Sangharakshita **The Taste of Freedom**

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‘Just as the mighty ocean
has but one taste,
the taste of salt,

so too has my teaching
but one taste:
the taste of freedom.’

FOREWORD

When Sangharakshita delivered *The Taste of Freedom* in 1979 twelve years had passed since he founded the Triratna Buddhist Community – or FWBO as it was then known. During that time, the question the lecture opens with is one he must often have asked himself. Faced with the task of communicating the Dharma without an allegiance to any particular Buddhist tradition, within a culture unlike any into which it had been introduced before, the question 'What is Buddhism?' must have gained a new urgency. What is it truly, in its essence?

The answer he gave on that occasion cut through the intellectual abstractions, doctrinal divergences, cultural accretions, exoticism, techniquism, and attachment to traditional forms with which Buddhism had become encumbered. It cut through

them with a directness and vividness that only a metaphor can convey. The Dharma, so says the Buddha, is like the mighty ocean. In particular, just as the mighty ocean has one taste, the taste of salt, so the Dharma has one taste, the taste of freedom. And as Sangharakshita makes clear, this is no ordinary freedom, but the freedom of the Dharma - *vimutti* - which is strange and wonderful, vast and dynamic, enjoyable and continually fresh.

Sangharakshita goes on to explain the three 'fetters' that hold us back from tasting such freedom. His treatment of this traditional formulation confirms his ability to breathe new life into ancient wisdom, making it both practicable and challenging. It is this combination of directness and vividness, of practicability and challenge, that makes his words as relevant today as they were forty years ago. In this new printed edition readers of a new generation are invited to taste the freedom of the Dharma for themselves.

Vidyaruchi

Adhisthana, September, 2019

THE TASTE OF FREEDOM

What is Buddhism? Over the years there have been quite a number of attempts to answer this question, or to define this protean term. Buddhism has been defined as a code or system of ethics, as an Eastern philosophy, and even as a form of Eastern mysticism. It has been described as a spiritual path and as a tradition. By some people, on at least some occasions, it has even been described as a religion. Worse still, for the last hundred or so years it has been described as 'Buddhism'. Until that time what we nowadays call Buddhism was known simply as the *Dharma* or, more precisely, as the *Dharma-Vinaya*: the principle and the practice.

But going back to the beginning, we find that it was the Buddha himself who gave us the best definition – or at least the best description – of Buddhism.

And he gave it in the form of an image rather than in terms of concepts or abstract ideas. The Buddha simply said that Buddhism, or the Dharma-Vinaya, was an ocean, a great and mighty ocean.

This description occurs in a Pali text: the *Udana* or 'Verses of Uplift'. The *Udana* tells us that one full moon night the Buddha was seated surrounded by a great number of what the text calls *bhikkhus*. This word is usually translated, in its singular form, as 'monk' or 'brother', but is perhaps better translated as 'partaker', the bhikkhu being one who partakes of, or shares in, the food of the land in the form of his daily alms, as well as one who partakes of, or shares in, the spiritual life along with the Buddha and his fellow disciples. Thus the Buddha was seated surrounded by a great number of partakers. According to the *Udana*, they all sat there together, in complete silence, not just for one or two hours, but for the whole night. They didn't say a word. They didn't fidget. They didn't even blow their noses. One could say they meditated together, but perhaps they were all at a stage where you don't even need to meditate. You simply sit there

– all night.

Then, just as dawn was about to break, something happened. I won't go into the full story, but it transpired that one of those present, though professing to be committed to the spiritual life, was in fact 'unvirtuous, wicked, unclean, of suspect habits, secretive of his acts, no monk but claiming to be one'. Maha-Moggallana, who among all the Buddha's disciples was known for the accuracy of his intuition, became aware of this man's true nature, and prevailed upon him to leave. And it was with reference to this incident that the Buddha described the Dharma-Vinaya in terms of the 'mighty ocean'. There were eight strange and wonderful things about the mighty ocean, he said, and similarly there were eight strange and wonderful things about the Dharma-Vinaya.

The Eight Strange and Wonderful Things

Firstly, the mighty ocean gets deeper little by little. We are to imagine, it seems, a gradually sloping shore, not a coastline of sheer cliffs dropping suddenly into the sea. Similarly, the training, the course, the path, of

the Dharma-Vinaya is gradual. There is no abrupt penetration of knowledge. The path is – as we shall see in the next chapter – a path of regular steps.

Secondly, the Buddha said, the mighty ocean is 'of a stable nature, not overpassing its boundary'. Just so, the Buddha's disciples do not transgress, even for the sake of life itself, the training he has enjoined on them. In more familiar terms, the commitment of the Buddha's disciples to the Dharma-Vinaya is absolute.

Thirdly, the mighty ocean 'does not associate with a dead body but casts it up on to the shore'. In the same way, the sangha or spiritual community of the Buddha's disciples rejects one who is not, in fact, leading a spiritual life, though outwardly professing to do so. Even though seated in the midst of the sangha such a person is far from the sangha, and the sangha is far from him. This, of course, is a reference to what has just happened. In other words, there is no such thing as nominal membership of the spiritual community. There is no such thing as honorary membership. Sooner or later, therefore, a nominal member will have to 'leave', or rather, as the bogus 'partaker'

did, simply find himself or herself outside.

Fourthly, when great rivers reach the mighty ocean they abandon their former names and lineage, and instead of being known as the Ganges, the Jumna, and so on, are reckoned simply as 'mighty ocean'. In the same way those who 'go forth' from home into the homeless life in response to the *Dharma-Vinaya* proclaimed by the Buddha lose their former names and lineage and are reckoned simply as 'ascetics who are sons of the Shakyan', that is to say, ascetics who are disciples or followers of the Buddha. In other words, they become part of the spiritual community – or, to put it more precisely, they are 'merged' with the spiritual community without losing their individual spiritual identity.

The Buddha himself spoke in terms of abandoning one's caste identity as a noble, a brahmin, a merchant, or a serf – those being the four main hereditary castes of his day. But we in the West must think in rather different terms. We can speak, for example, of abandoning our national identity. Within the spiritual community there is no question of being English or

Irish or Scottish or Welsh, no question of being American or Indian or Australian or Finnish or Dutch. Within the spiritual community one is simply a spiritually committed human being, relating as such to other spiritually committed human beings.

Fifthly, whatever streams flow into the mighty ocean, or whatever rains fall from the sky, the mighty ocean neither increases nor decreases. This is not strictly true, of course: in the Buddha's day people did not, it seems, know anything about the polar ice caps. However, that does not really matter. The important thing is not the scientific accuracy of the comparison, but the point it is meant to illustrate. If we can imagine that the mighty ocean neither increases nor decreases, then we can say that, similarly, though many people pass finally away into that condition of nirvana which 'leaves nothing behind', yet that condition of nirvana neither increases nor decreases.

Sixthly, the mighty ocean has one taste, the taste of salt. Just so, the Dharma-Vinaya has one taste, the taste of freedom.

Seventhly, the mighty ocean contains many kinds

of gems. As the poet Gray puts it in his 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard',

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene
> The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear.

Similarly, the Dharma-Vinaya contains many kinds of spiritual teachings, such as the four foundations of mindfulness, the five spiritual faculties, the seven factors of Enlightenment, the Noble Eightfold Path, and so on.

Eighthly and lastly, the mighty ocean is the abode of monsters such as the leviathan, the fisheater, and so on. Here the *Udana* seems to be a little uncertain about its marine biology, but evidently creatures like whales and sharks are meant, besides creatures of a more fabulous kind. Whatever they are, the mighty ocean is their abode. In the same way, the Dharma-Vinaya is the abode of great beings such as Stream-entrants, once-returners, non-returners, and arahants. It is also the abode, we could add (though the *Udana* does not actually say so), of bodhisattvas and

mahasiddhas, gurus and devas, dakas and dakinis and dharmapalas.

Thus there are these eight strange and wonderful things about the mighty ocean, and these eight strange and wonderful things about the Dharma-Vinaya. And of these eight things we are here going to be focusing on the sixth, on the fact that the Dharma-Vinaya, or what we have got into the habit – unfortunately – of calling Buddhism, has 'the taste of freedom'. But before doing so, let us pause for a moment over something that we might easily overlook in the Buddha's description of the Dharma-Vinaya as being like the mighty ocean. We need to allow these two epithets – 'strange' and 'wonderful' – to have their full effect on us.

In what sense is the mighty ocean strange? Here we must remember that the Buddha lived and taught in the valley of the Ganges, many hundreds of miles from the sea. So far as we know, he had never seen the mighty ocean, and the vast majority of his disciples had never seen it either. They had probably simply heard a rumour to the effect that far beyond their own

land there existed a great body of water far greater than any river, greater even than the Ganges itself. So to them the mighty ocean was a foreign, an unfamiliar, element.

It was the same – it *is* the same – in the case of the Dharma-Vinaya. The Dharma-Vinaya is strange to us. We can in fact go further and say that the spiritual life is strange to us; the unconditioned is strange to us; the transcendental is strange to us. It is something of which we have only heard. It is foreign to us; it is not our native element. Indeed, the Buddha himself is strange to us. He is a stranger in an ultimate sense. He comes from another world, another dimension, as it were. He stands at our door, perhaps, but we do not recognize him. Even the spiritual community is strange to us if we are not ourselves true individuals, or are not spiritually committed. Thus the mighty ocean of the Dharma-Vinaya is strange to us.

But in what sense is the mighty ocean wonderful? It is wonderful in its vast extent. It is wonderful in its perpetual movement: it never rests, not even for a moment, not even the tiniest particle of it. It is wonderful

in its uninterrupted music: 'the sound of the ocean tide'. It is wonderful in its ever-changing lights and colours: the blue and the green and the mauve; the purple, the gold. It is wonderful in its unfathomable depth. It is particularly wonderful when we see it, and come into contact with it, and perhaps swim in it, when we plunge in, move our arms and legs about and, perhaps for the first time in our lives, find that we are swimming in the mighty ocean. Or at least, if we haven't summoned the nerve to take the plunge, we can at least paddle, feeling the force of the waves, looking in wonder towards the horizon where sea meets sky.

It is the same with the Dharma-Vinaya, except that the Dharma-Vinaya is not simply vast; it is infinite. The Dharma-Vinaya – the principle and the practice of the Dharma – is a shoreless ocean. We can see no end to it. And it is not fixed, rigid, static, unmoving, unchanging, but full of life, full of movement. It is continually adapting itself to the needs of living beings, continually speaking to us, singing to us, playing its own inimitable music to us, in its own indes-

cribably appealing and fascinating way. It is no dull religious monument; it is alive with all sorts of brilliant and tender lights, all sorts of vivid and delicate colours. It is alive with the radiantly colourful forms of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, dakas and dakinis. And it is so deep, this mighty ocean of the Dharma-Vinaya, that we can never hope to fathom it. The Dharma-Vinaya is wonderful in all these ways.

Perhaps we don't usually think of the Dharma-Vinaya in this manner; but this is what it is really like. It is wonderful. The Buddha is wonderful. As Matricheta says in his 'Five Hundred Verses of Worship':

> What steadfastness! What conduct! What form!
> What virtues!
> In a Buddha's attributes there is nothing that is not wonderful.

The spiritual community is wonderful. Spiritual life is wonderful. It is wonderful that we can sit and meditate together. It is wonderful that we can live in residential spiritual communities. It is wonderful that we

can work in right livelihood projects. It is wonderful that I am able to speak to you in this way. It is wonderful that what I am communicating in the form of a talk can be metamorphosed by editors into the chapter of a book. It is wonderful that you are reading this book now. Thus the Dharma-Vinaya is indeed wonderful: strange and wonderful.

Perhaps this is how we experience the Dharma-Vinaya when we first come across it, and we might think that we will never forget how wonderful it is. But after a while, I'm sorry to say, we are only too likely to start experiencing Buddhism – or spiritual life – as 'old hat': a stage we went through when we were young and naive, but which we have long since outgrown. It is said that familiarity breeds contempt, but it is probably more true to say that familiarity breeds indifference.

Of course, in the case of the Dharma-Vinaya, the familiarity that breeds contempt is usually with the words, concepts, and external forms in which it finds expression. But the Dharma-Vinaya is not to be identified with its external forms. And if we become famil-

iar with the spirit of the Dharma-Vinaya, or even have a tongue-tip taste of it, we will see the Dharma-Vinaya as more and more wonderful. It is important to keep alive this sense that the Dharma-Vinaya is a wonderful thing; and thus at the same time keep alive a sense of the spirit of the Dharma-Vinaya. According to Plato, philosophy begins with a sense of wonder; and certainly there is no spiritual life without an ever-continuing sense of wonder.

But we can go further than that – and in the *Udana* the Buddha does so. The *Udana* goes further than that. After describing the eight strange and wonderful qualities of the Dharma-Vinaya, the Buddha says 'These, then, partakers, are the eight strange and wonderful things in this Dharma-Vinaya, beholding which again and again partakers take delight in this Dharma-Vinaya.'

Here again we find a couple of very significant expressions. Firstly, just as some people see a film again and again without ever becoming tired of it, so the partakers – that is, the followers of the Buddha – see the Dharma-Vinaya, look at the Dharma-Vinaya, hear the Dharma-Vinaya, without ever becoming tired of it. In fact the more they see and hear of the Dharma-Vinaya the more wonderful it appears.

Secondly, the partakers take delight in the Dharma-Vinaya. The Dharma-Vinaya is not only wonderful but also enjoyable. It is enjoyable because it is wonderful. It is wonderful because it is enjoyable. Spiritual life is enjoyable. Meditation is enjoyable. Living in a residential spiritual community is enjoyable. Working in a right livelihood project is enjoyable. Being 'thrown in at the deep end' is enjoyable. Not being allowed to rationalize away our slips and failings is enjoyable. It is important to remember this: that in every way the Dharma-Vinaya is enjoyable. Buddhism is enjoyable. It is something in which, seeing it again and again, we take delight. It is hardly necessary to point out how greatly this differs from the usual conception of religion and religious life.

And of all the strange and wonderful qualities of the Dharma-Vinaya, I want now to focus on one in particular: that it has the taste of freedom.

What is Freedom?

This is perhaps a question that we ask ourselves even more often than we ask 'What is Buddhism?' and the answer for most of us will have, probably, something to do with civil and political liberties. However, the concept we are dealing with here is expressed by another word altogether, of which 'freedom' is just a translation. This is the Pali term *vimutti* (Sanskrit *vimukti*), which translates as 'release', 'emancipation', or 'freedom'. Thus we are concerned not with the meaning of the English word, as such, but only with its meaning as a provisional equivalent of the original Pali term. We are concerned with freedom in the sense of *vimutti*, not with *vimutti* in the sense of freedom.

What, then, is *vimutti*? In order to begin to understand this we shall have to see what place *vimutti* occupies in the complete scheme of spiritual self-development; and we can do this by looking at where it comes in the series of the 'positive' *nidanas*, as I have called them.

These *nidanas* represent stages of spiritual development. They are called *nidanas* or 'links' because each one arises in dependence on the one preceding or, we may say, out of the fullness of the one preceding. Thus in dependence on suffering arises faith and devotion; in dependence on faith and devotion arises satisfaction and delight; in dependence on satisfaction and delight arises rapture; in dependence on rapture arises tranquillity; in dependence on tranquillity arises bliss; in dependence on bliss arises samadhi or 'concentration' – in the sense not of mere mental concentration, but of the complete integration of all the psychophysical energies of one's being; in dependence on samadhi arises knowledge and vision of things as they really are; in dependence on knowledge and vision of things as they really are arises disengagement, or disentanglement; in dependence on disengagement, or disentanglement, arises dispassion; in dependence on dispassion arises *vimutti*; in dependence on *vimutti* arises knowledge of the destruction of the 'biases' (craving, wrong views, and ignorance).

And this is the last of the twelve positive *nidanas*, for knowledge of the destruction of the biases is equivalent to Enlightenment, representing the goal and consummation of the entire spiritual life, as well as the complete overcoming of mundane existence, and, by implication, the complete realization of the unconditioned and transcendental.

This is not the place for a detailed account of this progressive series. Simply listing them, however, makes one thing at least clear: that *vimutti* occupies a very high place indeed in the whole series, and thus in the complete scheme of spiritual self-development. It is, in fact, the penultimate stage. *vimutti* is not, therefore, what we ordinarily understand by freedom: it goes far, far beyond that. It goes far beyond any question of political and civil liberties, and far beyond freedom in the ordinary psychological sense. But if this is so, then what are we to make of the term? Let us see if we can work our way towards a clearer impression of the nature of freedom in the sense of *vimutti*.

The fourth to the seventh *nidanas* – rapture, tranquillity, bliss, and samadhi – represent the process of

what is usually called meditation, that is to say, meditation in the sense of an actual experience of higher states of consciousness, not meditation simply in the sense of preliminary concentration. They constitute meditation in the sense of what is technically called samatha or 'calm', and they are very considerable attainments indeed. But it is the next stage, 'knowledge and vision of things as they really are', that is the important one. In fact, the transition from samadhi to knowledge and vision of reality is absolutely crucial. It represents the great turning point in the spiritual life. It is the point at which our most refined, most blissful, most beatific experience of the conditioned, or of the mundane, is succeeded by the first 'experience' – there is no other word for us to use here – of the unconditioned, the transcendental. 'Knowledge and vision of things as they really are' thus constitutes a form of what is technically called *vipassana* or Insight.

The fact that *vimutti* occurs subsequent to knowledge and vision of things as they really are (with two other stages in between) means that there is no *vimutti* – no real freedom – without Insight. Moreover,

when 'knowledge and vision of things as they really are' arises, and one makes that crucial transition from calm to Insight, one is said – in traditional Buddhist language – to 'enter the stream': one becomes a 'Stream-entrant', or – to use another traditional term – an *ariya-puggala* or 'true individual'. So freedom in the sense of *vimutti* is accessible only to one who has become a Stream-entrant, a true individual.

All this should establish unequivocally the scale of experience denoted by the term *vimutti*, or freedom. However, it may still leave us little the wiser as to the actual nature of *vimutti*. To begin to estimate this we need to look at that crucial point when we 'enter the stream'. What in fact happens as we do that, or as that happens to us – both these expressions here have the same meaning – is that we break free from (or there are broken) the first three 'fetters' binding us to the lower, grosser levels of mundane existence. It is the breaking of these fetters that will give us a real 'taste of freedom'.

These three fetters are usually described as: firstly, the fetter of belief in an essential, unchanging self;

secondly, the fetter of doubt and indecision with regard to the Dharma; and thirdly, the fetter of attachment to religious observances as ends in themselves. Here, however, we are going to approach them in very general, even basic – or down-to-earth – terms, as: firstly, the fetter of *habit*; secondly, the fetter of *superficiality*; and thirdly, the fetter of *vagueness*.

The Fetter of Habit

A habit is something we are said to *have*. We have 'the tendency or disposition to act in a particular way'. However, as this dictionary definition makes clear, a habit consists of actions, and action is an essential part of us, not just something added on, something we have. In fact according to the Dhamma-Vinaya we *are* our actions. And this is the way we usually think of, and refer to, a person: someone is the sum total of his or her actions of body, speech, and mind, and doesn't exist apart from these.

The fact that we have a 'tendency or disposition to act in a particular way' means, therefore, that we have a tendency or disposition to *be* in a particular way. We

are not just the sum total of our actions: we are the sum total of our habits. We are our habits. We could even say that each one of us is simply a habit – probably a bad habit. The person we think of as George or Mary, and recognize as acting in a particular way, is simply a habit that a certain stream of consciousness has got into.

But since it has got into it, it can get out of it. It is like a knot tied in a piece of string: it can be untied. Breaking the fetter of habit means, essentially, getting out of the habit of being a particular kind of person. It is only a habit you have got into. You don't have to be the way you are. There is no necessity about it. Breaking the fetter of habit means, therefore, getting rid of the old self, the past self. It means becoming a true individual; that is, becoming continually aware and emotionally positive, continually responsible, sensitive, and creative – continually creative of one's own self.

This is the meaning of the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* or 'no-self'. It is not so much that we never have a self as that we always have a new self. And if

each *new* self is a better one than the last, then we can say that spiritual progress is taking place.

It is not easy to get out of the habit of being the kind of person that we are. It is not easy to get rid of the old self and become a true individual. One of the reasons for this is other people. Not only have we ourselves got into the habit of being in a particular way, but other people have got into the habit of experiencing us as being in the habit of being in a particular way.

The people who experience us as what we *were* rather than as what we *are* – or what we are in process of becoming – represent a collective way of thinking, feeling, and acting. They represent the group as opposed to the individual. The group is the enemy of the individual – of the true individual – inasmuch as it will not allow the true individual to emerge from its ranks. It insists on dealing with you not as you are but as you were, and to this extent it tries to deal with someone who no longer exists. This tends to happen, for example, when one visits one's family after some time.

Becoming free of the group does not, of course, necessarily mean actually breaking off relations with the group. What it means is breaking away from the influence – the habit-reinforcing influence – of the group.

The Fetter of Superficiality

To be superficial means to act from the surface of ourselves and, in consequence, to act without thoroughness or care; it is about acting in outward appearance rather than genuinely or actually. Now why should we do this? Why should we act superficially?

The reason is that we are divided. More often than not, the conscious rational surface is divided from the unconscious emotional depths. We act out of intellectual conviction but do not succeed in carrying the emotions with us. Sometimes, of course, we do act out of the fullness of our emotions but then, only too often, the rational mind holds back, and even, perhaps, does not approve. In neither case do we act totally, wholeheartedly. We do not act with the whole of ourselves and, therefore, in a sense, do not really act at all.

This state of affairs is very general. Superficiality is one of the curses of the modern age. Matthew Arnold, more than a hundred years ago, spoke of our 'sick hurry', our 'divided aims' – and that just about describes the situation. We are neurotically busy, without any real focus, any singleness of purpose. We don't truly, authentically, do anything. We don't do anything with the whole force of our being. When we love we don't really love, and when we hate we don't really hate. We don't even really think. We half do all these things.

It is the same, only too often, when we take up the spiritual life and try to follow the Dharma-Vinaya. When we meditate, it is only with part of ourselves. When we communicate, or when we work, again it is only with part of ourselves. Consequently we don't get very far: we don't really grow; we don't really develop. We don't carry the whole of our being along with us, so to speak. A small part of us is prospecting ahead, but the greater part is lagging far behind.

Breaking the fetter of superficiality therefore

means acting with the whole of oneself: acting with thoroughness and care; acting genuinely and actually. It means, in a word, commitment. It means committing oneself to the spiritual life, committing oneself to being a true individual.

The Fetter of Vagueness

'Vague' means 'indistinct, not clearly expressed or identified, of uncertain or ill-defined meaning or character'. So why should anyone be vague? The fact is, we are vague when we are undecided, vague when we don't *want* to decide, and, above all, vague when we don't want to commit ourselves. Our vagueness is, therefore, a dishonest vagueness.

After all, spiritual life is very difficult. Growth and development is often a painful process (even though it is always enjoyable). Therefore we tend to shrink back. We keep our options open. We keep a number of different interests, or a number of different aims, on which we can fall back, and allow ourselves to oscillate between them, even to drift between them. At all costs we remain vague: woolly, foggy, shapeless, indistinct, unclear.

Breaking the fetter of vagueness means being willing to think clearly. It means giving time to thinking things out, having the determination to think things through. It means being prepared to look at what the alternatives really are, and to sort out one's priorities. It means being ready to make up one's mind. It means making a decision to choose the best and then to act wholeheartedly upon that choice. It means not postponing the moment of decision.

Tasting the Teachings

The three fetters – of habit, of superficiality, and of vagueness – are broken by means of Insight, that is, by means of knowledge and vision of things as they really are. In less traditional terms, they are broken by our becoming creative (in the sense of self-creative or creative of our own new self), by becoming committed, and by becoming clear. When Insight arises, one enters the Stream, the Stream that leads directly to Enlightenment: one becomes a Stream-entrant and, being a Stream-entrant, one becomes a true indi-

vidual. And as a true individual, one can experience *vimutti*, one can enjoy the taste of freedom.

Two key points emerge from all this. The first is that only the true individual is really free; the second, that one becomes a true individual only by developing Insight: that is, by breaking the three fetters and thereby becoming creative, committed, and clear. This is freedom.

So what does the Buddha mean by the *taste* of freedom? When the Buddha says 'Just as the mighty ocean has one taste, the taste of salt, so the Dharma-Vinaya has one taste, the taste of freedom' – what does this mean? It means, of course, what it says – that the Dharma-Vinaya is wholly pervaded by the taste of freedom. Every part of it has that taste.

The Dharma-Vinaya consists of a great many things – perhaps more now than in the Buddha's own day. It consists of all sorts of teachings, all sorts of practices, all sorts of institutions. It consists of philosophies, concentration techniques, ethical systems, rituals, arts – entire cultures, in fact. But the one question that must be asked about all these things is: do

they have the taste of freedom? That is, do they help us, directly or indirectly, to become free in the sense of *vimutta*? Do they help us to develop Insight – i.e. to break the three fetters and 'enter the Stream' – and thus become true individuals? Because if they do not, then they form no part of the Buddha's teaching, no part of the Dharma-Vinaya.

It must be admitted that there are many things in the traditional practice of Buddhism in the East with regard to which we cannot answer these questions in the affirmative. Whether it is the Theravada, or Tibetan Buddhism, or Zen, there are many elements within these rich and important traditions that do not have this 'taste of freedom'. This is why we do not, in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, identify ourselves exclusively with any one form of traditional Buddhism. Instead, we follow the Buddha's own advice and accept as his teaching only what helps us to grow, or what actually has the taste of freedom.

One issue raised by the title of this essay remains unaddressed. How is it that the Buddha speaks not of the *idea* or *concept* of freedom but of its *taste*? One

could, of course, argue that he does this only because he has already spoken of the mighty ocean as having the taste of salt: that the word 'taste' is used literally when referring to the ocean, and only metaphorically with regard to freedom. However, it is in fact the ocean that is the metaphor, not the Dharma-Vinaya. He speaks of the taste of salt in order to emphasize a corresponding quality of the Dharma-Vinaya: that the Dharma-Vinaya likewise has its characteristic taste – the taste of freedom. He wants to emphasize that freedom is something to be tasted. So what is this really about?

The Pali term translated as 'taste' is *rasa*, which means 'juice, special quality, flavour, taste, relish, pleasure, essential property, extract, or essence'. So *rasa* in the first place means 'juice', and juice is liquid, flowing, has no fixed form. And freedom or *vimutti* is like that. It is not fixed or definite, not conditioned. On the contrary, it is absolute and unconditioned. And the Dharma-Vinaya, being pervaded by the taste of freedom, is likewise an uninterrupted flow of spiritual and transcendental states. It may crystallize into

different teachings, practices, and so on, but it is not to be identified with them; it remains an uninterrupted flow.

Rasa means not only 'juice', but also 'taste'; and taste is a matter of direct experience. So the taste of freedom as an all-pervading quality of the Dharma-Vinaya is a direct, personal experience of freedom. If you practise the Dharma-Vinaya you will yourself become free.

Another expression offered to translate *rasa* is 'special quality'. The direct experience of freedom is the special quality of the Dharma-Vinaya, i.e. the quality by which you can recognize it. If it doesn't have this quality it isn't the Dharma-Vinaya, just as if something doesn't taste sweet it can't be sugar.

This brings us to yet another aspect of the meaning of *rasa*. That special quality of the Dharma-Vinaya gives it its distinctive 'flavour'. With practice we begin to appreciate this flavour, even to relish it: we begin to take pleasure in it, and to enjoy it. And so we find that *rasa* means also 'relish' and 'pleasure'.

Furthermore, *rasa* means 'essential property'. The

experience of freedom is an essential property of the Dharma-Vinaya, and there is no Dharma-Vinaya without it. Whatever else you may have, if you don't have the experience of freedom you don't have the Dharma-Vinaya. Finally, *rasa* means 'extract' or 'essence'. If you were able to take the mighty ocean of the Dharma-Vinaya and distil it, if you were able to boil it down and condense it into a single drop, that drop would be freedom, or *vimutti*.

If we were then to visualize an image of that quintessential spirit, we would begin with the image of space or the image of the usual way we perceive space: the sky, infinite in extent, deep blue in colour, and perfectly pure. In the midst of this image there would be another image: a figure flying through the sky. It is a naked, red figure, a female figure. Her long black hair is streaming out behind her, her face is uplifted in ecstasy, and there is a smile on her lips. She is what is known in Buddhist tradition as the dakini or 'lady of space', the embodiment of the spiritual energy of the Buddha. She is absolutely free: free to fly in any direction – north, south, east, west, the zenith, and the nadir. She is free, even, to remain still. Hers is the liberty of infinite space. She enjoys the Taste of Freedom.

SEMINAR EXTRACTS

Being on Seminar with Sangharakshita

In the long, hot summer of 1976 I was living in a men's community, a ramshackle squat in a rough part of London. I was nineteen and filled with enthusiasm for the Dharma. I wore Tibetan shirts and a long, large-beaded mala. My hair in those days grew upwards, long and thick. One day, Lokamitra, the incredibly friendly and energetic chairman of Pundarika - our first proper Buddhist centre - suggested to half a dozen of us that we go to the forest for a weekend retreat. It was all arranged he said, and he would meet us there.

We gathered at an old farmhouse in Thetford Forest that we used for retreats in those days, surrounded by glowering pines. Every now and then a fighter jet roared overhead. Soon enough Lokamitra

arrived and with him a wonderful surprise: our teacher Sangharakshita - Bhante as we called him - who was going to lead us in some Dharma study. The following morning we gathered in a small lounge. Bhante came in, long-haired, in deep yellow robes, with a rather tatty-looking jumper underneath them and carpet slippers. He sat cross-legged in an armchair and began to take us through the *Mangala Sutta*, where the Buddha describes many auspicious signs – the signs that show real human and spiritual progress.

I was, of course, in awe of Bhante. I also possessed that blend of self-intoxication and awkward self-consciousness that goes with being a teenager. Inevitably, I would get my first taste of Bhante as the vajra guru – 'the no nonsense guru'. To one of my rather trite replies to his questions he said, somewhat witheringly: "That's a good Buddhist answer." He wanted more than clichés. Alongside this though was his eager sense of humour and playfulness. I tried several times to get him talking about the Buddhist Tantra, a subject I was obsessed with at the time.

"He's cunningly luring us onto Tantric territory, always edging us nearer and nearer to it," Bhante said, provoking much good-natured laughter.

In all the seminars I was lucky enough to attend over the years, it was as if reality took shape around Bhante while he spoke. Not long after the *Mangala Sutta* seminar I was back in the farmhouse in the forest for my ordination retreat. Once again, Bhante appeared in his robes, this time without the tatty jumper, but instead a rich saffron-coloured, dragon-patterned Tibetan ceremonial shirt. As well as ordaining Ratnaguna and I, Bhante led us through *The Shepherds Search for Mind*, from *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. In this chapter Milarepa reveals to a sixteen-year old shepherd the true nature of mind. Bhante was clearly inspired by this and as he spoke I felt the exhilaration of being given an elusive glimpse of the liberated, luminous nature of mind. Much later, on another seminar, the discussion moved to the Green Tara mantra. As Bhante drew out its meaning I had the tangible feeling of a green breeze passing through the room.

Bhante was always methodical when he took us through a text, reading closely, explaining the cultural contexts and the Pali sources. He wove together the earliest teachings of the Buddha with other Buddhist traditions – the Mahayana, the Vajrayana, and Zen. Great literature and the Western canon flowed from him just as easily. There would also be references to other religions and philosophies. I first heard about Sufism on seminar with Bhante. What he said was so attractive that it gave me an abiding interest in that tradition.

On seminars, Bhante made the Dharma live for us. This could be uplifting and exhilarating, though sometimes his relentless exploration of the truth, hour after hour, was profoundly challenging, even humiliating. A seminar I attended not long after my ordination on *Mind in Buddhist Psychology* was like that. As Bhante sat calmly in his armchair, a Buddhist rosary in his hands, taking us deep into the Abhidharma, it was like being passed by a great ocean liner while struggling to stay afloat in armbands. At the end of ten days of intensive study I couldn't decide

whether I was feeling purified by the seminar, or just relieved it was over!

I could not attend many of Bhante's seminars in the 1980s, but of those that I did attend, as well as encountering his incisive intellect, his range of cultural reference and playful humour, I also noticed his deep reverence for the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and his overriding concern to communicate the living reality of those precious Three Jewels. Sometimes a fresh way of presenting the Dharma would emerge as we went along and these would become integral to Triratna: *The Bi-tendential Value of Being*; *The Greater Mandala of Aesthetic Appreciation*; *The Imaginal Faculty*; *The Gestalt*; *The Five Great Stages of the Spiritual Path*; *Reality Principle and Pleasure Principle as the Middle Way*. There are so many and there remains so much to be explored.

Above all, Bhante wanted us to put the Dharma into practice and do our best to live it fully and completely. The seminars, which began in 1973 with the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, spoke to our needs back then, but much that lies buried in the transcripts of the

seminars is deeply relevant to us now and waiting to be found. Bhante said in one seminar that he was starting a lot of hares running and it was up to us to chase after them.

One of the last study seminars I attended with Bhante was on his lecture *The Taste of Freedom*. By then Bhante was an old man and he could barely see. At a certain point he reminded us that the word freedom was a translation of vimukti, which was synonymous with Nirvana itself – complete liberation from conditioned existence. He then said: "Perhaps all we can do is contemplate the full significance of that." At that moment he became quiet and still and the whole room with him, as if there and then he was contemplating the real meaning of *vimukti*. Indian, including Indian Buddhist tradition, speaks of the importance of darshan – seeing (and being seen by) the teacher. This was a moment of darshan for me. I do not know what *vimukti* is, but in that moment I knew I was in the presence of someone who had, at the very least, a deep sense of what it is.

The great 11th century Indian master Atisha, who did so much to revive the Dharma in Tibet, said that the Precept of the Lama was more important than all the sutras and commentaries because the precept shows you how to apply the teachings to your actual experience. The seminar extracts you are about to read are the record of a man who spent his life showing how to apply the great treasury of the Dharma to our lives in order to bring about profound transformation. I hope you feel something of Sangharakshita's energy and presence talking directly to you. Oh yes...and where did I read about the Precept of the Lama? In a seminar transcript of course!

Padmavajra
Padmaloka, August, 2020

A pinch of the Dharma

From a seminar the Udāna

Just as the ocean has one flavour, the taste of salt, so the Dharma has one taste, the taste of freedom.

Sangharakshita: This comparison is particularly important because it suggests the basic function of the whole Dharma in all its formulations: to lead to liberation of mind, vimutti, translated as release or emancipation or freedom. From whichever part of the ocean you take water, it still tastes of salt, and in the same way, whatever aspect of the Buddha's teaching you consider, it will bring about emancipation of mind. If it doesn't have that flavour – if it doesn't produce that result – it isn't to be considered part of the Dharma. This is also an aspect of the Buddha's advice to Mahapajapati Gotami, his aunt and foster-mother: the essential characteristic of the Dharma is that it conduces to freedom. It is sometimes better not to insist on this because people might think it means doing just as you like, the 'you' being the purely subjective, not to say neurotic, 'you', indulging itself. It's about learning what freedom really is. Sometimes a distinction is made between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'. The word translated here as 'flavour' is *rasa*, which also occurs in Indian aesthetics, the word for aesthetics being *rasa-śāstra*, the science of flavour, sometimes translated as 'aesthetic relish'. It has a much more strongly emotive – well, flavour – than the English word 'taste'.

Much of the sense of the archaic term *vimutti* is conveyed when we speak in terms of growth and development. In fact, that is a more positive way of speaking of the same thing. 'Freedom' in the sense of simply becoming 'free from' is too negative. It is not just breaking away but developing to a higher level. You could say that the concept of becoming liberated is contained in the concept of growth and development and the Higher Evolution. Instead of saying that like the ocean the Dharma has one flavour, the flavour of release, you could say, as the Buddha said to Mahaprajapati Gotami, that the Dharma has one flavour, the flavour of growth and development.

Whatever helps you to grow and develop and get rid of your past conditioning, that is the Dharma. The conditioning could be represented by last year's dead leaves, which you have to shed, and the growth and development by the buds that are going to blossom.

There is something suggestive in the use of the word 'flavour', because a flavour is subjective, something that you can only experience. A verse in the Dhammapada says that the wise man can detect the flavour of the Dharma just as the tongue detects the taste of soup. In other words, the characteristic of the Dharma, if we take this word rasa, taste or flavour, as significant, is that its true nature cannot be comprehended abstractly, but only by way of an actual experience akin to an aesthetic experience. You can't convey the Dharma conceptually. You have to say, 'Come and taste it yourself.' To put it extremely, one could say that understanding the Dharma is more like eating than thinking. And to go further – though this is a little fanciful – it is perhaps not a coincidence that among all the flavours, the Dharma is compared here to salt. According to Indian cookery and medicine

there are six flavours: the sweet, the sour, the salty, the pungent, the astringent, and the bitter. Out of these six, the Dharma is compared to salt because salt brings out the real flavour of everything else. Without a pinch of the Dharma, everything else is flavourless.

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Filing away at the fetters

From Questions and Answers on Going for Refuge, *Tuscany, 1986*

Sangharakshita: It did occur to me just a few minutes ago, when we were talking about Stream Entry and the breaking of the three fetters, that perhaps we need to find positive equivalents for those three fetters – not thinking of Stream Entry in terms of what you get rid of, so to speak, but what you achieve, what you attain. I've mentioned this before, speaking in terms of clear, creative, and – what else was it? – committed. But perhaps even that isn't really enough; perhaps it isn't sufficiently concrete, unless one perhaps turns them into abstract nouns: commitment and clarity and creativity. But do you see what I mean? Perhaps we need to get away from the more negative type of terminology and turn to the more positive type. Perhaps people would respond more enthusiastically if you were to speak in terms of achieving greater clarity, a higher degree of spiritual commitment, and a higher degree of creativity. But you would have to define those terms quite carefully, wouldn't you? Creativity, for instance, could be greatly misunderstood.

Ratnaprabha: I suppose the advantage of the negative terminology is that you can speak of breaking one of these fetters, breaking through your self-view, for example, so that it is no longer there, whereas something like creativity or clarity suggests a gradual process. It is difficult to see a point at which you don't have clarity beforehand and do have it afterwards.

S: Well, perhaps it's so with the fetters; perhaps you don't actually snap them just like that, but you file away at them. Some people do just snap them, no doubt, but that requires a tremendous burst of energy. I think most people just go on filing away, and then they see that there is very little of the fetter left, and then they summon up all their energy and burst that last remaining thread, so to speak, of the fetter.

A tangled mass

From a Study Leaders seminar based on The Higher Evolution of Man *lecture series*

Sangharakshita: I believe the traditional view is that they are broken one by one, but nonetheless it's clear that one can regard them as different aspects of the same problem. Your being, your psyche, is quite complex, and it could be that it takes a while for the realisation that corresponds with Stream-entry to work its way through your system. It might affect one part of your system, and therefore one particular fetter, before it affects another part and another fetter. That is quite possible. Sometimes one doesn't see the implications even of one's own realisations. It takes some time for that realisation to spread to other areas of one's understanding and consciousness and being. You ought to see the logical consequences but you just don't, sometimes; there's some sort of block, and it takes time for the influence of even a genuine realisation to work its way round your system. But it's certainly not a question of just ticking off fetters one by one. They are all interconnected; they're matted, and knotted, and tangled together. You can hardly see where one ends and the other begins. They really are a tangled mass.

A question of habit

From a seminar on The Buddha's Law Among the Birds, *Tuscany, November 1982*

Sangharakshita: This whole question of habit is very important. It's very easy to form habits. In some ways it's necessary, because you don't want to have to stop and think about everything all the time. Habits are useful, they make it possible for one to function more easily and smoothly. But one should be careful to form habits that are positive and helpful rather than habits that are negative and unhelpful, habits that are skilful rather than unskilful. Inasmuch as one finds oneself in a particular situation, one tends to do things in a fixed way, and in that way you form habits. For example, you may get up at a particular hour each day. There's no logical reason why you should get up at the same time. You could vary it every day. But it's more convenient to get up at the same time every day, have breakfast at the same time, meditate at the same time. You're more likely to get through all the things you need to do. You may have a habit of having your hair cut every two weeks, because then you don't have to think about it. You don't have to stop and think about everything. But it is important that the habits that you form are not harmful.

Aryamitra: So a regular life is a better sort of life?

S: Yes, yes. The things you do, especially the things you do regularly, habitually, have a very powerful effect on your mental state, on your whole being. So you should watch what habits you are forming, what things you're doing repeatedly, especially perhaps in the line of work. Work usually involves the repetition of certain actions, doesn't it? – so it's important to watch what habits you are forming at work. For instance, if you work in a business where orders come in, you might develop the habit of not attending to those orders until the next day. That might be a bad habit – bad for the business and bad in the sense that it represents an element of procrastination in your character which you're strengthening. Or you may form the bad habit of being rather sharp with your

colleagues. It becomes habitual, you get a reputation for being a bit snappy, and that becomes a permanent part of your character, at least while you're at work, though you may not notice that you have formed that habit, and it may need to be pointed out. Or you may get into the habit of answering the phone in a certain way without realising it – another little habit which may or may not be a good one.

Silaratna: Habit is usually talked of as being of one of the first three fetters, habit, superficiality, and vagueness. But then you've got craving further on, as the fourth fetter. Craving is so tied up with habits that I can't see how you can have craving without having a habitual response to something.

S: Well, the lower fetters represent the cruder forms of certain unskilful states and actions. One shouldn't try to compartmentalize them too literally. I think I've said that you yourself may just be a bad habit that you've got into. Your whole being may represent a bad habit. You don't have to be the way you are. You could

be completely different tomorrow, turn over a new leaf, form a fresh set of habits. Easier said than done, of course. One could summarise the whole matter by saying that habit is a good servant but a bad master.

Am I really doing this?

From a seminar on Milarepa's Heartfelt Advice to Rechungpa*, Padmaloka, autumn 1980*

In the Mahamudra there is no acceptance or rejection.[1]

Sangharakshita: Nothing is to be accepted as good in itself or rejected as bad in itself. You can't be sure that if you accept this and reject that you're definitely on the spiritual path. There's no such guarantee with regard to external things or beliefs or doctrines. So there's no security in going through the motions. This is what I was talking about in the lecture on 'The Taste of Freedom', where I called it superficiality. Just going through the motions can never be a substitute for the real thing. In Eastern Buddhism there are so many examples: becoming a monk, having your head shaved, putting on the yellow robe. That is going through the motions, and it may help you or it may not. Some people regard that as being in itself the living of a spiritual life or following of the spiritual path but it can't be that.

A voice: Does this relate to the breaking of the three fetters?

S: The fetter is a fetter of superficiality, as I called it in that lecture. It's what is usually called ritualism. It's going through the motions without the corresponding mental state, the corresponding experience – not only that, but thinking that going through the motions is enough, that it is in fact the experience. You're unable to draw the distinction. It's superficial because you're doing those things on the surface. You're not really doing them though you may think you are, due to your mental confusion.

What Milarepa is really saying is that you can't ensure that you're on the right path by going through the right motions. Here he is referring to quite a high level of spiritual experience, but the principle holds good all the way through. It's as though he's saying, 'Look, you might be a very holy monk, you might be observing all the precepts, you might be a yogi, you might be a hermit living in a hermitage, you might be meditating all the time, but with regard to ultimate

truth you can still just be going through the motions.' You have to ask yourself at every stage, 'Am I really doing this or am I just going through the motions?' That may have some value but it isn't the real thing, and it won't have the effect that it could have if you were doing it wholeheartedly.

Clive: You might have a certain amount of genuine feeling and you can be doing things, but there's parts of you that aren't involved and you start to become aware of that.

S: This is the normal procedure, as implied in the whole teaching about the path of vision and path of transformation. It is a gradual process. But what this teaching is getting at, and what the teaching about the second fetter is getting at, is that one must never mistake going through the motions, doing something with only a part of oneself, for doing it with the whole of oneself. One must never think that going through the motions is sufficient. If one sees that a great part of oneself isn't involved and if one is making honest

efforts to involve more and more of oneself, that is quite different. The mistake is to be unaware that only a part of you is involved or even to quite cynically go through the motions and believe that you're really doing it when in fact you're not doing it at all. If you're not careful, if you do this for too long, you almost start believing that you really are doing it when you're really only keeping up appearances. You see so much of this in the East. You can meet monks who really think that they're monks. It has never occurred to them that they're only going through the motions, though it's quite clear that that is what they're doing. They're not the least bit interested in spiritual life or spiritual development. They don't even think about it, or they just think, 'Well, of course we're monks. If we're not monks, who is? We've got shaven heads, we're living in viharas, of course we're monks.' That is the attitude of many of them. It's what being a monk means. Everybody knows that. If you were to come along wearing your white kesa, you could meditate twenty hours out of the twenty-four and observe all the precepts strictly but they wouldn't think that you

were a monk. They'd think that they were the monks even though they might not be doing any of those things.

Clive: Do you mean that you could be going through the motions and be unaware of it? Something like a solitary retreat would make that obvious to you, surely?

S: To some extent, because on a solitary retreat you are free to do what you want to do. External pressures or group pressures, even of a positive nature, are no longer there. If you sleep all day and don't meditate, no-one's going to know. In that situation you have to ask yourself, 'What do I really want to do?' The danger is that you may be very conscious of the eye of the group still on you even though you're by yourself, like the 'eye of God in every place beholding the evil and the good'. You may therefore continue to do all the right things not because you really want to but because you feel you're still under observation even though you're on solitary retreat. You have to watch

that too. But if you're genuinely on solitary retreat and not feeling that anybody is watching you and then you do meditate because you want to, you can be sure that you're not going through the motions.

Clive: What's the difference between being in touch with the spiritual community while you're on solitary retreat and feeling that the spiritual community is watching you?

S: Basically you're seeing the spiritual community as a group. If you are aware of the spiritual community as a spiritual community you're only aware of encouragement and inspiration, but if you carry the recollection of the spiritual community with you as a group because that's the way you see it, then you'll feel it as something a bit threatening and disapproving – why aren't you getting up in the morning, why aren't you meditating? – and it will make you feel a bit guilty because you're not doing the right things. If you think, 'Suppose they knew that I wasn't getting up early this morning, they'd be quite disapproving', then

you're probably seeing the spiritual community just as a group.

1. Mahamudra means 'Great gesture, symbol, or seal', and is defined by Gampopa – one of Milarepa's disciples – as "the realization of the natural state as awareness-emptiness, absolutely clear and transparent, without root".

A new centre for one's whole being

From a seminar on The Nature of Existence, *chapter 11 of* The Three Jewels *by Sangharakshita, held at Sukhavati, East London, in June 1982*

> *Personality-view is of two kinds: one posits the survival, after death of a separate, immortal, unchanging soul or self (*atma*) eternally distinct from the body; the other, identifying the personality either with the body or the body plus the mind, maintains that at death it perishes. The first is a form of* sasvatavada *(Pali* sassatavada*) or eternalism, the second of* ucchedavada *or annihilationism.*

Sangharakshita: Here I've explained it simply according to the traditional account, but we need to go into it a bit more deeply than that. What does *sakayadrsti* really mean? It's really the view that you are you, and you can't be changed. In fact it's not just that you can't be changed; change is unthinkable. You can't imagine yourself deep down as any different, so you can't imagine or believe in the possibility of

change. This is what *sakayadrsti* really is. It's taking yourself as you are now as something given, something absolute, something beyond which you can't get. It's believing that I am I, and I can't be changed, or even that I don't want to be changed. In a way it's a lack of imagination, the inability to conceive oneself as any different from what one is, or the unwillingness even to try to do so. You're clinging on to yourself as you are now, and resisting the idea of change and development and transformation beyond what you are now, except in a very superficial and peripheral manner.

A voice: Is this at an intellectual level?

S: It's intellectually formulated, but it's your whole basic attitude, conscious and unconscious. It may reach the point of conscious formulation, it may not. It may even be made explicit in a whole thought-out philosophy of life. But the message is the same – I am not to be changed, I can't be changed, I am what I am. What I'm trying to make clear is that *sakayadrsti* is not

just a rejection of certain philosophical views about the self for purely theoretical reasons. *Sakayadrsti* represents a deep-seated feeling or conviction or even philosophy to the effect that one is what one is and that's that, and you can't, and even won't, change. It's resistance to any radical change of what you think of as yourself, and therefore hanging on to yourself as you are now, resisting transformation. That's the fetter of *sakayadrsti*. So it's obviously there all the time – you resist change and can't even imagine yourself being radically changed.

> *The next fetter, only most approximately rendered as doubt and scepticism, represents not that honest doubt in which, so the poet assures us, 'there lives more faith than half the creeds', but rather a culpable state of uncertainty and indecision; a reluctance, even a refusal finally to make up one's mind about the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and commit oneself – in the Existentialist sense – wholeheartedly to the logical consequences of having taken refuge in them.*

S: So it's not just doubt in a purely intellectual sense. It's unwillingness or reluctance to make up one's mind, in case one has to commit oneself. It's deliberately keeping oneself in a state of wavering and indecision and dilettantism, because one is afraid of commitment. It's more like that. Well, enough said. It seems pretty clear, doesn't it?

> *Dependence on morality and observances, the third fetter, is often mistranslated and misunderstood. Protestantizing English writers of the last century, with the great Ritualist controversy fresh in mind, understood it as belief in the efficacy of rites and ceremonies.* Sila*, however, means behaviour. especially ethical behaviour;* vrata *covers the sacrificial and other observances of the Vedic tradition as well as the more eccentric types of ascetic practice. What this fetter in fact consists of is the wrong belief that any external observance, whether one's own or another's on one's behalf, is in and by itself sufficient for, or even conducive to the attainment of salvation. Not by* sila *or even by* samadhi*, can the Transcendental Path be gained, but only by* prajna *based upon* sila *and* samadhi.[2]

S: Or, to put it more clearly and straightforwardly, this fetter consists in the belief that it's enough if the change or the religiosity or the spiritual life is relatively external. That doesn't just mean external practices and observances but even attitudes which don't go right deep down to the very centre of one's being. In other words, it's an absence of wholeheartedness. You don't do things from the very depths of your being, from your heart, you do them on the periphery of your being without being really involved deep down. You are satisfied with something relatively superficial and external. Your commitment doesn't reach right down to the depths of your being. You keep something in reserve. You go through the motions, even mentally, but deep down there's something in you that is not participating.

Lokamitra: I've seen a connection now between the first three fetters which I hadn't really seen before. I'd

thought of them as entirely separate but they seem now to flow on from one to the other ... If you don't have a self-view then you have no fear about committing yourself, nothing to hang on to to stop you committing yourself, and then if you get rid of that doubt, you can give your whole being to something.

S: Yes, right. Otherwise you can be doing the puja and have all sorts of wonderful devotional feelings and you can be meditating with concentration, you can have all the right thoughts, all the right ideas, but it's all a big act. You're not deeply and genuinely doing it with the innermost part of yourself, and that's what this *silavrata-paramarsa* is all about.

Vajradaka: Presumably that's quite a deep thing to overcome.

S: Oh it is, sure. Well, if you've overcome this and the other two then you're a Stream Entrant. What about the positive counterparts? Try and think of positive

counterparts for each of these three fetters, just in one or two words.

A voice: Confidence.

S: Confidence. But confidence of a rather special kind.

Lokamitra: Well, commitment.

S: Commitment is nearer, yes. What about the first?

A voice: Wholeheartedness.

S: Wholeheartedness was the third. What about the first?

Vajradaka: Flow and flux, sort of a constant moving.

S: Not just moving but progressive movement up the spiral, isn't it? Openness to that. Willingness to change, readiness to change. Have we got just one word for that?

Lokamitra: Mobility or freedom.

S: Mobility. Self-transcendence. We don't have quite the right word, do we? – but we can get close. Anyway, you can see that we're not just concerned with the technicalities of Buddhist philosophy in the past, but with quite basic fundamental issues here and now. The positive counterpart of the first fetter is being oriented beyond one's present self, isn't it? A supra-egoistic orientation ... Well, in a way it's individuation, of a more extensive kind than Jung's definition. It's finding a new centre for one's whole being and reorganizing it around that.

2. *Sila*, *samadhi*, and *prajna* are ethics, meditation, wisdom, and freedom.

Clarifying your doubts

From a seminar on Mind in Buddhist Psychology, *Padmaloka, summer, 1976.*

5. Indecision (vicikitsa)
'It is to be in two minds about the truth.'
(Abhidharmasamuccaya)

Sangharakshita: The reason we so often fail to put in the commitment required to realize our ideals is that we have not addressed our underlying doubt and indecision about them.

Doubt and indecision lie at the root of our difficulties with the spiritual life, and that is where we have to bring clear thinking to bear. If one doesn't really believe that it is possible to develop as an individual, one won't be able to put into that development the energy that will enable one to develop. If one is unsure about the value or effectiveness of meditation, so that one does it with an attitude of just seeing how it will turn out, hoping something will come of practicing it, one probably won't get very far. One can't start

off with no doubts whatsoever, but there must be at least some sort of willing suspension of disbelief; one must have a degree of conviction sufficient to fuel one's practice with the requisite energy and decisiveness and thus produce a result tangible enough to confirm the rightness of the original decision. In this way there is a possibility of something tentative and provisional being proven on the anvil of experience.

For example, perhaps one believes that psychological development is possible but one is not sure about the whole idea of spiritual development – or vice versa. Either way, one has to be clear about what these notions actually amount to before one decides to commit oneself to them. The reason we so often fail to put in the commitment required to realize our ideals is that we have not addressed our underlying doubt and indecision about them.

Freedom is something you create for yourself

From a women's seminar on The Perfection of Patience and Strenuousness *(chapters 14 and 15 of* The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*), Padmaloka, June 1980*

Another virtue is according to the Mahayanasutralankara that: By strenuousness one crosses the perishable and becomes free.

Sangharakshita: 'By strenuousness one crosses the perishable' – that is to say, leaves behind the conditioned – 'and becomes free', enters upon the unconditioned. Do you think there is any particular connection between energy and freedom?

A voice: You can't achieve one without the other.

S: You can't achieve one without the other. You need energy to burst through the bonds, the limitations, the conditions. It's as though if energy is in operation you are in the process of becoming free. Energy is freedom, you could almost say.

Sanghadevi: I think you can go through phases when you are afraid – well, it may be parts of your energy you haven't experienced before. It is going to lead to changes, and part of you isn't sure.

S: It's what Fromm calls the fear of freedom. Freedom is a responsibility. Freedom is free. But this brings me to something I've been thinking about recently. In the Pāli texts, the Buddha quite often speaks in terms of freedom, the Pāli for which is *vimutti*. For instance, in one passage, the Buddha says, 'O monks, just as the great ocean from whatsoever part of it you take water has but one taste, the taste of salt, so in the same way my teaching, my Dharma, whatsoever part of it you taste, has only one taste, the taste of freedom.' So the experience of freedom has quite an important place in the Buddhist teaching and its mode of expression, but it occurs to me that in our movement we don't have recourse to that sort of phraseology very much. We speak more in terms of growing, developing, attaining Enlightenment, don't we?

Sanghadevi: I've talked about freedom quite often in beginners' classes.

S: Ah, that's interesting. So what made you do that?

Sanghadevi: Well, maybe because the experience of being a woman leads to thoughts about liberation and freedom, and that sparked off that train of thought that we are moving towards freedom. We spend our lives trying to become freer, and we think that money can do it, but in fact it's only through meditation that we can achieve ...

S: Do you think the emphasis on freedom in the modern Western context ties up with freedom in the political sense? Do you think it has a significance for that reason?

Sanghadevi: I think it's a useful starting point. A lot of people do experience cramped and entangled conditions, and they feel they can't do anything about the situation. It can be quite liberating to realize that

sitting in a room meditating is a step towards becoming free.

S: Right, yes. Well, in that case, you'll be happy to learn that that way of looking at things is in accordance with the Pāli texts, because the Buddha does speak in those terms, clearly using the word freedom in a rather special sense, but still there is a connection. One can speak in terms of economic freedom, personal freedom, political freedom, but then there's the freedom to be an individual, the freedom from all that limits you as an individual, the freedom from all that holds you back from gaining Enlightenment, the freedom not so much for oneself or of oneself but *from* oneself – freedom from the old self, allowing the new self to emerge. Of course, most people who talk in terms of freedom don't really want freedom in the Buddhistic sense, but still, if they like the sound of the word freedom, and if you use the word freedom too, albeit in a profounder sense, it is a point of contact. It does appeal to the more adventurous side of people's character, doesn't it?

Gay: Maybe the language of freedom-fighting stems from the French Revolution?

S: Well, actually the Buddha uses the same phraseology. He says in one passage in the Pāli scriptures: 'O Bhikkus, we are Kshatriyas.' (That is to say, 'We are warriors.') 'And for what are we fighting? We are fighting for Sila, we are fighting for Samadhi, we are fighting for Prajna and we are fighting for Vimutti.'[3] That's the fourfold classification. So the bhikkhus were freedom fighters. But to be a freedom fighter in that sort of sense, you have to fight with yourself, not with others. Freedom is not something that others can give you or can be made to give you. It's something that you create for yourself.

3. That is, ethics, meditation, wisdom, and freedom.

Part of living Buddhism

From Study Leaders' Question and Answer sessions on Aspects of the Bodhisattva Ideal*, January 1986*

Sangharakshita: Today we were discussing breaking the fetters and gaining insight, and I became concerned that we might be taking doctrinal lists too literally again. So my question is: Does an insight experience necessarily correspond precisely to the breaking of certain fetters?

Sangharakshita: Well, there are different ways of looking at insight experiences. That is one of them, and it is considered quite important in Theravada Buddhism and in early Buddhism generally, and has been taken over by the Mahayana. In a way the breaking of the fetters provides one with a standard by which one can measure oneself. If you are still thinking very much in terms of me, myself, and I, clearly you haven't developed much in the way of insight, perhaps nothing at all. One might say that the list of fetters just provides one with a means of checking up. As insight develops, you're making a transition from the conditioned to the Unconditioned, let us say, so you're loosening the ties or the fetters that bind you to the conditioned. So what are those ties, what are those fetters? For convenience one can look at them in terms of the three fetters, or the five fetters, or the ten fetters. These are helpful in that they give greater precision to your effort. You are not just trying to get free from the conditioned in a broad liberal way; you are trying quite specifically to get rid of certain things, to break certain definite fetters which tie you to the conditioned, so to speak, or which constitute your existence on the conditioned level.

But this whole idea or concept of breaking fetters is just a way of putting it. In a strict literal sense one might say that there are no fetters to be broken. You can't really distinguish the fetters that bind you to the conditioned from the conditioned itself, as experienced by you. But nonetheless they constitute a useful check list, especially as we look at them in our movement, where we try to make sense of them and

relate them to our actual experience, and express them in comparatively contemporary terms. In explaining them to newcomers, one doesn't necessarily have to explain them in the traditional way. I have suggested several alternative ways of explaining them, and one could perhaps adopt one or another of those ways. But clearly there has got to be some progress, some development beyond oneself as one at present experiences it, so you have got to as it were free yourself from the old self. You have got to have a certain stability of conviction and you have also got to become less mechanical, less inclined to go through the motions instead of giving yourself heart and soul to what you are doing, to the spiritual life. So the first three fetters by breaking which you become a stream entrant do have a very definite significance; they do have a pretty direct bearing on the spiritual life, on the Going for Refuge.

It occurs to me, just in passing, that one could perhaps try to look at them in how they hold you back from Going for Refuge in the effective sense, and in the real sense. I think the list of the ten fetters,

especially the first three fetters, is certainly one of those doctrinal lists that is still quite meaningful and useful to us, though no doubt needing a certain amount of, not exactly reinterpretation, but maybe translation almost into a different medium, a different terminology. For instance, if you translate *silavrata-paramarsa* as dependence on rites and rituals, as many scholars do, the newcomer might say, 'I don't depend on rites and rituals at all, I dislike rites and rituals, I dislike the puja, so I have apparently broken that fetter.' But clearly the fetter of dependence on religious vows and ethical observances is a much more subtle thing than that. You certainly don't break it by having a dislike of pujas. You may be very attached to your four o'clock tea-drinking ritual and be quite irritated if that is upset, or to your seven o'clock in the evening TV-watching ritual, or whatever it happens to be. Every activity can assume a ritualistic aspect in that sort of sense, not to speak of moral observances. I think the teaching with regard to those first three fetters is very much a part of living Buddhism.

Wild abandon

From a seminar on The Tibetan Book of the Dead, *Padmaloka, September 1979*

Sangharakshita: When you see this red dakini, this red wrathful naked dancing figure complete with bone ornaments, what sort of impression do you get?

A voice: It conveys tremendous freedom.

Devamitra: Complete abandon.

S: Yes, it's abandon more than freedom.

Sagaramati: Wild abandon.

S: Wild abandon, yes. Ecstatic wild abandon! But in what way or in what sense is that a spiritual quality? Abandon in the ordinary sense is certainly not a spiritual quality, so what spiritual quality is being bodied forth here?

Anandajyoti: Is it the quality of letting everything go for the Dharma, so you're not holding anything back?

S: Yes, there's that.

Devamitra: It's like a wild woman, a wild, passionate woman throwing herself into the arms of her lover; it's that kind of feeling for the Dharma.

S: Yes, that's right. But that isn't the way people usually think of the spiritual life, is it? Can you imagine the average clergyman thinking in those terms, or even preaching a sermon in church about it?

Sagaramati: I think the thing about the dakinis is that they feel a bit nearer, a bit closer to one.

S: Yes. It's very difficult to feel really close to the peaceful deities. Of course, you may be quite wrong in thinking that you're closer to the wrathful deities than you are to the peaceful deities, but it doesn't really matter. With the wrathful deities you feel at least that

you've got a foothold, you've caught hold of something, and that is the important thing. But in the case of the peaceful deities you may find it very difficult to catch hold of anything.

Subhuti: Then it would seem that we should make considerably more use of them than we do.

S: Yes, if they do actually help us. What we actually need is to develop more the quality they embody. Whether those particular iconic representations will help us to do that is another matter. They're not helping us right at the moment, for instance. We're simply discussing them conceptually. We're not actually looking at images. Perhaps that's something people should try when they go away on solitary retreat: take a picture of a wrathful deity with them and concentrate on the development of that sort of energy. If it's a fine, sunny day and there aren't any people around, maybe you could even take all your clothes off!

A voice: Paint yourself red!

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