Preparing the Fire

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:06:03

So next we're going to talk about the third discourse, burning. We've looked at the Buddha's first formal teaching, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma. Then we looked at Anattalakkhana, the not-self characteristic, which was taught five days later. And then we move on to what is regarded as the third discourse, although in fact he gave talks in between times.

For this, we have to have a bit of a backstory. This one is called preparing the fire because the third discourse is usually called the fire sermon or the fire discourse—you could translate it simply as burning.

The build-up to it I find very interesting because it's weird. First of all, we left the Buddha and his five disciples. They're now all Arahants and they're living at Isipatana. The job's done, they're all fully enlightened, so they're feeling pretty chilled and they're not rushing off anywhere—they're just living there. Isipatana is just north of Baranasi, which is a major merchant city.

Living in this city there is a setthi, usually translated as banker, but probably more like the head of the banker's guild—basically someone who works in high finance at the time. This banker had a son called Yassa, and he was brought up in great luxury, of course. He is a young man and he lives in this big room, attended by beautiful female attendants who basically look after him in all sorts of ways which we won't go into.

One night they're all sleeping in the same room and he wakes up in the middle of the night. He looks around and sees all these beautiful women sleeping there, and he's suddenly overcome by horror and dread. He has what in the later tradition would be called dukkha nana. Dukkha, of course, is suffering, unsatisfactoriness, pain. Nana is understanding or knowledge. It sounds like he had a very strong case of adinava nana and nibbida nana. Adinava is danger, disadvantage, downside—suddenly seeing the disadvantage or the downside of any situation. And nibbida is disenchantment. The discourse says that the downside, the adinava of what he saw became apparent, and his heart settled upon disenchantment, nibbida. And he says, "The terror, the horror."

Now what he saw was the human body. But he saw it without any filters of enchantment. So he's living in a world which is dominated by beauty—he's particularly fond of female beauty, and of course he's completely caught up in this world. Then quite unexpectedly, without any warning, no preparation, he just happens to wake up in the middle of the night. His eyes fall upon these bodies sleeping there, and all the illusions drop away, and all he sees is the human body, which is actually rather weird when you consider it. Basically he hasn't turned into a Puritan; it's just that he suddenly sees that a body is just blood, bones, flesh and mess, and that's all it is.

So he has this profound existential shock which is completely unprepared for. As a result, he's in a state of shock, both mental and physical, and he stumbles out of the house, into the city, through the streets, and then out of the city. According to the text—and the text is the Mahavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka, the first history of the Sangha, the earliest history, so these stories come from there—he leaves the city via the gate, aided by the non-humans, amanussā, according to the text, who help him out.

We kind of read this or listen to this and think, well, you walk through the gate and apparently somebody helped him. But the non-humans, the amanussā, are some kind of spirits. Keep in mind that this is an ancient Indian city. At night, the gates are closed and locked for security purposes. Outside every gate there would be a kind of basic motel for travelers who arrived after sunset when the gates were shut, so they could stay there overnight. There is no way those gates would be opened. It's just too dangerous. The gates are carefully guarded by the troops.

And each gate is also guarded by spirits. The way this was done, particularly for city gates which were very important, was that either a powerful local spirit would be captured in some way and trapped there with the use of an image, or if they couldn't manage that, they would execute criminals at the gate and bury them. Their vengeful ghosts would become guardians of the gate. So these spirits at the gates were not happy, friendly spirits at all. And yet they help him through, and he's getting through a locked gate with lots of human guards, but somehow he passes. You can see that we're in the realm of fairy story here.

So he stumbles out of the city. One would presume a banker's house would have a few guards and locks on it too, wouldn't it? And well-paid individuals guarding them.

Gates, of course, are important because they're liminal places—places of transition. To move through a gate is to move from one state to another. They're places of potentiality where what is normally taken for granted as real becomes unstuck and something else can emerge. I think this whole story of the gate emphasises this transformative process which is going on for Yasa.

So he wanders north mumbling "the terror, the horror" and happens to stumble into the Buddha, who is doing walking meditation. This is not long before dawn. The Buddha has gotten up early and is doing his walking meditation. He sees Yasa coming and hears him mumbling, and he says, "This is not terrible, not horrifying. Come, Yasa, and I will teach you Dharma."

The Buddha sees Yasa and immediately recognises someone whose mind is ripe as a result of this profound shock. Everything that he thinks is real turns out not to be. Everything that he thinks is worth holding on to turns out not to be. In this state of profound shock, the Buddha sees someone who's ready for the teaching.

So the Buddha gives progressive instruction: dana, sila, and then sagga, the heavens. Dana is generosity. Sila is ethics. The heavens mean if you are generous and ethical, you are doing good things. Your karma is good, so your vipāka—the ripening of these actions—is very positive, and these will give you noticeable

benefits in recognisable form in terms of living a good life. Of course this gets extended beyond death, life after life—the heavens. Heaven is basically having a good time without any restriction. These are the mundane benefits of leading a good life.

Then he talks about the danger or disadvantage in sensual stimulation and the benefits of letting go or renunciation. Yasa is listening to this progressive instruction—first the basics. With progressive instruction you give a very basic teaching and then check: have you got that? Have you connected with that? Maybe you stop there because that's as far as the person can go. But if they can go a step further, you take it the next step. If you think they've got that and they're ready to go further, you take it the next step.

This progressive instruction is a graded introduction into the Dharma, a basic template that many traditions use. Finally, when Yasa's heart was quite ready, receptive, free from hindrances, eager and trustful, then the Buddha hits him with the four truths: dukkha, its arising, its cessation and the path. The Buddha teaches him the same thing he taught the five ascetics after he had opened them up with the middle way. Here he teaches Yasa, who's a layman, after opening him up with this progressive instruction.

As a result, Yasa attains the first stage of awakening. He sees the Dharma. This is what's going on. He's enlightened, at least to the first stage.

This is the first time that this idea of progressive instruction is mentioned. But the Buddha uses it now again and again. It's like the Buddha is working out how to spread this further. He's got the five, but he has to teach other people as well. How is he going to do that? So he works out this template of progressive instruction, and Yasa is the guinea pig. There's a sense in which the Buddha has been waiting for him to turn up.

Of course, Yasa is a lay person. This is the first lay person who is being taught serious dharma. And when it's done—bang—the first lay person to attain the first stage of awakening.

So Yasa was taken care of. Meanwhile, time had passed. The household had awakened, and people realized that the young man of the house—the heir to the fortune—had vanished. Of course there was pandemonium. Chaos erupted as everyone desperately searched for him. Had he been killed? Had he been kidnapped? How could he have simply disappeared? What was happening?

Yasa's father, presumably at the head of something of a posse, went out in search of his son and also headed north, eventually meeting the Buddha. By this stage, there was daylight. They had eaten breakfast and were sitting around. So there was the Buddha sitting with the five companions plus Yasa, and then Yasa's father approaching with a posse from the distance.

The Buddha thought, "I should try to avoid distracting Yasa senior, the father." So what he did was exercise his shamanic power and cause Yasa, who was sitting right there, to disappear—to vanish. This is interesting because it shows the Buddha as shaman, a side of his character which tends to be written out but was very much part of his identity.

The Buddha then calmed down Yasa's father and gave him progressive instruction. Sure enough, the father also attained stream entry and became the first person to take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—which is what we chant each night. He was the first person to do that. You can see that the institution of Buddhism was beginning to take shape, along with lay practitioners.

During this talk, Yasa was listening and reviewing his understanding as it progressed. As a result, he attained full awakening as he sat there. The text says: "Then Yasa, son of a good family, as the Dharma was being taught, reviewed the degrees to which he had seen and experienced, and by not clinging, his heart was liberated from the taints."

"He reviewed the degrees which he had seen and experienced." Those familiar with the system of ñāṇas, of insight knowledges, know that there is one called review, and this is the first mention of it in the texts. It's interesting that awakening is something that can be thought about, considered, reviewed. There's a rationality within this understanding that we're developing. It's direct, it's intuitive, but there's also rationality in it. The two sides sometimes struggle—too much imposition of rationality kills the experience, while not enough rationality makes it meaningless and chaotic.

So Yasa ordained and became a bhikkhu. Word of this spread throughout the city. Four of Yasa's friends came out to visit him, and they converted, ordained, and became fully awakened. Others came, and basically the word was spreading—notice it was spreading throughout the merchants of Varanasi.

This is really important. The Buddha very early on realized that if he was going to make a go of it in terms of building something significant, he needed people with money. He targeted them immediately. The first lay people he approached were the commercial elite of a commercial city. It sounds like a Sayadaw's model.

Finally, when there were sixty arahants plus the Buddha—making sixty-one fully awakened ones—he sent them out into the world. There you get the famous passage: "Don't go two by two, but singly, and go off for the benefit of the many, the welfare of the many," and so on.

I find this very interesting because these people were very new. We don't know how long the Buddha spent there—weeks, maybe months—but they were very new. They were fully awakened, and many of them were very young. Yet he simply sent them out: "Just go off and do whatever you do." And not even in pairs within a system of control where "I'll watch you, you watch me. If he does anything bad, report back to headquarters." The Sayadaw would do that. But no—it was one by one.

In other words, he has complete confidence in these people, complete faith in them. "You just go and do it. Off you go."

The Buddha himself says, "I shall go to Uruvela, to Sena Nigama, to teach the Dharma." So he sends everybody else out to wander around the world, but the Buddha has a very specific place that he intends to go to.

It's interesting that although the Buddha is very successful in Varanasi, he doesn't stay there, nor apparently does he return. I don't know of any other stories about him which are set in Varanasi. He starts there, he has a spectacular success, but then he leaves and he doesn't come back.

So why not? Possibly because it just wasn't important enough. Varanasi was on the borderland between the two rival kingdoms of Magadha to the east and Kosala to the west. Wars were fought between them, and sometimes one side would grab it and sometimes the other. At this point it belongs to Magadha—it was the dowry of King Pasenadi of Kosala's sister, who had married King Bimbisara of Magadha. So at this point it belonged to Magadha, though later it would be fought over again.

The Buddha heads east toward Magadha, which is one of the two major kingdoms. It's also an area that he's familiar with. He's been there before and had apparently met King Bimbisara before, according to legend. So he's going to the big city in an area that he already knows, where people know him—not as the Buddha, but they know him because he's been there before when he was a wandering ascetic, possibly even before he began his ascetic practices, when he was on his way to find a place where he could undertake them.

Maybe what was happening was he wanted to go to the center of things. He was planning to build an empire. If you strike it big as a guru in, say, Australia, and you want to hit the big time, what do you do? Do you stay in Australia? No, you go to the US. Because if you make it big there, you can spread across the planet. I think the Buddha basically had the same business plan. In fact, later on, when he gets an offer to go to Kosala by a rich merchant from Shravasti, he quickly abandons Magadha and makes his headquarters in Kosala, which was the biggest kingdom.

So the Buddha is a man with a strategy. He's got a plan. He's picked up this idea of teaching. At first he thought, "I don't know if it's even possible." It works, at least for all these crazy ascetics. Then he's trying to work out, "But can I include lay people here?" And sure enough, it works. "Okay, now I've got a product, and I can market this. I'm ready now."

So off he goes to the big smoke. But before he goes, he's got an important errand to do. Because he doesn't go to Rajagaha, which is the capital—he goes to a small district called Sena Nigama at Uruvela. This is an area in the Gaya district on the banks of the Uruvela River, not far from where he was awakened, so he knows this area.

And he enters the territory of the three dreadlocks wearers, the jatila. These are ascetics who have dreadlocks, and they're brothers. Each of them is called Kashyapa, which probably means they were Brahmins. There was Kashyapa of Uruvela, who was head of 500 ascetics; Kashyapa of the river, Nadi Kashyapa, head of 300 ascetics; and Kashyapa of Gaya, Gaya Kashyapa, head of 200 ascetics. So these are three brothers, each of whom are major teachers in their own right.

And the Naga, whose residence this is—the Buddha has essentially walked uninvited and unannounced

into the living room of a powerful and not particularly good-tempered spirit who doesn't appreciate this intrusion at all. The Naga becomes enraged and produces smoke and flame to indicate his irritation.

The Buddha sits there calmly and produces smoke and flame in response. "You can do it, I can do it."

This escalates into a full supernatural battle. The entire fire chamber fills with flames as these two beings engage in a contest of psychic powers. Through the night, smoke and fire pour from the building. Outside, Kasapa and his ascetics watch in amazement and growing concern as their sacred fire chamber appears to be burning down. They're convinced that this beautiful young samana, impressive though he seemed, is surely being incinerated by the terrible Naga.

But when dawn comes, the Buddha emerges from the fire chamber completely unharmed, carrying the Naga coiled peacefully in his alms bowl. The spirit has been completely subdued—not destroyed, but tamed and converted. This is a crucial detail: the Buddha doesn't kill or banish the Naga. He transforms their relationship from one of hostility to one of peace.

Kasapa is astounded. This is clearly no ordinary ascetic. But he's not quite ready to concede spiritual superiority. "Great indeed is the Samana," he admits, "great indeed is his psychic power. But he is not awakened like me."

This becomes the refrain throughout what follows. Each time the Buddha demonstrates miraculous powers, Kasapa acknowledges his greatness while maintaining that he himself is still the awakened one, the spiritual authority in this territory.

What unfolds next is an extraordinary series of supernatural demonstrations. The Buddha stays with Kasapa's community, and day after day performs miraculous feats. He appears to be playing a very deliberate game, systematically displaying different categories of psychic abilities.

When the ascetics need to gather wood for their fire sacrifices, the Buddha causes all the wood they need to appear magically, perfectly cut and ready. When they need to light their fires, he lights them with his mind. When they need their ritual implements—axes, hatchets, various tools—these appear spontaneously. He demonstrates mastery over the elements, over matter itself.

He shows that he can read minds by answering unspoken questions. He demonstrates clairvoyance by describing distant events as they happen. He multiplies himself, appearing in several places simultaneously. He walks through walls as if they were empty space. He rises into the air and moves through the sky like a bird.

Each miracle is precisely calculated to address the specific spiritual obsessions of these fire-worshipping ascetics. They spend their time gathering wood, lighting fires, performing ritual sacrifices. The Buddha shows that he can accomplish effortlessly what requires all their elaborate ceremonial effort.

But he does it carefully so that the Naga is not harmed.

The Naga angrily blazes up in fire, in flame. And so the Buddha enters into the fire element and he also blazes up in flame. The text says that with both of them ablaze, it was like the fire chamber itself was in flames, burning and blazing.

All of these ascetics—five hundred of them—are sitting around watching, because everybody wants to see this. Their whole fire chamber is just burning away with huge flames. They're looking at this thinking, "We haven't seen this before. This is interesting." And they say, "The great Samana, who is so beautiful"—and it's interesting, this is what people would say about the Buddha when they met him—"The great Samana, who is so beautiful, is being destroyed by the Naga."

In the morning, the flames have died down. Of course, the place is still there—these are shamanic, magical flames. Out of the door steps the Buddha, completely unharmed, totally cool. He's carrying his bowl, as usual, because he's a bhikkhu, a beggar. He walks up to Kasapa and stands in front of him.

Kasapa looks into the bowl, and there's the ferocious royal Naga—now a tiny little snake all curled up, completely harmless. The Buddha explains to Kasapa how the Naga's fire was exhausted by fire—fighting fire with fire.

Kasapa doesn't say anything, but he thinks to himself: "This guy is very powerful, but he's not an Arahant like I am. He's not fully awakened like I am."

What's happening, of course, is the Buddha is acting as a shaman. In entering into that fire chamber, he's deliberately challenging the Naga. It's no accident. This is quite deliberate and quite macho—come out and fight. In winning and showing his mastery over the fire element, he's also challenging Kasapa, but indirectly.

Kasapa's practice revolves around the fire element, and the Buddha is in effect saying—without actually saying the words—"I am much more powerful than you are and therefore superior." This is the challenge that Kasapa is receiving. The Buddha is showing himself to be a master of one-upmanship.

But Kasapa is impressed, but not converted. The reason is because he feels that power is one thing, but awakening is another. "Okay, this guy is incredibly powerful. In fact, he's so powerful, the sooner we get rid of him, the better. But so what? That doesn't mean he's awakened—like me."

He apparently welcomes the Buddha into the community as an honored guest, but he does not take the Buddha's superior power as evidence of awakening. That instinct is very good—people often confuse power with awakening. You can have a guru who can manifest all sorts of power, be incredibly charismatic, and people think, "Oh, he's got these powers, he must be awakened." But it's complete bullshit. Power is power. Awakening is awakening. They're not the same thing.

Kasapa knows that. He's a man of wisdom. You can see why the Buddha wants him, because what the Buddha is doing is trying to convert this guy. He really wants him in the company.

But Kasapa is also very stubborn, which reminds us, of course, of the Buddha before his awakening. He was very stubborn too. You can't help but feel that the Buddha knows exactly who he's dealing with. In a sense, it's like he's dealing with his pre-enlightenment self—what he was like, except this guy is in a different tradition.

The problem Kasapa has is he's deluded about the nature of awakening. He thinks he's awakened, but he's not.

And the Buddha needs to hammer this out, get this view out of his mind.

Now when the Buddha was dealing with the five ascetics, how he opened them up was by the middle way. Here he's got a different person in a different context and he's using a completely different method. And it's really interesting because it's not a method he uses again. These are very weird stories. But for Kasapa he thinks this is the way. I've got to hammer this guy. And so he does.

So the Buddha takes up residence in a jungle thicket near Kasapa's hermitage. You notice that Kasapa on the one hand treats him as an honored guest but on the other hand keeps him at arm's length. He doesn't want him too close. It's like there's a wariness in the relationship.

Anyway, that night the Buddha is meditating and the four divine kings come to the Buddha. Now these are gods—the god of the north, the south, the east and the west. And they're just above the earth realm. So they're quite junior. So they come and visit the Buddha and they light up his jungle thicket quite like pillars of fire. So again you have fire. And there are four pillars of fire in this little jungle clearing, blazing away all night. And if you imagine Kasapa and the ascetics are having a hard time getting to sleep because they look up, oh my God, those pillars of fire are still there.

Anyway, next morning, Kasapa turns up to tell the Buddha that the meal is ready. They're feeding him. He's a guest. And he says, so you had some visitors last night? And the Buddha says, yes, yes, the four divine kings, they came. And so Kasapa is impressed, but he continues to think, very powerful, that he's not enlightened like I am.

So then you get this bizarre relationship that develops. The Buddha sticks around. He's like the man who came to dinner. He won't leave. And they can't get rid of him because he's so powerful. So they keep him kind of tucked away and hope that this whole thing blows over before it gets weird.

Anyway, next two nights, the same events take place. The first night, Sakka, ruler of the gods, turns up, blazing fire. The next night, Brahma Sahampati, blazing fire. Remember him? He was the one who persuaded the Buddha to teach. Each morning, Kasapa turns up to invite the Buddha to the meal. I noticed you had a visitor last night. Yes, yes, Brahma Sahampati. He just came in for a chat. But again Kasapa responds in the same way.

Next Kasapa has a great sacrifice that has to be done. Now this is a big occasion. People are coming from

all over Magadha and Anga. Anga is the territory to the east. So this is southeast Ganges Valley and it has its own particular regional kind of spirituality. Within this region Kasapa is a very important figure. He's known all over the region and when he has his annual great sacrifice people come from all over to attend.

Now he's worried because he hopes the Buddha doesn't actually show up and upstage him by displaying some showy miracle. So he's a bit agitated because if he did, Kasapa might lose his customers. They might all go over to this new guy. Now the Buddha of course knows what he's thinking and so he makes a point of quietly disappearing and not interfering.

So it doesn't say whether they were killing living beings or whether it was a sacrifice more symbolic like the Vedic sacrifice involved ghee and various other things put into fire. There are different forms of sacrifice. We don't know which kind. I suspect non-violent, these are ascetics, so I suspect symbolic things were tossed into the fire. There'd be chanting, ritual and so on.

Now that means the Buddha decides he's not going to get fed by the ascetics so he goes on alms round. And so he goes to Uttarakuru and gathers food there and then takes it to Lake Anottata in order to eat it.

Now you're probably wondering, where is Uttarakuru? Remember we talked about the four great continents. In the middle was Mount Meru. The Buddha lives on the southern continent, and Uttarakuru is the northern continent. So the Buddha flies over Mount Meru, goes on alms round, flies up to the lake which is in the Himalayas, and has his breakfast there.

Next morning Kasapa turns up and says, "So where were you yesterday?"

"Oh well, I just went to the northern continent for alms round and then I had my breakfast at this lake in the Himalayas. I wanted to avoid the rush hour."

So Kasapa is getting really stressed by this stage. This is getting weirder and weirder.

Anyway, that day the Buddha acquires a piece of discarded cloth. The way he makes his robe, he collects discarded cloth and he washes it and prepares it. He collects it so when he's got enough he can make a robe. He collects this bit of cloth and he wants to wash it, except that there's no suitable washing place in his jungle thicket. But no problem, because Sakka, king of the gods, rockets down and creates a pond so he can wash it.

But then he realizes that he can't wash it properly because he hasn't got a stone to beat it upon. But no problem—Sakka provides a stone for him. And then he's got to hang it to dry. And Sakka, who is still there... No, actually, this time it's not Sakka. There's a kadumba tree, and the spirit of that tree, the deva of that tree, bends a branch down so it can be used as a washing line to dry out his cloth.

Next morning, Kasapa turns up, invited for breakfast. "Hmm, that pond wasn't there before. I don't recall seeing that stone before. That branch wasn't there before. So okay, how did all this happen?"

"Well, I got this cloth and Sakka turned up, then the tree deity bent the branch."

"Okay, okay, very powerful, but you're not enlightened like I am."

And then on successive days, Kasapa comes to invite Buddha to the meal. The Buddha says, "Look, just go on without me." Now apparently the meal was actually taken at the fire chamber. So Kasapa walks back to the fire chamber, enters, and the Buddha's already sitting there. So he just kind of flew there. But not only that, he's sitting there with some fruit that he's just collected—except that the kind of fruit that he has is fruit that can't be found within five hundred kilometers.

On the last occasion, the Buddha's sitting there with a flower from the heaven of the Thirty-three Devas. So you get this sense of just escalation here.

Next day, the ascetics have to... they're fire ascetics. They worship the fire. So they use up a lot of wood. They're constantly chopping up logs for the fire. But suddenly they can't split logs. They just can't do it. And Kasapa suspects the Buddha's intervention here. The Buddha is interfering in some way. And sure enough, the Buddha turns up and says, "You blokes seem to have a problem."

"Yeah, we just can't split logs."

And then the Buddha goes, more or less, "Let the logs be split." And suddenly, all the logs are split. "Go ahead, no problem."

And then the next day, this time they can split the logs, but they can't light the fires. But the Buddha turns up—"Ah, okay"—and the fires are lit. And the next day they can split the logs, they can light the fires, but they can't put them out. So the Buddha turns up—"Oh, you've got a problem there"—and the fires go out.

So every day the Buddha's just chipping away at Kasapa. And every day Kasapa has the same response.

"Yeah, very impressive, but you're not enlightened like I am."

This continues for twenty-four days, until the eight mid-winter nights arrive. During these nights—the coldest of the year—the ascetics perform their ceremonial bathing in the river. The Buddha, in his compassion, creates five hundred braziers so they can warm themselves when they emerge from the icy water. Here we see his metta and karuna, his loving-kindness and compassion flowing forth. Yet again, it's expressed through this showmanship, this extravagant display of magical powers.

Twenty-four days after all this begins, a flash flood strikes. The place where the Buddha is staying becomes completely inundated. The next day, Kasapo worries about him and comes in a boat—the only way to travel after such flooding. Sure enough, everywhere is covered by water except the Buddha's little jungle thicket, which remains completely dry. There sits the Buddha on the earth.

Seeing the boat above, the Buddha rises into the air and lands gracefully on Kasapo's vessel. And Kasapo responds exactly as before.

At this point, the Buddha recognizes it's time to change tactics. He thinks, "This foolish fellow will continue thinking like this for a long time." He decides he must put the boot in differently. So he says to Kasapo: "You are not an arahant, nor are you on the way to becoming one. There is nothing in your practice by which you might become an arahant or enter into the way of becoming one."

This time he verbally dismantles him. You're not an arahant—forget about it. And there's nothing you're doing that will ever get you there. You are wasting your time completely.

Now Kasapo finally cracks. He's convinced. Why does he break at this point? Because over the past twenty-four days, the Buddha has made it abundantly clear that he knows Kasapo's practice and can perform it much better than Kasapo himself can—effortlessly, in fact. If anyone knows where this practice leads, it would have to be the Buddha. Nobody could doubt that anymore.

Kasapo must have been deeply sincere in his spiritual aspiration, because he has much to lose. This man is a major spiritual leader with five hundred disciples, known throughout eastern India. Now someone is telling him that what he's doing is complete nonsense—that he's utterly deluded and will never reach enlightenment. But he's a genuine practitioner, and when he recognizes his error, he admits it. He surrenders and converts.

However, he must consult with his followers. He has students and feels responsible for them. So he approaches them: "This is the situation. I've decided I must convert. What do you think?"

They look at each other and respond: "We have long had faith in the great samana. If you lead the highest life under him, we will do likewise."

Of all five hundred ascetics, Kasapo was the last to understand what was happening. Isn't this typical of leaders? They're always the last to figure out what's going on.

The ascetics then took their hair, their dreadlocks, their belongings, and their implements for fire sacrifice, and dropped them all into the water to be carried away. They gathered everything from their ritual practice, shaved off their dreadlocks, and cast it all into the river.

The ascetics are abandoning a particular form of practice they now see as incompatible with the Buddha's way. But why put everything in the river? It's tempting to think they're simply throwing these things away—that this is all junk now, superstitious claptrap they once considered important but now chuck away in contempt for their past delusion as they march into the light of true faith.

But actually no, what they're doing is they're making an offering to the devas, quite respectfully. Remember the story about King Arthur and his sword Excalibur? Early in his career he received the sword from the Lady of the Lake, and that was the sacred sword he used throughout his career. When he was dying—I forget whether he threw the sword into the lake or ordered somebody else to throw it. Gawain, perhaps. So the sword is thrown. Gawain probably had no idea what was going on: "Why are you

chucking away this sword?" It flies through the air, and before it hits the lake, an arm comes out, grabs it, and disappears. He's offering it back to where it came from. It's an act of respect, not contempt.

I think the ascetics are doing the same thing. They are not rejecting their gods. What they're doing is changing their practice. That's the big difference.

Buddhism absorbs. It does not simply reject. Classically, when Buddhism comes to a new culture, it doesn't say, "Right, you're all doing the wrong thing. Stop doing it right now. From now on, you do what we tell you to do." Rather, they look around: "Okay, these practices that you do—they're really good. Perhaps you could understand them in a slightly different way. These practices over there, they're not so good. They're akusala. They just lead to harm and suffering. You'd be better off without them. These gods you worship—keep worshiping them. Worship the same gods. There's no problem. These people you respect, you should continue to respect them."

So Buddhism absorbs. It doesn't fight against. It doesn't reject. And this is happening here.

You notice also how everyone takes for granted the existence of other worlds and that these worlds intersect with our world. The world of the Naga Raja, the world of the devas of the river and of the forests, the world of people—these are different worlds, and yet the worlds of the various gods, tree spirits, and so forth intersect. This is fundamental to the belief system at the time.

Anyway, all this equipment floats downstream and is seen by Nadi Kasapa, Kasapa of the river. When he sees this, he fears disaster has overtaken his brother. He and his students rush upstream to see what's going on, but everyone's there, everyone seems very happy—except they've shaved their heads and they're not doing what they used to do.

Kasapa of the river asks his brother, "Is this better, Kasapa?"

And Kasapa says, "It is."

So Nadi Kasapa converts along with his group. They do the same thing.

Meanwhile, the stuff is floating downstream. It turns up at the camping site of Gaya Kasapa and his followers. They go upstream. Same thing: "Is this better, Kasapa?"

"Yes, it is."

So they join as well.

Now there are—how many are we talking about? The numbers, of course, are symbolic. They're not literal. So five hundred is a very great number. Three hundred is a lot.

When you see these numbers in the Buddha's teachings, and this is typical of oral traditions, they're symbolic rather than literal. Two hundred is a lot, but not so much compared to three hundred or five

hundred. But still, there must have been substantial gatherings.

Did the lay supporters come out and cook meals as they typically did for bhikkhus? We don't know the exact rules for these ascetics. It's possible they could cook for themselves, perhaps collecting uncooked grain to store and prepare when needed. One of the rules in the Vinaya stipulates that a bhikkhu cannot accept uncooked grain—it must already be cooked to prevent food storage. But we don't know precisely what rules these fire-worshippers followed.

What we do know is that India at this time was one of the wealthiest, most cosmopolitan, and sophisticated societies on earth. It could easily support large numbers of samaṇas and brāhmaṇas.

At this point, having converted them through his demonstration of power and superior shamanic abilities, the Buddha had not yet taught them anything at all. He takes them away from this area to Gayā-sīsa, a hill near Gayā. The surrounding area is flat plain, and in the middle rises this hill called Gayā-sīsa, the "Head of Gayā."

Taking them to the summit, he delivers the Ādittapariyāya Sutta—the Fire Sermon. This third discourse completes the trilogy. Notice the extraordinary preparation he undertook—softening them up for almost a month just so he could deliver the Dharma. And of course, being the Buddha, it would be Dharma perfectly suited for this particular audience.

Tomorrow night we'll examine that discourse—the third teaching. Tonight has been bedtime stories; tomorrow we delve into the profound teaching itself.

"You mentioned there was a famous passage about going forth singly, yet all the other accounts I've read show them always in groups. When did he change his approach?"

He might have changed it later when establishing formal rules. At this early time, there were virtually no rules. The regulations developed gradually over time—when someone did something inappropriate, they would establish a guideline against it. This was a period of minimum rules and maximum enlightenment.

There's another famous incident where, many years later, someone asked the Buddha: "When we started out, we had few rules and abundant enlightenment. Now we have countless rules and little enlightenment. What happened?" The Buddha essentially replied, "Yes, that's the way it is. That's how it's always been."

"Where does this fabulous story come from?"

The Mahāvagga, in the opening section of the Vinaya Piṭaka—I believe it's called the Mahākhandhaka. It begins with this history of the Saṅgha, containing the earliest layer of stories about how the monastic community began.

"There weren't many stories about the Buddha's magical powers, were there?"

No, in fact he later refuses to engage in such displays. From then on he was very discreet, but here he's wielding these powers freely. Again, it's this quality of shamanic power, that aspect of him emerging.

For example, when all this is finished, he goes to Rājagaha and establishes himself there. Then he receives an invitation from a wealthy supporter—Anāthapiṇḍika, the model of generosity—to come to Sāvatthī, where he would build a monastery. So the Buddha moves to Sāvatthī, where he encounters King Pasenadi. To succeed in Kosala, he must establish good relations with Pasenadi, who was known as something of a volatile ruler.

And he has the first encounter and manages to convert him. But now the Buddha is quite young at this time and Pasenadi is also quite young. I think they're actually the same age. And Pasenadi arrives and says, "You know, so you claim to be fully enlightened. Well, a whole number of big time teachers have come through here because this is the most important part of the world, mate. And none of them—and these are old and venerable and respected teachers—none of them have claimed to be fully enlightened. Here you are, some young whippersnapper, nobody's heard of, just wandered into town and you claim to be fully enlightened. Why on earth should anyone take you seriously?"

And the subtext being: why shouldn't I just consider you a fraud, drag you off to prison and chop you in pieces?

And the Buddha replies something along the lines of: "There are four things that you must never underestimate because of their youth: a fire, a kṣatriya, a warrior, a snake, and a Buddha."

And so you've got Pasenadi who is not so subtly threatening him, and the Buddha comes back and threatens him even more. "Mess with me mate, and it will be a big mistake."

He's a mighty warrior himself and so he's sort of talking his language to him. He understands power. A bit of shirt fronting there. That's ritual shirt fronting. And the Buddha wins. And Pasenadi says, "Okay. I can see I've got a venomous young snake in my garden, and I will let him alone."

So this shamanic, powerful side of the Buddha—it's there, but it tends to be kind of not noticed so much. It's not exaggerated, but it's highlighted in Tibetan teachings, like the Mahayana teachings, the powers, the magical powers, the forces of floating gold and lotus and all that sort of stuff. Because they have a strong shamanic tradition. And again, Buddhism absorbs. It goes to a place with a strong shamanic tradition—it just buddhizes it.

Even in Zen, there's a shamanic tradition in Zen stories. It pops up there, but again, it's quite on the side. It tends not to be noticed.

"So Patrick, this term 'the Buddha'—that was an ideal before the Buddha was enlightened? They used that term?"

Yeah, they used the term *jina*. Mahavira, who was older than the Buddha, claimed to be fully enlightened.

He was jina, the conqueror. But he was also buddha, awakened. But jina was the major title, buddha was a minor one. With the Buddha, buddha was his major title, but jina was a minor one. So he just took the same language. I think tathāgata would have been something he borrowed. So some of the basic terms he borrowed.

So this is part of the yoga tradition. You have shamans, you have yogis, you have ascetics. And you have whole groups of these people with this ideal of enlightenment. You have the Brahmin priests and they don't have an ideal of enlightenment. They just follow the law and control society as the way it should be.

So you have this tremendous multicultural variety at the time of the Buddha. All sorts of strange characters. And the Buddha kind of flowing among them and getting converts from all of these different parts of society and bringing them together under one roof.

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