The Mirror of Dharma Part 1

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 51:31

This is the first in a series of four talks on the theme, The Mirror of Dharma. And I have to confess, I'm making this up as I go along, so I hope it's not too ragged around the edges. But we shall hope and see.

So let's begin. This comes from a talk—a long, obviously a very long talk—given by Mahasi Sayadaw in 1960 to what is described in the title as "fully practiced yogis." The purpose of it was to help them be confident in reading their own experience, in understanding their own experience. The talk was published for limited circulation, and presumably limited only to mature practitioners or fully practiced yogis, perhaps. When I was in Malaysia one time, I came across a typed photocopy of this, which was given to me. So I took it home and promptly worked on it. And I was pondering what to do in this retreat, whether we should have a series of Wednesday night talks. I thought, well, the Mirror of Dharma—that would be a good place to start. So here we are.

We're back in 1960. Mahasi Sayadaw is teaching these practitioners, and they are essentially graduates of his meditation system. He was teaching them so that they could make an assessment of their own practice and an assessment about their level of attainment—what had they attained in the course of doing all this?

The thing is, of course, that assessing one's own practice and assessing one's own level of attainment is not easy or straightforward. Mahasi said to them: "Some would hold the opinion that every yogi can decide for himself on the stage of insight knowledge experienced by him, together with its name. That's just not so. For their knowledge, they will mostly know the uniqueness of samādhi ñāṇa, knowledge born of concentration, but are not capable of deciding on the naming of the particular insight."

In other words, he's saying what we understand when we meditate is the specific events that we go through as the practice develops. But we don't know the name of these events, these experiences. We can't read the experience. We don't know what it means. We don't know where it fits in a broader context.

Mahasi Sayadaw adds that the only person who can actually recognize somebody else's attainment is the Buddha, who of course is not available. And since he's not available, this suggests the importance of the yogi being independent. They can't rely on the Buddha to tell them what's going on. And they need to be accurate in their assessment. If nobody can tell me what's going on, then I have to decide for myself. But how can I if I don't understand my own practice experience and how that individual experience fits into a broader system?

So here we have Mahasi Sayadaw educating his graduate students on the meaning of what they have gone through. And he begins by going back to the Buddha, to a particular discourse. We're going to look at this

discourse. This is Saṃyutta Nikāya 55.8, The Brick Hall.

It begins: "This is how I heard it. Once upon a time, the Blessed One was living at Nātika in the brick hall. Then Venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One, greeted him respectfully, sat down to one side, and said to him: 'Bhante, the bhikkhu named Sāḷha has died. What is his destination? What is his future state? The bhikkhunī named Nandā has died. What is her destination and future state? The male lay follower named Sudatta has died. What is his destination and future state? The female lay follower named Sujātā has died. What is her destination and future state?'"

First of all, you notice that everybody here takes for granted life after life. That's just a given. And everybody takes for granted that the conditions of one's rebirth is a direct reflection on the maturity of one's practice. So this question is really asking: How far did these people get in their practice? Were they enlightened?

The first thing that strikes me when I read this is how the love of gossip about one's fellow practitioners goes back a very long way, right back to the beginning. Don't we all want to know? There are a number of different discourses in which the Buddha is asked this question for different people.

But we're just looking at this one. And in this instance, the Buddha begins by answering the question directly.

He explains that Salha is an Arahant, meaning fully awakened. Nanda attained "spontaneous birth due to attain Nibbana without returning from that world." Sudatta "became a once-returner," and Sujata "had, with the utter destruction of three fetters, become a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the netherworld, fixed in destiny, with awakening as her destination."

So each of these people had attained some measure of enlightenment, from full awakening in Salha's case, down to stream-entry for Sujata.

For the Buddha, awakening is not a binary. It's not that we're unawakened and then suddenly—bang—we're fully awakened. It's a process. And this makes a great deal of sense when you get to know the Buddha's teaching, because he's always talking about process. The practice is a process. Life is a process. Death is a process. So it's not surprising that awakening, enlightenment, is also a process.

He says there are four stages of awakening. In order, these are: stream-entry (*sotapanna*), once-returner (*sakadagami*), non-returner (*anagami*), and fully awakened (*arahant*).

Let's get a sense of what he's talking about here.

Starting at the top, we have the arahant, who is fully awakened. *Arahant* literally means "worthy" or "deserving." The idea here is that there's an assumption that arahants are monks or nuns, bhikkhus or bhikkhunis. Lay people support bhikkhus and bhikkhunis in their practice—they feed them, house them, clothe them, look after them. But of course, the question swimming around in everybody's mind is: are

they worthy of this support? Are the lay people getting a return on their investment? The answer is yes, once the practitioner attains full awakening. But until then, not so much. So you can see that the standard is pretty high.

The standards have come down over the centuries, of course. When I was at the Mahasi Centre, we'd go in for interviews—for example, with U Pandita. He conducted his interviews in his reception room, which also had a large library of books. Now, in our culture, interviews are private, one-on-one. Close the door. Nobody else can hear. But there, you'd go into his room, and apart from your fellow practitioners lined up behind you sitting against the wall, there would be a Burmese family. Each day, a different family. And you might wonder, what on earth are they doing there?

Well, the answer is they're the ones who paid for today's meals. They're feeding the meditators that day, and they want to see what value they're getting for their investment. So they're checking out the practice standards. Nothing private about it—which is very interesting.

So this is the arahant. What is full awakening? Briefly, all greed, hatred, and ignorance are completely gone, vanished, and they're not coming back. Arahants are rare, particularly in today's world. And just as an aside, Mahasi Sayadaw was regarded as an arahant.

So that's at the top. At the bottom, we have the stream-enterer. Stream-enterers are those who have had the first glimpse of reality. In other words, they've experienced the *dhamma cakkhu*, the vision of Dharma, at least once. They are much more numerous—there are far more stream-enterers wandering around than there are arahants. In fact, Mahasi Sayadaw's practice system was designed specifically to bring ordinary people along from normal everyday delusion to stream-entry. Hence the "fully practiced yogis."

His talk is addressed to. So these are graduates of the system, which means, as far as anybody's aware, they've attained stream entry.

Now the central insight that characterizes stream entry—in other words, the central insight that this practice is aiming at—is conveyed by the idea of the abandonment of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, which can be translated as the view of the reality of the person. Sometimes you see it translated as "personality view," but it goes a lot deeper than what we would normally call personality. The stream-enterer directly realizes anattā, not-self, and recognizes that the identity he or she has constructed since birth is no more than a construction—a network of concepts that he or she has been busily building all this time. In other words, fundamentally, this individual person is not real. She is real only as a network of concepts. A person who actually gets this, who fully understands and embodies this, is one who is described as accomplished in view, diṭṭhi-sampanna. And this person has made the breakthrough, the abhisamaya.

We'll talk about this later on during these talks, but notice again that Mahasi Sayadaw's audience are these people. Presumably they wouldn't have been in that group if Mahasi Sayadaw thought they shouldn't be, so they probably were stream-enterers.

Stream-enterer at the bottom, Arahant at the top—and as we move from stream-entry to Arahant stage, we could chart the number of graduates of each level in a non-linear curve of ascending difficulty and rarity.

Now this is my personal opinion. People who could be reasonably considered as attaining the second stage of awakening are much rarer than those who made it to the first stage. People who could be reasonably considered as attaining the third stage of awakening are much rarer than those who made it to the second stage. And people who could be reasonably considered as attaining the fourth stage, the Arahant, are much rarer than those who made it to the third stage. Again, that's just my personal opinion based on my own observations.

The first one and the last one are both reasonably straightforward. The final one is fully awakened—pretty abstract, but it's clear intellectually, conceptually. And the first one is reasonably clear: direct recognition of not-self. But what about the in-betweeners, called once-returner and non-returner?

There are two ways to make sense of these classifications: psychological and cosmological. The names themselves are essentially cosmological, so let's start with the psychological.

This rests on the Buddha's distinction between the cognitive and the affective aspects of human nature, which we've already discussed in this retreat. When the Buddha talks about the cognitive problem that we have, or the problem that we have looked at cognitively, he says the problem is avijjā—ignorance or delusion. I don't know what's going on. And delusion is stronger than this: I don't know what's going on, but I think I do.

Sometimes I've heard Buddhists adopt an air of superiority over Christians because Christians are burdened with the doctrine of original sin. And I shake my head and say Buddhists are far worse off. We have original delusion. It's a lot worse.

Now the solution to this problem is bodhi—classically translated as enlightenment, though we've been translating it as awakening because linguistically that's actually what it means. So that's the cognitive aspect of the teaching.

Then you have the affective aspect. What is the fundamental problem that we have? It's what the Buddha calls taṇhā, literally thirst, and essentially it's drivenness—the drivenness of the heart. What's the solution to the problem? Nibbāna, or in English, nirvana, which is an affective term. It's the cooling of the heart.

You're probably all familiar with the idea of the three fires or the three poisons, often translated as greed, hatred, and ignorance. If you look at those three, you'll notice the first two are affective in nature—they're of the heart. I want. I hate. And the third is cognitive. For the Buddha, the power of the affective is central to understanding the human condition. The Western tradition emphasizes the centrality of rationality in human nature, so we tend to see humans as rational beings who also feel.

But the Buddha tends to see us as feeling beings who also think. And this is entailed in the idea of sentient beings that we've already talked about, where to be sentient is to feel and to be aware—but in particular to feel, and in particular to feel pain.

And this is where we see why the stages of awakening beyond stream entry are progressively more rare. Stream entry cuts through *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the view of the reality of the person. And you note that view is cognitive. So this initial breakthrough is cognitive in nature—it's not affective, it's cognitive. And this means that while the practitioner has significantly reduced the ignorance or delusion that characterizes the human condition, greed and hatred continue to roll on. The affective drive continues to haunt us.

So in ordinary everyday language, while we have a deeper understanding of what is going on, we remain driven by our disordered emotions. Now the advantage of the realization of stream entry, this vision of Dharma, is that although the practitioner still clings to the affective drives, when he is mindful, he sees what he's doing when he gets caught up in these, and he recognizes that no specific experience—including this experience of being driven—actually belongs to him. And when he recognizes this, he lets it go. If he forgets his mindfulness, he can get caught up again. But sooner rather than later, he will recognize what's going on and let go.

At the second stage of awakening, greed and hatred—in other words the affective drives—are greatly reduced. And at the third stage of awakening, all but the most subtle affective drives are gone. So what this model suggests is that of the three fires—greed, hatred and ignorance—the most difficult to abandon are the first two, greed and hatred. The affective drives are deeper and more difficult to come to terms with than the cognitive delusions.

So when we see that the practice of insight, *vipassanā*, favors the cognitive—seeing and understanding—this is because it's easier to change the cognitive. It's harder to change the affective. This is a kind of psychological explanation of the model.

But then there's the cosmological one, which in the Buddha's time they took for granted, but to us is alien. In the Buddha's cosmology, the human realm is located between the heavenly realms above and, roughly speaking, the hell realms below. The heavenly realms are those characterized by the dominance of happiness, and the hell realms are characterized by the dominance of pain. We are in the middle.

Cosmologically speaking, practitioners who attain the second and third stages will tend to be reborn in the higher and more subtle heavens. A second stage practitioner will "return once" to the human realm, while a third stage practitioner will "never return" to the human realm. Hence, "one-returner" and "never-returner." This is the basic model. It begins with the stream-enterers, and they're the ones we're going to focus on.

So let's come back to our discourse. We read how the Buddha answered these questions about the fate of his senior students after their death. However—if it's not too disrespectful to say that a Buddha sometimes

gets fed up—then he's showing clear signs of doing so in this discourse. After answering the question, the Buddha says:

"It is not surprising, Ānanda, that a human being should die. But if each time someone has died, you approach and question me about this, that will be annoying for the Tathāgata."

Tathāgata is how the Buddha would refer to himself—a title he used for himself. And so he says:

"I will teach you an explanation of Dharma called The Mirror of the Dharma. A mature student who is equipped with this could independently declare: 'I am one who is finished with hell, finished with the animal realm, finished with the domain of spirits, finished with the realms of misery, the bad destinations, the lower worlds.'"

So someone who has this Mirror of the Dharma can be confident in saying, "That's it, I'm done with these lower realms. I am a stream-enterer, no longer tied to the lower realms, fixed in destiny, with awakening as my destination."

No longer tied to the lower realms. Have you ever played the game Snakes and Ladders? It was invented in India. It illustrates *saṃsāra*. You go up on the ladders and down on the snakes. You're moving up, then you bump into a snake, and you're right down again.

So you stumble around, you get another ladder, you move up, crash, you're down again. This illustrates the Indian view of samsara. You're more likely to fall down than you are to rise up.

But one who is a mature student—and here "mature student" clearly means stream enterer—could independently declare, knowing it for themselves: "I am one who is finished with hell. I am a stream enterer, no longer tied to the lower worlds, fixed in destiny with awakening as my destination." I'm on my way, and I'm definitely getting there.

Now, you notice that despite the fact that the Buddha is being asked about students at every level of attainment, what he's concerned with is only to give an explanation for the first. And why is this? Possibly because this is the most common level of attainment, and therefore more people are concerned with it. But also perhaps because once the practitioner is clear about stream entry, then the higher levels of realization will also be clear, if in fact they arise. So it's the key. Understand this one and you'll get the whole lot.

Being clear about stream entry is central because once this attainment has been experienced, full awakening is guaranteed. The stream enterer is, as the texts say, "finished with the lower worlds." In terms of cosmology, the stream enterer will not be reborn beneath the human realm. As we've seen, for the Buddha, the human realm is the middle. It's between realms that are predominantly painful and realms that are predominantly pleasant.

Lower realms are so painful there's no opportunity for Dharma practice. Beings there are struggling just

to survive. Higher realms are so pleasant that the beings there are dull and complacent. They're not motivated to take up the practice. And if you look at the stories about the devas in the suttas, by and large they're a pretty self-satisfied, dull bunch. They've got basically no interest in Dharma because they're so busy enjoying themselves.

The human realm is characterized by a mixture of pleasure and pain. Isn't that why we are here? Because we live a life which is reasonably evenly mixed. Some people do live in hell realms. A friend of mine who's a mature practitioner and also a clinical psychologist once described his job to me this way: he reaches down into the hell realms and tries to lift his clients up into the human realm. That's how he sees his work.

To be in the human realm—in this sense of a roughly even mixture of pleasure and pain, enough pain to motivate us, enough pleasure to not destroy us—to be in this position is very valuable, and from the Buddha's cosmology, rare. Only a tiny minority of beings are in this realm.

There's one story which comes to mind here. In the Buddha's time, there was a young man who got religion and ordained. He meditated fiercely and determinedly. But unfortunately, he was so dedicated to his practice and so ascetic in his approach that he ended up killing himself. He died, like the Buddha before he became the Buddha almost did.

And what happened was this: he's meditating away with closed eyes, and then he opens his eyes because his meditation is over, and he's looking at the most gorgeous woman he's ever seen in his entire life. She's gobsmackingly gorgeous. And he's surprised. He says, "Who are you?" And she says, "I'm your wife." And he says, "What are you talking about? I'm a bhikkhu." And she says, "No you're not. You live in that palace over there." It's a fantastic palace, full of gorgeous women. And then he looks down and realizes he's endowed with a perfect sixteen-year-old body, adorned with jewellery and fine garments. He looks at this, he looks at her, and he thinks, "Oh no, I've gone and died and I'm in heaven."

Now fortunately, he has the presence of mind—he's only been there consciously for a number of seconds, so he hasn't yet completely forgotten his previous life. And he realises he's in deep trouble. So he uses his deva powers to rocket down to earth and seek out the Buddha.

He says, "I've got a terrible problem. I'm dead, and I'm in heaven. What do I do?"

And the Buddha teaches him the Dhamma. And he gets it. He attains stream entry. And he goes, "Phew!" Off he goes. And right now he's enjoying himself, but he knows he's heading to enlightenment. It'll take a bit longer because he's got a bit of enjoyment to go through first.

So these are the kinds of attitudes that people had in those days. The Buddha is saying that one who enters the stream is guaranteed that their practice and their psychological state will never collapse to the point that they can no longer make progress. They will make progress—maybe slowly, if they're really slack in their practice, or if they take a detour through heaven; maybe quickly, if they're diligent—but they will go forward, to the point that the stream-enterer can say of herself that she is, quote, "fixed in destiny,"

unquote, with awakening as her destination. She's on a one-way street to awakening. And by the way, the Buddha describes this practice of satipaṭṭhāna as a one-way street to awakening.

So you can see why it's extremely important that practitioners be very careful in their estimation of their own practice. What if I mistakenly thought that I've attained stream entry? What if my teacher mistakenly thought that I've attained stream entry? What if my teacher mistakenly thought that he or she attained stream entry?

If it was me, maybe at that point I would become complacent and drift away from the practice. After all, it's not essential that I continue it—not in this lifetime. But if I'm wrong, then I will end up a lot worse than I was before. And if I became a teacher on the basis of this mistake, I could do a lot of damage. So it's important to get this right.

In another discourse, the Buddha and Sāriputta are discussing the state of the stream-enterer. Sāriputta is one of the two chief students of the Buddha, and he's foremost in wisdom. The Buddha says that people talk about "the stream." What is this stream that people are talking about? And Sāriputta replies that the stream is the Noble Eightfold Path. Then the Buddha asks, "Then who is a stream-enterer?" And Sāriputta says that a stream-enterer is, quote, "one who is endowed with this Noble Eightfold Path."

Think about the image of a path, which is really basic to the Buddha's way of talking about things. Sometimes a path is hard and steep. Sometimes it goes around in circles. Sometimes it's suddenly blocked by rockfalls or other obstacles. Sometimes it extends through difficult deserts. It's hard work walking this path.

Then think of the image of a stream. Entering the stream, I'm automatically carried downstream to its ultimate destination—the ocean, or in this case, full awakening. This is what the simile of stream entry suggests. The practitioner, or the practice of Dhamma, has turned a corner such that the end result is now inevitable. The stream-enterer is heading to awakening. It's just a question of time.

Now just as an aside, Mahāsi Sayādaw says that awakening will inevitably arise in part because, at this level of attainment, the practitioner realises for herself the nature of this practice, making her independent in this practice. This is really important.

Mahāsi Sayādaw says, "The fact is that a sotāpanna already possesses the know-how regarding the method of practice, which cannot be forgotten in any existence. It is indeed unforgettable because it is solely awareness of the nāma-rūpa phenomena arising within oneself."

It is not the sort of thing which has to be recited and memorized.

What Mahasi Sayadaw is getting at here is the essential simplicity of the practice. And at this level of attainment, this essential simplicity has become vividly clear. The Mahasi method, quote-unquote, consists of various techniques and practices, and we have been going through some of these. You notice that when

we do these exercises, we jump through various meditation hoops—do this, do that, check out this, don't do that, and so on. But all of them are secondary to the basic principle of the practice, which consists, quote, "solely of awareness of the nama-rupa phenomena arising within oneself." In other words, continuous awareness of the flow of experience now. That's all. That's it. That is what Mahasi Sayadaw is teaching.

And once we realise the essence of the method, the method itself—the method as a method, as a technique—falls away. What's revealed is the radical simplicity of whatever is happening now. And this is not something that one can forget. One can, for example, go to another life and forget all about ever having done the Mahasi method, but it remains experientially clear that what's going on is a stream of phenomena. Now. That's it. That's what's happening. And this is the essence of the practice, which will never be forgotten, according to Mahasi Sayadaw.

Let us return to the Dhamma Mirror, the Brick Hall Sutta that we started with. What is that Dhamma explanation, the Mirror of Dhamma? This is the Buddha speaking:

"Here, a mature student has experiential faith in the Buddha in this way: This Blessed One is accomplished, fully awakened, endowed with understanding and conduct, well gone, the knower of worlds, the unsurpassed trainer of people with potential for training, teacher of gods and people, awakened and blessed.

He has experiential faith in the Dhamma in this way: The Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One—visible, immediate, verifiable, leading onwards, to be personally experienced by the wise.

He has experiential faith in the Sangha in this way: The community of the Blessed One's students has entered the good way. The community of the Blessed One's students has entered the straight way. The community of the Blessed One's students has entered the true way. The community of the Blessed One's students has entered the right way. That is, the four pairs of persons, the eight types of persons. This community of the Blessed One's students is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of respectful greetings—an incomparable field of auspicious action for the world.

And finally, he possesses the virtues dear to cultivated ones—unbroken, untorn, unblemished, unflawed, liberating, praised by the wise, not clung to, leading to concentration, leading to samadhi."

So the Buddha speaks of basically two qualities that characterise the stream-enterer: experiential faith, with the objects of that faith being Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha (which we won't elaborate on here as it becomes quite extensive), and virtues dear to cultivated ones—and these cultivated ones are the ariya.

Now why are these important? Let us start with faith. When we hear this, we might think of the stream-enterer as a convert—a person who has converted to Buddhism and therefore possesses complete faith. The early translators and commentators on the Buddha's teaching thought that was exactly what stream-entry was. They said, "Oh, this is obviously conversion, hence the faith business."

But the key to understanding what the Buddha is talking about is the idea of experiential faith. The stream-enterer has faith because she has directly experienced what the Buddha is talking about. Her practice has revealed to her a world that makes perfect sense, and within which she can live with satisfaction and well-being—a degree of satisfaction and well-being that was never available before, and perhaps not even imagined before.

She does not believe, quote-unquote, in this world, and she certainly doesn't believe in doctrines that can never be proved. She believes—if that's the right word—in her own experience. She believes in the undeniable facts of the way her life flows. This is experiential faith. And similarly, there is experiential faith in the Dhamma, the way things really are, and experiential faith in the Sangha, the community of practitioners. And of course, she is now a member of that community.

And then finally, the stream-enterer possesses, quote, "virtues dear to cultivated ones." Again, the cultivated ones are the ariya. We talked at the beginning of the retreat about this Indian term ariya, found in both Sanskrit and Pali. When the British came across this word, being themselves hopelessly racist, they assumed it was a racial term. But for the Indians, it isn't.

It's a cultural term, not a racial term. An ariya is one who is cultivated. And different communities within India would have different ideas of what constitutes cultivation. For secular society, for example, you would need to be fluent in Sanskrit. I mean, how can you be cultivated if you didn't know Sanskrit? And you would need to live according to your caste rules, and so on. There would be various things expected of you—roughly speaking, a gentleman or a lady.

But for the Buddha, the cultivated one is the mature practitioner. His citta, his heart and mind, is cultivated. So he possesses the virtues dear to cultivated ones—unbroken, untorn, unblemished, unflawed, liberating, praised by the wise, not clung to, leading to samadhi.

Now, what this is suggesting is that the mature practitioner has learned to live in a world in which it is abundantly clear that an ethical life leads to welfare and happiness, both for himself and for those around him. And this becomes obvious. When the sense of a separate self falls away, what arises is a natural empathy.

So the stream-enterer knows, truly knows, that if someone behaves badly towards him, he suffers. And it's equally obvious that if he behaves badly towards somebody else, that person suffers in exactly the same way. And so he won't do that. Because he looks at the suffering of other people and knows exactly how they feel. They feel the way he does. He looks at the happiness of other people and knows exactly how they feel. They feel like he does.

So there's a natural empathy that emerges which guides the ethical life. And this natural ethical stance is based on the stream-enterer's understanding of anatta, of not-self.

That is enough for tonight. Next week we'll continue our exploration of the dharma mirror.

A question came about how the realms the Buddha talks about relate to the Abhidharma realms. In the Abhidharma, which is the work of scholars systematizing the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha never attempted to create a system. What he did was wander around and teach this group of people what he felt they needed to know, then wander off and teach that group what he thought they wanted to know.

The way I look at it is this. One time, for my sins, I worked in the public service with a relational database. In a relational database you have a whole series of tables, each of them linked because one field in a table connects to another field in another table, and you end up with this complex web of information. You can go into the database, create the appropriate inquiry, and have a report spread out.

Now let's say you've got an incredibly complex, deep, subtle, and sophisticated relational database and you print out a report. Is that report the database? No. Let's say you print out a thousand reports. Is that pile of a thousand reports the database? No.

So the database is the Dharma, and it's held in the minds and the hearts of the Sangha, the sangha of practitioners. The Buddha never created a systematic system that would satisfy the requirements of an academic, for example, because he wasn't an academic.

So after he died, senior students got together and said, "What do we do about this? We've got to somehow preserve this teaching without him wandering around inspiring everybody." And so they created a system. They systematized it.

Now, in the case of these realms, you do get in the early discourses mention of various types of non-human beings, amanusa. But there's no systematic way of classifying them. And it could well be that the Buddha was in one area and the people there believed in certain kinds of spirits, and then he went to another area where those people believed in certain other kinds of spirits, and he just accepted it. So in the suttas it's more of a mix-up.

Later on, you get the system. For example, you get the thirty-one planes of existence. If you look at orthodox Theravada, you get charts that show all the planes of existence from the top down to the bottom. That's a product of the later tradition.

The concept is much looser in the Buddha's time.

A question arises: this teaching comes from twenty-five centuries ago, from a very different culture. Many of these things could be considered metaphors or understood to carry different meanings. How do we interpret some of these stories? They're incredibly colorful, but they come from a different place. How do they translate into twenty-first century Australia?

Well, they can translate, but we've got no idea whether we're getting it right. We don't know a great deal about ancient India. We know something, but we don't know a huge amount. But what we do know is the

practice. And we do know that the practice instructions that have come down through the centuries work. We know this experientially, because we try it and it works. So that's what we know.

From that place of experiencing the practice, we can then look at the discourses, look at the metaphors, and we can read them, interpret them, in a way that makes sense to us. Are we reading them the same way that they were read two and a half millennia ago? It seems unlikely—the people were so different. But can we read them in a way that makes sense to us and gives us a coherent sense of the universe within which we can find our place?

This is what the tradition calls *loka*—usually translated as "world." But a *loka* is not just a world in the sense of a planet. It's a meaningful world. It's a world in which things hang together, and within which I can function because I have a role, I have a place, and this place is useful for myself and the beings around me. We use this heritage to create a *loka*.

When we're talking about the stages of awakening, for example, you can look at it psychologically and completely dismiss the cosmology. Say, look, the cosmology is nonsense, it's not scientific, forget about it. And it works. This is the world of secular Buddhism. Or you could look at it both psychologically and cosmologically and say, yeah, why not? Why shouldn't there be heavens above and hells below? There are people who have been reborn and who have memories of previous births. Why shouldn't there be rebirth? And just live in that world. Both worlds work.

So it doesn't really matter. The main thing is that we live in a world that is coherent and makes sense and gives us a role—something we do that makes the world better. If we've got that, then all is well.

Another question: talking about going up the ladder, as you go up, the numbers keep getting smaller and smaller. Rarer and rarer. And that's even within the Buddhist world. There's a whole bunch of other people out there who aren't interested, who don't have a clue. It's not even within their culture—they don't even know what the Buddha taught. So it's even rarer at the top. Who have you got to talk to?

That's even within Buddhism. Outside of Buddhism, maybe there's no one going up the ladder, although I suspect there are some. But at the top, who have you got to talk to? I'll even go for halfway. Even halfway? Who have you got to talk to? Well, I can answer that question when I get there. But until then, I'm just speculating.

The main thing, and this is actually the practical problem of Sangha—if you want a Sangha, if you want a community, if you're going to join a community, what you're looking for are people you can talk to about your practice such that they actually understand what you're talking about and have something useful to reply. That eliminates most of the world's population at a stroke.

Now, I shouldn't say this, but you'll never hear it elsewhere. For example, my brother. For the decades that I've been involved in Buddhadharma, not only has he never shown the slightest interest, but he has shown every indication that he doesn't want to know anything at all about it. So if we're having a chat on the

phone—we keep in touch—and he says, "How are you going?" and I say, "Good," he's happy. But if I say, "Oh, well, I was just teaching this retreat and..." he'll say, "Oh, that's good," and change the subject. Impossible to talk to him about these things. And he's not alone.

That's why you need a Sangha.

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