:** The red is the red of Amitabha, radiant light.

**S:** Right. (Pause) We come onto some of the wrathful forms of divinities some of which are very impressive. Some are almost amusing. We have these little Naga princesses, or naga maidens looking rather like mermaids from the western point of view. Here also we have a black background with the figures as picked out in colour. This style also is quite effective, quite impressive. And of course there are some very fine portraits, of great lamas and teachers, historical figures connected with Tibetan Buddhism.

**(End of tape and of interview)**