

Sangharakshita / 150 - The Four Great Reliances: Criteria for the Spiritual Life

Lecture 150: The Four Great Reliances: Criteria for the Spiritual Life

Mr Chairman, and friends.

Some of you, quite a few of you in fact, I know, have been to India. Some of you in fact quite recently. Some of you I know have visited at least some of the Buddhist Holy places of India - that is to say those places in India, especially in Northern India, North Eastern India which are associated with events of one kind or another in the life of the Buddha. There's Buddhagaya, where the Buddha gained enlightenment. There's Sarnath where he started upon his teaching career. There's Shravasti where he spent many many rainy seasons, and gave very many teachings to his disciples. And there's Kushinagara, where he finally passed away between the twin Sal trees; and so on.

And these holy places, these sacred sites, are nowadays in various stages of restoration, usually under the auspices of the government of India Archaeological Department. And these places, these holy places, are very different from one another, in various ways. But they all have at least one feature in common. They all have Stupas. Now what is a Stupa - some of you may not have encountered this word before. A Stupa is a dome-shaped structure, often of quite enormous size. It's made of brick, faced with stone. And it usually contains a body relic of the Buddha - that is to say it contains a tiny fragment of bone or ash. Some of these Stupas are at present in a state of extreme dilapidation. Some of them are really not much more than just heaps of rubble, heaps of brick and stone, and many of them indeed have been plundered, in the course of centuries, for their materials. As late as the 18th century for instance, bricks were taken from one of the great Sarnath Stupas in order to build a market-place in the city of Benares.

A few of the Stupas are relatively undamaged. A few have even been restored. But even those that have been restored, even those that have been so to speak, rebuilt, renovated, have a rather desolate look. They're not decorated at all; after all the Archaeological Department's responsibility is perhaps to restore them but not to decorate them, not to make them look really beautiful. So they're not decorated at all. And more often than not, there are very few people around, and many of the people who are around are tourists or sight-seers anyway. But a thousand to two thousand years ago, things were very different indeed. If you had visited the Buddhist holy places of Northern India then, you would have seen a very different sight.

To begin with, all the Stupas would have been quite intact. They would have been entirely covered with stone slabs - you wouldn't have seen any brick-work visible at all. And many of the slabs would have been most elaborately carved. Moreover, the Stupa would have been very beautifully decorated - it would have been decorated all over with multitudes of coloured flags and banners. It would have been decorated with all sorts of streamers; some of these streamers would have been made of precious materials. Some of them would have been made of gold or silver plates, hinged together, just as one sometimes sees in Nepal even today. They would have been hung perhaps with strings of pearls, and festoons of flowers, and one would have seen, especially at night, thousands upon thousands of tiny oil lamps burning in all the little niches.

And there would have been gateways of flowers, of sweet-smelling Indian flowers, set up on the four sides of the Stupa - set up north, south, east and west. And above all, around the Stupas, in the vicinity of the Stupas, there would have been thousands upon thousands of people, thousands upon thousands of devotees, all dressed in garments of spotless white. They wouldn't have been just aimlessly milling around as though they were at a sort of fair. They wouldn't have been just gaping or gawking at the Stupa. They would have been circumambulating it - that is to say, they would have been marching round and round it, keeping it, as a sign of respect, on their right. They would have been marching round and round it perhaps eight, or perhaps ten abreast, and they would have been carrying in their hands, trays containing all sorts of offerings, offerings of flowers, offerings of lighted lamps, offerings of sticks of lighted incense. And as they march round and round, as they circumambulated, they would have chanted; they would have chanted the refuges, chanted the precepts, chanted all sorts of devotional verses in praise of the Buddha, in praise of the Dharma, in praise of the Sangha, in praise of the great Bodhisattvas; and there would have been accompanying all that chanting, there would have been the sound of drums and all sorts of other musical instruments. So that altogether, it must have been a truly wonderful spectacle - especially when the sun shone down on it all from a clear blue sky, as was usually the case.

So this sort of observance, this sort of celebration, this sort of festival one might say, this continual festival around the Stupa, was very popular, was very popular with ordinary lay Buddhists in ancient India, and it's usually known as "Stupa worship". But this expression "Stupa worship" is not really quite correct. Those people, those devotees were not in fact worshipping the Stupa at all. They were not worshipping the structure of brick and stone, however beautiful. They were worshipping the body relics of the Buddha enshrined within the Stupa. They were worshipping the Buddha. And this sort of worship is known as "misha Puja" or "worship with material things", and it has its counterpart with more or less degrees of splendour in all traditions of course.

But here a question comes in, inevitably, and the question is "Is there not a better way of worshipping the Buddha?" and this question arises in Chapter 13 of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa* which together with Chapter 14, Thurman, the American translator of the text, entitles simply "Epilogue", and it's in the course of the answer to this question that we come across what I've called "the Four Great Reliances". And this of course is our theme tonight - the Four Great Reliances - criteria for the spiritual life.

Now before going into the Four great Reliances, I propose to do four things. First, I'm going to describe the general context within which both question and answer arise, and this will include a brief account of the previous chapter also of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*. And secondly, I'm going to say something about the need for criteria in the spiritual life.

So first of all the general context. Let's start with the events of the previous Chapter, Chapter 12. This chapter is entitled "Vision of the universe Abhirati and the Tathagata Akshobya". This vision in fact constitutes the principal event in this chapter. The chapter starts though, the chapter opens though, with a section on "Seeing the Buddha". The Buddha asks Vimalakirti, who in a sense, as you know is the hero so to speak of the whole text, the Buddha asks Vimalakirti "Noble son, when you would see the Tathagata, "that is to say, see the Buddha, "how do you view him?" And Vimalakirti replies. We may come back to this later on. Sariputra then asks a question. He asks the Buddha in which Buddha Land Vimalakirti died before reincarnating, so to speak, in this Buddha Land. The Buddha tells Sariputra to ask Vimalakirti himself. And Sariputra does so. But Vimalakirti not very surprisingly perhaps, is not very helpful. He becomes very metaphysical and very paradoxical indeed. So the Buddha then comes to the rescue, and he says that Vimalakirti comes from the presence of the Buddha Akshobya, in the universe Abhirati He is reincarnated in this Saha universe, this universe of suffering, and tribulation, voluntarily, that is to say, not as a result of past Karma. He has done so in order to purify living beings. He has done so in order to make the light of Wisdom shine in the midst of the darkness of the passions. Having heard this, everybody in the great assembly wants to see Abhirati. So Vimalakirti, at the Buddha's request, shows it to them. And he does this by means of his magical power.

In the next chapter, the first of those which go to make up the Epilogue in Thurman's translation, we're again concerned with the question of previous incarnations. On this occasion, including those of the Buddha Shakyamuni himself. At the beginning of the chapter, we find, Sakra, more usually known as Indra, the king of the gods, coming forward. He says that he has never before heard such a wonderful teaching as this of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*, and he praises that teaching at length. He promises, he undertakes, to protect it, and from this of course, we know that the Sutra is beginning to come to an end. The Buddha approves of what Sakra, approves of what Indra, the king of the gods says. He says that the worship of the Dharma is the worship of the Buddhas of the three periods of time, that is to say, past, present and future, and he then refers to material worship. He says, suppose the whole great universe was full of Buddhas, as full of Buddhas as it is of plants, of bushes and grass and trees. As full as that. And suppose these Buddhas passed away into Parinirvana or, in ordinary parlance, died, and suppose somebody erected marvellous Stupas for each and every one of them. Stupas made entirely of precious stones, each Stupa as large as a world, and suppose they spent a whole aeon or more worshipping all those Stupas with flowers, perfumes, music etc, just as I described a little while ago. They would gain, the Buddha says, much merit.

But suppose on the other hand, someone was to accept, recite and understand deeply this exposition of dharma, called "instruction in the Inconceivable Emancipation" - their merits would be far greater. And why is this? It is because, the Buddha says, the enlightenment of the Buddhas arises from the Dharma, and one honours them by Dharma worship. One worships the Buddha by worshipping the Dharma. One does not worship the Buddha by means of material worship, by means of material offerings. It's not that material worship is wrong - it helps to develop devotional feelings. But worshipping the Dharma is very much better. One does not worship the Buddha by worshipping his body relics, enshrined in the Stupa. The body relics are not the Buddha. The Buddha is not to be identified with his material body - even during his actual lifetime. The Buddha is to be identified with what the Mahayana terms his "Dharmakaya".

And this is made very clear by Vimalakirti at the beginning of Chapter 12 in the passage that I mentioned. When the Buddha asks Vimalakirti

"When you would see the Tathagata, how do you view him?"

What does Vimalakirti reply? I'll read the whole passage. Vimalakirti says

"Lord, when I would see the Tathagata, I view him by not seeing any Tathagata. Why? I see him as not born from the past, not passing on to the future, and not abiding in the present time. Why? He is the essence which is the reality of matter, but he is not matter. He is the essence which is the reality of sensation, but he is not sensation. He is the essence which is the reality of intellect, but he is not intellect. He is the essence which is the reality of motivation, yet he is not motivation. He is the essence which is the reality of consciousness, yet he is not

consciousness. Like the element of space, he does not abide in any of the four elements. Transcending the scope of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, he is not produced in the sixth sense media. He is not involved in the three worlds, is free of the three defilements, is associated with the triple liberation; is endowed with the three knowledges, and has truly attained the unattainable.

The Tathagata has reached the extreme of detachment with regard to all things, yet he is not a reality limit. He abides in ultimate reality, yet there is no relationship between it and him. He is not produced from causes, nor does he depend on conditions. He is not without any characteristic, nor has he any characteristic. He has no single nature, nor any diversity of natures. He is not a conception, not a mental construction, nor is he a non-conception. He is neither the other shore, nor this shore, nor that between. He is neither here nor there, nor anywhere else. He is neither this, nor that. He cannot be discovered by consciousness, nor is he inherent in consciousness. He is neither darkness nor light. He is neither name nor sign. He is neither weak nor strong. He lives in no country or direction. He is neither good nor evil. He is neither compounded, nor uncompounded. He cannot be explained as having any meaning whatsoever.

The Tathagata is neither generosity, nor avarice, neither morality, nor immorality; neither tolerance nor malice; neither effort nor sloth; neither concentration nor distraction; neither wisdom nor foolishness. He is inexpressible. He is neither truth, nor falsehood; neither escape from the world, nor failure to escape from the world. Neither cause of involvement in the world, nor a cause of involvement in the world. He is the cessation of all theory and all practice; he is neither a field of merit, nor not a field of merit. He is neither worthy of offerings, nor unworthy of offerings. He is not an object, and cannot be contacted. He is not a whole, nor a conglomeration. He surpasses all calculations; he is utterly unequalled, yet equal to the ultimate reality of things. He is matchless, especially in effort. He surpasses all measure. He does not go, does not stay, does not pass beyond. He is neither seen, heard, distinguished, or known. He is without any complexity, having attained the equanimity of omniscient gnosis; equal towards all things, he does not discriminate between them. He is without reproach, without excess, without corruption, without conception, and without intellectualization. He is without activity, without birth, without occurrence, without origin, without production, and without non-production. He is without fear, and without sub-consciousness, without sorrow, without joy, and without strain. No verbal teaching can express him.

Such is the body of the Tathagata, and thus should he be seen. Who sees thus truly sees. Who sees otherwise, sees falsely".

In other words, the Buddha is to be identified with his spiritual essence so to speak. He is to be identified with what makes him a Buddha - that is to say with his enlightenment, his realization of the nature of ultimate reality. To be identified with his becoming one, as it were, with ultimate reality. But here, a question arises. Agreed that the Buddha is best worshipped by Dharma worship, but what is Dharma worship? The Buddha therefore goes on to answer this question in the epilogue, by way of further instruction to Sakra, the king of the gods. He answers it by referring to events of the remote past. And it's in this section of the epilogue, that we come across the four great reliances. I hope that we won't be too long in getting to them. The Buddha says that once upon a time, (the text doesn't actually say 'once upon a time'- this is my version, but it gives you the right sort of feeling) once upon a time there was a Buddha called Bhaisajjaraja which means "king of healing" or "medicine-king". He lived an inconceivably long time ago. His length of life, the Buddha says, was twenty short aeons. He had a retinue of thirty six million billion disciples, that is to say, followers of the Hinayana, and also a retinue of twelve million billion Bodhisattvas, that is to say, followers of the Mahayana. At the same time, there lived a universal monarch called Ratnacchatra, which means "precious umbrella" or "precious parasol", and he had a thousand sons, and this king was very devoted to the Buddha Bhaisajjaraja. And all the sons, all thousand of them were very devoted too, and they all worshipped the Buddha Bhaisajjaraja, with many many offerings with offerings of material things, and this went on, that is to say, the making of offerings, by the father, the king, the universal monarch and his thousand sons, this went on for altogether ten aeons. But there was one prince who was not satisfied with this sort of thing. He was, so to speak, the odd man out - if you like he was the individual. He was called Candracchatra, or "lunar umbrella" or "lunar parasol" - he retired into solitude. Perhaps we might go so far as to say he got fed up with all this worship, and he thought to himself, "Is there not another mode of worship, even better and more noble than this?" And he got an answer. The gods spoke to him from the sky, and they said, "The supreme worship is Dharma-worship", and Candracchatra asked "What is this Dharma-worship?" and the gods replied "Go to Buddha Bhaisajjaraja, and he will tell you", so Candracchatra went to Bhaisajjaraja, and he asked him, what is the Dharma-worship, and Bhaisajjaraja replied. He said,

"Noble son, the Dharma worship is that worship rendered to the discourses taught by the Tathagata; these

discourses are deep and profound in illumination; they do not conform to the mundane, and are difficult to understand, and difficult to see, and difficult to realize. They are subtle, precise, and ultimately incomprehensible. As scriptures, they are collected in the Canon of the Bodhisattvas, stamped with the insignia of the king of incantations and teachings. They reveal the irreversible wheel of Dharma arising from the six transcendences; cleansed of any false notions, they are endowed with all the aids to enlightenment, and embody the seven factors of enlightenment. They introduce living beings to the great compassion, and teach them the great love. They eliminate all the convictions of the Maras, and they manifest relativity.

They contain the message of selflessness, living beinglessness, lifelessness, personlessness, voidness, signlessness, wishlessness, nonperformance, non-production, and nonoccurrence.

They make possible the attainment of the seat of enlightenment, and set in motion the wheel of the Dharma. They are approved and praised by the chiefs of the gods, nagas, yaksas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kimnaras, and mahoragas. They preserve unbroken the heritage of the Holy Dharma, contain the treasury of the Dharma and represent the summit of the Dharma worship. They are upheld by all holy beings, and teach all the Bodhisattva practices. They induce unmistakable understanding of the Dharma in its ultimate sense. They certify that all things are impermanent, miserable, selfless, and peaceful, thus epitomizing the Dharma. They cause the abandonment of avarice, immorality, malice, laziness, forgetfulness, foolishness, and jealousy, as well as bad convictions, adherence to objects, and all opposition. They are praised by all the Buddhas. They are the medicines for the tendencies of mundane life, and they authentically manifest the great happiness of liberation. To teach correctly, to uphold, to investigate, and to understand such Scriptures, thus incorporating into one's own life the holy Dharma - that is the Dharma-worship.

Furthermore, Noble Son, the Dharma-worship consists of determining the Dharma according to the Dharma; applying the Dharma according to the Dharma; being in harmony with relativity; being free of extremist convictions; attaining the tolerance of ultimate birthlessness and non occurrence of all things; realizing selflessness and living-beinglessness; refraining from struggle about causes and conditions, without quarrelling or disputing; not being possessive; being free of egoism; relying on the meaning and not on the literal expression; relying on gnosis and not on consciousness; relying on the ultimate teachings definitive in meaning, and not insisting on the superficial teachings interpretable in meaning; relying on reality, and not insisting on opinions derived from personal authorities; realizing correctly the reality of the Buddha; realizing the ultimate absence of any fundamental consciousness; and overcoming the habit of clinging to an ultimate ground. Finally, attaining peace by stopping everything from ignorance to old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, anxiety and trouble, and realizing that living beings know no end to their views concerning these twelve links of dependent origination; then, noble son, when you do not hold to any view at all, it is called the unexcelled Dharma-worship".

So this is what Bhaisajjaraja says. And when Candracchatra heard this, he was overwhelmed. He had a profound transcendental experience. He vowed to devote himself to the Dharma; vowed to attain supreme enlightenment, and then without delay, he went forth; he went forth from home, into the homeless life. The Buddha then proceeds, Sakyamuni then proceeds, to identify for Sakra's benefit, for Indra's benefit, the characters in the story. He says that king Ratnacchatra was none other than Buddha Ratnarcis, as he afterwards became, and is now known. His thousand sons are the thousand Bodhisattvas of the present aeon; whereas for Prince Candracchatra, he was the Buddha Sakyamuni himself, or rather the Buddha Sakyamuni was Candracchatra. The Buddha then transmits the Dharma to the Bodhisattva Maitreya, together with various instructions, and the Sutra, *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*, comes to an end.

So much then for the general context within which arises the question with which we are concerned. The question of whether there is a better way of worshipping the Buddha than by making offerings of material things. We've seen that there is a better way, and that this better way is known as Dharma-worship. And one of the things of which Dharma-worship consists is the Four Great Reliances, that is to say, relying on the meaning and not on the literal expression; relying on gnosis, and not on consciousness; relying on ultimate teachings definitive in meaning, and not insisting on the superficial teachings interpretable in meaning; relying on reality, and not insisting on opinions derived from personal authorities. And it's these four great Reliances, as I need hardly remind you, that are our theme this week. Our theme tonight.

Before going onto them however, I have to fulfill my promise to say something about the need for criteria for the spiritual life. I also want to touch upon one or two other constituents of Dharma worship as enumerated by Bhaisajjaraja. So - the need for criteria for the spiritual life. I'll be quite brief here. I simply want to emphasize the need for such criteria, criteria which we find of course in the four great Reliances, Nowadays, there's a lot of talk, often very superficial talk, about the spiritual life; there's a lot of talk about growth; there's a lot of talk about

personal development; there's even a lot of talk about meditation; I'm referring of course mainly to the West. But these terms are used very vaguely; very few people have a clear idea of what they mean by them. And in this way, they lay themselves wide open to what one can only call exploitation. Somebody comes along - maybe comes from the East, or what is more likely nowadays, comes from California - he or she sets up shop, so to speak; advertises, widely advertises, this or that technique of personal development, this or that brand of meditation, or maybe something in fact quite bizarre. And they usually charge quite a lot of money. And lots of people get involved. But very often they don't know what they are getting involved in. They've no criteria to apply. At best, they get involved with a reasonably positive group. At worst, they get involved in a racket, and are severely damaged, psychologically, in the process. But they certainly don't get involved in spiritual life in the real sense. They certainly don't advance in the direction of enlightenment. So criteria for the spiritual life are necessary. In Buddhistic terms, we must know what Dharma-worship really is. I want to direct attention to just one of the things that Bhaisajjaraja says, or rather to two things. We'll then go straight on to the four great Reliances themselves. Bhaisajjaraja says

"Dharma-worship consists of determining the Dharma according to the Dharma; applying the Dharma, according to the Dharma".

This is very important. "Determining the Dharma according to the Dharma". Lamotte translates "Understanding the law according to the law". So what does this mean? It means, not determining, or not understanding, the Dharma according to that which is not the Dharma. For us in the West it means, not determining, not understanding the Dharma, according to Christian beliefs, whether conscious, unconscious, or semiconscious. It means not determining or understanding the Dharma in accordance with modern secularist, humanist, rationalist, scientific, modes of thought. It means not determining or understanding the Dharma in accordance with the fanciful ideas of the worthy, but woolly-minded people who organize such things the Festival of body, mind and spirit.

The Dharma is to be determined in accordance with the Dharma. The Dharma is to be understood in accordance with the Dharma. To determine it or understand it in accordance with anything else, anything other than itself, is to falsify it, is to distort it, is to betray it. In the same way, Dharma worship consists of applying the Dharma according to the Dharma. If one tries for example to break off a bit of the Dharma, so to speak, and apply it according to Christian ideas, it will not work - that is to say it will not work as the Dharma. There's no such thing as "Christian Zen" for example. The Dharma is to be applied according to the Dharma.

Now for the Four Great Reliances. In dealing with them, I'm going to do three things. I'm going to rearrange the order in which they're given. In *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*, for some reason or other, they're not enumerated in the usual order, the order in which we encounter them in other texts, so I'm going to deal with them in the usual order, because this makes them rather more intelligible. And I'm going to change the translation somewhat. Thurman, whose translation I've used so far, paraphrases a little, and I'm going to put them in the imperative mood as this again is more usual. Thus we get :

1. One should rely on the Dharma, not on any person.
2. One should rely on the meaning, not the expression.
3. One should rely on the discourses of explicit meaning, not on the discourses of implicit meaning.
4. One should rely on transcendental awareness, not on discriminative consciousness.

So these are the four great Reliances. I'll have something to say about each of them in turn. But first a few remarks on the word "reliance" itself. This translates the Sanskrit term 'pratisarana' or 'pratisarna' - it's not clear which form is the more correct. Sarana as distinct from sarna of course means refuge and 'prati' is simply a preposition. In this context it probably means something like 'about' or 'connected with'. When you rely on something or someone, you entrust yourself to it or to him, you take refuge in it or in him so to speak. Pratisarana is probably a little stronger in meaning than our word 'reliance'. I therefore speak of the four Great Reliances, And this also serves to underline the intrinsic importance of the subject.

So now for the first of them:

One: One should rely on the Dharma, not on any person.

The word for person here is 'pudgala' - it's usually translated 'person' - it could also be rendered 'individual'. Dharma of course means 'the teaching of the Buddha'. So one should rely on the Dharma, on the teaching of the Buddha, not on any person, not on any individual. What does this mean? Does it mean that one should not rely upon teachers? Does it mean that one should not rely upon spiritual friends? Does it mean that one should simply read books about Buddhism without having any contact with Buddhists, as some people do? It certainly doesn't mean that. It means that one should rely on the person, rely on the individual, only to the extent that he embodies the Dharma. Note that I don't say 'to the extent that he represents the Dharma'; I don't say 'to the extent that he

symbolizes the Dharma', I say, 'to the extent that he embodies the Dharma', 'to the extent that he realizes the Dharma' because after all the Dharma does not exist in the abstract. There's no such thing as 'friendliness' - there are only people who are friendly. There's no such thing as 'joy' - there are only people who are joyful. 'there's no such thing as meditation - there's only people who meditate. There's no such thing as 'wisdom' there are only people who are wise. We could even say, there's no such thing as 'enlightenment' - there are only people who are enlightened. An abstract Dharma is a nonexistent Dharma. The Dharma does not really exist in the Sutras, it does not really exist in books, it exists only to the extent that it is practised, realized, in the lives of individual human beings.

So when it is said that one should rely on the Dharma, not on any person, it does not mean that one should abandon the living Dharma, that is to say the Dharma as actually realized by individuals, for the sake of the dead Dharma, that is to say, the words of the Dharma as preserved in books. It doesn't mean that one should abandon the spiritual community, and shut oneself up in the library. It does not mean that one should be self-sufficient in an individualistic sort of way. It does not mean that one should rely on one's own limited subjective understanding of the words of the scriptures - on the dead Dharma. What then does it mean? It means, in a few words, that one should not rely on authority. But what is authority? There is natural authority, and there is artificial authority. One should not rely on artificial authority. What does this mean? Let me give you an example. Suppose some new spiritual teacher is expected from the East - maybe from mystic Tibet, or maybe from Japan, or maybe from mysterious India. Before he arrives, there's a big propaganda. There are posters all over the place with his picture. One is told, usually with bated breath, that he's a very great teacher indeed, a very great guru - in fact he's enlightened! And depending on the tradition to which he belongs, one may be told that he is an incarnation of god, or the incarnation of god, or even God! Just God! Or one may be told that he is the umpteenth reincarnation of some great spiritual personality of the past. or one may be told that he's the head of a huge organization; that he's got thousands, even millions of followers; that he's in possession of all sorts of wonderful, esoteric, spiritual, secrets. And eventually, the great man comes, and a big meeting is organized to receive him. You don't get anywhere near him of course. You may get a glimpse of him from the distance; you may hear what he has to say - it's usually pretty platitudinous, but you are terribly impressed. You believe every word, accept every word, hang upon every word. After all, it's an enlightened master speaking! It's even God speaking - there's even a book I read by one of these people called "God speaking". And after a few days, he flies on to the next capital city, and another big reception. And you? You join the local group which has been started in his name, you enrol yourself as a disciple.

Now maybe I have exaggerated a bit! But not very much! In London over the last few years, we've actually seen this sort of thing happening, those of us who were lucky enough, or unlucky enough, see it happening almost exactly as I have described. So what does it mean? It means that people are relying on authority. It means that they're relying on a person, not on the Dharma. After all, more often than not, they don't actually meet the new spiritual teacher. They don't get to know him personally. They don't enter into communication with him. They just see him, sitting up there on his throne, surrounded by a halo - of electric bulbs! They just believe the claims that are made on his behalf. or in some cases, claims that he makes himself. Now when people make claims in this sort of way, we can be sure of one thing: we can be sure that they are trying to impress you. That they're trying to exercise power over you, despite the pseudo-religious, or pseudo-spiritual trappings. Therefore, what they are doing has no connection, no real connection with the spiritual life. They themselves are not spiritual teachers. What they're engaged in is politics. They are politicians. They are interested basically in just two things: power and money. Now I'm certainly not saying that there are not spiritual teachers in the East; I'm certainly not saying that there are no spiritual teachers coming to the West; I'm certainly not saying that those who come should not be given proper respect. But I am saying that real spiritual teachers do not make claims in this sort of way, and they don't allow claims to be made on their behalf. They are not out to impress, they are not after power. And I say this so strongly because in some quarters, there are signs that the great Eastern spiritual traditions are being turned into nothing less than a racket. Signs that people are being simply exploited - being exploited because they are insecure, because they don't know what to do; because they want to be told what to do; told by some authoritarian person. Therefore this first great reliance comes as a timely warning: one should rely on the Dharma, not on any person. one should rely on the Dharma, not on claims. One should rely on the Dharma, not on authority. One should rely on the Dharma, not on power. One should rely on the Dharma as actually embodied in the lives of spiritual friends - friends with whom one is in actual contact, actual communication, that is far more real, far more conducive to the spiritual life; far more conducive to individual development.

Two: One should rely on the meaning not on the expression.

Before going into this, the second great reliance, I want to make one thing clear: I've said that one should rely on the Dharma as actually embodied in the lives of spiritual friends. This does not mean that the study of the dharma as contained in the scriptures should be neglected. The scriptures are after all the record of the spiritual experiences, the spiritual insights and discoveries and realizations, of the Buddha and his disciples down the

ages. The study of the scriptures therefore occupies an important place in the spiritual life. We can gain a great deal of inspiration in this way. But, the scriptures are best studied in the company of spiritual friends, with the help of spiritual friends. By virtue of their own spiritual experience they will be able to bring the dead words of the scriptures to life. In the words of Bhaisajyaraja they will determine the Dharma according to the Dharma, they will explain the Dharma according to the Dharma, not according to preconceived ideas that have nothing to do with the Dharma or in accordance with subjective emotional states. Now the scriptures consist of words, consist of sentences; and the explanations of the scriptures given by spiritual friends also consist of words, consist of sentences. And these words, these sentences, can be understood in two ways; can be understood according to the letter and they can be understood according to the spirit. And what the second great reliance is saying is that in either case we should rely on the meaning, not on the expression; or should rely on the spirit not on the letter. The word translated as meaning is 'Artha' - it means quite literally 'meaning'. The word rendered as expression is 'Vyanjana' ; this is rather more difficult to explain. it means something like 'manifestation', 'expression', 'sign'; in this context it means 'a manifestation or expression of meaning in words'. Such an expression is always approximate only; words have their limitations, even though within those limitations they can usually do far more than we think they can. we don't find a Shakespeare for instance complaining of the limitations of language even though he had more to express than most people have. Nonetheless we can't understand what someone is saying, can't understand what the Buddha is saying if we pay more attention to the expression than to the meaning, if we rely on the expression instead of relying on the meaning. We find this, as I am sure you will know from your own experience, in the course of ordinary communication. You may be trying to tell somebody something; you may be trying to explain something to them. But you find, to your surprise perhaps, to your annoyance eventually, they keep picking you up on certain phrases, on certain turns of speech, even on certain words, in a quite unreasonable sort of way. And eventually it dawns on you, eventually you realise, they don't really want to understand at all; they don't really want to understand what you are trying to say; they don't want to communicate. So they pay attention to your expression not to your meaning, they try to trip you up over that, over words. Communication is possible only if there is openness, only if there is receptivity. You must want to understand what the other person is trying to say; you must pay attention to his meaning rather than to his expression; you must pay attention to him, you must be aware of him, because the meaning after all is his meaning. So one should rely on the meaning not on the expression; rely on the spirit, not on the letter. And this applies to ordinary communication, it applies to one's communication with ones spiritual friends, it applies to one's study of the scriptures. One should rely on the meaning of the Dharma, not on its expression in words and phrases, otherwise one will be in danger of becoming like the mere scholar in Buddhism, the scholar who has the letter of the Dharma practically at his finger-tips but who does not come within a million miles of its spirit.

Three:

One should rely on the discourses of explicit meaning, not on the discourses of implicit meaning.

Here we become just a little technical. 'Discourses' translates the word 'Sutras', that is to say discourses delivered by the Buddha, discourses on the Dharma. It is these discourses of course which make up the greater part of the Buddhist scriptures. These discourses are very numerous; they are traditionally said to comprise what are called 84,000 dharma Skandhas or groups, or categories of teaching. And not only are they very numerous they are also very varied; they're varied in form, they're varied in content, they are also varied in other ways. In some cases, the meaning of the discourse, the meaning of the sutra, is quite obvious, in other cases it's not so obvious, it requires interpretation. Let me give just two simple examples, examples from the Dhammapada. Dhammapada verse 5 says: "Enmity does not cease by enmity at any time, it ceases only by non-enmity". This is sometimes translated by "Hatred never ceases by hatred, it ceases only by love". Now, is the meaning of the verse clear, does it mean what it says; is it quite obvious or does it require interpretation? Well, one would have thought not, one would have thought it didn't require interpretation. Would it be possible for instance to interpret the verse as meaning that enmity does cease by means of enmity, that hatred does cease by means of hatred. Would it be possible to interpret it as meaning that violence or war was justified; that there could be a war to end all wars. No, it would not be possible. The meaning of the verse is quite clear, quite obvious, quite unambiguous, it requires no interpretation, it means exactly what it says. Enmity does not cease by enmity at any time, it ceases only by non-enmity. But suppose we take another verse, also from the Dhammapada; verse 294 says: "Having killed mother and father, the Brahmana goes blameless." Now what about this verse? Is its meaning clear? Does it mean what it says, does it require interpretation. Well, the meaning is clear enough apparently but it does require interpretation and the Buddha himself gives, in another place, the interpretation. He says that the mother is craving, the father is ignorance; they are called 'mother and father' because they are the root of samsara, the root of conditioned existence. To cut this root is to put an end to samsara, that is why one who kills mother and father goes blameless, this is the interpretation. Thus we have two kinds of sutras, two kinds of discourses, two kinds of sayings of the Buddha: those that do not require any interpretation and those that do require interpretation, or discourses of explicit meaning as they are called and discourses of implicit meaning, in Sanskrit: 'nitartha' and

'neyyārtha', or 'nitartha' and 'anitartha'. This is a very important distinction; it is important partly because of what follows from it, and what follows from it is the third great reliance, that is to say that one should rely on the discourses of explicit meaning not on the discourses of implicit meaning. Should rely on them because their meaning is clear, obvious, unambiguous; their meaning requires no interpretation. Not only that, discourses of implicit meaning should be interpreted in accordance with discourses of explicit meaning. That is to say interpretations which are given of them should not contradict the discourses of explicit meaning; discourses of explicit meaning are the criterion. Interpretations can be as fanciful and as far fetched as you like. You can bring out all sorts of strange, unexpected ideas from these sutras, these discourses of implicit meaning; this is perfectly legitimate, perfectly valid, but what is brought out must not contradict the discourses of explicit meaning. In this way, one relies on the discourses of explicit meaning, not on the discourses of implicit meaning.

At this point a question may arise: what about the discourses like those of *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* itself, or rather like certain passages in *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*? That is to say those that deal with all sorts of magical happenings, magical events, magical performances, how do they stand in relation to this third great reliance, this third criterion of the spiritual life? I'll make just two points here. The meaning of these passages in *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* is not rational or scientific, it is poetic, imaginative, mythic; as such it makes its own non-rational appeal. The distinction of explicit meaning and implicit meaning applies mainly to discourses of a more discursive nature. Consequently it does not really apply to these passages of *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*. But if these passages are so to speak interpreted, if they are translated, as it were, from the poetic to the rational mode of expression, then the rational expression must not contradict the discourses of explicit meaning.

Four: One should rely on transcendental awareness, not on discriminative consciousness.

The Sanskrit words here are: 'Jnana' and 'Vijnana', both derived from the root Jna - to know. Jnana is pure knowledge, pure awareness; it's knowledge without any subject, any object. It's knowledge which does not know anything and which is not anybody's knowledge. I have therefore rendered it transcendental awareness. It's what Gampopa describing the Dharmakaya calls 'the pure non-dual shine'. Vijnana is divided knowledge, divided awareness; it's knowledge which is divided between subject and object, whether between sense organ and sense object or mind and mental object, or between ego self and world. It is knowledge which takes place within the subject/object framework, which is limited by the subject object framework - even distorted by it. I therefore rendered 'Vijnana' as 'discriminative consciousness'. Those of you who have studied 'The Depth Psychology of the Yogachara' will know that they are eight vijnanas. There are the five sense vijnanas or sense consciousnesses; there is the mind consciousness, there is the soiled mind consciousness and there is the relative store consciousness. And these vijnanas have to be transformed into the four jnanas. That is to say the eight discriminative consciousnesses have to be transformed into the four transcendental awarenesses, into the awarenesses symbolised by the Buddhas of the four directions. That is to say by Amoghasiddhi, Akshobhya, Ratanasambhava, and Amitabha. However, I don't want to go into all that, I don't want to become too technical. The main point is quite clear, that one should rely on transcendental awareness not on discriminative consciousness. The Dharma can be understood, truly understood, deeply understood only by means of transcendental awareness. Spiritual life can be understood only by means of transcendental awareness, it cannot be understood by means of discriminative consciousness. We should therefore rely on transcendental awareness but that, but that is easier said than done. Before we can rely on transcendental awareness we must have transcendental awareness. If we don't have it, we must develop it by one means or another.

In the course of the last eight or nine weeks we have been concerned in one way or another with 'The Inconceivable Emancipation'. We have been concerned with themes from *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*, a Mahayana Buddhist scripture' and I hope that these themes have done something to help awaken our transcendental awareness. After all, in the course of these weeks we have been in some rather strange spaces, we have had perhaps some rather strange experiences. We have experienced something of the magic, the sheer magic of a Mahayana sutra. We've had a vision, a splendid resplendent vision of 'Building the Buddha land; we have seen what it means to be quite literally 'All Things to All Men', we have seen in action 'The Transcendental Critique of Religion'. We have seen in the figures of Vimalakīrti and Manjusri 'History versus Myths in Man's Quest for Meaning'; We have been initiated into 'The Way of Nonduality'. We have experienced something of 'The Mystery of Human Communication'. And finally tonight, we have been concerned with 'The Four Great Reliances: Criteria for the Spiritual Life'. We have seen that one should rely on the Dharma, not on any person; one should rely on the meaning, not on the expression. One should rely on the discourses of explicit meaning, not on the discourses of implicit meaning. One should rely on transcendental awareness, not on discriminative consciousness. These eight talks are, of course, very far from adding up to a complete and systematic exposition of *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*. I have selected only a few themes out of hundreds of possible themes. I have taken only a few drops from the Ocean. The Ocean itself remains for us to plunge into.

The Ocean of *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* - a Mahayana Buddhist Scripture. The Ocean of The Inconceivable Emancipation.