



# Fundamentals of Buddhism

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# CONTENTS

	FOREWORD	1
	BUDDHISM — A MODERN PERSPECTIVE	3
<b>I.</b>	THE PREBUDDHIST BACKGROUND	12
<b>II.</b>	LIFE OF THE BUDDHA	21
<b>III.</b>	THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS PART I	28
<b>IV.</b>	THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS PART II	41
<b>V.</b>	MORALITY	49
<b>VI.</b>	MENTAL DEVELOPMENT	59
<b>VII.</b>	WISDOM	69
<b>VIII.</b>	KARMA	80
<b>IX.</b>	REBIRTH	90
<b>X.</b>	DEPENDENT ORIGINATION	103
<b>XI.</b>	THE THREE UNIVERSAL CHARACTERISTICS	113
<b>XII.</b>	THE FIVE AGGREGATES	125
	CONCLUSION	133

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**THE GIFT OF TRUTH EXCELS ALL GIFTS.  
BY THE MERIT OF THIS VIRTUE,  
MAY ALL THE SPONSORS BE WELL AND HAPPY,  
AND ATTAIN THE BLISS OF NIRVANA.**

## **FOREWORD**

Buddhism has long been an important part of the cultural heritage of South East Asia. The monuments of Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Indonesia are just two of countless testimonies to the former greatness of Buddhism in this region. In Singapore too Buddhism is an important element in the cultural heritage of the people. The fact that a large section of the Chinese Community as well as the small but influential Srilankan Community acknowledge Buddhism as the primary force shaping their religious ideals and moral values is more than proof of this. Nonetheless, it is certain that if Buddhism is to continue to exercise a positive influence upon present and future generations, it cannot remain content with the achievements of the past. The religious ideals and moral values of Buddhism which have proved so useful to past generations must be transmitted to men and women living in a changing world. In order that this can be accomplished, it is important that the teachings of the Buddha be made available to the largest number of people.

With this objective in mind, the Srilankaramaya Buddhist Temple invited Dr Santina to deliver a series of public lectures. The lectures outlined the fundamentals of Buddhism and were well delivered. As a result, it was decided to produce transcriptions of the lectures and publish them in the form of a book to be made freely available. It is also hoped that the publication will contribute in a small degree to the understanding of the genuine teachings of the Buddha.

Sincerest thanks are extended to all those who lent their invaluable support and contribution to this project and especially to Dr Santina for imparting to us his deep understanding of the Buddha Dharma.

N Sumana Thera  
Resident Monk

SRILANKARAMAYA  
BUDDHIST TEMPLE  
SINGAPORE

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## **BUDDHISM: A MODERN PERSPECTIVE**

We are going to cover what we might call basic Buddhist teachings over a series of twelve lectures. We are going to cover the life of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, Karma, rebirth, dependent origination, the three universal characteristics and the five aggregates. But before I begin the series of lectures, I would like to deal today with the notion of Buddhism in perspective. There are many ways in which different people in different cultures view Buddhism and particularly, I think we can contrast the western or modern attitude towards Buddhism with the traditional attitude. The reason why this kind of perspective study is useful is because when we understand how people of different cultures view a certain thing, we can then begin to see some of the limitation or one-sidedness of our own view.

In the west, Buddhism has aroused extensive interest and sympathy. There are many persons of considerable standing in western societies who are either Buddhists or who are sympathetic towards Buddhism. This is most clearly exemplified by the remark made by Albert Einstein in his autobiography, the remark that he was not a religious man, but if he were one, he would be a Buddhist. This is quite surprising, and off-hand we would not expect such a remark to be made by the Father of Modern Science. Yet if we look at contemporary western societies, we will find an astrophysicist who is a Buddhist in France, we will find an outstanding psychologist who is a Buddhist at the University of Rome, and until recently a judge from England who is a

Buddhist. We will look into the reasons for this interest in Buddhism in the west in a moment. But before we do that I would like to compare this situation with the situation that we find in this part of the world.

In Europe generally, the attitude towards Buddhism is that it is very advanced, very rational and very sophisticated. It was therefore quite a shock to me when I came to Singapore and found that a lot of people here view Buddhism as old fashioned, irrational and too much tied up with superstitions. This is one of the two attitudes that work against the appreciation of Buddhism here. The other is that Buddhism is so deep and so abstract that no one can ever understand it. It is a complete turnabout. This is what I mean by perspective, because in the western perspective Buddhism has a certain image, while in the traditional perspective we have another image. This negative image that people have about Buddhism has to be changed before they can really come to appreciate the Buddha's teachings, before they can get a kind of balanced perspective regarding Buddhism.

One of the first things that a westerner appreciates about Buddhism is that it is not culture bound, not bound to any particular society, race or ethnic group. There are certain religions that are culture-bound, Judaism is one example. Buddhism is not. That is why historically we have Indian Buddhists, Thai Buddhists, Chinese Buddhists, Srilankan Buddhists, Burmese Buddhists and so forth, and we are going to have in the near future English Buddhists, American Buddhists, French Buddhists and so forth. This is because Buddhism is not culture-bound. It moves very easily from one culture to

another because the emphasis in Buddhism is on internal practice rather than on external practice. Its emphasis is on the way you develop your mind rather than the way you dress, the kind of food you take, the way you wear your hair and so forth.

The second point that I would like to make regards the pragmatism or the practicality of Buddhism. Instead of taking an interest in metaphysics and academic theories, the Buddha deals with problems *per se* and approaches them in a concrete way. This is again something which is very much in agreement with western ideas about utilitarianism. That is, if something works, use it. It is very much a part of western political, economic and scientific philosophy. This attitude of pragmatism is clearly expressed in the Culama-lunkya Sutra where the Buddha made use of the example of the wounded man. The man wounded by an arrow wishes to know who shoots the arrow, from which direction it comes, whether the arrow head is made of bone or iron, whether the shaft is of this kind of wood or another before he will have the arrow removed. This man is likened to those who would like to know about the origin of the Universe, whether the world is eternal or not, finite or not before they will undertake to practise a religion. Just as the man in the parable will die before he has all the answers he wants regarding the origin and nature of the arrow, such people will die before they will ever have the answers to all their irrelevant questions. This exemplifies what we call the Buddha's practical attitude. It has a lot to say about the whole question of priorities and problem solving. We would not make much progress developing wisdom if we ask the wrong question. It is essentially a question of priority. The first

priority for all of us is the problem of suffering. The Buddha recognized this and said it is of no use for us to speculate whether the world is eternal or not because we all have got an arrow in our chest, the arrow of suffering. We have to ask questions that will lead to the removal of this arrow. One can express this in a very simple way. We can see that in our daily life, we constantly make choices based on priority. If, for instance, we happen to be cooking something on the stove and we decide that while the beans are boiling we will dust the house, and as we dust the house we smell something burning. We have to make the choice, whether to carry on with our dusting or whether to go to turn down the flame on the stove to save the beans. In the same way, if we want to make progress towards wisdom we have to recognize our priorities and this point is made very clearly in the parable of the wounded man.

The third point that I would like to refer to is the Buddha's teaching on the importance of verification through experience. This point is made clearly in His advice to the Kalamas contained in the Kesaputtiya Sutra. The Kalamas were a people very much like us in our modern day when we are exposed to so many different teachings. They went to the Buddha and enquired that as there were so many different teachers and as all of them claimed that their doctrine was true, how were they to know who was telling the truth. The Buddha told them not to accept anything out of authority, not to accept anything because it happens to be written down; not to accept anything out of reverence for their teacher; or out of hearsay; or because it sounds reasonable. But to verify, test what they have heard in



the light of their own experience. When they know for themselves that certain things are harmful then they should abandon them. When they know for themselves that certain things are beneficial, that they lead to happiness and calm, then they should follow them. The Buddha gives this advice that one has to verify what one hears in the light of one's experience. In the context of the Buddha's advice to the Kalamas, I think what the Buddha is saying is to use your own mind as a test tube. You can see for yourself that when greed and anger are present, they lead to suffering, pain and disturbance. And you can see for yourself that when greed and anger are absent from your mind, it leads to calm, to happiness. It is a very simple experiment which we all can do for ourselves. This is a very important point because what the Buddha has taught will only be effective, will only really change our life if we can carry out this kind of experiment in our life, if we can realize the truth of the Buddha's teachings through our own experience and verify it through our own experience. Only then can we really say that we are making progress on the path towards enlightenment.

We can see a striking parallel between the Buddha's own approach and the approach of science to the problem of knowledge. The Buddha stresses the importance of objective observation. Observation is in a sense the key to the Buddha's method of knowledge. It is observation that yields the first of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of suffering. Again at the final stage of the Buddha's path, it is observation that characterizes the realization of the total end of suffering. So at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the Buddha's

path, observation plays an extremely important role. This is similar to the role that objective observation plays in the scientific tradition which teaches that when we observe a problem we must first formulate a general theory followed by a specific hypothesis. We find the same thing happening in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and here the general theory is that all things have a cause, and the specific hypothesis is that the causes of suffering are craving and ignorance. This truth that the causes of suffering are craving and ignorance can be verified by the experimental method. In the context of the Four Noble Truths, the experimental method is the path. Through the path, the truth of the Second Noble Truth (the truth of the cause of suffering), and the Third Noble Truth (the truth of the cessation of suffering) are verified because through this cultivation of the path one eliminates craving and ignorance. And through the elimination of craving and ignorance one eliminates suffering. This experiment is repeatable just as in science because not only did the Buddha attain the end of suffering, but so too did all those who followed His path.

So if we look closely at the Buddha's approach to the problem of knowledge, we find that His approach is very similar to the scientific approach and this too has aroused a tremendous amount of interest in the west. We can now begin to see why it is that Einstein could make a remark like the one that he did. We will see more clearly why this is not as surprising as it seems initially because I would like to talk about the Buddhist method of analysis and we can begin to see it operating very clearly when we look at the Buddhist approach to experience.

Experience in Buddhism is comprised of two components — the objective component and the subjective component. In other words, the things around us and we the perceivers. Buddhism is noted for its analytical method in the area of philosophy and psychology. What we mean by this is that the Buddha analyzes experience into various elements, the most basic of these being the five Skandhas or aggregates — form, feeling, perception, mental formation or volition and consciousness. The five aggregates in turn can be analyzed into the eighteen elements (Dhatus) and we have a still more elaborate analysis in terms of this seventy two elements. This method is analytical as it breaks up things. We are not satisfied with a vague notion of experience, but we analyze it, we probe it, we break it down into its component parts like we break down the chariot into the wheels, the axle and so on. And we do this in order to get an idea how things work. When we see for instance a flower, or hear a piece of music, or meet a friend, all these experiences arise as a result of components. This is what is called the analytical approach. And again this analytical approach is not at all strange to modern science and philosophy. We find the analytical approach very substantially used in science. In philosophy, we see the analytical tradition perhaps best in Bertrand Russell. There have been studies that compare quite successfully the philosophy of Bertrand Russell with the philosophy of the Buddhist Abhidharma. So in western science and philosophy, we find a very close parallel with the Buddhist analytical method and this again is one of the familiar features that has attracted western thinkers and academics to Buddhism. In the area of psychology, psychologists are

now deeply interested in the Buddhist analysis of the various factors of experience — feeling, idea, habit and so forth. They are now turning to Buddhist teachings to gain a greater insight into their own disciplines.

This growing interest in Buddhism and these many areas of affinity between the teachings of the Buddha and the tendencies of modern science, philosophy and psychology have reached their apex at this very time in the suggestions now proposed by quantum physics, the latest developments in experimental theoretical physics. Here too we find that not only is the method of science observation, experiment and analysis anticipated by the Buddha, but that some of the very specific conclusions about the nature of man and the universe that are indicated by the latest developments in quantum physics were also indicated by the Buddha. For instance, the importance of the mind. A noted physicist not long ago remarked that the Universe is really something like a great thought. And it is said in the Dhammapada that the mind precedes all things, that the mind is the maker of all mental states. Similarly, the relativity of matter and energy is mentioned. There is no radical division between mind and matter. All these indications are now gradually being revealed by the latest developments in science.

So what has happened is that in the western contexts, academics, psychologists, and scientists have found in Buddhism a tradition which is in harmony with some of the basic tenets of western scientific thought. In addition to this, they find that Buddhism is particularly interesting because although the methods and the dis-

coveries often resemble closely those of Buddhism, they find that in science so far, there is no path or method of achieving an inner transformation. They have methods of building better cities and expressways but they have not had any system which will enable them to build better people. So people in the west are turning to Buddhism. As an ancient tradition, it has many aspects that closely resemble practices in the western scientific traditions and yet goes beyond the materialism of the western tradition, beyond the limits of the scientific tradition.

## **THE PREBUDDHIST BACKGROUND**

We are going to begin today with a consideration of the prebuddhist situation in India. Normally Buddhist studies courses begin with a study of the life of the Buddha. We are going to begin before the life of the Buddha. Personally I feel this is quite important as I feel it helps one to understand the life and teachings of the Buddha in their broader historical and conceptual context and to understand and appreciate better the nature of Buddhism and perhaps Indian thought as a whole.

I do not know how many of you have visited India. We have in the North of India two great rivers — one is the Ganges and the other is the Yamuna. These two great rivers have separate sources in the Himalayas and they flow separately for a good proportion of their lengths. They unite in the north eastern region of India. From there they flow on together to the Bay of Bengal. In a way the geography of these two great rivers is a symbol of the origin and development of Indian religion, philosophy and thought because in Indian religion too we have two great rivers which were originally quite distinct and had separate origins and which for a considerable length of time were separate but which at a certain point of time merged and flowed on united right to the present day. Perhaps as I go into the prebuddhist history of India, we can keep in mind the image of these two rivers originally separate and at a certain point merging and flowing together to the sea.

When we look at the very early history of India, we find that there existed in the 3rd Millennium B.C. a very

highly developed civilization in the Indian subcontinent. This civilization is as old as those which are called the cradles of human culture, civilizations like those of Egypt and Babylon. This civilization existed approximately between the year 2800 B.C. and 1800 B.C. It was known as the Indus Valley Civilization or it is sometimes called the Harappa Civilization, and it extended from what is now Western Pakistan, south to a point which is near Bombay and eastward to a point which is in the neighborhood of what is now Simla in the foothills of the Himalayas. If you see a map of India, you will realize that this is a very considerable extent. Not only was this civilization stable for a thousand years, it was also a very highly developed civilization both materially and spiritually. Materially the civilization was an agrarian one. They were skilled in irrigation and the planning of towns. In addition, they had a very highly developed spiritual culture. This is clear from the archaeological evidence that has been discovered at Mohenjodaro and Harappa. There is also evidence of the fact that they were literate. They had developed a script which unfortunately we are not able to decipher.

The peaceful life of this civilization was unfortunately interrupted in about the year 1800 or 1500 B.C. by an invasion that came from the North West. The invading people were known as the Aryans and this is a term that designated a people of Eastern Europe. The origin of the Aryans was in the grassy region extending from Poland to Western Russia. The Aryans were very different from the people of the Indus Valley Civilization because they were generally nomadic and pastoral.

They did not have a highly developed urban civilization. They were a warlike expanding pioneer civilization that lived in large part from the spoils and plunder that they gathered from the peoples they conquered in the course of their migration. When the Aryans arrived in India, they very quickly destroyed the Indus Valley Civilization. The Indus Valley Civilization succumbed very quickly to the military might of the Aryans. What existed in India after the invasion was an Aryan dominated civilization.

Here we have a brief outline of the facts regarding the early history of India. But let us look at the religious outlook of the people of the Indus Valley Civilization and the Aryan Civilization which is of particular interest to us. The Indus Valley Civilization had a script which we are unfortunately unable to decipher. But our information regarding the nature of this civilization is from two sources, first from the archaeological discoveries at the sites of Mohenjodaro and Harappa and second from the records of the Aryans who described the religious behaviour and beliefs of the people they conquered. From the archaeological evidence we find a number of symbols that are of religious significance, that are special to Buddhism: the symbols of the Bodhi tree and animals such as the elephant and deer. Perhaps most importantly there have been discovered several images of figures sitting in cross-legged postures with their hands resting on their knees, with their eyes narrowed, half-closed quite evidently in postures of meditation. These archaeological findings have been studied by eminent scholars and the conclusion is that we can quite definitely trace the origin and practice of



meditation to the Indus Valley Civilization. When we look at the descriptions of the religion of the Indus Valley Civilization from the writings of the Aryans — the Vedas — we find the figure of a wandering ascetic frequently mentioned. We find that they practised meditation, that they were celibate, that they observed an austere life, that they were sometimes naked or clothed in most simple garments, that they wandered about homeless and that they taught in the way beyond birth and death. If we put together the evidence of the archaeological findings and the evidence of Aryan literature, we find that there emerges a picture of the religion of the people of the Indus Valley Civilization in which there are several important elements. First of all, meditation or mental concentration; secondly renunciation, abandoning the household life, living the life of a wandering ascetic; thirdly that we have a conception of rebirth over a long series of lives; fourthly we have a conception of moral responsibility beyond this life, the notion of karma; and lastly we have a goal of religious life, a goal of liberation. These are the salient features of the religion of the very earliest Indian Civilization.

By contrast, and it would be hard to find two religious views that are more different, let us look at the religion of the Aryans. Here we find it much easier to construct a picture because we have a complete literature with regard to their religion. When the Aryans came to India, they had a religion which was totally secular. They were an expanding pioneering society. There are many close parallels between the Aryan religion and the religion of the Greeks. If you have come across the description of the Greek pantheon you

will find striking similarities between their pantheon and the Aryan pantheon. You will find in the Aryan faith a number of gods who are personifications of natural phenomena. We have Indra for instance who was the God of Lightning and the Thunderstorm personifying power, we have Agni the God of Fire, and Varuna the God of Water. We have a religious set-up in which the priest is the most important figure, while in the Indus Valley Civilization the ascetic was the most important figure. In the Indus Valley Civilization renunciation was the ideal of religious life, while in the Aryan religion the ideal state is the householder state. In the Indus Valley Civilization we have a rejection of sons and offspring, while in the Aryan religion sons are the highest good. While in the Indus Valley Civilization we have the practice of meditation, in the Aryan religion we have the practice of sacrifice — sacrifice was an important means of communication with the gods, of achieving victories in battles, of gaining offspring, of going to heaven. While in the Indus Valley Civilization we have belief in the Law of Karma, and rebirth, in the Aryan Civilization we have no conception of rebirth. Just as in the Indus Valley Civilization we have the notion of moral responsibility extending over a series of lives, in the Aryan Civilization we have no such notion. In fact the highest ideal was loyalty, those values that contributed to the power of the community. Finally while in the Indus Valley Civilization we have liberation as the goal of religious life, in the Aryan Civilization we have heaven as the goal of religious life. The idea that they had of heaven was a heaven modelled upon a perfected version of this life. So if we want to sum up the differences between the religions of these two civilizations, we can

say that on the one hand the Indus Valley Civilization stresses renunciation, meditation, rebirth, karma, the goal of liberation; on the other hand the Aryan religion stresses this life, material well-being, wealth, power, fame and sacrifices as means of achieving these goals. It would be hard to find a set of more diametrically opposed religious attitudes. In addition, there are two more important elements of Aryan religion that we ought to recall: caste — the division of society into social strata; and belief in the authority of the revealed scriptures, the Vedas. These two elements were not present in the Indus Valley Civilization.

The history of Indian religion from 1500 B.C. up to 600 or 500 B.C., the time of the Buddha, the history of those 1000 years in India is a history of gradual interaction between these two totally opposed religious views. As the Aryans gradually spread and settled across the gigantic Indian subcontinent, as their pioneering exploits diminished, gradually these two totally opposed religious views began to influence, interact and merge with each other. This is the merging I had in mind when I talked about the merging of the two great rivers. Consequently by the time of the Buddha, we have a very heterogeneous religious scene. We can understand this clearly if we look at some of the facts regarding the life of the Buddha. For instance, we find that when the Buddha was born, two groups of people made prophecies regarding His future greatness. The first prophecy was made by Asita. Asita was a hermit, who lived in the mountains and yet sources tell us that he was a Brahmin, that he belonged to the priestly class. This in itself is already evidence of the interaction of the

two traditions. In the Buddha's time, Brahmins had begun to go forth as hermits. This was unheard of a thousand years before. A little later, we are told that 108 Brahmins were invited to the naming ceremony. Here we have examples of priests who had not renounced the household life, an example of an institution that properly and originally belonged to the Aryan Civilization.

How is it that the two traditions — the Indus Valley tradition and the Aryan tradition, initially so different were able to merge? I think the answer to this lies in the dramatic changes which took place in the life of the Indian people between the 2nd Millennium B.C. and the time of the Buddha. The Aryan expansion came to an end when they had conquered the plains of India. This end of expansion brought about many social, economic and political changes. In the first place, the tribal political society evolved into the institution of the territorial state so that no longer do you have a tribe with a very close personal set of loyalties. You have now a territorial state where many people of various tribes exist together. The kingdom of Magadha ruled by Bimbisara in the time of the Buddha is an example of an emerging territorial state. Secondly, you have this nomadic pastoral lifestyle gradually changed into a more urbanized agricultural settled lifestyle so that the people were now living in urban centres, and were removed from the natural forces that had been personified in the gods. Economically, commerce became important. So while in the early days of the Aryan Civilization the priests and warriors were the most important figures — the priest because he communicated with the gods, the warrior because he

waged wars against the enemy and brought spoils into the community — now the merchants became increasingly important. We can see this in the days of the Buddha, the famous disciples who were merchants — Anathapindika to name only one. These social, economic and political changes contributed to an openness on the part of the Aryans to accept the religious ideas of the Indus Valley Civilization. While the Aryans conquered the Indus Valley people militarily, the subsequent 1000 to 2000 years saw them coming increasingly under the influence of ideas taken from the Indus Valley Civilization. So that by the first few centuries of the Common Era, the distinction between the Aryan tradition and the Indus Valley tradition became more and more difficult to draw. In fact, this fact is at the bottom of the misconception when it is said that Buddhism is a protest against Hinduism, or that Buddhism is a branch of Hinduism.

In Buddhism we have a religion which draws most of its inspiration from the Indus Valley religion, the ideas of renunciation, meditation, karma and rebirth, ultimate liberation — ideas which were important to the Indus Valley Civilization. The Buddha Himself indicated the Indus Valley origins of His tradition when He said that the path which He taught was an ancient path and the goal to which He pointed to was an ancient goal. We also have a Buddhist belief in six Buddhas prior to the Buddha Shakyamuni within this aeon. All these point to a continuity between the tradition of the Indus Valley Civilization and the teachings of the Buddha. If we look at Buddhism and Hinduism we will find a greater or lesser proportion of elements taken

from either of the two traditions of the Indus Valley Civilization and Aryan Civilization. For instance, if we look at Buddhism, the greater proportion was taken from the Indus Valley Civilization religion, a lesser proportion from the Aryan tradition. That is why we find mention of the Aryan gods in Buddhist scripture, though their role is peripheral, an example of an Aryan element in the Buddhism tradition. On the other hand, if we look at some schools of Hinduism, we find a greater proportion of elements taken from the Aryan tradition and a lesser proportion from the Indus Valley Civilization. We find caste emphasized, the authority of the revealed scripture of the Aryans – the Vedas – emphasized and sacrifices emphasized. Alongside, we find a place made for renunciation, meditation, karma and rebirth.

## **LIFE OF THE BUDDHA**

Today I would like to spend a little bit of time on the life of the Buddha. I do not intend to spend too much time on the life and career of the Buddha since most of the biography is essentially narrative. But I would like to take the opportunity today to draw attention to a few important Buddhist values which come through strikingly in the life of the Buddha.

Last week we talked about the two traditions and how the two traditions which were originally very distinct gradually began to interact and eventually fused in India and we said that the beginning of this process of interaction can be placed about the time of the Buddha. In fact during the time of the Buddha, we can see the beginning of the interaction and it was a process that continued until a thousand years later when the two traditions fused and became difficult to differentiate. It is not perhaps a coincidence that one of the primary areas where the two traditions came into the most active contact was in the area known as Madhyadesha, the area around what is now Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This area was regarded by the Brahmins as an area of challenge to the Aryan tradition. It happens that when two traditions of this nature meet, it creates an atmosphere where there is a great potential for the growth of new religious directions. To a large extent we can see the life and teachings of the Buddha in this context. In addition to the interaction of the two religious traditions, there were also significant social, economic and political changes that were taking place and which we have touched on last week. All these

contributed to a heightened level of religious consciousness. It always happens in times of political and social upheaval that man looks inward, that man turns to religion. When they see the institutions that their forefathers took as stable and unchanging shaken, there is a natural tendency to turn to religion, and this contributes to heightened religious consciousness and activities. This is very much the case in the 6th century B.C.

The values that emerge from the Buddha's life that I would like to highlight are essentially three, and they are renunciation, loving-kindness and compassion, and wisdom. These three values emerge very clearly through episodes in the Buddha's own life. Incidentally it is no coincidence that these three qualities between them equal the attainment of Nirvana because as you know there are three defilements (Klesha) that cause us to be born again and again — the defilements of desire, ill-will and ignorance. In this context we might also remember that renunciation is the antidote for desire, loving-kindness and compassion is the antidote for ill-will, and wisdom is the antidote for ignorance. Through cultivating these three qualities one is able to eliminate the defilements and attain enlightenment. So it is no accident that these qualities should stand out so prominently in the life of the Buddha.

Let us look at them one by one and let us start with renunciation. As often happens, some of the very first evidence of the Buddha's renunciation manifested itself while He was still very young. Renunciation is basically a recognition that all existence is suffering. When one recognizes the fact that all existence is suffering, this



brings about what we might call a turning about, in other words, seeing that life is full of suffering one begins to look for something more. This is why suffering is the First Noble Truth. This recognition that existence is suffering is the essence of renunciation. You may know of Prince Siddhartha's visit to the annual ploughing ceremony at the age of seven. It was there that while watching the ploughing the prince noticed a worm that had been unearthed by the plough devoured by a bird. This sight led the prince to contemplate the realities of life, to recognize the fact that all living beings kill each other for food and this is a great source of suffering. Already we see at this tender age in the biography of the Buddha the beginning of this recognition that existence is suffering. If we look a little bit later in the life of the Buddha, we will come to the famous episode of the four sights which moved the prince to renounce the household life and to follow a life of asceticism to seek the truth. The sights of old age, sickness, death and an ascetic led Him to consider why it was that He should feel uneasy when in fact He was Himself not free from, was subject to old age, sickness and death. This consideration led Him to develop a sense of detachment from pleasure, led Him to seek the truth by way of renunciation. It is interesting to note that Prince Siddhartha's renunciation is not renunciation out of despair. He enjoyed the greatest happiness and yet saw these sufferings of life, recognizing that no matter how great one's indulgence in pleasures of the senses might be, eventually one would have to face these sufferings. Recognizing this, He was moved to renounce the household life and seek enlightenment for the sake of all living beings.

Let us next look at the quality of loving-kindness and compassion. Here too we can see this quality manifested very early in the life of the Buddha. The most striking example of this is the episode of the wounded swan. We are told that He and His cousin Devadatta were roaming in the park surrounding the palace when Devadatta shot down a swan with his bow and arrow. Both boys ran towards the spot where the swan had fallen, but Siddhartha being the faster runner came to the place where the wounded bird lay. Gathering the bird in His arms, He nursed the bird and this brought about a reaction from Devadatta who insisted that the bird ought to be his since he was the one who shot it down. The boys brought this dispute to the wise man of the court who decided that life belonged rightly to the one who preserved it, not to one who destroyed it. Here we have a striking example of the Buddha's attitude of loving-kindness and compassion which grows directly out of this recognition that the nature of life is suffering. Later too after His enlightenment, the Buddha continued to display this quality, as for instance in the famous episode in which the Buddha nursed the sick Tissa whose illness was such that the other members of the Order shunned him.

Let us look at wisdom which is the third of the three qualities. Wisdom is the most important of the three qualities because after all it is wisdom that opens the door to enlightenment. It is wisdom that uproots ignorance, the underlying cause of suffering. It is said that just as one can cut off the branches and trunk of a tree and yet if the root of the tree is not taken out the branches and trunk will grow again. So in the same way

one can eliminate desire through renunciation, ill-will through loving-kindness and compassion, but so long as ignorance is not eliminated, this desire and ill-will are liable to grow again.

Wisdom is achieved primarily through meditation. We have an episode again early in the life of the Buddha in which we see His early development of skill in concentrating the mind and this episode in fact occurred at the same time as the incident we considered a moment ago involving the bird and the worm. We are told that after having witnessed the bird devouring the worm, having recognized the unhappy nature of life, the young prince sat under a tree and began to meditate spontaneously. He achieved the first level of meditation through concentrating the mind on the process of in-breathing and out-breathing. So we have this experience of meditation in the early life of the Buddha, and later when He renounced the household life and went forth to seek the truth, one of the first disciplines which He tried was again the discipline of mental concentration. We are told that He studied with two foremost teachers of the time, Arada Kalama and Udraka Ramaputra and He learned from these teachers the methods of mental concentration. Last week we said that amongst the discoveries made at Mohenjodaro and Harappa were images of the figures sitting in postures of meditation. We have very good reasons to believe that the methods of mental concentration go as far back as the 3rd Millennium B.C. and it is very likely that these two teachers were exponents of this tradition of mental concentration. Yet we find that the prince left the two teachers because He found that meditation alone could

not permanently end suffering. This is important because, although in its emphasis on mental development Buddhism is very much in the tradition of the Indus Valley Civilization, yet the Buddha goes beyond the tradition of mere meditation. This is what distinguishes the Buddha's teachings from the teachings of many other Indian schools, particularly the teachings of the tradition of Yoga. It is also what distinguishes Buddhism from some of the contemplative traditions of other religions, because in Buddhism meditation by itself is not enough. Meditation is like sharpening a pencil, sharpening the mind so to speak. Just as when we sharpen a pencil we sharpen it for a purpose, so that we can write with it, so in sharpening the mind we have a purpose and that purpose is wisdom. Sometimes this relationship between meditation and wisdom is exemplified by the example of a torch. Suppose we want to see a picture in a darkened room with a torch. If there are many draughts in the room, we will find that the light of the torch will flicker. Similarly, if our hand shakes, the light cast by the torch will be unsteady, and we will be unable to see the image. In the same way, if we want to penetrate into the real nature of things, if our mind is unsteady, distracted, wavers as a result of emotional disturbances, then we will not be able to penetrate into the real nature of things. The Buddha applied this discovery on the night of His enlightenment when we are told that with His mind concentrated, made one-pointed and supple by meditation, He directed it to the understanding of the nature of reality and penetrated the real nature of things. So the Buddha's enlightenment is the direct result of this combination of meditation and wisdom — concentration and insight.

We also find other aspects of wisdom expressed in the life of the Buddha, and one of the more important ones is of course the Middle Way. We do not have time today to discuss all the various levels of the meaning of the Middle Way but suffice it to say that the most basic significance of the Middle Way is the avoidance of the extreme of indulgence in pleasures of the senses and the extreme of tormenting the body. The Middle Way is exemplified in the life of the Buddha by His own experience of a life of luxury as a prince and by the six years of vigorous asceticism which He practised after He left His father's palace. After realizing the futility of these extremes in His own experiences, He then hit upon the Middle Way which avoids these extremes.

There are many other important episodes in the life of the Buddha. But if we can begin to see and understand the life of the Buddha as a lesson and not simply as a biography containing a number of names and places; if we can begin to appreciate the values and qualities that are exemplified in the life of the Buddha, we will have gained greater insight into the real significance of the life of the Buddha.

## **FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS PART I**

This is the third in the series of lectures and we are getting into the real heart of Buddhism with today's lecture because in the next hour or so I would like to say a few words regarding the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths are a very important aspect of the teachings of the Buddha. Their importance has been stated in no uncertain terms by the Buddha. He has said that it is because we fail to understand the Four Noble Truths that we have run on so long in this cycle of birth and death. This indicates how important the Four Noble Truths are to the understanding of the Buddha's teachings and to the realization of the goal of His teachings. Similarly, it is no coincidence that in the Buddha's first sermon the Dhammachakkappavattana Sutra to the five monks at the deer park near Benares, the Buddha spoke primarily about the Four Noble Truths and the Middle Path. Here we have two very significant indications of the importance of the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths in a sense are a summary of the Buddha's teachings both from the point of view of doctrine or theory and also from the point of view of practice. So here in the Four Noble Truths which are the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering, we have the foundation of the teachings of the Buddha for understanding and practice.

Before we consider the Four Noble Truths individually, I would like to say a few words about the

nature of the scheme that the Four Noble Truths represent and in this context we can perhaps remember that medical science had enjoyed a certain amount of development in ancient India. One of the structures that had been developed by medical science in ancient India was the four fold structure of disease, diagnosis, cure and treatment. Now if you think carefully about these four steps in the practice of medicine, the practice of the art of healing, you will see that they correspond quite closely to the Four Noble Truths. In other words, suffering corresponds to the illness; the cause of suffering corresponds to the diagnosis, in other words identifying the cause of the illness; the end of suffering corresponds to the cure; and the path to the end of suffering corresponds to the treatment whereby one is cured of the illness.

Now having said this about the therapeutic nature of the Four Noble Truths and the stages that they represent, I would like to say something slightly more conceptual but nonetheless very important for the correct understanding of the Four Noble Truths. When Shariputra, one of the foremost disciples of the Buddha came upon Ashvajit (who was one of the first five monks to whom the Buddha delivered the first sermon) and spoke to Ashvajit about the Buddha's teachings, Ashvajit said, "I cannot tell you in great detail as I am relatively new to the teachings, but I will tell you briefly." So Shariputra said, "Very well, tell me briefly then," and Ashvajit replied with a very brief summary of the Buddha's teachings which is as follows — Of things that proceed from a cause, their cause the Tathagata has told, and also their cessation: Thus

teaches the Great Ascetic. Shariputra was greatly impressed by this summary and he went to find his friend Maudgalyayana and the two of them soon joined the Order and became prominent disciples of the Buddha. This summary of the Buddha's teachings tells us something about the central concept that lies behind the Four Noble Truths. It indicates the importance of the relationship between cause and effect. The idea of cause and effect is at the heart of the Buddha's teachings and is at the heart of the Four Noble Truths. Now in what sense? Specifically there is a starting point, the problem of suffering. This problem arises from causes. Finally just as there is suffering and the causes of suffering, so too there is an end of suffering and a cause for the end of suffering. In this case it is a negative process. In other words, when the causes of suffering are removed then suffering ends.

If you look at the Four Noble Truths you can see that they divide quite naturally into two groups. The first two, suffering and the cause of suffering belong to the realm of birth and death. Symbolically they can be represented as a circle, in the sense that they are circular. The causes of suffering lead to suffering, suffering produces the causes of suffering which again produce suffering. They are circular. They belong to samsara. The second two, the end of suffering and the path to the end of suffering can be symbolized in terms of a spiral. Movement is no longer circular. It is now directed upwards. If we keep this structure, the idea of cause and effect at the back of our mind when we look at the Four Noble Truths, I think we can find them easier to understand. Similarly, if we remember the principle of



cause and effect it will be of great value to us as we continue to study the Buddha's teachings when we come to consider karma and rebirth or when we come to consider dependent origination. In short, throughout all the Buddha's teachings we will see that the principle of cause and effect runs like a thread.

Let us now look at the first of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of suffering (Duhkha). Many non-Buddhists and even some Buddhists have felt disturbed by the choice of suffering as the first of the Four Noble Truths and many have said that this is an indication of pessimism. I often find non-Buddhists saying to me "Why is Buddhism so pessimistic? Why does it begin with and emphasize suffering?" There are a number of answers to this question. Some of you may be familiar with the distinction between pessimism, optimism and realism. Let us put it this way. If one is suffering from a disease and one refuses to recognize the fact that one is ill this is not being optimistic, this is merely being foolish. It is analogous to the ostrich burying its head in the sand. If there is a problem the only sensible thing to do is to recognize the problem and see what can be done to eliminate it. Secondly, if the Buddha had taught only the truth of suffering and had stopped at that, then there might be some truth in the charge that the teachings of the Buddha are pessimistic. But the teachings of the Buddha do not end with the truth of suffering because the Buddha taught not only the truth of suffering but also the truth of its cause and more importantly in this context the truth of its cessation.

All of us, I am quite sure, if we are honest with ourselves, will admit that there is a fundamental problem with life. Things are not as they should be. Something in somewhere is not quite right. And no matter how much we may try to run away from it, at some time or other, perhaps in the middle of the night, or perhaps in the middle of a crowd, or perhaps in the moment during one's work, we do come face to face with ourselves, the realization that things are not all as they should be, that something is wrong somewhere. This is what in fact impels people to seek solutions. They may seek solutions in more material things or they may seek solutions in various therapies.

In Buddhism, specifically the truth of suffering can be divided into two categories, broadly speaking, physical and mental. Here the physical sufferings are the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. You can recall that last week we touched upon the Buddha's encounter with sickness, old age and death in the form of the three sights — the sick man, old man and the corpse. Here we find a fourth suffering, the suffering of birth. Birth is suffering because of the physical pain suffered by the infant and because birth impels all the other sufferings. Birth in a sense is the gateway to the other sufferings of sickness, old age and death which follow inevitably upon birth. I think one need hardly spend much time on the suffering of sickness, old age and death. Most of us have experience of suffering from sickness and we have also observed the suffering of sickness in our friends and relatives. We have all observed the suffering of old age, the inability to work, to function and to think coherently. We have all

observed the suffering of death, the pain, and the fear experienced by the dying. These sufferings are an inevitable part of life. No matter how happy and contented our lives may be, the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death are absolutely unavoidable.

In addition to these physical sufferings there are mental sufferings. There is the suffering of separation from our loved ones, separation either due to reasons of work or because those whom we love die or because those whom we love have to go away, or because we have to leave them. Then there is the suffering of contact with those whom we dislike or those who dislike us. It can take very mild forms such as a colleague at work who is antagonistic to us and we dread to go to work because we know that this person whom we dislike somehow always wants to find fault with us. It can take more radical forms such as persecution, torture and so forth. Finally there is the suffering of frustrated desire, when we cannot get what we want, when we cannot get that job, the position that we want, when we cannot win over this or that person. These physical and mental sufferings are woven into the fabric of our existence. But what about happiness? Is there no happiness or enjoyment in life? Of course there is. But the pleasure or happiness which we experience in life is impermanent. We may enjoy a happy situation, we may enjoy the company of someone we love, we may enjoy youth and health and yet all these forms of happiness are impermanent. Sooner or later we will experience suffering.

If we really want to do something about suffering, to solve the problem of suffering, we must identify its cause. If the lights go out and we want to set it right we have to identify its cause. We have to find out whether it is a short circuit or whether a fuse has blown or whether perhaps the power supply has been cut off. Similarly, when we recognize the problem of suffering we have to look for the cause. It is by understanding the cause of suffering that we can do something to solve the problem. What is the cause of suffering according to the Buddha? The Buddha has taught that craving or desire (Trishna or Raga) is a great cause of suffering — craving for pleasant experiences, craving for material things, craving for eternal life and craving for eternal death. We all enjoy good food, we all enjoy fine music, pleasant company. We enjoy all these things and we want more and more of these things. We try to prolong these pleasant experiences. We try to get more and more of these pleasures. And yet somehow we are never completely satisfied. We may find that we are fond of a particular kind of food and yet if we eat it again and again we get bored with it. We try another kind of food. We like it, enjoy it and again we get bored with it. We go on to look for something else, we get tired of our favourite piece of music. We get tired of our friends. We look for more and more. Sometimes this chase after pleasant experiences leads one to extremely negative forms of behaviour such as alcoholism and drug addiction. All of these are the cravings for satisfaction of our desires for pleasant experiences. It is said that trying to satisfy one's desire for pleasant experiences is like drinking salt water when one is thirsty. If one drinks

salt water to satisfy one's thirst, one's thirst, rather than being quenched, is only increased.

Not only do we crave for pleasant experiences but we also crave for material things. You can see this clearly in children. I have a five year old son. Take him into a toy shop and he will want every toy in the shop. And perhaps he will buy a toy. Almost as soon as he has bought the toy he begins to lose interest in it, and without fail, within a few days the toy will be neglected in the corner of the room and he will want another toy. While this can be seen very clearly in young children, are we any different? After we have bought that new car don't we want another one? After we have got a new house don't we think "Well, this house is quite nice, but it will be even nicer if I can get a better one, one with a little garden or one with four rooms, or a point block, or a condominium." And it goes on and on, whether it is a train set or a bicycle or a video recorder or a Mercedes Benz. It is said that the desire for acquiring wealth or possession is involved with three major sufferings, or problems. The first one is the problem of getting it. You have to work, and save enough to buy that car or that house. Secondly, there is the suffering of protecting it. You worry that someone might bang your car, you worry that your house may burn down or be damaged by the rain. Finally there is the suffering of losing them, because sooner or later they will fall apart.

Craving for existence or eternal life is a cause of suffering. We all crave for existence, we all crave for life. Despite all the suffering and frustration of life we all crave for life. And it is this craving which causes us

to be born again and again. Then there is the desire for annihilation, the desire for non-existence, what we might call the desire for eternal death. This expresses itself in nihilism and in suicide. Craving for existence is one extreme. Craving for non-existence is another extreme.

You may ask, “Is craving alone a sufficient cause of suffering? Is craving alone enough to explain suffering? Is the answer as simple as that?” The answer is no. There is something that goes deeper than craving. There is something which in a sense is the foundation of craving. And that something is ignorance (Avidya).

Ignorance is not seeing things as they really are, or failing to understand the reality of experience or the reality of life. All those who are well educated may feel uneasy about being told that they are ignorant. I can recall what Professor Lancaster who visited Singapore a few months ago said regarding this. He said this is one of the most difficult things to explain to university students in the United States when they begin a course in Buddhist studies because they are all very happy and proud to be in the university. Here you have to tell them that they are ignorant. He says always the hands shoot up immediately, “How are we ignorant? In what sense are we ignorant?” Let me say this. Without the right conditions, without the right training and without the right instruments we are unable to see things as they really are. None of us would be aware of radio waves if it were not for the radio receiver. None of us would be aware of bacteria in a drop of water if it were not for microscopes, and none of us would be aware of

molecular structure if it were not for the latest techniques of electron microscopy. All these facts about the world in which we live in are known and observed only because of special training, special conditions and special instruments. When we say that ignorance is failure to see things as they really are, what we mean is that so long as one has not developed one's ability to concentrate one's mind and insight so one is ignorant of the true nature of things. We are familiar with the fear that we experience when we see a shape in the darkness by the side of the road while walking home alone late at night. That shape by the side of the road may be a tree stump. Yet it is our ignorance that causes us to quicken our steps, perhaps our palms may begin to perspire, we may reach home in a panic. If there were a light there would be no fear and no suffering because there would be no ignorance. We would have seen the tree stump for what it is.

Specifically in Buddhism, we are speaking about ignorance regarding the self, taking the self as real. This is the fundamental cause of suffering. We take our body or ideas or feelings as a self, as a real independent ego just as we take the tree stump for a potential assailant. Once we have this idea of self we have an idea of something that is apart from or different from ourselves. Once we have this idea of something that is apart or different from ourselves, then it is either helpful or hostile. It is either pleasant or unpleasant to ourselves. From this notion of self we have craving and ill-will. Once we believe in the real existence of ourselves, that "we" exist in reality, independently, apart from all others, apart from all the physical objects that surround

us, we crave and desire and want those things which benefit us and we are averse towards those things which do not benefit us, which damage us or which are unhelpful to us. Because of this failure to see that in this body and mind there is no independent, permanent self, desire and ill-will inevitably thrive. Out of the root and the trunk of ignorance grow the branches of craving — desire, greed, ill-will, anger, hatred, envy, jealousy, pride and the whole lot. All these branches grow out of the root and trunk of ignorance and these branches bear the fruits of suffering. So here, ignorance is the underlying cause, and craving, ill-will, greed and anger are the secondary or subsequent causes.

After having identified the causes of suffering one is in a position to put an end to suffering. Just as when one might identify the cause of that pain in one's lower abdomen on the left side as appendicitis, one would then be in a position to remove the cause of the pain. One can put an end to suffering by eliminating the cause of suffering, by eliminating craving, ill-will and ignorance. Here we come to the Third Noble Truth, the truth of the end of suffering.

In dealing with the truth of the end of suffering, the first obstacle that we have to overcome is the doubt that exists in some minds of whether an end of suffering is really possible. Whether one can really end suffering, or whether one can really be cured. It is in this context that confidence or faith plays an important role in Buddhism. When we speak of confidence or faith we do not speak of faith in the sense of blind acceptance. We speak of faith in the sense of recognizing or admitting



the possibility of achieving the goal of the end of suffering. If you do not believe that a doctor can cure you of that pain in your abdomen you will never go to a doctor, you will never take the medicine or have the operation and as a result you may die of that illness which could be cured. So confidence, belief in the possibility of being cured is an indispensable prerequisite. Here too, as in other cases, people may say, "How can I believe in the possibility of Nirvana? How can I believe that the end of suffering is really possible when I have never experienced it?" Well, as I said a moment ago, none of us would have experienced radio waves were it not for the development of radio receivers, and none of us would have experienced microscopic life were it not for the invention of the microscope. Even now none of us here, unless there is any physicist in this room, have actually observed electrons and yet we accept them because there are those among us with the special training, and special instruments who have observed electrons. So here too as regards the possibility of the end of suffering and the possibility of attaining Nirvana, we ought not to reject the possibility of attaining Nirvana outright simply because we have not experienced it, simply because we have not seen it for ourselves. Many of you may be familiar with the old story of the turtle and the fish. One day the turtle left the pond and spent a few hours on the bank. When he returned to the water he told the fish of his experiences on the bank. The fish would not believe him. The fish would not believe that there existed a place known as dry land because it was totally unlike what the fish knew, what the fish was familiar with. The fish would not believe that there was a place where

creatures walked rather than swam, where one breathed air rather than water, and so forth. There are many historical examples of this tendency to reject information that does not tally with what we already believe, or what we are already familiar with. When Marco Polo returned to Italy from his travels to the Far East, he was imprisoned because his account did not tally with what was then believed about the nature of the universe. When Copernicus advanced the theory that the sun did not circle the earth but in fact that the case was the opposite, he was disbelieved and ridiculed. We ought to be on guard against dismissing the possibility of the complete end of suffering or the possibility of attaining Nirvana simply because we have not experienced it ourselves. Once we accept that the end of suffering is possible, that we can be cured of an illness, then we can proceed with the steps that are necessary in order to achieve that cure. But unless and until we believe that that cure is possible there is no question of successfully completing the treatment. In order therefore to realize progress on the path, to realize eventually the end of suffering one has to have at least confidence in the possibility of achieving the goal, in the possibility of attaining Nirvana.

## **FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS PART II**

When we speak of the end of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, we are speaking of the goal of the Buddhist path. In one place the Buddha says that just as the ocean, though vast, is of one taste — the taste of salt, so it is in His teachings. Although there are many items, all these teachings as vast as the ocean have only one taste, and that is the taste of Nirvana. As you will see, although there are many items of Buddhist teachings — the Four Noble Truths, the three ways of practice, dependent origination, the three characteristics and so on — all these teachings have one goal in view and that goal is the cessation of suffering. It is the goal that gives all the various teachings that we find in Buddhism their directions and purposes. The end of suffering is the goal of Buddhist practice and yet this end of suffering is not something which is only transcendental, which is only ultimate. This is interesting because yesterday I was asked to speak on the origin and development of the Semitic religions and at the end of the session one of the questions raised was “What is the final goal of the Semitic religions and what is the distinction between the spiritual goal offered by the Semitic religions and the goal offered by Buddhism?” In the case of the Semitic religions, I think it is fair to say that there are two goals. One refers to this life, and is expressed in the sense of building a kingdom of love, prosperity and justice in this world. The other higher goal refers to attaining heaven in the after-life. But in Buddhism we have a much more comprehensive treatment. In other words, this goal of the end of suffering that the Buddha speaks

of is very broad and comprehensive in its meaning. Because when we speak of the end of suffering, we can mean the end of suffering here and now, either temporarily or permanently. Let us see whether we can explain this in greater detail. Suppose we happen to be in dire poverty — insufficient food, medicine, schools and so forth. There are sufferings such as birth, sickness, disease and old age, separation from one's loved ones, contact with those we don't want contact. When we remedy the situation here and now through achieving prosperity, through developing our medical and educational systems, our sufferings are reduced. Buddhism teaches that the particular happiness or suffering that is experienced in this life is the result of our actions done in the past. In other words, if we are in fortunate conditions, these conditions are the results of good or wholesome actions done in the past. Similarly, those who find themselves in less fortunate conditions, those conditions are the results of unwholesome actions done in the past.

What does Buddhism offer in the way of the end of suffering? Practising Buddhism results in the short term in relative happiness in this life. This happiness can be of a material variety in the sense of better material conditions or it can be of a spiritual variety in the sense of greater peace or happiness of mind. All of these are achievable in this very life here and now. This is one dimension of the end of suffering in this life. And this is equivalent to what the Semitic religions call the kingdom on earth. In addition to this, the end of suffering means happiness and good fortune in the next life, in the sense of rebirth in fortunate circumstances, in circum-

stances of happiness, prosperity, health, well-being, success and so on. And this can be as a human being on this earth or it can be in the heavens. We can liken it to the heaven that the Semitic religions speak of. The goal of Buddhism initially means happiness and prosperity in this life and next. But the goal of Buddhism is more than just that and it is here that Buddhism differs from the Semitic religions because not only does Buddhism promise happiness and prosperity in this life and next, Buddhism also offers liberation — Nirvana, the total, absolute and permanent cessation of suffering. This is the ultimate and final goal of Buddhism.

When we speak of Nirvana, we encounter certain problems of expression because when we are speaking of an experience, the exact nature of that experience cannot be communicated. It has to be experienced directly. This is true of all experiences whether they be the experiences of the taste of salt, sugar, chocolate or whatever. All these experiences cannot be exactly described. I often ask people here in Singapore in order to make this point. Imagine I have just recently arrived in Singapore and I have not eaten a durian. How would you describe to me the taste of a durian? Would it be possible to describe accurately the taste of a durian if I have not eaten one myself? We can describe it by means of comparison or simile or by means of negation. So, for instance, you might say that a durian is slightly sour, that it has a mealy texture. You might say a durian is something like a jackfruit or you might say a durian is not like a banana. So we have a similar kind of problem when we come to try to describe Nirvana. We find that

the Buddha and Buddhist teachers have used these kinds of devices to describe Nirvana.

The Buddha described Nirvana as supreme happiness, as peace, as immortal. Similarly, He has described Nirvana as uncreated, unformed, as beyond the earth, as beyond water, fire, air, beyond the sun and moon, unfathomable, unmeasurable. So we have two approaches to the description of Nirvana. One is the positive approach where we liken Nirvana to something which we experience in this world where, say, when one experiences intense happiness accompanied by profound peace of mind one can imagine that one is experiencing a faint glimpse of Nirvana. But a jackfruit is not really like a durian. Similarly, we can say that Nirvana is not like anything in this world, is not like any experience that we have from day to day. It is uncreated. It is beyond the sun and the moon. It is beyond all these names and forms which we are used to thinking in terms of, through which we experience the world. The point of all these is that to understand what Nirvana is really like one has to experience it for oneself. To know what a durian is really like, one has to eat it. No amount of essays, no amount of descriptions of durians will even approach the experience of eating one. One has to experience the end of suffering for oneself and the way that one does it is through eliminating the causes of suffering — the defilements of desire (Raga) ill-will (Dosha) and ignorance (Avidya). When one has totally eliminated these causes of suffering, then one will experience for oneself Nirvana.

How does one remove these causes of suffering? What are the means through which one can remove the defilements that lead to suffering? This is the path taught by the Buddha. It is the Middle Path, the path of moderation. You will recall that the life of the Buddha before His Enlightenment falls into two quite distinct periods. The period before renunciation was a period when He enjoyed all the luxury possible. For instance, we are told that He had three palaces, one for each season. He experienced luxury to an extent which we can scarcely imagine. This period of luxury was superseded by six years of extreme asceticism and self-mortification when He abandoned the essential amenities of life, a period in which He lived in the open, wore the poorest garments and fasted for lengthy periods. In addition to these privations, He experienced the suffering of torturing His body through various practices of self-mortification — sleeping on beds of thorns and sitting in the midst of fires in the heat of the noon-day sun. Having experienced the extremes of luxury and privation, having reached the limits of these extremes, He saw their futility and He discovered the Middle Way that avoids the extremes of indulgence in pleasures of the senses and self-mortification. It was through realizing the nature of the extremes in His own experience that He was able to arrive at the Middle Path, the path that avoids the two extremes. As we shall see in the subsequent weeks, the Middle Path is capable of many profound and significant interpretations, but most importantly and most essentially, it means moderation in one's approach to life, in one's attitude, in all things.

We use the example of the three strings of the lute to illustrate the Middle Path. The Buddha once had a

disciple by the name of Sona who practised meditation so intensely that he could not progress in his meditation. He began to think of abandoning his life as a monk. The Buddha, who understood his problem, said to him, “Sona, before you became a monk you were a musician”. Sona said that was true. So the Buddha said, “As a musician which string of the lute produces a pleasant and harmonious sound. The over-tight string?” “No,” said Sona, “The over-tight string produces an unpleasant sound and is moreover likely to break at any moment.” “The string that is too loose?” Again, “No, the string that is too loose does not produce a tuneful sound. The string that produces a tuneful sound is the string that is not too tight and not too loose.” So here the life of luxury is too loose, without discipline. The life of mortification is too tight, too tense, too likely to cause the breakdown of the mind and body just as the over-tight string is likely to break at any moment.

Specifically, the path to the Buddhist goal is like a medical prescription. When a competent doctor treats a patient for a serious illness, his prescription is not only physical, it is also psychological. If one is suffering, for instance, from heart disease, one is not only given medication. One is also asked to control one’s diet and to avoid stressful situations. Here too when we look at the specific instructions with regard to following the path to the end of suffering, we can see that the instructions refer not only to one’s body – actions and words – but also to one’s thoughts. In other words, the Noble Eightfold Path, the path to the end of suffering is a comprehensive path, an integrated therapy. It is designed to cure the disease through eliminating the



causes, through treatment that applies not only to the body but also to the mind.

Right understanding is the first step of the Noble Eightfold Path and it is followed by Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. Why do we begin with Right Understanding? It is because in order to climb a mountain we have to have the summit clearly in view. In this sense, the first step depends on the last. We have to have our goal in view if we are to travel a path to reach that goal. In this sense, Right Understanding gives direction and an orientation to the other steps of the path. We see here that the first two steps of the path, Right Understanding and Right Thought refer to the mind. Through Right Understanding and Right Thought we eliminate ignorance, greed and anger. But it is not enough to say that through Right Understanding and Right Thought we eliminate ignorance, greed and anger because in order to achieve Right Understanding and Right Thought we also need to cultivate, to purify our mind and our body. The way that this is done is through the other six steps of the path. We purify our physical existence so that it will be easier to purify our mind, and we purify our mind so that it will be easier to attain Right Understanding.

For convenience' sake, the Noble Eightfold Path has been traditionally divided into the three groups of training or the three ways of practice and they are morality or good conduct (Shila), meditation or mental development (Samadhi), and wisdom or insight (Prajna). The eight steps of the path are divided into these three

ways of practice as follows — Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood belong to the way of good conduct; Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration belong to the way of mental development; and Right Understanding and Right Thought belong to the way of wisdom. Because it is necessary to purify our words and actions before we can purify our mind, we begin our progress along the path with good conduct. As the Noble Eightfold Path is the means of arriving at the goal of Buddhism, we will be spending the next three weeks dealing with these three ways of practice.

## MORALITY

Last week we completed our survey of the Four Noble Truths and in so doing the last topic that we dealt with was the Noble Eightfold Path to the end of suffering. We used the analogy of mountain climbing when we talked about treading the Eightfold Path to the end of suffering. We have said that just as when one climbs a mountain the first step depends on the last, the last depends on the first because we have to have our eyes firmly fixed on the summit of the mountain and yet we also have to be careful not to stumble while taking the first few steps up to the mountain path. So here in climbing a mountain, each portion of the path depends on the other portions. In this sense, regarding the Noble Eightfold Path, all the steps of the path are interrelated, are dependent on one another. We cannot do away with any one step. Nonetheless, for practical purposes the eight steps of the path have been divided into three ways of practice, or three divisions of training. These three divisions are good conduct or morality (Shila), mental development or meditation (Samadhi) and finally wisdom or insight (Prajna). Although conceptually and structurally, the first step depends upon the last and the last depends upon the first; although they are dependent on one another, still in practical terms when one climbs a mountain one has to climb the lowest slope first. One may be attracted to the summit, but in order to get there one has to cover the lower slope first. It is for this very practical reason that we find the eight steps of the Eightfold Path grouped into these three ways of practice.

The first of these three ways is good conduct. Good conduct forms a foundation for further progress on the path, for further personal development. It is said that just as the earth is the base of all animate and inanimate things, so is morality the foundation of all qualities. When we look around us we can see that everything rests upon the earth, whether it be the building, whether it be the tree and bush, or whether it be the animal. The earth is the foundation, and in the same manner morality is the foundation of all qualities, all virtues, all attainments ranging from the mundane to the supra-mundane, ranging from success, good fortune all the way up to skill in meditation, wisdom and enlightenment. Through this metaphor, we can understand the importance of good conduct as a foundation for following the path, as a basis for achieving results on the path.

Why do we take time to stress the importance of good conduct as a foundation for progress on the path? The reason is that there is a tendency to think of good conduct as rather boring, rather dull. Meditation sounds more exciting and interesting. Philosophy has a kind of fascination about it. There is a dangerous tendency to neglect the importance of good conduct and to go to the more exciting parts of the path. But if we do not create this foundation of good conduct, we will not succeed in treading the other parts of the path.

We have to understand the way in which the precepts or the rules of good conduct are established within Buddhism because there are various ways in which moral or ethical codes are established. If you look

at the moral codes of the major religions, you will find that there is a surprising correspondence. If you look at the moral teachings of Confucius, of Lao Tzu, of the Buddha, of Hindu teachers, Christians, Muslims, and Jews, you will find that regarding the basic rules of morality, there is a large degree of correspondence. But while the rules in many cases correspond, the attitude, the ways in which the rules are presented, understood and interpreted differ considerably from religion to religion. Essentially, to generalize, there are two ways in which moral codes can be established. One way we might call the authoritarian way, and the other we might call the democratic way. And a good example of the first is God's handing down the Ten Commandments to Moses on the mountain. On the other hand in Buddhism, I think what we have here might be called a democratic way of establishing the rules of good conduct. You might wonder why I say that. After all we do have the rules of good conduct laid down in scriptures. So you might ask is this not similar to God's handing down the tablets to Moses? But I think this is not really so because if we look closely at the scriptures, we do find what lies behind the rules of good conduct, and the principles that lie behind that are the foundation of the rules of good conduct, are the principles of equality and reciprocity.

What equality means is that all living beings are equal in their essential attitudes. In other words, all living beings want to be happy. They fear pain, death and suffering. All want to live, to enjoy happiness and security. And this is also true to all living beings just as it is true to ourselves. We can call this equality the great

universality of the Buddhist vision in which all living beings are equal. On the basis of this equality, we are encouraged to act with the awareness of reciprocity.

Reciprocity means that just as we would not like to be killed, robbed, abused and so forth, so would all other living beings not like to have these things happen to them. One can put this principle of reciprocity quite simply by saying “do not act towards others in a way which you would not want them to act towards you”. Given these principles of equality and reciprocity, it is not hard to see how they stand behind, how they create the foundation for the rules of good conduct.

Let us now look specifically at the contents of good conduct in Buddhism. The way of practice of good conduct includes three parts of the Noble Eightfold Path, and these three parts are Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Speech is an extremely important part of our life. We often tend to underestimate the power of speech. We often tend to exercise very little control over our faculty of speech. This should not be so. We have all been very greatly hurt by someone’s words at some time of our life. And similarly, we have been encouraged by the words of another. In the sphere of politics, we can see how those who are able to communicate effectively are able to influence people tremendously for better or for worse. Hitler, Churchill, Martin Luther King were all accomplished speakers who were able to influence millions of people with their words. It is said that a harsh word can wound more deeply than weapons. A gentle word can change the heart and mind of the most

hardened criminal. Probably more than anything else, the faculty of speech differentiates man from animals. So if one is to develop a society in which harmony, well-being, communication and co-operation are goals which are to be realized, one must control, cultivate and utilize one's faculty of speech positively.

All the rules of good conduct involve respect that is founded upon the understanding of equality and reciprocity. In this context, right speech involves respect for truth and respect for the welfare of others. If one speaks with these criteria in mind, one will be cultivating right speech and through this one will achieve greater harmony within society. Traditionally we speak of four aspects of right speech. Right speech means to avoid lying, to avoid back biting or slander, to avoid harsh speech, and to avoid idle talk. Some of you may recall the Buddha's instruction to Rahula regarding the importance of avoiding lying. He used the example of a vessel. The vessel had a tiny bit of water in the bottom and He asked, "Rahula, see the small amount of water in the bottom of the vessel. Those who are not ashamed of lying, their virtue is small, their renunciation is small like the small amount of water in the vessel." Then the Buddha threw away the water and said, "those who are not ashamed of lying throw away their virtue just as this water is thrown away." Then the Buddha showed Rahula the empty vessel and said, "just so empty is the virtue, the renunciation of those who habitually tell lies."

Thus He used the vessel as a means to illustrate the point that lying is intimately associated with one's

practice of wholesome actions, with one's good conduct, with one's character. Once we are confident that we can act in one way and speak in another, then we will not be afraid to act badly, because we will be confident that we can cover up our bad actions by lying. Lying therefore opens the door to all kinds of unwholesome actions. Slander is divisive. It creates quarrels between friends. It creates pain and discord. So just as one would not want to be divided from one's friend by slander, so ought one not to slander another. So also one ought not to abuse others with harsh words, but on the contrary should speak courteously to others as one would like to be spoken to oneself. Regarding idle talk, often you hear of people saying that we cannot even indulge in a bit of idle talk. It is not quite that bad. Here the kind of idle talk that is particularly indicated refers to malicious gossips, diverting oneself, entertaining oneself, recounting the faults and failings of others. Rather than use this faculty of speech which is so powerful for deception, for dividing others, for abusing others, for idling away time at the expense of others, why not use it constructively, to communicate meaningfully, to unite others, to encourage understanding between neighbours and friends, and to communicate helpful, meaningful advice. The Buddha once said, "Pleasant speech is as sweet as honey, truthful speech is as beautiful as a flower, and wrong speech is unwholesome and filthy". So let us try for our own good and that of others to cultivate Right Speech, respect for truth, and respect for the welfare of others.

The next part of the path that falls under good conduct is Right Action. Right Action entails respect for



life, respect for property, and respect for personal relationships. We will recall what was said a moment ago about life being dear to all. It is said in the Dharmapada that all tremble at punishment, all fear death, and that all living beings love life. So again, keeping in mind the principles of equality and reciprocity, we ought not to kill living beings. One might be ready to accept this in regard to human beings, but we might demur with regard to other living creatures. Some of the developments that we have seen taking place in the world of science and technology in recent years ought to give the most skeptical free-thinker food for thought. When one destroys a certain strain of insects, is one absolutely sure of accomplishing the greatest good, the long-term good of the environment? Or do we more often than not contribute unwittingly to an imbalance which creates even greater problems in the future? Respect for property — not to steal from or cheat others. This is important because those who take what is not given, by stealth, by treachery, are as guilty of breaking this precept as those who steal by force. In other words, the employer who does not pay his employee an honest wage that is commensurate with his work is guilty of taking what is not given. Similarly, the employee who collects a salary and shirks his duties is guilty of lack of respect for property. Finally respect for personal relationships means to avoid adultery, to avoid sexual misconduct. You can see how, if these guidelines are sincerely cultivated within a society, such a society will be a better place to live in.

The third step of the Noble Eightfold Path included in the way of good conduct is Right Livelihood. Right

Livelihood is an extension of the rules of Right Action to one's role as a breadwinner in a society. We have seen that with regard to Right Speech and Right Action the underlying principles behind the rules are respect for truth, life, property and personal relationships. Right Livelihood means that one ought not to earn a living in such a way as to violate these principles which are underlying principles of good conduct. Specifically, there are five kinds of livelihood that are discouraged for Buddhists. These are trading in animals for slaughter, dealing in slaves, dealing in weapons, dealing in poisons, and dealing in intoxicants, those are drugs and alcoholic drinks. These five kinds of livelihood are discouraged because they contribute to the ills of society and because they violate the principles of respect for life and so forth. Dealing in the slaughter of animals violates respect for life. Dealing in slaves violates respect for life and personal relationships. Dealing in deadly weapons violates the principle of respect for life. Dealing in poisons violates the principle of respect for life. Dealing in intoxicants violates the principle of respect for the welfare of others. All these trades contribute to the insecurity, to the suffering and discord in society.

How does good conduct function? We have said that, in regard to society, following the rules of good conduct creates a society characterized by harmony and peace. All social goals can be achieved through the principles and rules of good conduct based upon the fundamental recognition of equality and reciprocity. In addition, the individual also benefits through the practice of good conduct. In one Sutra, the Buddha said, "he who has practised respect for life and so forth, he

feels as a king duly crowned and his enemies subdued. He feels at peace, at ease.” The practice of good conduct creates within the individual an inner sense of peace, of stability, of security and of strength. Once he has created that inner peace, he can then fruitfully and successfully practise the other steps of the path. He can cultivate and develop meditation. He can achieve wisdom only when he has created both inwardly and outwardly in his relationships with others and in himself the necessary foundation of good conduct.

Very briefly, these are the origin, contents and goal of good conduct. I would like to touch on one point before I stop today, and that is when people look at the rules of good conduct, they often say how can they possibly follow the rules of good conduct? It is terribly difficult to observe the precepts. For instance, even the precept against taking life can sometimes seem awfully difficult to follow. When you clean up your kitchen, you quite likely may kill some ants. Again, it may seem difficult to always observe the precept of Right Speech. How are we to deal with this problem which is a genuine one? It is not the point whether we can observe all the rules of good conduct all the time. The point is, if the rules of good conduct are well founded, if we can accept that equality and reciprocity are principles we believe in, if we acknowledge that the rules are appropriate to implementing those principles, then it is our duty to practise, to follow the rules of good conduct as much as we can. That is not to say that we will be able to follow the rules absolutely all the time. But it is to say that if we accept that in order to live at peace with ourselves and others, we ought to respect the life of

other living beings, respect their property and so forth. And if a situation arises in which we find ourselves unable to apply a particular rule in a particular situation, then that is not the fault of the rule. That simply is the gap between our own practice and the ideal.

When a navigator steers his ship across the ocean by the stars, he is not able to follow precisely the course indicated by the stars. Yet the stars are his guide and by following the stars however inaccurately or approximately, he reaches his destination. In the same way, when we follow the rules of good conduct we do not pretend that we can observe them all the time. This is why for instance the five precepts are called the training precepts and that is why we take them again and again. What we have in the rules of good conduct is a framework through which we can try to live in accord with the fundamental principles that illuminate the Buddhist teachings, the principle of the equality of all living beings and the principle of respect for others.

## MENTAL DEVELOPMENT

Our topic today is mental development. We are going to look at the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path that fall into the group known as mental development, meditation or Samadhi. We have spoken about how the steps of the path are interrelated and in this context it is particularly interesting to understand the position of mental development because standing as it is between good conduct and wisdom it is relevant and important for both of them. You may ask why this is the case. In fact sometimes people have said to me regarding the need for meditation: if one simply follows the moral precepts, is that not sufficient to lead a moral life?

I think there are several answers to this question. First of all, in Buddhism there is not only one goal. Besides the goal of happiness and good fortune, there is also the goal of freedom. If one wants to attain the goal of freedom, the only way that can be achieved is through wisdom. And in order to achieve wisdom one has to purify the mind, develop the mind through meditation. Even for the practice of good conduct, for the observance of moral rules, mental development is necessary. Why? Because it is relatively easy to follow the rules of good conduct when things are going well. If we have a good job, if we live in a stable society, if we earn sufficiently to support ourselves and our families, it is relatively easy to observe the precepts. But when we find ourselves in circumstances of stress, of instability, as for instance when we lose our job, when we find ourselves in a situation where lawlessness prevails, this is the point at which the observance of good conduct

comes under attack. In this kind of circumstance, the only thing that can safeguard our practice of good conduct is mental development, strengthening of the mind, attaining control over the mind. In that way, mental development on the one hand serves as a safeguard of our practice and on the other hand it serves to prepare the mind to see things as they really are, to prepare the mind to attain wisdom which will open the door to freedom, to enlightenment. Mental development therefore has an extremely important role in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

This emphasis on mental development is not surprising if we remember the importance of the role of the mind in experience in Buddhism. I remember a week before last, someone in the audience remarked that it seemed as though the mind was the most important thing in regard to the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path. I remarked that this was a very significant and true statement. We find this very clearly in the Buddha's own words. The Buddha has said that the mind is the source of all mental states, that all mental states are fashioned by the mind. It is also said that the mind is the source of all virtues, of all qualities. In order to attain these virtues, one must discipline the mind. Mind is the key to changing the nature of our experience. It was once said that if we had to cover the whole surface of the earth in order to protect our feet from being cut by sticks and stones, if we had to cover the whole surface of the earth with leather, this would be a very difficult undertaking. But by covering only the surface of our feet with leather it is as if the whole surface of the earth were covered with leather. In the same way if we had to

purify the whole universe of greed, anger and delusion, it would be a very difficult task. Simply by purifying our own mind of greed, anger and delusion it is as if the whole universe were purified of these defilements. That is why in Buddhism we focus upon the mind as the key to achieving a change in the way we experience life, in the way we relate to other people.

The importance of the mind has recently been recognized by scientists, psychologists and doctors. Some of you may be aware of some of the techniques that are being used by medical practitioners in the west. A number of doctors have successfully employed techniques very similar to the techniques of meditation in order to help patients overcome chronic diseases and disorders. This is now a recognized fact within the medical profession. Not long ago I was told of a case involving the wife of a professor. Their family doctor has begun to use techniques of mental development to treat patients who are suffering from certain complaints. The lady was told that she would need an operation to correct a certain disorder. Alternatively, it was suggested that she practice this technique of mental development twice a day for a period of two months. Having practised this, it was found that she no longer required the operation. We can all understand the influence the mind has on our attitude by looking at our own experience. We know how we occasionally feel happy and have a positive attitude towards our activities, and when this happens we are efficient, we respond and we are able to carry out our activities in the best possible way. On other occasions when our mind is disturbed and depressed, we find that we cannot even

discharge simple tasks efficiently. In this way, we can see how important the mind is in all spheres of activity.

There are three steps of the Noble Eightfold Path that are included in this mental development group and they are Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. Together these three steps encourage and enable one to be self reliant, attentive and calm. First of all, in its most general sense Right Effort means cultivating a positive attitude towards our undertakings. We can call Right Effort enthusiasm as well. It means undertaking our tasks with energy, with a will to carry them through. It is said in one text that we ought to embark upon our tasks in the same way as an elephant enters a cool lake during the heat of the midday sun. With this kind of effort, we can then be successful in whatever we plan to do, whether in our career, in our study, or in our practice of the Dharma. In this sense effort is also related to confidence. It is a practical application of confidence. If we fail to put effort into whatever we do, we cannot hope to succeed. But effort must be controlled, must be balanced, and here we can recall what we said regarding the Middle Path, the strings of the lute, the overly tight string and the overly loose string. So effort should never become too tense, too extreme, and similarly, it should not become too slack, should not be abandoned. This is what we mean by Right Effort, a controlled, sustained, enthusiastic, cheerful determination.

Right Effort is defined as four fold. It is the effort to prevent unwholesome thoughts from arising. It is the effort to reject unwholesome thoughts once they have



arisen. It is the effort to cultivate wholesome thoughts. It is the effort to maintain wholesome thoughts. This last is particularly important because it is often the case that even when we have succeeded in cultivating wholesome attitudes, all too often these are short-lived. Between them, these four aspects of Right Effort focus the energy of Right Effort upon our mental states in such a way as to reduce and eventually eliminate the number of unwholesome mental states that we entertain in our mind and to increase and firmly establish wholesome thoughts as a natural integral part of our mental states.

The second step of the Noble Eightfold Path that is included in the group of mental development is Right Mindfulness. Right Mindfulness is essential even in our daily life. This Buddhist teaching, in fact I would venture to say all Buddhist teachings, can be explained, can be exemplified with situations that belong to everyday life, that are familiar to all of us. In fact if you look at the Buddha's own teachings, you will find that He always used examples that were familiar to his audience when teaching the Dharma. So here too in regard to mindfulness, we may do well to look at the importance of mindfulness in our ordinary mundane activities. Mindfulness is awareness or attention, avoiding a distracted and clouded state of mind. There would be many fewer accidents if everyone were mindful. So whether one is driving a car, or crossing a busy street, or doing accounts, whatever one is doing, that task would be more effectively carried out if one is attentive and mindful. It will increase one's efficiency, productivity, and similarly it will reduce the number of accidents that occur due to inattention, due to the failure to be aware.

Specifically, in regard to the practice of the Dharma, mindfulness acts as a rein upon our mind. In this sense, if we consider how our mind normally behaves, we can see a need for a rein, a control upon our mind. A moment ago, there was a gust of wind which caused a window over here on my right to bang. I am sure that most of our minds immediately focussed upon that sound. Similarly, at almost every moment of our life, our minds are running after objects of the senses. The mind is never concentrated, or still. The objects of the senses may be sounds, or they may be sights. As you drive down the streets, your eyes may be caught by an attractive advertisement, your mind will be attracted to that advertisement. When you smell someone's perfume, your mind will become entangled with that object. All these are the causes of distraction. So in order to control, to minimize this distraction, we need a kind of guard which can protect the mind from becoming entangled with objects of the senses, from becoming entangled in unwholesome thoughts. This guard is mindfulness. The Buddha once told a story about two acrobats — master and apprentice. On one occasion the master said to the apprentice, "You protect me, and I will protect you. In this way we will perform our tricks and come down safely." But the apprentice said, "No master, that will not do. I will protect myself and you will protect yourself." In the same way we have to guard our own mind. Some people may say this is rather selfish. What about teamwork? But I think that is a fundamental misunderstanding. A chain is only as strong at its weakest link. A team is only as efficient as its members. A team of distracted persons who are incapable of discharging their own responsibilities will

be an inefficient team. Similarly, in order that we can play an effective role in relation to our fellow beings, we must first guard our mind. Suppose you have a fine car. You will be careful to park the car in such a place so that it will not be hit by another motorist. Even at work or at home, you will occasionally look out of the window to make sure the car is all right. You will be sure to take it to the mechanic regularly. You will be sure to wash it regularly. In the same way all of us possess one thing which is far more valuable than any other possession. That one thing is our mind.

Recognizing the value of our mind, we ought to guard it. This is being mindful. This is an aspect of mental development which we can practise at any time and in any place. Sometimes I find people saying to me that it is extremely difficult to practise meditation, and often people are also somewhat afraid to practise meditation. By and large, they are thinking of concentration meditation or sitting meditation. But even if one is not prepared to practise concentration meditation, certainly Right Effort and Right Mindfulness can be practised without any fear of any adverse consequences. It simply entails being aware and attentive, watching your mind, seeing where it is going, seeing what it is doing. Just as when I am talking to you now, with one corner of my mind I can watch my mind, keep an eye on my mind. What am I thinking of? Is my mind on what I am saying to you, or am I thinking about what happened this morning, or last week, or what I will be doing tomorrow. I once heard a teacher saying that if you are making a cup of tea, Buddhism means making a cup of tea well, focussing, concentrating the mind on what one

is doing. This is true no matter what one is doing — cleaning the house, going to school, or cooking. No matter what one is doing, one can practise mindfulness, the practice of watching the mind, of keeping an eye on the mind.

The practice of mindfulness traditionally has played an important role in Buddhism. At one place, the Buddha has called the practice of mindfulness the one way to achieve the end of suffering. Specifically, the practice of mindfulness has been developed to include four particular applications. These are application of mindfulness with regard to body - awareness of the positions of one's limbs and so forth; mindfulness with regard to feelings pleasant, unpleasant or neutral; mindfulness with regard to moments of consciousness; and lastly mindfulness with regard to objects. These four stations of mindfulness have continued to play an important role in the practice of Buddhist meditation.

Let us go on to consider the third step, and that is concentration, or it is sometimes called meditation, or tranquility. You will recall that we traced the origin of meditation all the way back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Concentration has nothing to do with frenzy, or torpor, or semi-consciousness. Concentration is the practice of focussing the mind single-pointedly on a single object. The object may be physical or mental. When total single-pointedness of the mind upon a single object is achieved through concentration, the mind is totally absorbed in the object to the exclusion of all thoughts, distractions, wavering, agitation, or drowsiness. This is the object of the practice of Right Concen-

tration, to focus the mind single-pointedly upon one object. Most of us have had intimations of this kind of state. Occasionally something approaching single-pointedness of mind occurs spontaneously when listening to a favourite piece of music, or watching the sea or sky. One may have experienced the moment when the mind rests single-pointedly, undistractedly upon that object, that sound or that form.

Concentration may be practised in a number of ways. The object of concentration may be a sight such as a flame, an image, or a flower, or it may be an idea, an immaterial thing such as space, such as loving-kindness. When one practises concentration, one repeatedly focuses the mind on the object. This eventually, gradually leads to the ability to rest the mind upon the object without distraction. When this can be achieved for a protracted period, then one has achieved single-pointedness. It is important to note that this aspect of mental development has to be practised with the guidance of an experienced teacher. This is because there are a number of technical factors that condition success or failure and they include posture, attitude, duration and occasion of practice. And it is difficult for anyone to get all these right simply by reading a book. Nonetheless, one need not become a monk to practise this kind of meditation, one need not live in a forest, and one need not abandon one's daily activities. One can begin with relatively short periods, as short as ten to fifteen minutes a day.

When one's ability in this kind of meditation is developed, it has two principal benefits. Firstly, it leads

to mental and physical well-being, comfort, joy, calm, tranquility. Secondly, it turns the mind into an instrument capable of seeing things as they really are. It prepares the mind to attain wisdom. When we talk about seeing things as they really are, we liken the development towards this ability to the development of specialized instruments in science through which we have been able to observe atomic particles and so forth. Had it not been for the development of the radio receiver we would not be aware of radio waves. Similarly, if we do not develop our mind through the cultivation of Right Effort and Right Mindfulness and especially single-pointedness of the mind, our understanding of the real state of things, of truth will remain an intellectual knowledge. In order to turn our understanding of the Four Noble Truths from book knowledge into direct experience we have to achieve one-pointedness of the mind. It is at this point that mental development is ready to turn its attention to wisdom. It is at this point that we see the role of concentration in Buddhism. I touched upon this briefly when I spoke of the Buddha's decision to leave the two teachers Arada Kalama and Udraka Ramaputra and of His combination of concentration or meditation with penetrative insight on the night of His enlightenment. So here too, single-pointedness of the mind is not enough. It is similar to sharpening the pencil to write with, or the sharpening of the axe which we use to cut off the roots of greed, hatred and delusion. When we achieve single-pointedness of the mind, we are then ready to conjoin tranquility with penetrative understanding, meditation with wisdom.

## WISDOM

Today we are going to complete our survey of the Noble Eightfold Path. In the last two weeks, we have looked at good conduct and mental development. Today, we have the third group to look at, and that is the wisdom group. Here we have an interesting situation which we attended to sometime ago when we discussed the Four Noble Truths. When one sees the Noble Eightfold Path listed in sequence, one begins with Right Understanding and yet in the context of the three fold division of good conduct, mental development and wisdom, wisdom comes at the end. One tries to explain this by using the analogy of climbing a mountain. When one sets out to climb a mountain one has the summit in view and it is the sight of the summit that gives direction to one's path. In that sense, even when one begins to climb the mountain, one has one's eyes on the summit. As such, right understanding is necessary right at the beginning of the path. Yet in practical terms one has to climb the lower steps, scale the intermediate ridges before one reaches the summit, the attainment of wisdom. In practical terms, therefore, wisdom comes at the end of one's practice of the path.

Wisdom is described as the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, or the understanding of dependent origination and so forth. What is meant by this is that when we speak of the attainment of wisdom, we are concerned with transforming these items of the doctrine from simple intellectual facts to real personal facts. We are interested in changing this knowledge from mere book learning to real living experience. And the way

this is done is through the cultivation of good conduct and specifically through the cultivation of mental development. Otherwise, anyone can read in a book the explanation of the Four Noble Truths and so forth and yet this is not the same as attaining wisdom. As the Buddha Himself said, it is through failing to understand the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination that we have all run on in this cycle of birth and death. Obviously when He said this, He meant something deeper than simply failure to be acquainted intellectually with these items of doctrine. Understanding here has to be taken in the sense of Right Understanding, direct understanding, in the sense of seeing. This is perhaps why so frequently the language of seeing is used to describe the attainment of wisdom. We speak in terms of seeing the Truth, of seeing things as they really are. Because the attainment of wisdom is not an intellectual or academic exercise. It is seeing, understanding these truths directly. When this kind of direct understanding of the truth is gained, this is equivalent to gaining enlightenment. This opens the door to freedom, freedom from suffering and to Nirvana. Wisdom is the key thing in Buddhism. In other religions, we find that faith is paramount. In still other religions, we find that meditation is supreme as for instance in Yoga. In Buddhism, faith is preliminary, meditation is instrumental. The real heart of Buddhism is wisdom.

The two steps of the Noble Eightfold Path that are included in wisdom are Right Understanding and Right Thought. Right Understanding can be said to be seeing things as they really are. Understanding the truth about things rather than simply seeing them as they appear to



be. What this means is insight, penetrative understanding, seeing beyond the surface of things. If we want to explain this in doctrinal terms, we will have to speak about the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, impermanence, not-self and so forth. But for the moment let us just speak about the means of gaining Right Understanding. Here we can again see the scientific attitude of the teachings of the Buddha. Because when we come to look at the means of acquiring Right Understanding, we see that we begin with objective observation of the situation and of ourselves. We join objective observation with enquiry, examination and consideration.

In acquiring Right Understanding, we find that there are two types of understanding. One is the understanding that we acquire by ourselves. The other is the understanding that we acquire through others, that we are shown by others. Ultimately, these two types of understanding merge because in the final analysis real understanding of Right Understanding has to be our own. But in the meantime, one can distinguish between Right Understanding that we achieve through observation of the environment and the Right Understanding that we achieve through the study of the teachings. Just as with regard to our situation, we are asked to observe objectively what we see, what we experience and then examine and consider its significance, so when we approach the teachings of the Buddha we are asked to study them, to listen to them and then to consider them, to examine them. Whether we speak in terms of observation and enquiry, or whether we refer to study of the doctrine and we speak in terms of reading, or listen-

ing and consideration, the third step in this process of acquiring understanding is meditation. It is on this third stage of the process of acquiring Right Understanding that the two types of understanding merge. To summarize, the means of acquiring Right Understanding is as follows — on the first stage, one has to observe, study and read. On the second stage, one has to examine intellectually what one has observed, studied and read. On the third stage, one has to meditate upon what one has examined, considered and determined. Let us use a practical example. Let us say we intend to travel to a certain destination. In order to do so, we acquire a road map which shows the route to reach the destination. We look first at the map for the directions. Then we must review what we have seen, review the map, examine the map to be certain that we understand the directions. Only then do we actually travel to our destination. This is analogous to meditation. Again supposing we have bought a new piece of equipment. It is not enough to read the instructions. We have to reread the instructions, examine them to be certain that we understand them intellectually. When we are certain that we have clarified our intellectual understanding, we can then proceed to actually operate the new piece of equipment. This is analogous to meditation, to meditating upon what we have acquired through observation, learning, consideration and examination. On the third stage, through meditation these facts become part of our living experience.

Perhaps we might spend a few moments discussing the attitude that one can do well to cultivate in approaching the teachings of the Buddha. It is said that one who approaches the teachings ought to seek to

avoid three faults in his attitude and these faults are illustrated with the example of a vessel. In this context, we are the vessel, the teachings are what are to be filled into the vessel. Suppose the vessel is covered with a lid, we will not be very successful in filling the vessel, say with milk. This is similar to one who listens to the teachings with a closed mind, a mind that is already made up. The Dharma cannot enter, fill the vessel. Again supposing we have a vessel that has a hole in the bottom. If we fill the vessel with milk, the milk will run out of the hole. This is similar to those of us who find that what we hear does not stay with us. And finally there is the case of the vessel in which there are impurities. Suppose we fill the vessel with milk before having cleaned it. Suppose there is some spoiled milk left in the vessel. The fresh milk that we fill into the vessel will be spoilt. In the same way if we listen to the teachings with an impure mind, with impure attitudes, because for instance we want to achieve a certain amount of honour, or fame, with these kinds of selfish attitudes or desires, we are like a vessel tainted by impurities. We must seek to avoid these faults in our approach to the teachings of the Buddha, in the study of the Dharma. Alternatively, it is said that one might listen to the Dharma in the way that a patient listens to the instructions of the physician. In this context, the Buddha is the physician, the Dharma is the medicine, we are the patients and the practice of the Dharma is the means by which we can be cured of the disease, the disease of the defilements – greed, anger and delusion – that produce suffering. We will surely achieve some degree of Right Understanding if we approach the study of the Dharma with this notion in mind.

We often divide Right Understanding into two aspects. The first relates to the ordinary level while the second relates to a deeper level. Sometime ago, we spoke about the goals that Buddhism offers, in the sense of two levels of goals — happiness and good fortune in this life and the next, and ultimate liberation. Here too, in discussing Right Understanding, we see that there are two levels, two aspects of Right Understanding. The first aspect corresponds to the first type of goal, and the second corresponds to attaining liberation. The first aspect of Right Understanding is the understanding of the relation between cause and effect in the sphere of moral responsibility of our actions and our behavior. This briefly stated means that we will experience the effects of our actions. If we act well, if we observe the principles of respect for life, property, truth and so forth, if we act in these wholesome ways we will experience the good effects of our actions. We will enjoy happiness and fortunate circumstances in this life and the next. Conversely, if we act badly, we will experience unhappiness, miseries and unfortunate circumstances in this life and the next.

On the level of understanding as it relates to the ultimate goal of the teachings of the Buddha, we are concerned with Right Understanding in terms of seeing things as they really are. When we say seeing things as they really are, what do we mean? Again one can get doctrinal answers to this question. It can mean seeing things as impermanent, as dependently originated, as not-self, as impersonal, as seeing the Four Noble Truths. All these answers are correct. All express something about seeing things as they really are, seeing the reality

of things. In order to arrive at an understanding of this first and in a sense the last step of the Noble Eightfold Path, we have to look for something that all these expressions of Right Understanding have in common. When we describe Right Understanding in all these various ways, all these descriptions are opposed to ignorance, to bondage, to entanglement in the cycle of birth and death. When the Buddha attained enlightenment, His experience was essentially an experience of destruction of ignorance. This experience is described by the Buddha Himself most frequently in terms of understanding the Four Noble Truths and understanding dependent origination. Both the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination are concerned with the destruction of ignorance. In this sense, ignorance is the central problem, the central idea in both the formula of the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination.

Let us look at the Four Noble Truths again for a moment. The key to transforming one's experience from the experience of suffering to the experience of the end of suffering is understanding the Second Noble Truth, the truth of the cause of suffering. Once we understand the cause of suffering, we can then act to achieve the end of suffering. The Four Noble Truths as we have discussed are divided into two groups, two of them to be abandoned, and two of them to be gained — the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering are to be abandoned, and the truth of the end of suffering and the truth of the path to the end of suffering are to be gained. Understanding the cause of suffering enables one to do this. We can see this clearly in the Buddha's description of His experience on the night of His enlightenment.

When He saw the cause of suffering, when He understood that desire, ill-will and ignorance were the causes of suffering, this opened the door to His enlightenment. Ignorance, desire and ill-will are the causes of suffering. If we want to reduce our examination to the most essential concept, we must focus upon ignorance because it is due to ignorance that desire and ill-will arise.

Essentially, ignorance is the idea of a permanent, independent self. It is this conception of an “I” opposed and separate from the people and things around us. Once we have the notion of an “I”, we have an inclination to favour those things that sustain this “I” and to be averse to those things that we think threaten this “I”. It is this conception of the self that is the fundamental cause of suffering, the root of the various negative emotions — desire, anger, ill-will, envy, greed and jealousy. It is ignorant of the fact that the so-called “I”, the self, is just a convenient name for a collection of ever-changing, dependent, contingent factors. Is there a forest apart from the trees? The self is just a convenient name for a collection of processes. The self is a cause of suffering and fear. In this context the self is likened to mistaking a rope for a snake in the semi-darkness. If we come upon a rope in the darkness, we may assume the rope is in fact a snake and this assumption is a cause of fear. Similarly, in ignorance we take the impersonal, impermanent processes of feelings, perceptions, and so forth to be a self, and as a result we respond to situations with hope and fear. We desire certain things, we are averse to others. We are fond of certain people, we dislike others. So ignorance in this sense is the mistaken notion of a permanent ego, of a real self. This teaching

of not-self does not contradict the law of moral responsibility, the Law of Karma. In fact, you will recall that we described Right Understanding in terms of two aspects, understanding the Law of Karma, and here in terms of seeing things as they really are, understanding the nature of existence. Once this egoism is removed, once this erroneous notion of the self is dispelled by Right Understanding, greed, anger and the rest do not occur. When this is stopped the end of suffering is gained. I do not expect this to be completely clear to everyone immediately. We shall be spending several sessions in the next few weeks deepening and expanding the examination of the nature of ignorance.

Let us go on to the next part of the path that belongs to the wisdom group and that is Right Thought. Here we begin to see the reintegration, the reapplication of the wisdom group to the sphere of good conduct because thought has an immense influence on one's behaviour. The Buddha has said if one acts and speaks with a pure mind, then happiness follows as one's shadow that never leaves. And if one speaks and acts with an impure mind, then suffering follows as the wheel follows the hoof of the ox. Thought has a tremendous influence on one's behaviour. Right Thought means avoiding desire and ill-will. So you can see how important wisdom is because the cause of suffering is described in terms of desire, ill-will and ignorance. Right Understanding removes ignorance. Right Thought removes desire and ill-will. So Right Understanding and Right Thought remove the causes of suffering.

To remove desire and greed we need to cultivate renunciation or detachment. To remove ill-will, we need to cultivate loving-kindness and compassion. How does one cultivate the attitudes of renunciation, loving-kindness and compassion which will act as antidotes for desire and ill-will? Firstly, renunciation is cultivated by meditating upon the unsatisfactory nature of existence, particularly the unsatisfactoriness of pleasures of the senses. We liken pleasures of the senses to salt water. A thirsty man who drinks salt water only finds that his thirst increases. He achieves no satisfaction. The Buddha also likened pleasures of the senses to a certain fruit called the Kimbu fruit. It is a fruit that is very pleasant in appearance. It has an attractive skin. It is fragrant and tasty. But it causes disaster as it is poisonous when eaten. Similarly, pleasures of the senses are attractive, enjoyable and yet they cause disaster. So in order to cultivate detachment, one has to consider the undesirable consequences of pleasures of the senses. In addition, one has to contemplate, to understand that the nature of samsara is suffering. That no matter where one may be born within the confines of the cycle of birth and death, that situation is pervaded by suffering. The nature of samsara is suffering just as the nature of fire is heat. Through understanding the unsatisfactory nature of existence, and through recognizing the undesirable consequences of pleasures of the senses one can cultivate detachment.

One can cultivate loving-kindness and compassion through recognizing the essential equality of all living beings. All fear death, all tremble at punishments. Recognizing this, one should not kill or cause others to



be killed. All desire happiness, all fear pain. In this, we are all alike. All living beings are alike. Recognizing this, one should not place oneself above others, one should not regard oneself differently from the way in which one would regard others. This recognition of the fundamental equality of all living beings is basic to the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion. All want happiness just as I want happiness. Understanding this, one ought to regard all living beings with loving-kindness and compassion. One ought to cultivate this wish that all living beings may be happy. Just as I fear suffering and pain, and wish to avoid it, so do all living beings fear suffering and pain, and wish to avoid it. Understanding this, one develops and cultivates an attitude that wishes to see all living beings free from suffering.

In this way, we can develop and cultivate the attitudes of renunciation, loving-kindness and compassion which between them counteract and eventually eliminate greed and anger. Finally through wisdom, having eliminated ignorance, greed and anger, having purified ourselves of those three defilements, we can attain freedom, the final goal that is the purpose of the Noble Eightfold Path, the bliss of Nirvana.

## **KARMA**

Today we have come to a couple of related ideas which are common in Buddhism and they are the ideas of karma and rebirth. These ideas are closely inter-related, but because the subject is a fairly wide one, we will begin to deal with the idea of karma today and rebirth in the following lecture.

We know that what binds us in samsara are the defilements — desire, ill-will and ignorance. We spoke about this when we talked about the Second Noble Truth — the truth of the cause of suffering. These defilements are something which every living being in samsara shares, whether we speak of human beings or animals or beings who live in the other realms which we do not normally perceive. In this, all living beings are alike and yet amongst all the living beings that we can normally perceive, there are many differences. For instance, some of us are wealthy, some are less wealthy, some are strong and healthy, others are disabled and so forth. There are many differences amongst living beings and even more so there are differences between animals and human beings. These differences are due to karma. What we all share – desire, ill-will and ignorance – are common to all living beings, but the particular condition in which we find ourselves is the result of our particular karma that conditions the situation in which we find ourselves, the situation in which we may be wealthy, strong and so forth. These circumstances are decided by karma. It is in this sense that karma explains the differences amongst living beings. It explains why some beings are fortunate while others are less fortunate,

some are happy while others are less happy. The Buddha has specifically stated that karma explains the differences between living beings. You might also recall that the understanding of how karma affects the birth of living beings in happy or unhappy circumstances — the knowledge of how living beings move from happy circumstances to unhappy circumstances, and vice versa, from unhappy to happy circumstances as a result of their karma — was part of the Buddha's experience on the night of His enlightenment. It is karma that explains the circumstances that living beings find themselves in.

Having said this much about the function of karma, let us look more closely at what karma is. Let us define karma. Maybe we can define karma best by first deciding what karma is not. It is quite often the case that we find people misunderstanding the idea of karma. This is particularly true in our daily casual use of the term. We find people saying that one cannot change one's situation because of one's karma. In this sense, karma becomes a sort of escape. It becomes similar to predestination or fatalism. This is emphatically not the correct understanding of karma. It is possible that this misunderstanding of karma has come about because of the popular idea that we have about luck and fate. It may be for this reason that our idea of karma has become overlaid in popular thought with the notion of predestination. Karma is not fate or predestination.

If karma is not fate or predestination, then what is it? Let us look at the term itself. Karma means action, means "to do". Immediately we have an indication that

the real meaning of karma is not fate because karma is action. It is dynamic. But it is more than simply action because it is not mechanical action. It is not unconscious or involuntary action. It is intentional, conscious, deliberate, wilful action. How is it that this intentional, wilful action conditions or determines our situation? It is because every action must have a reaction, an effect. This truth has been expressed in regard to the physical universe by the great physicist Newton who formulated the law which states that every action must have an equal and opposite reaction. In the moral sphere of conscious actions, we have a counterpart to the physical law of action and reaction, the law that every intentional, wilful action must have its effect. This is why we sometimes speak either of Karma-Vipaka, intentional action and its ripened effect, or we speak of Karma-Phala, intentional action and its fruit. It is when we speak of intentional action together with its effect or fruit that we speak of the Law of Karma. In its most basic sense, the Law of Karma in the moral sphere teaches that similar actions will lead to similar results. Let us take an example. If we plant a mango seed, the plant that springs up will be a mango tree, and eventually it will bear a mango fruit. Alternatively, if we plant a Pong Pong seed, the tree that will spring up will be a Pong Pong tree and the fruit a Pong Pong. As one sows, so shall one reap. According to one's action, so shall be the fruit. Similarly, in the Law of Karma, if we do a wholesome action, eventually we will get a wholesome fruit, and if we do an unwholesome action eventually we will get an unwholesome, painful result. This is what we mean when we say that causes bring about effects that are similar to the causes. This we will

see very clearly when we come to specific examples of wholesome and unwholesome actions.

We can understand by means of this general introduction that karma can be of two varieties — wholesome karma or good karma and unwholesome karma or bad karma. In order that we should not misunderstand this description of karma, it is useful for us to look at the original term. In this case, it is kushala or akushala karma, karma that is wholesome or unwholesome. In order that we understand how these terms are being used, it is important that we know the real meaning of kushala and akushala. Kushala means intelligent or skilful, whereas akushala means not intelligent, not skilful. This helps us to understand how these terms are being used, not in terms of good and evil but in terms of skilful and unskilful, in terms of intelligent and unintelligent, in terms of wholesome and unwholesome. Now how wholesome and how unwholesome? Wholesome in the sense that those actions which are beneficial to oneself and others, those actions that spring not out of desire, ill-will and ignorance, but out of renunciation, loving-kindness and compassion, and wisdom.

One may ask how does one know whether an action that is wholesome or unwholesome will produce happiness or unhappiness. The answer is time will tell. The Buddha Himself answered the question. He has explained that so long as an unwholesome action does not bear its fruit of suffering, for so long a foolish person will consider that action good. But when that unwholesome action bears its fruit of suffering then he

will realize that the action is unwholesome. Similarly, so long as a wholesome action does not bear its fruit of happiness, a good person may consider that action unwholesome. When it bears its fruit of happiness, then he will realize that the action is good. So one needs to judge wholesome and unwholesome action from the point of view of long-term effect. Very simply, wholesome actions result in eventual happiness for oneself and others, while unwholesome actions have the opposite result, they result in suffering for oneself and others.

Specifically, the unwholesome actions which are to be avoided relate to the three doors or means of action, and these are body, speech and mind. There are three unwholesome actions of the body, four of speech and three of mind that are to be avoided. The three unwholesome actions of body that are to be avoided are killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. The four unwholesome actions of speech that are to be avoided are lying, slander, harsh speech and malicious gossip. The three unwholesome actions of mind that are to be avoided are greed, anger and delusion. By avoiding these ten unwholesome actions we will avoid their consequences. The unwholesome actions have suffering as their fruit. The fruit of these unwholesome actions can take various forms. The fully ripened fruit of the unwholesome actions consists of rebirth in the lower realms, in the realms of suffering — hell, hungry ghosts and animals. If these unwholesome actions are not sufficient to result in rebirth in these lower realms, they will result in unhappiness in this life as a human being. Here we can see at work the principle of a cause resulting in a similar effect. For example, habitual killing which is motivated

by ill-will and anger and which results in the taking of the life of other beings will result in rebirth in the hells where one's experience is saturated by anger and ill-will and where one may be repeatedly killed. If killing is not sufficiently habitual or weighty to result in rebirth in the hells, killing will result in shortened life as a human being, separation from loved ones, fear or paranoia. Here too we can see how the effect is similar to the cause. Killing shortens the life of others, deprives others of their loved ones and so forth, and so if we kill we will be liable to experience these effects. Similarly, stealing which is borne of the defilement of desire may lead to rebirth as a hungry ghost where one is totally destitute of desired objects. If it does not result in rebirth as a ghost, it will result in poverty, dependence upon others for one's livelihood and so forth. Sexual misconduct results in martial distress or unhappy marriages.

While unwholesome actions produce unwholesome results — suffering, wholesome actions produce wholesome results — happiness. One can interpret wholesome actions in two ways. One can simply regard wholesome actions as avoiding the unwholesome actions, avoiding killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and the rest. Or one can speak of wholesome actions in positive terms. Here one can refer to the list of wholesome actions that includes generosity, good conduct, meditation, reverence, service, transference of merits, rejoicing in the merit of others, hearing the Dharma, teaching the Dharma and straightening of one's own views. Just as unwholesome actions produce suffering, these wholesome actions produce benefits. Again effects here are similar to the actions. For example, generosity

results in wealth. Hearing of the Dharma results in wisdom. The wholesome actions have as their consequences similar wholesome effects just as unwholesome actions have similar unwholesome effects.

Karma, be it wholesome or unwholesome, is modified by the conditions under which the actions are performed. In other words, a wholesome or unwholesome action may be more or less strong depending upon the conditions under which it is done. The conditions which determine the weight or strength of karma may be divided into those which refer to the subject – the doer of the action – and those which refer to the object – the being to whom the action is done. So the conditions that determine the weight of karma apply to the subject and object of the action. Specifically, if we take the example of killing, in order for the act of killing to have its complete and unmitigated power, five conditions must be present — a living being, the awareness of the existence of a living being, the intention to kill the living being, the effort or action of killing the living being, and the consequent death of the living being. Here too, we can see the subjective and the objective conditions. The subjective conditions are the awareness of the living being, the intention to kill and the action of killing. The objective conditions are the presence of the living being and the consequent death of the living being. Similarly, there are five conditions that modify the weight of karma and they are persistent, repeated action; action done with great intention and determination; action done without regret; action done towards those who possess extraordinary qualities; and action done towards those who have benefited one in the past.



Here too there are subjective and objective conditions. The subjective conditions are persistent action; action done with intention; and action done without regret. If one does an unwholesome action again and again with great intention and without regret, the weight of the action will be enhanced. The objective conditions are the quality of the object to whom actions are done and the nature of the relationship. In other words, if one does a wholesome or unwholesome action towards living beings who possess extraordinary qualities such as the arhats, or the Buddha, the wholesome or unwholesome action done will have greater weight. Finally the power of wholesome or unwholesome action done towards those who have benefited one in the past, such as one's parents, teachers and friends, will be greater. The objective and subjective conditions together determine the weight of karma. This is important because understanding this will help us to understand that karma is not simply a matter of black and white, or good and bad. Karma is moral action and moral responsibility. But the working of the Law of Karma is very finely tuned and balanced so as to match effect with cause, so as to take into account the subjective and objective conditions that determine the nature of an action. This ensures that the effects of actions are equal to and similar to the nature of the causes.

The effects of karma may be evident either in the short term or in the long term. Traditionally we divide karma into three varieties related to the amount of time that is required for the effects of these actions to manifest themselves. Karma can either manifest its effects in this very life or in the next life or only after

several lives. When karma manifests its effects in this life, we can see the fruit of karma within a relatively short length of time. This variety of karma is easily verifiable by any of us. For instance, when someone refuses to study, when someone indulges in harmful distractions like alcohol and drugs, when someone begins to steal to support his harmful habits; the effects will be evident within a short time. They will be evident in loss of livelihood and friendship, health and so forth. We cannot see the long-term effect of karma, but the Buddha and His prominent disciples who have developed their minds are able to perceive directly the long-term effects. For instance, when Maudgalyayana was beaten to death by bandits, the Buddha was able to tell that this event was the effect of something Maudgalyayana had done in a previous life when he had taken his aged parents to the forest and having beaten them to death, had then reported that they had been killed by bandits. The effect of this unwholesome action done many lives before was manifested only in his last life. At death we have to leave everything behind — our property and our loved ones, but our karma will accompany us like a shadow. The Buddha has said that nowhere on earth or in heaven can one escape one's karma. So when the conditions are correct, dependent upon mind and body, the effects of karma will manifest themselves just as dependent on certain conditions a mango will appear on a mango tree. We can see that even in the world of nature certain effects take longer to appear than others. If for instance, we plant the seed of a papaya, we will obtain the fruit in shorter period than if we plant the seed of a durian. Similarly, the effects of karma manifest either in the short term or in the long term.

Besides the two varieties of karma, wholesome and unwholesome karma, we should mention neutral or ineffective karma. Neutral karma is karma that has no moral consequence either because the very nature of the action is such as to have no moral consequence or because it is done involuntarily and unintentionally. For example, sleeping, walking, breathing, eating, handi-craft and so forth in themselves have no moral consequence. Similarly, unintentional action is ineffective karma. In other words, if one accidentally steps on an insect, being unconscious of its existence, this also constitutes neutral karma because there is no intention — the intentional element is not there.

The benefits of understanding the Law of Karma are that this understanding discourages one from performing unwholesome actions which have suffering as their fruit. Once we understand that in our own life every action will have a similar and equal reaction, once we understand that we will experience the effect of that action, wholesome or unwholesome, we will refrain from unwholesome behavior, not wanting to experience the effects of these unwholesome actions. And similarly, understanding that wholesome actions have happiness as their fruit, we will cultivate these wholesome actions. Reflecting on the Law of Karma, of action and reaction in the moral sphere encourages us to renounce unwholesome actions and cultivate wholesome actions. We will look more closely at the specific effects of karma in future lives and how karma conditions and determines the nature of rebirth in our lecture next week.

## **REBIRTH**

Today we are going to continue a theme that we began two weeks ago when we talked about the teaching of karma. We are going to consider the results of karma in the next life, in other words rebirth. But before I begin to consider specifically the Buddhist teaching regarding rebirth, I think we need to spend a little bit of time on the concept of rebirth in general. This is because it is a concept which many people have difficulty with, particularly over the last few decades when we have become increasingly conditioned to think in what passes for scientific terms, in what most people would naively believe to be scientific terms. Thinking in this way has caused many people to discard the idea of rebirth as something that smacks of superstition, that is a part of an old-fashioned way of looking at the world. So I think we need to redress the balance and create a certain amount of openness to the concept of rebirth before we treat specifically the Buddhist teaching on rebirth.

There are a number of approaches that we can take to what we might call outlining the case for the reality of rebirth. One line which we might take would be to recall that in almost all the major cultures of the world, at one time or another, there had been a strong belief in the reality of rebirth. This is particularly true in India where the idea of rebirth can be traced back to the very earliest period of Indian civilization where all the major Indian religions, be they theism or atheism, be they schools of Hinduism or non-Hindu doctrines like Jainism, believe in the reality of rebirth. Similarly, in other cultures there has been a belief in rebirth, as for

instance even in the Mediterranean world, there is a lot of evidence that belief in rebirth was quite common before and during the first few centuries of the Common Era. So the belief in rebirth has been an important part of the human way of thinking about one's situation.

Specifically, within the Buddhist tradition, we have the testimony of the Buddha on the matter of rebirth. On the night of His enlightenment, the Buddha acquired three varieties of knowledge and the first of these was the detailed knowledge of His past lives. He was able to recollect the conditions in which He had been born in His past lives. He was able to remember what His names had been, what His occupations had been and so on. Besides the Buddha's testimony, His prominent disciples were also able to recollect their past lives. Ananda, for instance, acquired the ability to recollect his past life soon after his ordination. Similarly, throughout the history of Buddhism, saints, scholars and meditators have been able to recollect their past lives.

Nonetheless, neither of these two arguments for rebirth can be expected to be completely convincing in a scientific and rational environment. So perhaps we need to look a bit closer to home so to speak, and here we get help from a very unexpected direction. Most of us may be aware that in the past twenty or thirty years there have been a huge amount of scientific investigations of the question of rebirth and these investigations have been pursued by psychologists and parapsychologists. Gradually through these investigations, we have built up a very convincing case for the reality of rebirth, a case which is developed along scientific lines. There have

been many books published in which the details of these investigations have been described and discussed. One scholar who has been particularly active in this area in recent years is Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, USA. He has published findings on more than twenty cases of rebirth. Some of us may be familiar with the case of the woman who was able to recall her past life more than a hundred years before as Bridey Murphy in a foreign land which she had never visited in her present life. I am not going to go through these specific cases in detail because if one is interested in this scientific evidence for rebirth one can read about it for oneself. Nonetheless, I think we are now at a point where even the most skeptical of us will have to admit that there is a lot of circumstantial evidence in favour of the reality of rebirth.

But in making the case for rebirth, we can look even closer to our own experience, and here we need to recall and examine it in the true Buddhist way to see what meaning we can distill from our own experience. All of us in this room have our own particular capabilities, our own particular likes and dislikes, and I think it is fair to ask whether these are all merely the result of chance. For instance, some of us are more capable at sport than others, some of us have a talent for mathematics, others have a talent for music, some of us like swimming, others are afraid of water. Are all these differences in our abilities and attitudes merely the result of chance? There are incredible peculiarities in the nature of our experiences. Let me take my own case. I was born in a Roman Catholic family in the United States. There was absolutely nothing in my early background to

indicate that by the age of twenty I would have travelled to India and that I would spend the next fourteen years of my life predominantly in Asia, and that I would become deeply involved in Buddhist studies.

Then, too, there are those situations in which we sometimes feel a strong presentiment that we have been in a particular place before although we have not visited this place in our present life. Or, sometimes we feel that we have known someone before. Sometimes we meet a person and within a very short space of time we feel that we have known that person thoroughly. Alternatively, sometimes we have known a person for years and yet we are not close to that person. These experiences of feeling that we have been to a place before or have known a person before are so common and universal even in a culture which knows almost nothing of rebirth. There is a particular phrase for this experience, the French words “*deja vu*” which mean “already seen or experienced”. If we are not dogmatic, when we add up all the evidence of rebirth — the persistent belief in rebirth in many cultures in many different times throughout history, the Buddha’s own testimony, the testimony of His prominent disciples, the evidence presented by scientific investigations, and our own personal intimations that we have been here before – we have to admit that there is at least a good possibility that rebirth is a reality.

In Buddhism, rebirth is part of the continuous process of change. In fact, we are not only reborn at the time of death, we are born and reborn at every moment. This too, like many other Buddhist teachings, is easily

verifiable by reference to our own experience and by reference to the teachings of science. For instance, the majority of the cells in the human body die and are replaced many times during the course of one's life. Even those few cells which last one's entire life undergo constant internal changes. This is part of the process of birth, death and rebirth. If we look at the mind too, we find that mental states of worry, happiness and so forth are changing every moment. They die and are replaced by new states. So whether we look at the body or the mind, our experience is characterized by continuous birth, death and rebirth.

In Buddhism, it is taught that there are various realms, spheres or dimensions of existence. There are thirty-one planes of existence listed, but for our purposes, we are going to utilize a simpler scheme which enumerates six realms of existence. In general, the six realms may be divided into two groups, one of which is relatively fortunate and the other relatively miserable. The first group includes three of the six realms and they are the realm of the gods, the realm of the demigods and the realm of human beings. Rebirth in these fortunate realms is the result of wholesome karma. The second group includes the three realms that are considered relatively miserable. They are sometimes called the realms of woe, and they are the realm of animals, the realm of hungry ghosts and the realm of hell beings. Rebirth in these states of woe is the result of unwholesome karma.

Let us look at each of these realms individually and starting from the realm at the bottom, let us look at the



realm of the hell beings (Niraya). There are various hells in Buddhism, and they are principally eight hot hells and eight cold hells. In the hells, beings suffer incalculable and inexpressible pain. It is said that the suffering experienced as a result of being pierced by three hundred spears in a single day in this life is only a minute fraction of the suffering experienced in hell. The cause of rebirth in hell is continuous, habitual violent actions — habitual killing, cruelty and so forth, actions that are borne of ill-will. Beings born in the hells suffer the pain of hell until their unwholesome karma is exhausted. This is important because we must note that in Buddhism no one suffers eternal damnation. When their unwholesome karma is exhausted, beings in hell are reborn in a more fortunate realm of existence.

The next realm is the realm of the hungry ghosts (Pretas). Beings in this realm suffer chiefly from hunger and thirst, and from heat and cold. They are completely bereft of the objects of their desire. It is said that when the hungry ghosts perceive a mountain of rice or a river of fresh water, and rush towards that vision, they find the mountain of rice is only a heap of pebbles, and the river of fresh water only a ribbon of blue slate. Similarly, it is said that in the summer even the moon is hot, while in the winter even the sun is cold for them. The foremost cause of rebirth as a hungry ghost is avarice and miserliness borne of greed. As with the hells, the beings in this realm are not condemned to eternal existence in the form of hungry ghosts, for when their unwholesome karma is exhausted, they will be reborn in a higher realm.

In the next realm which is the realm of animals (Tiryak), the living beings suffer from a variety of unhappy circumstances. They suffer from the fear and pain that is the result of constantly killing and eating one another. They suffer from the depredations of man who kills them for food or for their hides, horns or teeth. Even if they are not killed, domestic animals are forced to work for man and are driven on by hooks and whips. All these are a source of suffering. The principal cause of rebirth as an animal is ignorance. In other words, the blind, heedless pursuit of one's animal-like desires, the preoccupation with eating, sleeping and sexual desire, and the disregard of developing one's mind to the practice of virtue and so forth lead one to be reborn as an animal. Now when I say for instance that habitual killing is the cause of rebirth in the hells, or that greed is the cause of rebirth in the realm of the hungry ghosts, or that ignorance is the cause of rebirth in the realm of animals, it does not mean that a specific hateful, greedy or ignorant action will result in rebirth amongst the appropriate class of beings — the hells, the realms of hungry ghosts or the realm of animals. What it does mean is that there is a relationship between hatred and rebirth in the hells, and between greed and rebirth in the realm of hungry ghosts, and between ignorance and rebirth in the realm of the animals. If unimpeded, if unbalanced by other virtuous actions, such actions if habitual are likely to result in rebirth in these three states of woe.

I am going to skip the realm of human beings for the moment and go on to the realm of demigods (Asuras). The Asuras are more powerful physically and

are more intelligent mentally than human beings. Yet they suffer because of jealousy and conflict. Mythologically, it is said that the Asuras and the gods share a celestial tree. While the gods enjoy the fruits of this celestial tree, the Asuras are custodians of the roots of the tree. The Asuras are envious of the gods and constantly attempt to take the fruits of the tree from the gods. As a result of this, they fight with the gods, and are defeated by the gods and suffer greatly as a consequence. Because of this constant jealousy, envy and conflict, existence amongst the Asuras is unhappy and unfortunate. As with the other realms, there is a cause of rebirth amongst the demigods. On the positive side, the cause is generosity. On the negative side, the causes are anger, envy and jealousy.

The sixth realm, the realm of the gods (Devas) is the happiest amongst the six realms. As a result of having done wholesome actions, of having observed the moral precepts and having practised meditation, living beings are reborn amongst the gods where they enjoy sensual pleasure or spiritual pleasure, or tranquillity depending upon the level within the realm of the gods in which they are born. Nonetheless, the realm of the gods is not to be desired because the happiness of the gods is impermanent. No matter how much they may enjoy their existence as a god, when the force of their karma is exhausted, when the merits of their good conduct and the power of their experience in meditation are exhausted, the gods fall from heaven and are reborn in another realm. At this moment, at the moment of their death, it is said that the gods suffer even more mental anguish than the physical pain suffered by beings in the

other realms. The negative factor associated with birth in the realm of the gods is pride.

So here, as you can see, we have an affliction or defilement associated with the five realms — hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, demigods and the gods, and they are ill-will, desire, ignorance, jealousy and pride. Birth in any of these five realms is undesirable. Birth in the three lower realms is undesirable for obvious reasons, because of the intense suffering and because of the total ignorance of the beings who inhabit these realms. Even rebirth in the realms of the demigods and the gods too is undesirable. This is because, although one experiences a certain degree of happiness and power, existence amongst the demigods and gods is impermanent. Besides, because of the distractions and pleasures in these realms, beings there never think of looking for a way out of the cycle of birth and death. This is why it is said that of the six realms, the most fortunate, opportune and favored is the human realm. This is why I have left the human realm to the last.

The human realm (Manushya) is the most favoured of the six realms because as a human being one has the motivation and the opportunity to practise the Dharma and to achieve enlightenment. One has this motivation and opportunity because the conditions conducive to practising the path are present. In the human realm, one experiences both happiness and suffering. The suffering in this realm, though terrible, is not so great as the suffering in the three realms of woe. The pleasure and happiness experienced in the human realm is not so great as the pleasure and happiness experienced in the

heavens. As a result, human beings are neither blinded by the intense happiness experienced by the beings in the heavens, nor distracted by the unbearable suffering that beings in the hells experience. Again, unlike the animals, human beings possess sufficient intelligence to recognize the necessity to look for a means to achieve the total end of suffering.

Human birth is difficult to gain from a number of points of view. First of all, it is difficult to gain from the point of view of its cause. Good conduct is the foremost cause of rebirth as a human being, but how rare is truly good conduct. Again, human birth is difficult to gain from the point of view of number, for human beings are only a small fraction of the living beings who inhabit the six realms. Moreover it is not enough simply to be born as a human being because there are countless human beings who do not have the opportunity to practise the Dharma. It is therefore not only necessary to be born as a human being, it is also necessary to have the opportunity to practise the Dharma, to develop one's qualities of morality, mental development and wisdom.

The Buddha spoke about the rarity and the precious nature of opportune birth amongst human beings. He used a simile to illustrate this point. Suppose the whole world were a vast ocean, and on the surface of this ocean there were a yoke floating about, blown about by the wind, and suppose at the bottom of the ocean there lived a blind tortoise which came to the surface of the ocean once every hundred years. Just as difficult as it would be for that tortoise to place its neck through the opening in that yoke floating about in the ocean, just so

difficult is it to attain opportune birth as a human being. Elsewhere, it is said that just as if one were to throw a handful of dried peas against a stone wall, and just as if one of these peas were to stick in a crack in the wall, so to be born as a human being with the opportunity to practise the Dharma is similarly difficult.

It is foolish to waste human existence along with the conducive conditions that we enjoy in free societies, the opportunity that we have to practise the Dharma. It is extremely important that having this opportunity we make use of it. If we fail to practise the Dharma in this life, there is no way of knowing where in the six realms we will be reborn, and when we shall have such a chance again. We must strive to free ourselves from the cycle of rebirth because failing to do so means that we will continue to circle endlessly amongst these six realms of existence. When the karma, wholesome or unwholesome, that causes us to be born in any of the six realms is exhausted, rebirth will occur, and we will find ourselves again in another realm. In fact, it is said that all of us have circled in the these six realms since beginningless time, that if all the skeletons that we have had in our various lives were heaped up, the pile would exceed the height of Mount Sumeru. If all the mothers' milk that we have drunk throughout our countless existences were collected, the amount would exceed the amount of water in all the oceans. So now that we have the opportunity to practise the Dharma, we must do so without delay.

In recent years, there has been a tendency to interpret the six realms in psychological terms. Some teachers have

suggested that the experience of the six realms is available to us in this very life. Undoubtedly, this is true so far as it goes. Those men and women who find themselves in prisons, tortured, killed, and so forth are undoubtedly experiencing a situation similar to that of the hell beings. Similarly, those who are miserly and avaricious experience a state of mind similar to that of the hungry ghosts. And those who are animal-like experience a state of mind similar to that of the animals. Those who are quarrelsome, powerful and jealous experience a state of mind similar to that of the Asuras. Those who are proud, tranquil, serene and exalted experience a state of mind similar to that of the gods. Yet, while it is undoubtedly true that the experience of the six realms is to some extent available to us in this human existence, I think it would be a mistake to assume or to believe that the six realms of existence do not have a reality which is as real as our human experience. The hells, the realm of the hungry ghosts, animals, demigods and gods are as real as our human realm. We will recall that mind is the creator of all mental states. Actions done with a pure mind motivated by generosity, love and so forth result in happy mental states or states of existence like the human realm and the realm of the gods. But actions done with an impure mind affected by greed, ill-will and so forth result in unhappy lives like those of the hungry ghosts and hell beings.

Finally, I would like to distinguish rebirth from transmigration. You may have noticed that in Buddhism, we consistently speak of rebirth and not transmigration. This is because in Buddhism we do not believe in an abiding entity, in a substance that transmigrates. We do not believe in a self that is reborn. This

is why when we explain rebirth, we make use of examples which do not require the transmigration of an essence or a substance. For example, when a sprout is born from a seed, there is no substance that transmigrates. The seed and the sprout are not identical. Similarly, when we light one candle from another candle, no substance travels from one to the other, and yet the first is the cause of the second. When one billiard ball strikes another, there is a continuity, the energy and direction of the first ball is imparted to the second. It is the cause of the second billiard ball moving in a particular direction and at a particular speed. When we step twice into a river, it is not the same river and yet there is continuity, the continuity of cause and effect. So there is rebirth, but not transmigration. There is moral responsibility, but not an independent, permanent self. There is the continuity of cause and effect, but not permanence. I want to end with this point because we will be considering the example of the seed and the sprout, and the example of the flame in an oil lamp next week when we discuss dependent origination. And with the help of the teaching of dependent origination, we will understand better how dependent origination makes moral responsibility and not-self compatible.



## **DEPENDENT ORIGINATION**

Today, in this tenth session, we are going to take up a very important topic in Buddhist studies and this is the teaching of dependent origination. I am aware of the fact that many people believe that dependent origination is a very difficult subject and I would not say that there is no truth in that belief. In fact, on one occasion Ananda remarked that despite its apparent difficulty, the teaching of dependent origination was actually quite simple; and the Buddha rebuked Ananda saying that in fact the teaching of dependent origination was very deep. Certainly in the teaching of dependent origination we have one of the most important and profound teachings in Buddhism. Yet I sometimes feel that our fear of dependent origination is to some extent unwarranted. There is nothing particularly difficult, for instance, in the term dependent origination. After all, we all know what dependent means, and what birth, origination or arising means. It is only when we begin to examine the function and application of dependent origination that we have to recognize the fact that we have a very profound and significant teaching. Some indication of this can be gained from the Buddha's own statements. Very frequently, we find that the Buddha expressed His experience of enlightenment in one of two ways, either in terms of having understood the Four Noble Truths, or in terms of having understood the nature of dependent origination. Again, the Buddha has often mentioned that in order to attain enlightenment one has to understand the Four Noble Truths; or similarly, one has to understand dependent origination.

On the basis of the Buddha's own statements, we can see a very close relationship between the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination. What is it that the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination have in common? The principle that both have in common is the principle of causality — the law of cause and effect, of action and consequence. In one of our earlier lectures we have mentioned that the Four Noble Truths are divided into two groups. The first two — suffering and the causes of suffering, and the last two — the end of suffering and the path to the end of suffering. In both of these groups, it is the law of cause and effect that governs the relationship between the two. In other words, suffering is the effect of the cause of suffering; and similarly, the end of suffering is the effect of the path to the end of suffering. Here too in regard to dependent origination, the fundamental principle at work is that of cause and effect. In dependent origination, we have a more detailed description of what actually takes place in the causal process. Let us take a few examples that establish the nature of dependent origination. Let us take first an example used by the Buddha Himself. The Buddha has said the flame in an oil lamp burns dependent upon the oil and the wick. When the oil and the wick are present, the flame in an oil lamp burns. If either of these is absent, the flame will cease to burn. This example illustrates the principle of dependent origination with respect to a flame in an oil lamp. Let us take the example of the sprout. Dependent upon the seed, earth, water, air and sunlight the sprout arises. There are in fact innumerable examples of dependent origination because there is no existing phenomenon that is not the effect of dependent origination. All these phenomena

arise dependent upon a number of causal factors. Very simply, this is the principle of dependent origination.

Particularly, we are interested in the principle of dependent origination as it applies to the problem of suffering and rebirth. We are interested in how dependent origination explains the situation in which we find ourselves here. In this sense, it is important to remember that dependent origination is essentially and primarily a teaching that has to do with the problem of suffering and how to free ourselves from suffering, and not a description of the evolution of the universe. Let me briefly list the twelve components or links that make up dependent origination. They are ignorance, mental formation, consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and old age and death.

There are two principal ways in which we can understand these twelve components. One way to understand them is sequentially, over a period of three lifetimes: the past life, the present life and the future life. In this case, ignorance and mental formation belong to the past life. They represent the conditions that are responsible for the occurrence of this life. The following components of dependent origination – consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, craving, clinging and becoming – belong to this life. In brief, these eight components constitute the process of evolution within this life. The last two components – birth, and old age and death – belong to the future life. According to this scheme, we can see how the twelve components of dependent origination are distributed over the period of

three lifetimes, and how the first two — ignorance and mental formation — result in the emergence of this life with its psycho-physical personality and how in turn, the actions performed in this life result in rebirth in the future life. This is one popular and authoritative way of interpreting the twelve components of dependent origination.

But for today, I am going to focus on another interpretation of the relation between the twelve components of dependent origination. This interpretation too is authoritative and has the support of recognized Buddhist masters and saints. This interpretation might be called a cyclical interpretation because it does not depend upon a distribution of the twelve components amongst three lifetimes. Rather, it divides the twelve components into three groups, and these are defilements (Klesha), actions (Karma), and sufferings (Duhkha). This scheme has the advantage of not relying upon a temporal distribution amongst three lifetimes. According to this scheme, ignorance, craving and clinging belong to the group of defilements. Mental formation and becoming belong to the group of actions. The remaining seven, that is, consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, birth, and old age and death belong to the group of sufferings. Through this interpretation we can see how the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and particularly the teaching of the Second Noble Truth — the truth of the cause of suffering, is conjoined with the teaching of karma and rebirth; and how together these two important teachings explain in a more complete way the process of rebirth and the origination of suffering.

You may recall that in the context of the Four Noble Truths, we have said that ignorance, desire and ill-will are the causes of suffering. If we look here at the three components of dependent origination that are included in the group of defilements, we will find ignorance, craving and clinging. Here too, ignorance is the most basic. It is because of ignorance that we crave for pleasures of the senses, for existence and for non-existence. Similarly, it is because of ignorance that we cling to pleasures of the senses, to pleasant experiences, to ideas and, perhaps most significantly, to the idea of an independent, permanent self. This ignorance — craving and clinging — is the cause of actions.

The two components of dependent origination that are included in the group of actions are mental formation and becoming. Mental formation refers to the impressions or habits that we have formed in our stream of conscious moments — our conscious continuum. These impressions or habits are formed by repeated actions. We can illustrate this by means of an example taken from geography. We know that rivers form their course by means of a process of repeated erosion. As rain falls on a hillside, that rain gathers into a rivulet. That rivulet gradually creates a channel for itself, and gradually grows into a stream. Eventually, as the channel of the stream is deepened and widened by repeated flows of water, the stream becomes a river which develops well-defined banks and a definite course. In the same way, our actions become habitual. These habits become part of our personality and we take these habits with us from life to life in the form of mental formation or habit energy. Our actions in this life are conditioned

by the habits which we have formulated over countless previous lives. So to return to the analogy of the channel of the river and the water in it, we might say that mental formations are the channel of the river, and the actions that we perform in this life are the fresh water that flow again through the eroded channel created by previous actions. The actions that we perform in this life are represented by the component known as becoming. So here, as regards mental formation and becoming, we have the habits that we have developed over the course of countless lives combined with new actions performed in this life, and these two together result in rebirth and suffering.

To summarize, we have the defilements which may be described as impurities of the mind — ignorance, craving and clinging. These mental impurities result in actions, actions done in previous lives which have resulted in the formulation of habit energy, and actions done in the present life which on the whole are liable to conform to the patterns established in previous lives. Together, these impurities of the mind and these actions result in rebirth. In other words, they result in consciousness, in name and form, in the six senses, in contact between the six senses and the objects of the six senses, in feeling which is born of that contact, in birth, and in old age and death. In this interpretation, the five components of dependent origination included in the groups of defilements and actions – ignorance, craving, clinging, mental formation and becoming – are the causes of rebirth and suffering. Consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, birth, and old age and death are the effects of the defilements and actions.

Together, the defilements and actions explain the origin of suffering and the particular circumstances in which each of us find ourselves, in which we are born. You may recall that in one of our earlier lectures, we refer to the fact that whereas the defilements are common to all living beings, actions differ from individual to individual. So whereas the defilements account for the fact that all of us are prisoners within samsara, yet actions account for the fact that some are born as human beings, others are born as gods, and others as animals. In this sense, the twelve components of dependent origination present a picture of samsara with its causes and its effects.

There would be no point in painting this picture of samsara if we do not intend to use this picture to change our situation, to get out of samsara. It is in this sense that recognizing the circularity of samsara, the circularity of dependent origination is the beginning of liberation. How is this so? So long as defilements and actions are present, rebirth and suffering will occur. When we see that repeatedly, ignorance, craving, clinging and actions will lead to rebirth and suffering, we will recognize the need to break this vicious circle. Let us take a practical example. Suppose you are looking for the home of an acquaintance whom you have never visited before. Suppose you have been driving about for half an hour or more and have failed to find the home of your friend, and suppose suddenly you recognize a landmark that you saw half an hour previously. Suppose you again come upon the landmark, and it dawns upon you that you have passed the landmark half an hour ago. At that moment it will also

probably dawn upon you that you have been going around in circles, and you will stop and look at your road guide, or enquire the way from a passer-by so as to stop going around in circles and reach your destination. This is why the Buddha has said that he who sees dependent origination sees the Dharma and he who sees the Dharma sees the Buddha. This is why the Buddha has, as I have mentioned earlier, said that understanding dependent origination is the key to liberation. So once we see the functioning of dependent origination, we can then set about breaking this vicious circle of dependent origination. We can do this by removing the impurities of the mind – ignorance, craving and clinging. Once these impurities are eliminated, actions will not be performed, and habit energy will not be produced. Once actions cease, rebirth and suffering will also cease.

I would like to spend a little bit of time on another important meaning of dependent origination and that is dependent origination as an expression of the Middle Way. During one of our earlier lectures, we had occasion to refer to the Middle Way, and on that occasion we confined ourselves to only perhaps the most basic meaning. We have said that the Middle Way means avoiding the extreme of indulgence in pleasures of the senses and the extreme of self-mortification. In that context the Middle Way is synonymous with moderation. Now in the context of dependent origination, the Middle Way has another meaning which is related to the earlier meaning but deeper. In this context the Middle Way means avoiding the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. How is this so? The flame in the oil lamp exists dependent upon the oil and the wick. When either



of these are absent, the flame will be extinguished. Therefore, the flame is neither permanent nor independent. Similarly, this personality of ours depends upon a combination of conditions – defilements and actions. It is neither permanent nor independent. Recognizing the conditioned nature of our personality, we avoid the extreme of eternalism, of affirming the existence of an independent, permanent self. Alternatively, recognizing that this personality, this life does not arise through accident, or mere chance, but is instead conditioned by corresponding causes, we avoid the extreme of nihilism, the extreme of denying the relation between action and consequence. While nihilism is the primary cause of rebirth in states of woe and is to be rejected, eternalism too is not conducive to liberation. One who clings to the extreme of eternalism will perform wholesome actions and will be reborn in states of happiness, as a human being or even as a god, but he will never attain liberation. Through avoiding these two extremes, through understanding the Middle Way, we can achieve happiness in this life and in the future life by performing wholesome actions and avoiding unwholesome actions, and eventually we can achieve liberation.

The Buddha has constructed His teachings with infinite care. The Buddha's teachings are sometimes likened to the behaviour of a tigress towards her young. When a tigress carries her young in her teeth, she is most careful to see that her grip is neither too tight nor too loose. If her grip on the neck of her young is too tight, it will injure or kill the cub. If her grip is too loose, the cub will fall and will be injured. Similarly, the Buddha was careful to see that we should avoid the

extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Because He saw that clinging to the extreme of eternalism would be like a chain that would bind us in samsara, the Buddha was careful to teach us to avoid belief in an independent and permanent self. Because He saw the possibility of freedom destroyed by the sharp teeth of belief in the self, the Buddha asked us to avoid the extreme of eternalism. Yet understanding that clinging to the extreme of nihilism would lead to catastrophe – rebirth in the states of woe – He was careful to teach the reality of the law of cause and effect, of moral responsibility. Because He saw that one would fall into the misery of the lower realms by denying the law of moral responsibility, He taught us to avoid the extreme of nihilism. This objective is admirably achieved through the teaching of dependent origination which safeguards our understanding of the conditioned, dependent and impermanent nature of this personality and our understanding of the reality of the law of cause and effect.

In the context of dependent origination, we have established the dependent, impermanent nature of the personality, the self, by means of underlining its dependent nature. In the two weeks to follow, we are going to arrive at the impermanence and impersonality of the self through examining its composite nature and through analyzing it into its constituent parts. By these means, we will elucidate the truth of not-self that opens the door to enlightenment.

## **THE THREE UNIVERSAL CHARACTERISTICS**

The subject today is the three universal characteristics of existence. This is an important part of the teachings of the Buddha. Like the Four Noble Truths, karma, the teaching of dependent origination and the five aggregates, the teaching of the three characteristics is part of what we might call the doctrinal contents of wisdom. In other words, when we talk about the knowledge and the understanding that is implied by wisdom, we have this teaching in mind.

Before we examine the characteristics individually, let us come to an understanding of what they mean and in what way they are useful. First of all, what is a characteristic and what is not? A characteristic is something which is necessarily connected with something else. Because the characteristic is necessarily connected with something, it can tell us about the nature of that thing. Let us take an example. Heat for instance is a characteristic of fire but not a characteristic of water. Heat is the characteristic of fire because the heat of the fire is always and invariably connected with fire. On the other hand, the heat of water depends on external factors — an electric stove, the heat of the sun and so forth. But the heat of fire is natural to fire. It is in this sense that the Buddha uses the term “characteristic” to refer to facts about the nature of existence, that are always connected with existence and that are always found in existence. The characteristic heat is always connected with fire. So we can understand something about the nature of fire

from heat. We can understand that fire is hot. We can understand that we can use fire to cook our food, to warm ourselves and so forth. The characteristic of heat tells us something about fire, how to use fire and what to do with fire. If we were to think of the characteristic of heat as connected with water, it would not help us to use water because heat is not always connected with water. We cannot cook our food with water. We cannot warm ourselves with water. So when the Buddha said that there are three characteristics of existence, He meant that these characteristics are always present in existence, and that they help us to understand what to do with existence.

The three characteristics of existence that we have in mind are the characteristics of impermanence (Anitya), suffering (Duhkha) and not-self (Anatma). These three characteristics are always present in or are connected with existence, and they tell us about the nature of existence. They help us to know what to do with existence. What we learn to develop as a result of understanding the three characteristics is renunciation. Once we understand that existence is universally characterized by impermanence, suffering and not-self, we eliminate our attachment to existence. Once we eliminate our attachment to existence, we gain the threshold of Nirvana. This is the purpose that understanding the three characteristics serves. It removes attachment by removing delusions, the misunderstanding that existence is permanent, is pleasant and has something to do with the self. This is why understanding the three characteristics is part of the contents of wisdom.

Let us look at the first of the three characteristics of existence, the characteristic of impermanence. The fact of impermanence has been recognized not only in Buddhist thought but also elsewhere in the history of philosophy. It was the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who remarked that one could not step into the same river twice. This remark, which implies the ever-changing and transient nature of things is a very buddhistic remark. In the Buddhist scriptures, it is said that the three worlds (Dhatus) are impermanent like autumn clouds; that birth and death are like a dance; and that human life is like a flash of lightning or a waterfall. All these are compelling images of impermanence and they help us to understand that all things are marked or characterized by impermanence.

If we look at our own personality, we will find that our bodies are impermanent. They are subject to constant change. We grow thin. We grow old and grey, our teeth fall out, our hair falls out. If one needs any proof of the impermanence of the physical form, one need only look at one's own photograph on one's own driving licence or passport over the years. Similarly, our mental states are impermanent. At one moment we are happy, and at another moment we are sad. As infants, we hardly understand anything. As adults, in the prime of life we understand a great deal more. And again in old age we lose the power of our mental faculties and become like infants. Our minds are also characterized by impermanence. This is true also of the things that we see around us. Everything we see around us is impermanent. Not one thing will last forever — not the office blocks, nor the temples, nor the rivers and islands, nor

the mountain chains, nor the oceans. We know for a fact that all these natural phenomena, even those that appear to be the most durable, even the solar system itself will one day decline and become extinct.

This process of constant change of all things — personal and impersonal, internal and external, goes on constantly even without our noticing it, and it affects us intimately in our daily life. Our relations with other individuals are subject to the characteristic of impermanence and change. Friends become enemies, enemies become friends. Enemies even become relatives. Relatives become enemies. If we look closely at our life, we can see how all our relationships with other people are marked by impermanence. Our possessions are also impermanent. Those things that we dearly love — our homes, our automobiles, our clothes, all these are impermanent. All of them will decay and eventually be destroyed. So in every aspect of our life, whether it be personal or material, or whether with regard to our relationships with others, or whether it be our possessions, impermanence is a fact, verified by direct immediate observation.

Understanding impermanence is important not simply for our practice of the Dharma but also in our daily life. How often do friendships deteriorate and end because one of the persons involved has failed to take account of the fact that his friend's attitudes, interests and so forth have changed? How often do marriages fail because one, or both, of the parties fails to take account of the fact that his or her partner has changed? It is because we lock ourselves into fixed, artificial unchang-

ing ideas of the character and personality of our friends and relatives that we fail to develop our relationships with them positively and because of this failure we often fail to understand one another. Similarly, in one's career or public life, one cannot hope to succeed if one does not keep abreast of changing situations like, for instance, new trends in one's profession or discipline. So whether it is in regard to our personal life or in regard to our public life, understanding impermanence is necessary if we are to be effective and creative in the way that we handle our personal or professional affairs.

While understanding impermanence yields these immediate benefits, here and now, it is particularly effective as an aid to our practice of the Dharma. The understanding of impermanence is an antidote to desire and ill-will. It is also an encouragement to our practice of the Dharma. And finally, it is a key to understanding the ultimate nature of things, the way things really are.

Remembering death especially is said to be like a friend and a teacher to one who wishes to practise the Dharma. Remembering death acts as a discouragement to excessive desire and ill-will. How many quarrels, petty disagreements, life-long ambitions and enmities fade into insignificance before the recognition of the inevitability of death? Throughout the centuries, Buddhist teachers have encouraged sincere practitioners of the Dharma to remember death, to remember the impermanence of this personality. Some years ago, I had a friend who went to India to study meditation. He approached a very renowned and learned Buddhist teacher and asked him for some meditation instructions.

The teacher was reluctant to teach him because he was not convinced of his sincerity. My friend persisted and asked him again and again. Finally, the teacher said to him, “You will die, meditate upon that.” Meditation on death is extremely beneficial. We all need to remember the certainty of our death. From the moment of our birth, we move inexorably towards death. Remembering this, and remembering that at the time of death, wealth, family and fame will be of no use to us, we must turn our mind to the practice of the Dharma. We know that death is absolutely certain. There has never been a single living being who has escaped death.

Yet, while death itself is certain, the time of death is uncertain. We can die at any moment. It is said that life is like a candle in the wind, or a bubble of water. At any moment it may be snuffed out. At any moment it may burst. Understanding that the time of death is uncertain, and that we have now the conditions and opportunity to practise the Dharma, we ought to practise it quickly so that we may not waste this opportunity and this precious human life.

Finally, understanding impermanence is an aid to the understanding of the ultimate nature of things. Seeing that all things are perishable, and change every moment, we also begin to see that things have no substantial existence of their own. That in our persons and in the things around us, there is nothing like a self. So in this sense, impermanence is directly related to the third of the three characteristics, the characteristic of not-self. Understanding impermanence is a key to understanding not-self. We will talk more about this



later. For the moment, let us now go on to the second of the three characteristics, the characteristic of suffering.

The Buddha has said that whatever is impermanent is suffering, and whatever is impermanent and suffering is also not-self. Whatever is impermanent is suffering because impermanence is an occasion for suffering. It is an occasion for suffering and not a cause of suffering because impermanence is only an occasion for suffering so long as ignorance, craving and clinging are present. How is that so? In our ignorance of the real nature of things, we crave and cling to objects in the forlorn hope that they may be permanent, that they may yield permanent happiness. Failing to understand that youth, health and life itself are impermanent, we crave for them, we cling to them. We long to hold on to our youth and to prolonging our life and yet because they are impermanent by nature, they slip through our fingers like sand. When this occurs, impermanence is an occasion for suffering. Similarly, we fail to recognize the impermanent nature of possessions, power and prestige. We crave and cling to them. Once they end, impermanence is an occasion for suffering. The impermanence of all situations in samsara is a particular occasion for suffering when it occurs in the so-called fortunate realm. It is said that the suffering of the gods is even greater than the suffering of living beings dwelling in the lower realms of existence when they see that they are about to fall from the heavens into lower realms of existence. Even the gods trembled when the Buddha reminded them of impermanence. So because even those pleasant experiences which we crave and cling to

are impermanent, so impermanence is an occasion for suffering and whatever is impermanent is also suffering.

Now we come to the third universal characteristic of existence, the characteristic of not-self, or impersonality, or insubstantiality. This is in a sense one of the really distinctive features of Buddhist thought and of the teachings of the Buddha. During the later development of religion and philosophy in India, some Hindu schools became increasingly similar to the teachings of the Buddha, in their techniques of meditation and in some of their philosophical ideas. So it became necessary for Buddhist masters to point out that there was still one distinctive feature that set Buddhism apart from the Hindu schools that so closely resembled it. That distinctive feature is the teaching of not-self.

Sometimes, this teaching of not-self is an occasion for confusion because often we wonder how one can deny the self. After all, we do say “I am speaking” or “I am walking,” or “I am called so and so”, or “I am the father or the son of such and such a person.” So how can we deny the reality of that “I”? In order to clarify this, I think it is important to remember that the Buddhist rejection of the “I” is not a rejection of this convenient designation, the name “I”. Rather, it is a rejection of the idea that this name “I” stands for a substantial, permanent and changeless reality. When the Buddha said that the five factors of personal experience were not the self, and that the self was not to be found within them He meant that on analysis, this name “I” did not correspond to any essence or entity. The Buddha has used the example of the chariot and the forest to explain

the relation between the term “I” and the components of personal experience. The Buddha has explained that the term “chariot” is simply a convenient name for a collection of parts that is assembled in a particular way. The wheels are not the chariot. Neither is the axle, and neither is the carriage, and so forth. Similarly, an individual tree is not a forest. Neither is a number of individual trees a forest. There is no forest apart from the individual trees. The term forest is just a convenient name for an assembly of individual trees. This is the thrust of the Buddha’s rejection of the self. The Buddha’s rejection is a rejection of the belief in a real, independent, permanent entity that is represented by the term “I”. Such a permanent entity would have to be independent, would have to be sovereign in the way that a king is master of those around him. It would have to be permanent, immutable and impervious to change, and such a permanent entity, such a self is nowhere to be found.

The Buddha has applied the following analysis to the body and mind to indicate that the self is nowhere to be found either in the body or the mind. The body is not the self. For if the body were the self, the self would be impermanent, would be subject to change, decay, destruction, and death. So the body cannot be the self. The self does not possess the body, in the sense that I possess a car or a television, because the self cannot control the body. The body falls ill, gets tired and old against our wishes. The body has a shape which often does not agree with our wishes. So in no way does the self possess the body. The self is not in the body. If we search our body from the top of our head to the tip of

our toes, we can nowhere locate the self. The self is not in the bone, nor in the blood, nor in the marrow, nor in the hair, nor in the spittle. The self is nowhere to be found within the body. Similarly, the mind is not the self. The mind is subject to constant change. The mind is forever jumping about like a monkey. The mind is happy at one moment and unhappy at the next. So the mind cannot be the self for the mind is constantly changing. The self does not possess the mind because the mind becomes excited or depressed against our wishes. Although we know that certain thoughts are wholesome, and certain thoughts are unwholesome, the mind pursues unwholesome thoughts and is indifferent towards wholesome thoughts. So the self does not possess the mind because the mind acts independently of the self. The self is not in the mind. No matter how carefully we search the contents of our mind, no matter how carefully we search our thoughts, feelings, and ideas, we can nowhere find the self. There is a very simple exercise that anyone of us can perform. We can all sit quietly for a brief period of time and look within our body and mind, and without exception we will find that we cannot locate the self anywhere within the body nor the mind. The conclusion remains that the self is just a convenient name for a collection of factors. There is no self, no soul, no essence, no core of personal experience apart from the ever-changing, interdependent, impermanent physical and mental factors of personal experience such as our feelings, ideas, thoughts, habits, and attitudes.

Why should we care to reject the idea of self? How can we benefit by rejecting the idea of self? Here too,

we can benefit in two important ways. First of all, in our everyday life, on a mundane level we can benefit in that we will become more creative, more comfortable, and more open people. So long as we cling to the self, we will always have to defend ourselves, to defend our possessions, property, prestige, opinions and even our words. But once we give up this belief in an independent and permanent self, we will be able to relate to other people and situations without paranoia. We will be able to relate freely, spontaneously and creatively. Understanding not-self is therefore an aid to living.

Even more importantly, understanding not-self is a key to enlightenment. The belief in a self is synonymous with ignorance, and ignorance is the most basic of the three defilements. Once we identify, imagine, or conceive of ourselves as an entity, we immediately create a schism, a separation between ourselves and the people and things around us. Once we have this conception of self, we respond to the persons and things around us either with desire or with aversion. In this sense, the self is the real villain of the piece. Seeing that the self is the source and the cause of all suffering, and seeing that the rejection of the self is the cause of the end of suffering, rather than trying to defend, protect and preserve the self, why should we not do our best to reject and eliminate this idea of the self? Why should we not recognize that personal experience is like a banana tree or like an onion, that when we take it apart piece by piece, that when we examine it critically and analytically, we find that it is empty of any essential, substantial core, that it is devoid of the self?

When we understand that all things are impermanent, are full of suffering, and are not-self, and when our understanding of these truths is not merely intellectual or academic but through study, consideration and meditation, the facts of impermanence, suffering and not-self become part of our immediate experience. Through the understanding of impermanence, suffering, and not-self, we will have freed ourselves of the fundamental errors that imprison us within the cycle of birth and death — the error of seeing things as permanent, the error of seeing things as pleasant and the error of seeing things as self. When these delusions are removed, wisdom arises. Just as when darkness is removed, light arises. And when wisdom arises, one experiences the peace and freedom of Nirvana.

This week we have confined ourselves to looking at personal experience in terms of body and mind. Next week we will look more deeply into the Buddhist analysis of personal experience in terms of the elements of our physical and mental universe.

## THE FIVE AGGREGATES

This is the last in the series of twelve sessions that we have spent together, and in this last session we are going to look at the teaching of the five aggregates (Skandhas — Rupa, Vedana, Samjna, Samskara and Vijnana). In other words, we are going to look at the Buddhist analysis of personal experience or the Buddhist analysis of the personality.

Throughout the last lectures, I have had occasions a number of times to make the point that Buddhist teachings have been found relevant to modern life and thought in the fields of science, psychology and so forth. Here, in regard to the analysis of personal experience into the five aggregates, this is also the case. Modern psychologists and psychiatrists have been particularly interested in this analysis. It has even been suggested that in the Abhidharma and in the analysis of personal experience into the five aggregates, we have a psychological equivalent to the table of elements worked out in modern science. What we have in the Buddhist analysis of personal experience is a very careful inventory and evaluation of the elements of our experience.

What we are going to do today is basically an extension and a refinement of what we were doing at the end of last week's lecture. There, we spent some time on the teachings of impermanence, suffering and not-self. In the course of looking at the teaching on not-self, we have explored briefly how the analysis of personal experience can be carried out along two lines, and that is with regard to the body, and with regard to the mind.

You will recall that we have examined the body and mind to see whether in either of them we can locate the self, and we have found that the self is not to be found in either of them. We have concluded that the name 'self' is just a convenient term for a collection of physical and mental factors, in the same way that the name 'forest' is just a convenient term for a collection of trees. This week, we are going to take our analysis still further, and rather than looking at personal experience simply in terms of body and mind, we are going to analyze personal experience in terms of the five aggregates.

Let us first look at the aggregate of matter or form (Rupa). The aggregate of form corresponds to what we would call material or physical factors. It includes not only our own bodies, but also the material objects that surround us — the earth, the oceans, the trees, the buildings, and so forth. Specifically, the aggregate of form includes the five physical sense organs and the corresponding physical objects of the sense organs. These are the eyes and visible objects, the ears and sound, the nose and smell, the tongue and taste, and the skin and tangible objects.

But physical elements by themselves are not enough to produce experience. The simple contact between the eyes and visible objects, or between the ears and sound cannot result in experience without consciousness (Vijnana). The eyes can be in conjunction with the visible object indefinitely without producing experience. The ears too can be exposed to sound indefinitely without producing experience. Only the



co-presence of consciousness together with the sense organ and the object of the sense organ produces experience. In other words, it is when the eyes, the visible object and consciousness come together that the experience of a visible object is produced. Consciousness is therefore an indispensable element in the production of experience.

Before we go on to our consideration of the mental factors of personal experience, I would like to mention briefly the existence of one more set of an organ and its object, and here I speak of the sixth-sense — the mind. This is in addition to the five physical sense organs — eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. Just as the five physical sense organs have their corresponding physical objects, the mind has for its object ideas or properties (dharmas). And as in the case of the five physical sense organs, consciousness is present to unite the mind and its object so as to produce experience.

Let us now look at the mental factors of experience and let us see if we can understand how consciousness turns the physical factors of experience into personal conscious experience. First of all, we must remember that consciousness is mere awareness, or mere sensitivity to an object. When the physical factors of experience, as for example the eyes and a visible object, come into contact, and when consciousness too becomes associated with the physical factors of experience, visual consciousness arises. This is mere awareness of a visible object, not anything like what we could call personal experience. The way that our personal experience is produced is through the functioning of the other three

major mental factors of experience and they are the aggregate of feeling, the aggregate of perception and the aggregate of mental formation or volition. These three aggregates function to turn this mere awareness of the object into personal experience.

The aggregate of feeling or sensation (Vedana) is of three kinds — pleasant, unpleasant and indifferent. When an object is experienced, that experience takes on one of these emotional tones, either the tone of pleasure, or the tone of displeasure, or the tone of indifference.

Let us next look at the aggregate of perception (Samjna). This is an aggregate which many people find difficult to understand. When we speak of perception, we have in mind the activity of recognition, or identification. In a sense, we are talking about the attaching of a name to an object of experience. The function of perception is to turn an indefinite experience into an identified and recognized experience. Here, we are speaking of the formulation of a conception of an idea about a particular object. Just as with feeling where we have a emotional element in terms of pleasure, displeasure or indifference; with perception, we have a conceptual element in the sense of introducing a definite, determinate idea about the object of experience.

Finally, there is the aggregate of mental formation or volition (Samskara). This aggregate may be described as a conditioned response to the object of experience. In this sense, it partakes of the meaning of habit as well. We have spent some time discussing the component of mental formation when we considered the twelve components of dependent origination. You will remember

that on that occasion, we described mental formation as the impression created by previous actions, the habit energy stored up from countless former lives. Here, as one of the five aggregates also, the aggregate of mental formation plays a similar role. But it has not only a static value, it also has a dynamic value because just as our reactions are conditioned by former deeds, so are our responses here and now motivated and directed in a particular way by our mental formation or volition. Mental formation or volition therefore has a moral dimension just as perception has a conceptual dimension, and feeling has an emotional dimension. You will notice I use the terms mental formation and volition together. This is because each of these terms represents one half of the meaning of Samskara — mental formation represents the half that comes from the past, and volition represents the half that functions here and now. So mental formation and volition function to determine our responses to the objects of experience and these responses have moral consequences in the sense of wholesome, unwholesome or neutral.

We can now see how the physical and mental factors of experience worked together to produce personal experience. To make this a little clearer, let us take the help of a couple of concrete examples. Let us say after today's lecture you decide to take a walk in the garden. As you walk in the garden, your eyes come into contact with a visible object. As your attention focuses on that visible object, your consciousness becomes aware of visible object as yet indeterminate. Your aggregate of perception will identify that visible object as, let us say, a snake. Once that happens, you will

respond to that visible object with the aggregate of feeling — the feeling of displeasure, or more specifically that of fear. Finally, you will react to that visible object with the aggregate of mental formation or volition, with the intentional action of perhaps running away or perhaps picking up a stone. In all our daily activities, we can see how all the five aggregates work together to produce personal experience. At this very moment, for instance, there is contact between two elements of the aggregate of form — the sound of my voice and your ears. Your consciousness becomes aware of the sound of my voice. Your aggregate of perception identifies the words that I am speaking. Your aggregate of feeling responds with an emotional response — pleasure, displeasure or indifference. Your aggregate of mental formation or volition responds with a conditioned reaction — sitting in attention, daydreaming or perhaps yawning. We can analyze all our personal experience in terms of the five aggregates.

There is one point that has to be remembered regarding the nature of the five aggregates, and that is that each and all of them are in constant change. The elements that constitute the aggregate of form are impermanent and are in a state of constant change. We discussed this last week — the body grows old, weak, sick and so forth. The things around us are also impermanent and change constantly. Our feelings too are constantly changing. We may respond today to a particular situation with a feeling of pleasure. Tomorrow, we may respond to that same situation with the feeling of displeasure. Today we may perceive an object in a particular way. At a later time, under different cir-

cumstances, our perception will change. In semi-darkness we perceive a rope to be a snake. The moment the light of the torch falls upon that object, we perceive it to be a rope. So our perceptions like our feelings and like the material objects of our experience are ever changing and impermanent. So too, our mental formations are impermanent and ever-changing. We alter our habits. We can learn to be kind and compassionate. We can acquire the attitudes of renunciation and equanimity and so forth. Consciousness too is impermanent and constantly changing. Consciousness arises dependent upon an object and a sense organ. It cannot exist independently. As we have seen, all the physical and mental factors of our experience like our bodies, the physical objects around us, our minds and our ideas are impermanent and constantly changing. All these aggregates are constantly changing and impermanent. They are processes, not things. They are dynamic, not static.

What is the use of this analysis of personal experience in terms of the five aggregates? What is the use of this reduction of the apparent unity of personal experience into the various elements of form, feeling, perception, mental formation or volition, and consciousness? The purpose of this analysis is to create the wisdom of not-self. What we wish to achieve is to arrive at a way of experiencing the world which is not constructed upon and around the idea of a self. We want to see personal experience in terms of processes, in terms of impersonal functions rather than in terms of a self and what affects a self because this will create an attitude of equanimity, an attitude which will help us overcome the emotional disturbances of hope and fear.

We hope for happiness, we fear pain. We hope for praise, we fear blame. We hope for gain, we fear loss. We hope for fame, we fear infamy. We live in a state of alternating between hope and fear. We experience these hopes and fears because we understand happiness and pain and so forth in terms of the self. We understand them as personal happiness and pain, as personal praise and blame, and so forth. But once we understand them in terms of impersonal processes, and once through this understanding we get rid of the idea of the self, we can overcome hope and fear. We can regard happiness and pain, praise and blame and all the rest with equanimity, with even-mindedness, and we will then no longer be subject to the imbalance of alternating between hope and fear.

## CONCLUSION

I would like to spend a few moments by way of conclusion to reflect upon what we have done over the past weeks and relate it to what we can do now and in the future.

The teachings of the Buddha are exceedingly vast and very profound. In fact, over the past weeks, we have only managed to survey a few of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha, and these too only superficially. Yet, you may feel that what we have covered is a lot, and you may feel that it is impossible to practise all that we have discussed. In fact, it is said that it is difficult even for a monk living in isolation to practise all of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. No small wonder that it is difficult for laymen and women like ourselves who have many secular responsibilities. Nonetheless, if one succeeds in sincerely cultivating and practising even a few of the many teachings of the Buddha, then one will have succeeded in making this life more meaningful. One will be certain that one will again in the future encounter circumstances favourable to the practice of the Dharma and to the eventual realization of liberation.

Everyone can achieve the highest goal in Buddhism, be he a layman or a monk. All we need to do is to make an honest effort to follow the Noble Eight-fold Path. It is said that those who have realized the truth, like the Buddha Shakyamuni and His prominent disciples did not do so accidentally. They did not fall from the sky like rain, nor did they spring up from the earth like grain. The Buddha and His disciples were

once ordinary sentient beings like you and me. They were once afflicted by the impurities of the mind, desire, ill-will and ignorance. It is through contacting the Dharma, through purifying their words and deeds, through developing their minds and through acquiring wisdom that they became free, exalted beings able to teach and help others to realize the truth. There is therefore no doubt that if we apply ourselves to the teachings of the Buddha, we too can attain the ultimate goal of Buddhism. We too can become like the Buddha or like His prominent disciples.

It is of no use merely to listen to the Dharma or to read the Dharma. Similarly, it is of no use merely to write articles about the Dharma, or to give lectures about the Dharma if we do not put it into practice. It has been said that those of us who call themselves Buddhists can profit by occasionally taking stock. If we see that over the past years our practice of the Buddha's teachings has brought about a slight change in the quality of our experience (and it will be a slight change), then we will know that the teachings are having some effect. If all of us put the teachings into practice, there is no doubt that we will realize their benefits. If we seek to avoid harming others, if we try our best to help others whenever possible, if we learn to be mindful, if we learn to develop our ability to concentrate our mind, if we cultivate wisdom through study, careful consideration and meditation, there is no doubt that the Dharma will benefit us. It will first lead us to happiness and prosperity in this life and in the next. Eventually, it will lead us to the ultimate goal of liberation, the everlasting bliss of Nirvana.