

Sangharakshita / 143 - The Magic of a Mahayana Sutra

Lecture 143: the Magic of A Mahayana Sutra

Mr Chairman, and friends. Let's imagine that someone asks us to describe our lives. Suppose we were asked by them to say what it was essentially and specifically that characterized our lives as we ordinarily live them. I wonder what sort of reply, what sort of answer most of us would give? I wonder what most of us would have to say? That is to say, those of us who are quite ordinary people, not pop stars, not politicians, and certainly not T.V. personalities. Most of us, most ordinary people would say, that our lives more often than not, are characterized, by sameness. We'd say perhaps that we seem to spend most of our time doing much the same sort of things in very much the same sort of way. Not only for weeks together, not only for months together, but even sometimes for years together, or at least, what seems like years together, just doing the same sort of things in the same sort of way.

Of course if we reflect, we know that this is not really the case. We may in literal fact wash the very same identical dishes every day of the week, but we don't wash them in exactly the same way every day. We don't wash them in exactly the same sort of mood. We don't wash them under exactly the same sort of circumstances. One day, when we're washing them at the familiar kitchen sink, there may be sunlight streaming in at the open window. But another day, if we look outside while we're washing our dishes, the day may be dark and gloomy. In the same way, one day, we may be washing our dishes after a quiet reflective, perhaps even slightly boring, meal on our own, And another day we may be washing up after a pleasant meal with some fascinating stranger. But usually, we don't find it very easy to appreciate these finer differences, as we may call them. We feel that we are in fact doing the same thing every day. We feel that our lives are characterized by sameness, or at least by a sense of sameness, which comes of course, very much to the same thing. And this is true, not only of those who lead ordinary lives in the ordinary sense, it's true even of those who are leading or trying to lead, or professing to lead what we call 'spiritual', single inverted commas, lives - that is to say, those who are trying to develop as human beings. Such people too seem to spend much of their time doing much the same sort of things in much the same sort of way, in this case too, sometimes even it seems for years together.

If we are trying to lead the spiritual life, we find only too often, that we're observing, or trying to observe, the same old precepts. Even practising the same old meditations - in the morning, it's the 'Mindfulness of Breathing'; in the evening, it's the 'Metta Bhavana', and in the same way, we recite again and again, the same old Puja. We may even attend the same old Council Meeting, or the same old Co-op meeting again and again and again. Our lives seem really characterized by sameness. But of course we know it's not really like that. At least we realize that sometimes. At least we glimpse that sometimes - it's not really like that. We know that every time we meditate for instance, it is a completely new experience. We know that it's not even a question of every time. There's only ever just one time. Each experience is absolutely unique, and therefore unrepeatable. Every experience, from the meditation to the washing the dishes. But we don't always feel that; in fact we don't often feel that. We certainly don't always realize that. Much of the time, we just feel we're doing the same thing every day. We feel our spiritual life even is characterized by sameness, or at least by a sense of sameness. And even sometimes we have to admit, our spiritual life, our life as we try as individuals to evolve, to develop, to grow, even that, is characterized more often than not, by a sense of dullness, of flatness, of staleness, of insipidity; and it's important, it's above all important, that we should somehow get out of this feeling, this feeling of sameness, of flatness, of staleness. It's important that we should get away, completely away, from our ordinary lives, even our ordinary spiritual lives, get completely away even from our ordinary selves, even our ordinary spiritual selves, if we can use that expression. It's important that from time to time, we should take a plunge, a plunge into some other dimension, some other dimension of existence, some other dimension of experience, some other dimension of being, even a plunge into some other world, some other universe, some other system of things, at least in imagination, and at least to some extent. A plunge into a world in which all the familiar

landmarks are removed. A world in which we feel that we're being turned completely upside-down. So this is what we're going to be doing I hope in the course of the present series of talks.

In the course of these next eight or nine weeks, we're going to take the plunge into the unfamiliar, into the extraordinary, even as it may sometimes seem, the bizarre, world of The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa, or the Teaching of Vimalakirti. We're going to experience, we're going to allow ourselves to experience - because you just have to let go a bit - we're going to allow ourselves to experience the magic of a Mahayana Sutra. We're going to take in fact a plunge into the Inconceivable Emancipation.

But what do we mean by the Mahayana? This may be a word which is quite new to some of you, and what is a Mahayana Sutra? And more important still perhaps, what exactly do we mean by 'The Inconceivable Emancipation'?

So before we actually take the plunge, just a few words of explanation will no doubt be in order, at least for some of you. The word 'Mahayana' which is an Indian word, a Sanskrit word, means simply 'the great way' or 'the great vehicle'. And it's that form of Buddhism, it represents, it covers that form of Buddhism which sets no limit, no limit whatever, to the spiritual potential of the individual. It's that form of Buddhism, which encourages all living beings without exception, to aim at the very highest conceivable goal of spiritual life: in other words what we call supreme, perfect enlightenment. And one who aims at this supreme perfect enlightenment, not for his own sake only, but for the sake, for the benefit, of all, is known as 'a Bodhisattva'. In Mahayana Buddhism therefore, all living beings without exception are encouraged to become Bodhisattvas - to grow into Bodhisattvas, by the arising of what we call the Bodhicitta - the thought of, or will to supreme enlightenment for the benefit of all. All living beings are encouraged to take, as Bodhisattvas, or would-be Bodhisattvas, the four great vows, which are:

However innumerable beings are, I vow to deliver them;

However inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them;

However immeasurable the teachings are, I vow to master them;

However incomparable the Buddha Truth is, I vow to attain it;

These are certainly four magnificent, four awe-inspiring vows, but we have to understand that here, it's not so much a question of the ordinary limited self as it were, taking these vows, as though it added these vows onto itself. Rather it's a case of the ordinary self opening itself up to the forces of wisdom and compassion which these vows represent, and allowing them, allowing wisdom and compassion, to work through it. Allowing itself to be inspired by them, by wisdom, by compassion. Now the word 'Sutra' means simply 'thread' - especially in the sense of a thread of connection. And in a specifically Buddhist context, 'Sutra' is the name of a particular type, a particular kind, of Buddhist Canonical text. In fact Sutra is the type par excellence of Buddhist Canonical texts. When we speak of the Sutras, just like that, we usually mean the Buddhist Canonical texts, we usually mean what we might call in the West, the Buddhist scriptures. Sutras usually deal with a number of different topics in a more or less connected fashion. So in English, 'Sutra' is generally rendered simply as 'scripture'. In Chinese, in ancient and classical Chinese, 'Sutra' was usually rendered as 'Ching', which meant, as we usually translate that term 'classic'. But both these terms, that is to say the term 'scripture' and the term 'classic' as representing the Chinese 'Ching' - both these renderings are a little misleading, because they both suggest that the Sutras are primarily literary documents. After all, scripture means something actually written. But this is in fact not so - the Sutras are not primarily literary documents, they are literary records of oral traditions - traditions which originally were oral. It's very well known I think, that the Buddha himself wrote nothing. He went about North-

Eastern India, he met people, he spoke to people, he taught them as we say, he communicated with them, he communicated to them the Dharma, to a lesser extent, or to a greater extent - as much of it as they could bear, as much of it as they could assimilate, but he did all this orally. He didn't do it by means of the written word, he did it entirely by means of the spoken word - he communicated orally, face to face, directly, and his disciples remembered, those who came in contact with him, remembered what he had said. Sometimes it made a tremendous impression upon them, sometimes it represented a turning point in their lives, so how should they forget it, how should they not remember it? It was burned as it were into their hearts, into their minds, into their being, so they remembered. They became one with what he had said because they put it into practice; and they not only put it into practice, in due course, they themselves attracted other people, attracted as we say disciples, and they taught their disciples, they communicated orally what they had heard from the Buddha of the Dharma, and they, their disciples, taught their disciples, and in this way, the teachings, the whole of the Buddha's Dharma were handed down, handed down orally in fact for several centuries in India, and eventually after 3, 4, 5 centuries, they were committed to writing - not all at once; bit by bit. And in their written form, these oral traditions constitute the Buddhist Canonical texts, the Buddhist Canonical literature.

These Buddhist 'Scriptures' as we call them in English, it's important to understand, are not a Bible in the Christian sense. They're not some infallible revelation from God. They're the written record, based on an oral

tradition, of the life and teaching of a supremely and perfectly enlightened human being. A human being who was the embodiment, the living embodiment of absolute wisdom and infinite compassion. So we can now see what a Mahayana Sutra is. Broadly speaking, a Mahayana Sutra is a canonical text, in which the Buddha is represented as teaching, directly or indirectly, the Bodhisattva Ideal - that is to say, the ideal of supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings.

There are many many Mahayana Sutras in existence. Among them we have the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, including the very well-known Diamond Sutra, and the equally well-known Heart Sutra. We have the White Lotus Sutra, we have The Sutra of Golden Light, and so on and so on. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Sutras. Some Mahayana Sutras are still extant in the original Sanskrit in which the oral traditions were written down, but other Mahayana Sutras are known to us only through ancient Chinese, and ancient Tibetan translations.

Now The Vimalakirti Nirdesa, or Teaching of Vimalakirti - this text is a Mahayana Sutra. Though it's not a Sutra quite in the sense that I've defined, but I'll be going into that in just a minute. As a literary document, as distinct from an oral tradition, as a literary document The Vimalakirti Nirdesa appeared not later than the end of the 2nd century A.D. When the scribes, by the way, wrote down the oral traditions in literary form, they didn't date them. The Indians we might say were not very time-conscious in the way that we are. They didn't think that dates mattered very much. But anyway we know that The Vimalakirti Nirdesa appeared as a text, as a literary document, not later than the end of the 2nd Century A.D., and it's thus one of the older Mahayana Sutras. And we know that it cannot be later than the end of the 2nd Century A.D., because at the beginning of the 3rd Century, it was translated for the first time into Chinese. And the Chinese nearly always dated their translations; they not only gave the name of the translator, and where he translated the text, and who assisted him, but also the day of the week and the month and the year when he started, and also when he finished. The Chinese were much more historically and chronologically minded you can see, than were our Indian friends, who lived only too often completely above and beyond time in some space of their own. Altogether in the course of centuries, some seven Chinese translations remain, so you can see from this that The Vimalakirti Nirdesa must have been a very popular text - there were seven translations into Chinese altogether made. And among these there were the versions by Kumarajiva and Hsuan Tsang - that is to say, by the two greatest translators of Buddhist texts to appear in the entire history, the entire, practically 2000 year history, of Chinese Buddhism.

Kumarajiva's version is remarkable, as all his versions of Buddhist texts, especially of Mahayana Sutras are remarkable, for fidelity to the spirit of the original, and great literary beauty. Hsuan Tsang's version on the other hand is remarkable for scholarly accuracy and precision. And needless to say, Kumarajiva's version has always been by far the more popular of the two. There is also in existence, one complete Tibetan translation that's still extant. There are also fragments of translations of The Vimalakirti Nirdesa in different Central Asian languages; The original text, the original Sanskrit Text of The Vimalakirti Nirdesa, unfortunately has not survived, except for a very few short passages, which are quoted in Sanskrit Buddhist writings, Indian Sanskrit Buddhist writings, of a later period - especially for instance, we get in the Siksasamuccaya of Santideva whose Bodhicarya avatara many of you will be familiar.

In recent times, The Vimalakirti Nirdesa has been translated into quite a number of modern languages, both Eastern and Western, and there are to my personal knowledge, at least six versions already in English, and three of these are in print. These three versions are first of all by Charles Luk, and then secondly by Etienne Lamotte - this is an English rendering from a French version - and thirdly by Robert Thurman. Luk's version is based on Kumarajiva. Lamotte's is based on the Tibetan version as well as upon Hsuan-

tsang and Thurman's version is based on the Tibetan version. So you can see from this, we've plenty of material already available in English, for the study of The Vimalakirti Nirdesa, for the study of this very important text, and this is as it should be, because The Vimalakirti Nirdesa in fact is one of the very most important of all Mahayana Sutras, as well as one of the most fascinating, one of the most readable, one of the most inspiring.

Luk's version is the most traditional perhaps of the three, in the rather strict sense of the term traditional. Lamotte's is the most scholarly in the academic sense, and Thurman's, which is the most recent, comes somewhere in-between, and I may say above. Thurman's version is both traditional, and scholarly, but scholarship has been subordinated to the needs of spiritual understanding, subordinated to the needs of the spiritual life. Thurman has also taken very great pains with the language, in the literary sense, of his translations, and the result is, I may say, almost a model version of an English translation of a Mahayana Sutra. It's a version which is traditional in the best sense of the term, scholarly, and also very readable, and such a combination of qualities, of

characteristics, is quite rare, so far as translations of Buddhist texts are concerned, as those of you who have ploughed your way through some of the English translations of some Buddhist texts will know only too well - they're not always the most readable of things. So reading Thurman's version is not only we may say, a spiritual experience, but also a literary one. And this brings me to the point that I mentioned a little earlier - that is to say the point that The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa is not quite a Mahayana Sutra in the usual sense. To begin with, in Sanskrit, it's not actually called a Sutra at all. It's called 'Ching' or 'Sutra' 'Ching' meaning 'Sutra' in Chinese, in Chinese translations, but nowhere else. This is perhaps because in any case 'Ching' originally meant a classic in the literary sense, rather than in the religious sense. But be that as it may, The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa is not actually called Sutra. Its title is simply 'The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa' that is to say the Teaching, if you like, the exposition, if you like the Instruction, of Vimalakirti - whose name literally by the way means something like 'Stainless Glory', or 'Immaculate Fame'.

So the Teaching of Vimalakirti. This is the name of the text. And this is in the main what it actually is. It's not primarily the teaching of the Buddha, that is to say Gautama the Buddha, Shakyamuni, at all. The Buddha, Shakyamuni, does of course appear in the text - especially at the beginning and again at the end - but the teaching primarily is that of Vimalakirti, though the Buddha himself, Shakyamuni does as it were adopt the work at the end. There could be another reason why the Vimalakirti is not actually described as a Sutra. 'Sutra' perhaps suggests something as it were spiritually, dare I say it, authoritative. It's not really so of course, because 'spiritually authoritative' in fact is a contradiction in terms. But it may seem like that, at least to some people. After all the Sutra comes from the Buddha, or a Sutra comes from the Buddha - it contains the Buddha's teaching, and the Buddha is the supremely, the perfectly enlightened one. So we hearing, or reading, the Sutra may feel we've no choice but just to accept whatever the Buddha says, because after all, he knows, and we don't know, so we may feel we've no choice but to accept what the Buddha says in the Sutra whether we like it, or whether we don't. And this may create we may say, in our minds, some little resistance. But suppose a text is not actually labelled a Sutra. Supposing you don't have to regard it as 'spiritually authoritative'. Suppose we can read it quite straightforwardly, just as we read through any other work of imagination - a novel, a poem a short story. Suppose we can read this Buddhist text more or less like we read literature - read it as literature, rather than as dogma. Read it more as poetry, than as a statement of scientific fact, or philosophic truth. If we could read it in that sort of way, perhaps we then might be more open to its spiritual influence, might be more receptive to its message, might allow ourselves to be captivated a little bit by its magic. And this suggests a further thought. If it might be helpful to read Sutras more as works of imagination. It might be equally helpful, to read works of imagination more as Sutras! But I've no time to pursue this thought further. Perhaps I'll be able to do so on some other occasion. But in the meantime, I'll simply point out that such a thought suggests a profounder conception of the imagination than is usually the case nowadays.

But we must get back to The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa. We must get back to its title. Not only is it not actually called a Sutra, there are several alternative titles which it has. And the most important of these alternative titles is Acintyavimokṣa or 'Inconceivable Emancipation' - and this is of course the general title of this whole series of talks. So we need to go into it, into this question of the 'Inconceivable Emancipation'. After that we'll make a rapid survey of the whole sutra, the whole text, after that perhaps think of concluding.

'Vimokṣa' of course means, 'emancipation' or 'liberation' or 'freedom' It's one of a whole group of terms that was very prominent in early Buddhism, as we may call it. In addition to the word 'Vimokṣa', or 'vimokṣa', as it is in Pali, we have also 'mutti' and 'vimutti' as well as 'mokkha'. And they all have the same general sense: they all have the general sense of emancipation, liberation, freedom; and we may say quite categorically that this sort of experience, the experience of spiritual emancipation, the experience of absolute liberation, of total freedom, is very important, in fact is vital, in early Buddhism. It's in fact what the Buddha's teaching is all about, it's what the Buddha's teaching has always been all about - emancipation, liberation, freedom. In a well known passage in the Pali texts, the Buddha is represented as saying "Just as the great ocean has one taste, the taste of salt, from wheresoever in that great ocean you may take the water from; in the same way, my teaching has one taste", whether you're looking at the Four Truths, Noble Eightfold Path, Six Paramitas, whatever it may be - conditioned co-production, voidness, my teaching has but one taste - "the taste of emancipation". And the word here used is 'vimutti' or 'vimukti'.

Emancipation in fact, liberation in fact, freedom in fact, is the goal of the spiritual life, or rather it is in terms of emancipation, in terms of liberation, that the goal of the spiritual life is envisaged in Buddhism, from the most ancient times down to the present day. Emancipation from craving, emancipation from hatred, emancipation from delusion, emancipation from all that conditions and confines and distorts our deepest creativity. Emancipation

from all that prevents us from becoming Bodhisattvas, from becoming Buddhas.

A well-known formula, a formula occurring again and again in Pali texts and Sanskrit texts, a well-known formula speaks of there being four great stages of spiritual development, four great stages of spiritual life and progress: first of all the stage of morality, or uprightness; the stage of concentration and meditation, that is to say the stage of higher consciousness, and then the stage of wisdom, transcendental wisdom, insight into reality, and finally, fourthly, lastly, the stage of emancipation. And here again the term for emancipation is 'vimutti'. The term 'vimoksa' or 'vimokkha' appears in two other ancient formulas: the formula of the Eight Vimokkhas, or eight emancipations, and the formula of the Three Vimokkhas, or three emancipations. I'll say just a few words about each of these in turn, because this should help give us a better idea of this whole dimension, as we may call it, of spiritual experience - that whole dimension of spiritual experience with which we're at present concerned.

So first of all the Eight Emancipations. These represent different successively higher levels of meditative, even eventually of superconscious, experience. First of all, there's emancipation when craving arises - craving for this or that sense object, emancipation by reflecting on the repulsiveness, the unattractiveness of the particular object of craving. That's the first emancipation. Then secondly, emancipation when craving does not arise, by continued reflection on the repulsiveness of that same sense-object. That's the second emancipation. Then thirdly, emancipation by way of more and more intense appreciation of the purity and beauty of the state of non-craving, the state of freedom from craving. That's the third emancipation. Then fourthly, emancipation by way of the experience of the infinity of space. The experience of there being no obstruction, no hindrance, no blockage, no limit in any direction whatsoever. This is the fourth emancipation. And then fifthly, emancipation by way of the experience of the infinity of consciousness. There's no limit to the mind, no limit to the consciousness, no limit to the higher consciousness, it can go on and on as it were like light, as far as ever it pleases, it need never stop, it has no boundaries, no limits, so this is the fifth emancipation.

And then sixthly, emancipation by way of the experience of 'no-thingness'. There's no experience of 'this is this, and that is that', those sort of sharp hard outlines are as it were dissolved, but at the same time, nonetheless paradoxically, you see things more distinctly, more clearly, more vividly than ever, but not as separate, isolated, mutually exclusive bits of something-or-other, whether material or mental, or even spiritual. So that's the sixth emancipation. And then seventhly, emancipation by way of the experience of neither perception nor non-perception: you neither perceive, nor can you be said not to perceive. There's no object in the ordinary sense, and therefore no subject in the ordinary sense; there's no subject-object duality, no subject-object relationship in the ordinary sense. You have begun to transcend that sort of division; it's not completely transcended by any means, in fact it's not really transcended at all: you've just stretched it to a degree of unusual refinement, let us say. It's become somewhat attenuated, but you no longer see things so rigidly in terms of a subject here and an object or a world of objects out there. So this is the seventh emancipation.

And then eighthly, emancipation by way of the perfect cessation of all suffering, the perfect cessation of all experience of the purely conditioned and reactive; perfect cessation of the reactive mind, and release of total creativity, in other words enlightenment. So here, emancipations 4 - 7 correspond to the four formless, arupa, dhyanas as they're called, the four formless states of higher meditative consciousness, and the eighth emancipation corresponds to enlightenment itself.

The Three Emancipations are the three Samadhis of the Imageless, the Unbiased, and the Void. I've described these at some length in 'The Three Jewels', Section 14 which is on 'The Goal', so there's no need for me to dwell upon them now. Suffice it to say that they represent the three different aspects under which the unconditioned, if you like the Absolute, may be realised, aspects which correspond to the three main characteristics of conditioned existence. That is to say that conditioned existence is impermanent, painful, and insubstantial, and by penetrating through wisdom one or another of these characteristics of conditioned existence in its depths, one experiences the corresponding samadhi, and therefore also attains the corresponding emancipation. And this emancipation functions as a means of entrance into the unconditioned.

We should now have some idea what is meant by 'vimoksa' in the 'ordinary', inverted commas, sense. Acintya of course means 'inconceivable', 'unthinkable' and there's also the suggestion of the 'inexpressible' and even the 'ungraspable'. The Acintyavimoksa or 'Inconceivable Emancipation' is an emancipation which is peculiar to the Buddhas and irreversible Bodhisattvas. We can't really say more than that. At the beginning of this talk I raised the question what is meant by "Inconceivable Emancipation"? But we can't really say. We can say what we mean by the Mahayana, we can say what a Mahayana Sutra is, but we cannot say what we mean by the 'Inconceivable

Emancipation'. The 'Inconceivable Emancipation' is inconceivable. And because it is inconceivable, it is inexpressible. We can go further than that: we can say that all emancipations, all emancipations whatsoever, to the extent that they are emancipations are inconceivable. What do we mean by that? Emancipation is of course always emancipation from something. The term 'emancipation' itself has no meaning except in relation to a previous state of bondage. And when we're in that state of bondage, we cannot really imagine what emancipation from that state of bondage is like. We can form only a very vague, only a very general notion. Indeed, when we are in the state of bondage, we cannot imagine how much in bondage we are. We may even think that we're not in bondage at all. We realize how much we were in bondage, only when emancipation from that bondage has been attained. I'm speaking here of course, of what may be termed 'vertical' emancipation.

If we cannot even imagine how much in bondage we are, to this and to that, how much less likely it is that we shall be able to imagine what the state of emancipation from that bondage will be like. It will be inconceivable to us, and it's important to remember this. We often speak of Nirvana, or at least those of us who discuss Buddhism, often speak of Nirvana, or of higher spiritual experience as though we know all about them, but we don't. We don't really know anything about them at all. We can't even conceive of them. So what does this mean? It means that as we progress in the spiritual life, we do not go forward into what we already know, we go forward into what we don't know. And when we commit ourselves to the spiritual life, we commit ourselves to the unknown. Emancipation, vertical emancipation, is always emancipation from the known, the cognized; and the attainment of emancipation is always attainment of the unknown, the unpredictable, the unforeseen, even the unforeseeable. All emancipations, to the extent that they're emancipations, are therefore inconceivable.

But the inconceivable emancipation of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is inconceivable in a special sense, in a deeper sense. The Bodhisattva represents of course as we've already seen, the spiritual ideal of the Mahayana or 'Great Way'. We could say, putting it in very simple terms, that according to the Mahayana, the Bodhisattva is the ideal Buddhist. It's what every Buddhist would like to be. Now the Mahayana, like the Hinayana or 'Little Way', sees existence not statically, but dynamically; not in terms of entities, but in terms of processes; not in terms of fixed, solid unchanging things, but in terms of what are called 'dharmas' with a small 'd' - an untranslatable term. According to the Mahayana these 'dharmas' are in the ultimate sense neither existent nor non-existent. Existent and non-existent are only ideas of our own mind. And because they are neither existent nor non-existent, they naturally neither appear nor disappear. Suffering for instance doesn't really appear, it doesn't really disappear. And because these dharmas neither appear nor disappear, they are peaceful from the beginning, and by nature completely, to coin a word, 'Nirvana-

ized'. Moreover, because dharmas are neither existent nor non-existent, they've no separate characteristics by which they can be distinguished, or recognized. And because they have no separate characteristics, they're inconceivable, and inexpressible. All dharmas are therefore the same; or rather not different - and without duality. However I must warn you that for the Mahayana there can be no question of any reification of any of these terms. All dharmas, yes, are void of self nature, as it's expressed. But this voidness is not itself an entity. Voidness is also Void. It's not very easy to understand this of course. But as I've already said, the Inconceivable Emancipation is inconceivable. It's not just a question of seeing that emancipation is inconceivable: the Bodhisattva sees that existence itself is inconceivable. It's not that we don't know anything about Nirvana, or about higher spiritual experiences, not just that: we don't really know anything about anything at all. We cannot therefore say anything about anything, and this is quite a thought: this thought that we don't know anything about anything! It's not that we don't know very much, it's not that we don't know it very well. The statement is to be taken quite literally - we don't know anything about anything.

Of course we think that we know and on the basis of what we think we know, we build up all sorts of thought constructions, all sorts of ideas, attitudes, views, philosophies, but these, according to the Mahayana are nothing but delusion. We don't really know anything about anything. And it's important to reflect a little on this from time to time - perhaps while washing the dishes! Usually we're so sure that we know something - we're usually so sure even that we know it quite well, but we don't. The Mahayana says 'existence is inconceivable'. A flower, if you look at a flower - if you just look at it, is inconceivable. A tree, is inconceivable. A stone - if you just take it up in your hand and look at it - you'll see that it's inconceivable. And a human being is inconceivable too - a human being in fact is staggering. And of course a Buddha, an enlightened human being is inconceivable, a Bodhisattva is inconceivable, Buddhism is inconceivable. But here of course, a question arises: if the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas see existence as inconceivable, how is it possible for them to say anything about it? How is it possible for them to teach the Dharma?

The Dharma reveals, surely, the nature of existence, but the nature of existence, we've been told is inconceivable, and if it's inconceivable, it is also inexpressible. How then is it possible for the Dharma to be taught. With this question we get quite close to the unfamiliar world of The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa. We do really start to experience the magic of a Mahayana Sutra or text. Existence is inconceivable, not to be fathomed by thought. Because it is inconceivable, it is inexpressible, not to be uttered in words. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas therefore - even the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, cannot really teach the Dharma in words. So how do they teach it, if they can't teach it in words? Well, they demonstrate it. They demonstrate it in action - in particular they demonstrate it by means of magical action. We'll encounter some actual examples of this magical action in a few minutes time, when we make our rapid survey of the whole text. After all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are perfectly enlightened, or at least they're spiritually advanced beings, and as such, they're in possession, according to Buddhist tradition, of all sorts of magical powers. From this point onwards, I must warn you, it begins to sound a little bit like what I've sometimes called 'transcendental science-fiction'.

In particular, these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are able to move things from place to place; are able to create things, and they're able to transform themselves into the likeness of anything they wish; and moreover, they're able to do all this on a cosmic scale; they're able to move universes from one side of the whatever you like to call it to the other! So at this point I think we need to consider the significance of magic from the Mahayana point of view. That is to say, its so to speak, philosophical significance. Only then, we'll be able to understand what the Mahayana means when it compares existence to a magic show, and only then will we be able to understand why it's possible for The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa to regard magical acts as being demonstrations of the Dharma. Magic, as you perhaps know, was very popular in ancient India - I believe it still is. And it seems that the Indians have always been rather good at magic. They've produced quite a large number of magicians. In fact they've had a reputation for that sort of thing, even in foreign countries, even in ancient times.

But what exactly do we mean by magic in this connection? So let me give you a little example, a very ordinary example, a very homely sort of example. All right, you're an ancient Indian. You're in a village in ancient India, and one morning along comes a magician, yes a real live, itinerant magician. Whether he arrives on his flying carpet or not we don't know. Perhaps he just pretends to walk into the village, but anyway, the magician arrives in the village, and of course, as soon as he arrives, a drum starts to beat, it's announced that something is going to happen, and people all gather round, all eager and expectant; in fact if a magician was to walk in here, into this very hall this very minute you'd all gather round: you'd forget all about the lecture! And quite rightly too, because you can have a lecture any week, but you may not be able to see a magical display every week. But anyway, the people would gather round. And then what would the magician do? Well more often than not, he'd do something quite routine, quite ordinary - the sort of thing that magicians are expected to do - he'd conjure up an elephant. So there in front of everybody would be the elephant as large as life - legs, bulky body, tail, trunk, flapping ears, calmly standing there. Everybody would see that elephant - it would appear instantly just like that as soon as the magician repeated his mantra, because the Indians also believe that things of this sort are done with the help of mantras. So there's the elephant, so, I won't say life-like, because it would be life itself - an elephant is there. In fact some people in the audience might even get afraid and run away. So this is the sort of thing that used to happen, and apparently, it still happens in India, magicians do this sort of thing. So the Mahayana takes up this sort of experience - the experience of let us say, the magically created elephant or house or tree, or people, whatever it might be. We'd of course call it a collective hallucination, but let that pass.

The Mahayana would proceed to point out that the elephant which was perceived, which was experienced by all those village people, was not absolutely unreal, but neither was it absolutely nonexistent. After all, everybody had seen it. You can't deny the testimony of your own eyes. Everybody in the village had seen it, and they knew perfectly well what an elephant looked like, and there was an elephant standing in front of them; so they'd all seen it. Not only had they seen it, it had actually produced effects, because some people had run away. But at the same time, the Mahayana also pointed out, the elephant was not absolutely real, not absolutely existent, because after all, the magician had created it, and eventually, he would make it disappear. So according to the Mahayana, existence, ordinary existence, as we experience it, as we perceive it, is just like this. The dharmas are just like this - they're neither existent, nor are they non-

existent. That is to say, neither absolutely existent, nor absolutely nonexistent. And because they're neither existent nor non-existent, they cannot be said really to appear, or really to disappear. They're just like the magical illusion. Existence is just like the magical illusion, or if you like, like a great collective hallucination. It's also compared to an echo, a dream, a mirage, and a ball of foam. And the point of the comparison is not that something is perceived to exist but that it is not really there. That is not the point of the comparison. The point of

the comparison is that something is perceived to exist, but that that existence is not absolute.

There's nothing wrong, the Mahayana says, with our perception, nothing wrong with our experience. What is wrong is our conceptual interpretation of our experience. In particular, our interpretation of our experience in terms of entities, in terms of fixed, solid, unchanging things. The Mahayana does not doubt our experience, it does not question our experience. What it questions is the ultimate validity of the conceptual constructions which we superimpose upon our experience. So we can now begin to see why it is possible for The Vimalakirti Nirdesa to regard magical acts as being demonstrations of the Dharma - it is because magical creations are themselves an illustration of what existence is really like. We could say a lot more on this topic, but it's time we passed on to our rapid survey of The Vimalakirti Nirdesa itself.

As we've seen, it's not actually called a Sutra in Sanskrit. Nonetheless the text opens just like a Sutra. We're told that the Buddha was staying in Amrapali's Park: the park donated to the Buddha by Amrapali the famous courtesan of Vaisali after she became the Buddha's disciple and became a Bhikkuni. And this park was situated on the outskirts of the city of Vaisali, and the Buddha was dwelling there, he was surrounded we are told, by a numerous assembly, an assembly of Arahants, Bodhisattvas, Brahmas, and other non-human beings, that is to say gods and deities of all kinds, as well as monks and nuns, Bhikkhus and Bhikkunis, lay men and lay women. And on that occasion we are told, a Bodhisattva, the Bodhisattva Ratnakara came from Vaisali to visit the Buddha, with no less than 500 Licchavi youths. The Licchavis were a tribal people whose capital was this city of Vaisali. It was one of the most important centres of the Buddha's teaching in the days of the Buddha himself. So along comes Ratnakara, the Bodhisattva with these 500 Licchavi youths to see the Buddha. And these youths we're told, bring with them, and offer to the Buddha, some 500 precious parasols. Parasols by the way in India are not just utilitarian - in ancient India that is, they are symbols of sovereignty - in this case of spiritual sovereignty - so they bring along these 500 parasols, all of which are made of the seven precious things - after all you're in the world of the Mahayana Sutras now, and things are usually made of the seven precious things. So they offer these 500 parasols to the Buddha, and the Buddha on the spot, by his magic power, transforms them all into a single enormous precious canopy, and this canopy we're told, covers the entire billion-world galaxy. And in it as you look up, all things are reflected, all worlds, all beings in the whole galaxy, they're all reflected in that great single canopy. And Ratnakara then praises the Buddha in a very beautiful hymn.

After that, he asks the Buddha to explain the Bodhisattva's purification of a Buddha field: how a Bodhisattva purifies a Buddha field. How he builds as it were a Buddha Land. And it's this which will be the theme of our second talk, our talk next week on 'Building the Buddha Land'. 'Incidentally, in this series, I shall not be trying to give a systematic account of all the teaching contained in The Vimalakirti Nirdesa. This couldn't possibly be done in the course of eight talks. I'm simply going to take up a few themes for consideration, and I've selected these themes more or less at random, in accordance with whether I felt I had something to say on them.

In Chapter 2, the scene shifts to the city of Vaisali and we meet Vimalakirti himself. He's a great Bodhisattva, even a Buddha, but he lives just like an ordinary layman - lives at home, seems to have a family, seems to have a job, but all this is simply his skilful means - he outwardly adapts himself to people simply in order to be able to approach them, and to teach them the Dharma. And this sort of skilful means will be the theme of the third talk which will be on 'Being All Things to All Men'. So out of this skilful means of his, Vimalakirti falls sick, and all sorts of people come to see him, and he teaches them, teaches them the Dharma.

In Chapters 3 and 4, we are back in Amrapali's Park. And the Buddha suggests, He just sort of throws out the suggestion that someone should go and call on Vimalakirti and ask how he is getting on. The Buddha first asks the Arahant disciples, beginning with Sariputra to go and call on Vimalakirti, and then he asks the Bodhisattvas, beginning with Maitreya but all the disciples strange to say are quite reluctant to go and meet Vimalakirti. And the reason is that they've met him before. They've encountered him before, and he's given them it seems, Arahants though they were, Bodhisattvas though they were, he's given them a very rough time. He's exposed the inadequacies of their approach to the Dharma. So in view of this episode, the fourth talk will be called 'The Transcendental Critique of 'Religion'', single inverted commas,

In Chapter 5, Manjusri the Bodhisattva of Wisdom agrees to call on Vimalakirti, and with a large portion of the assembly, he sets out for Vaisali. And on his arrival in Vaisali, on his arrival at the house of Vimalakirti, who is of course lying on his bed, a really vigorous sort of ding-dong dialogue takes place between the two, between Manjusri and Vimalakirti - each trying to give the other a real dialectical transcendental hammering! But they're very evenly matched. So this little transcendental sparring match over, Manjusri asks Vimalakirti why he is sick.

And Vimalakirti gives that very famous reply. He says he is sick because beings are sick; he is sick out of great compassion. And he also explains at some length how a 'sick', inverted commas, Bodhisattva, that is to say, a Bodhisattva who is sick because beings are sick should control his mind. So in this chapter as well as in subsequent chapters we find Manjusri and Vimalakirti face to face. Manjusri is of course a mythical figure - the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. Vimalakirti is a historical personality, so the fifth talk will be concerned with 'History versus Myth in Man's Quest for Meaning'.

Chapter 6 deals with the inconceivable emancipation itself. In this chapter, Vimalakirti by his magical power transports thirty two hundred thousand Lion thrones from the Buddha Land of the Buddha Merupradiparaja which is innumerable Buddha Lands in the Eastern direction. And all these thrones, these thirty two hundred thousand Lion thrones, which are apparently miles and miles high, are all quite comfortably accommodated in Vimalakirti's house. This magical feat demonstrates to us the absolute relativity of space. Space is only a concept, just as time is only a concept. And having performed this magical feat, Vimalakirti describes various other magical feats, which the Bodhisattva who lives in the inconceivable emancipation is capable of performing.

In Chapter 7 Manjusri asks Vimalakirti how a Bodhisattva should regard all beings. And Vimalakirti replies. At this point, a goddess who lives in Vimalakirti's house, showers the whole assembly with heavenly flowers. Then a strange thing is noticed: these flowers do not stick to the Bodhisattvas - they just touch them and drop. But they stick to the Arahants. And Sariputra, who is of course one of the Arahants, tries to brush them off, because he's a monk, and monks are not supposed to wear flowers. And then a dialogue ensues between Sariputra and the goddess, and the goddess explains the great and wonderful characteristics of Vimalakirti's house.

In Chapter 8, Vimalakirti explains the way to attain the qualities of a Buddha. Manjusri for his part, explains in what the family of the Buddha consists, and they both speak in highly paradoxical terms. So highly paradoxical, I'm not even going to repeat them. Later, a Bodhisattva asks Vimalakirti about his mother and father, his children, his wife, his servants, and so on. In India, as those of you who've been there know, people always want to know this sort of thing about you - who's your mother, who's your father, where are they, are you married, what's your wife's name, how many children have you got? - so it's as though even a Bodhisattva puts this sort of question to Vimalakirti, about his mother and father, his children, his wife, where are they? So Vimalakirti replies in a long series of verses which form one of the most beautiful passages in the entire work. He says that the Bodhisattva's mother is the perfection of wisdom. It's from the perfection of wisdom that he's been born. It's by the perfection of wisdom that he is nurtured, nourished, and his father is skilful means. His wife is the delight in the Dharma - he doesn't need a wife, he doesn't need any companion of that sort - he delights in the Dharma. And his daughters are love and compassion; And his sons are righteousness and truth. And as for his home, as for his house, that is meditation on the meaning of the void. And in this way he goes on and on for forty or fifty verses - it's a very very beautiful passage indeed.

Chapter 9 deals with the question of nonduality. Vimalakirti asks all the Bodhisattvas present to give their ideas about nonduality. And they all do so in turn. And then they ask Manjusri what his explanation of nonduality is. He says they've all spoken well, but their explanations were all dualistic. Nonduality he says, cannot be expressed at all. And then Manjusri asks Vimalakirti for his explanation, and Vimalakirti remains completely silent. And this of course is the famous thunder-like silence of Vimalakirti. So nonduality will be the theme of the sixth talk on 'The Way of Nonduality'. But I shall however, be actually saying something - I shan't be imitating Vimalakirti for an hour or so.

In Chapter 10, we come relatively down to earth. Sariputra starts getting worried about the midday meal. After all, monks are not supposed to eat after 12 o'clock. You've never been a monk, so you don't know how important this is! So Vimalakirti knows what Sariputra is thinking - after all he's got that magical power too. So he performs a magical feat - he creates, he conjures up a magically formed Bodhisattva, a beautiful young Bodhisattva, golden in colour, and he sends him in the direction of the zenith, that is to say, right up and up, to a Buddha Land called "Fragrant with all Fragrances". And that Bodhisattva, that magically created, that magically formed Bodhisattva, comes back with a vessel containing fragrant ambrosia, and with it come back from that Buddha Land ninety two million Bodhisattvas, all into Vimalakirti's house. And the ambrosia, strange to say, is sufficient for the whole assembly, and there's even some left over. So in reply to a question by Vimalakirti, the Bodhisattvas who've come from that Buddha Land called "Fragrant with all fragrances" say that the Buddha of that land does not teach Dharma by means of sound and language, he teaches it by means of perfume. So the theme of our seventh talk will be 'The Mystery of Human Communication'.

In Chapter 11, the scene changes back again to Amrapali's Park, where the Buddha is teaching those disciples who did not accompany Manjusri on his visit to Vimalakirti, and while he's teaching, the whole park suddenly becomes larger, and everything in it becomes tinged with a beautiful golden colour, so the Buddha tells Ananda that Vimalakirti and Manjusri are coming from Vaisali with the whole great assembly, whereupon they all arrive. And the Buddha proceeds to explain that different Buddhas teach the Dharma in different ways, yet their enlightenment and their spiritual realizations are all the same, and he also speaks at length on the emancipation entitled "The destructible and the indestructible".

In Chapter 12, Vimalakirti explains how he sees the Buddha. Sariputra wants to know where Vimalakirti comes from, and the Buddha tells him that Vimalakirti comes from Abhirati - the Buddha Land of the Buddha Aksobhya in the eastern direction. So of course everyone wants to see Abhirati; so the Buddha asks Vimalakirti to show it to them. So Vimalakirti does this by means of his magic power - everybody sees the Buddha Land of Aksobhya, Abhirati, which means 'great delight'.

In Chapter 13 - we're coming very nearly to the end now - in Chapter 13, Indra the king of the gods, praises the teaching of the inconceivable emancipation, and promises to protect the Dharma. The Buddha then relates how he himself practised the Dharma in a previous existence. He describes in fact the teachings he received from the Buddha of those days called Bhaisajyaraja, and among these teachings is the teaching of the Four Reliances: 1. That one should rely on the meaning of the Dharma and not on the literal expression; 2. That one should rely on wisdom, and not on ordinary consciousness. 3. That one should rely on ultimate teachings, and not on provisional teachings. 4. That one should rely on principles, and not on personalities. We'll be studying these in the eighth and last talk, which will be on 'The Four Great Reliances: Criteria for the Spiritual Life'.

In Chapter 14, the Buddha entrusts his teaching of supreme enlightenment to Maitreya, the future Buddha. Maitreya promises to protect the Dharma, especially the present exposition; and all the Bodhisattvas promise likewise, as do the Four Great Kings, that is to say, the Guardians of the Four Quarters of the Universe.

Ananda, who of course thinks of everything, inquires by what name this exposition of the Dharma is to be known. The Buddha tells him, and the scene, the text, the Sutra, closes amidst general rejoicings - everybody is happy; in fact everybody is overjoyed; everybody is uplifted; everybody is transformed; everybody has advanced on the path as a result of hearing all these wonderful things.

Such then is The Vimalakirti Nirdesa. This is the sort of ground we shall be covering in the course of the next eight or nine weeks. These are the themes with which we shall be dealing. And by the time we've done this, we should have some experience of the Magic of a Mahayana Sutra.