

Wesak Festival – London – May 2014

## The Growth of Light

*Simon Marlow*

Friends here at the Lucis Trust in London welcome to our Wesak meditation meeting this evening, and a big welcome to all of you who are joining us now over the internet. We are working in the final lead up to the time of the Taurus full moon which occurs at 8.17 this evening. As it is so close to the end of our meeting some of us are going to stay on here and have a silent meditation starting at five past eight to observe the exact time of the full moon. You are all invited to stay and join us, although of course we realise that for many of you this may not be possible, as you have distances to travel, trains to catch, and other responsibilities which need attention.

I think we should start by reminding ourselves that our numerically small group here is actually part of a world-wide movement of millions of people pioneering in consciousness the ritual structure of the new world religion. Its aim is to strengthen the bridge of light between the Spiritual Hierarchy and the mind of humanity. It is via this bridge of light that the vision of the Plan can descend and fertilise numerous creative initiatives that are aimed at resolving the many problems of the world. It is via this bridge of light that a sense of spiritual purpose can be restored to the life of humanity. It is via this bridge of light that the love of God can animate hearts and minds everywhere, renewing us all in the life of the Soul.

When people look back over the course of human history, the events that loom large in most minds are the tales of conquest, the building of empires and all the panoply of human material achievement. We might imagine that here in London a look at the statues which adorn our parks, our squares, and our churches would bear this out. We might think for example that participation in military enterprise is a surer ticket to a public memorial than a life of philanthropy or spiritual achievement.

So it is a delightful surprise to find out that this is by no means the case. A beautiful statue of Mahatma Ghandi has graced Tavistock Square since 1968. Since 1882 the Victoria Embankment has featured sculptures of Newton, Milton, Bacon, and Shakespeare – all giants in their own way in the area of human excellence and soul expression. Not far from here in Pall Mall is a statue to that great Victorian disciple Florence Nightingale, who did so much to make nursing a respectable caring profession. It was she who pioneered the simple rules of hygiene that made such a difference to medical care and to hospital survival rates. And up the road from here at the north of Trafalgar Square is the statue to the executed nurse Edith Cavell which displays her statement “Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone”. It was almost a hundred years ago just after the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War that Edith Cavell, then in Belgium and viewed as a spy, voiced this insight and gave her life for it too.

So let us now pause for a few moments to recollect the lives of all servers of the human family. As we do so let us realise two important things: firstly what a huge debt of gratitude we all owe them: and secondly that we too can take our place within their ranks as committed servers of humanity and the world – indeed many of us already do. Then we will say together the mantram of the group of World Servers Group.

May the Power of the one Life pour through the group of all true servers.

May the Love of the One Soul characterize the lives of all who seek to aid the Great Ones.

May I fulfil my part in the One work through self-forgetfulness,  
harmlessness and right speech.

Our very brief exploration of statues in London should convince us that they do have real value. They are opportunities for passers-by to pause and think and to be inspired. But this of course is only possible because of lives well lived by people who decided to make a difference. But the ultimate memorial or legacy for all these people is the change they have brought about in the human condition. And I think this idea must have been at the back of the minds of the people who installed a plaque in York Minster that commemorated the life of a local notable citizen. On it are inscribed the following words: “If you want a memorial – go and do likewise”.

This is a wonderful starting point for our thoughts this evening when we are holding in mind the life and achievement of the Buddha. Our best way to venerate the Buddha is to emulate his achievement in our own lives – in other words to do likewise.

It is little realised that the time of the Buddha half a millennium before the Christian era was a time of great change. In her “Biography of the Buddha” the writer Karen Armstrong refers most illuminatingly to this time as the “Axial Age”, a term coined by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers. During this period there was a widespread intellectual awakening and spiritual ferment within the human kingdom all over the world – and apparently arising independently. There was Confucius in China, and Zoroaster in Persia. There were the philosophy schools in ancient Greece with such enlightened thinkers as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. In Judea it was the age of the Old Testament prophets. In India a veritable cauldron of ideas existed with the widespread thirst for spiritual knowledge and enlightenment generating many teachers and sects. It was into this spiritual and cultural milieu that the Buddha was born.

The major insight of the Buddha was that incorrect desire is the cause of all human suffering. So it is no coincidence that the life and work of the Buddha is celebrated at this time when the sun is in the sign of Taurus the Bull. For the sign of Taurus is, above all, the sign which focuses on the element of desire.

It is interesting to trace the symbolism of the Bull in the world’s religious history. I suspect that the legend of Theseus and his battle with the Minotaur – the half man half bull; the slaying of a bull by Mithras; the origin of the sacred cow in Hinduism; the Minoan civilisation with its famous paintings of athletes vaulting over a bull; the children of Israel worshipping the golden calf; and even the still extant Spanish and Latin American traditions of bull fighting, all these have their origin from that long time ago when the sun was in its 2,000 year sojourn in the sign of Taurus.

Perhaps this tells us something about that distant period – that humanity was having to consciously face the element of desire and gradually learn how to deal with it. It led to a long process of spiritual experiment and growth over a millennium or two that culminated in the life and achievement of the Buddha.

Certainly the desire nature still presents us all with the most difficult of challenges. Desire is at the centre of all our lives. Misused and misapplied, it draws disaster and suffering in its wake as we all know only too well. But desire can also be well used. When properly applied it can lead us onto the path of real progress and eventually the path of spiritual liberation. However it is then so different from the passions that we normally associate with the word, desire, that we give it other names. As Alice Bailey wrote:

“Will, power, desire, aspiration, ambition, motive, purpose, impulse, incentive, plan – all these are words which attempt to express one of the major underlying attributes and fundamental causes (man scarcely knows which) of manifestation, of the evolutionary processes and of the will-to-be or the will-to-live. The great triplicity of desire – aspiration – direction (will) are only three words which endeavour to describe the progress and bias of man the personality, man the soul, and man the channel for spirit or life. All three point inadequately to the cause of the threefold expression which underlies all events, all progress and all happenings in time and space.

“It was the Buddha who clarified for man the nature of desire and its results, with the unhappy effects which desire produces when persistent and unenlightened. It was the Christ Who taught the transmutation of desire into aspiration which, from the expression given to it in The New Testament, was the effort of the human will (hitherto animated by, or expressed through, desire) to conform itself to the will of God – this without understanding but conformity, in perfect trust and with the inner assurance that the will of God must be all that is good, both in the individual and in the whole.

“Now, as the Shamballa force is beginning to pour into the world, man is seeking another interpretation of God’s will which will not involve the hitherto blind acquiescence and unavoidable acceptance of the inscrutable dictates of a potent, inescapable Providence, but which will produce an understanding cooperation with the divine Plan and an enlightened fusion of the individual will with the great, divine will and this for the greater good of the whole. For this desirable attitude there is worldwide preparation going forward in a simple and unobtrusive manner through the gradual fomentation of the will-to-good

everywhere and the demand, so universally voiced, that human conditions may be more truly enlightened, more acutely polarised for the benefit of the whole and more definitely subordinated to the innate divine urge for beauty, synthesis and the free expression of the hidden mystery which is to be found at the heart of all forms. It is going forward also through the constant attempt to comprehend and interpret the Plan for humanity, as its broad outlines begin to become apparent to the developing intelligence of man.”

I think this perfectly sums up the challenge facing humanity at this time. It also beautifully illustrates the fact that the evolution of humanity makes us significantly different from what we were two and a half thousand years ago when the Buddha walked this earth. Indeed, many thoughtful people consider that our present time is again one of those rare and intense moments of awakening for humanity – a new axial age, in fact, most aptly called a “turning point”. And it is important that all who realise this should strive to the utmost to make this time creative of the right sort of change. Nevertheless, the Buddha’s formulation of the four noble truths at his moment of enlightenment under the Bo tree is still crucial to our negotiating a way into a better future.

On the face of it, these Truths are a method to escape from the sorrows of material existence.

1. Existence in the phenomenal universe is inseparable from suffering and sorrow.
2. The cause of suffering is desire for existence in the phenomenal universe.
3. The cessation of suffering is attained by eradicating desire for phenomenal existence.
4. The Path to the cessation of suffering is the noble eightfold path – right belief, right intentions, right speech, right actions, right living, right endeavour, right-mindedness and right concentration.

Yet the Buddha also had the experience of noticing with exquisite clarity the pain engendered by an insect being devoured by a predator. His response was to vow to stay with humanity until all sentient beings – not just humans – have achieved nirvana.

In these two experiences of the Buddha’s life, we have illustrated one of the major tests for all true disciples and servers of humanity – having to choose between one’s own deliverance from suffering and deciding to stay and help all beings attain enlightenment. The keynote for our full moon meditations summarises this:

“He who faces the light and stands within its radiance is blinded to the issues of the world of men; he passes on the lighted way to the great Centre of Absorption. But he who feels the urge to pass that way, yet loves his brother on the darkened path, revolves upon the pedestal of light and turns the other way.

“He faces towards the dark and then the seven points of light within himself transmit the outward streaming light, and lo! the face of those upon the darkened way receives that light. For them, the way is not so dark....”

Legend has it that the Buddha is thus annually impelled at this time to return from his high place to confer a blessing upon humanity and the material worlds. Whether this actually happens, or whether this is a myth to awaken us all to the reality of the great chain of Hierarchy and to realise our Buddha nature (and myths are powerful embodiments of timeless truths), or whether indeed they are in a way both true, we will all have to discover for ourselves.

But the fact of the matter is that those of us who are at all sensitive to the energy of the Soul can see, all over the world, the evidence of human awakening. The light of right human relations is becoming stronger. We can see that the strands of compassion that unite us all into the One Humanity are becoming strong cables through which the energy of love can reach everywhere. The soul is so near to the surface now that we thrill into expectancy of great things happening to our world. And if we by-pass the fear focussed sensationalism of the media, we can look out into the world, and see the most wonderful things happening everywhere. Even the disasters and the tragedies are generating positive and creative responses.

For me one of the most heart-warming of them all is the story of Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani girl who campaigned tirelessly for the right of all girls to have an education. As I am sure we all know she was shot in her bus on the way to school by the Taliban who hoped to silence her. She miraculously survived of course, and, very movingly, addressed the UN on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. She included these words:

“The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambitions, but nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born.”

Would that we could all react to the difficulties that life throws at us with the same soul-inspired courage! And of course many people do, though most often without public awareness. As George Eliot described it in her novel *‘Middlemarch’*: “For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Whether in the full glare of worldwide publicity or working incognito we know that millions are confronting the issue of the desire and emotional nature with its key ingredient of attachment to form. And this is no longer just an individual issue but a global one. For example it is one of the ironies of our present time that the world economy and the opportunity to work and pay our way is entirely dependent on artificially manufactured and manipulated desire to produce the increasing consumption of things. When we realise this, we understand in a new way how certain aspects of humanity’s present life are based on utterly false values. And this will have to change, and it will be a major and difficult change. Will circumstances force the change, or will we collectively choose a better way? I suspect the former, though the latter is always a possibility.

So this Wesak festival gives us the focused opportunity once again to face these crucial issues. Humanity commonly uses two techniques to deal with desire, neither of which really work. One is the technique of suppression. This might work as a temporary expedient, but in the long run the damned up energy erupts into disastrous circumstances. The other technique is over-indulgence which produces different but equally bad results. So we are led directly to the necessity to explore a third, middle way, which is embodied in the various stages of the eightfold path. Perhaps for us today these eight stages can be simplified into:—cultivating a correct perspective on life, and adopting spiritual values as our motives. The superficial things are not important. We need to learn to see things as the soul sees them. What is important is personal and group integrity. We need to cultivate harmlessness as a key quality of our lives. And in this respect we need to remember that harmlessness is not just refraining from harmful actions, much more importantly it is emotional harmlessness, it is making sure that our thoughts are always reflective of the love and compassion of the soul. As soon as we attempt to achieve this we realise what a hard task we have set ourselves.

Perhaps a good technique to try is a willed and persistent observance and direction of our thoughts and emotions, all the time substituting the light, the thoughts and values of the soul for the normal chaos of our waking consciousness, constantly pulling the trend of our thinking back into the light, stilling our emotions so that they transmit love. In this way we get into the habit of letting the soul control the outer form and life and all events. And we begin to see that despite outer appearance, it *is* love that underlies the happenings of the time. And we realise that we in our true selves *are* that love: that we are all Buddhas and Christs in the making. This is not a technique of suppression or of indulgence at all, it is the technique of reality. Then we start to understand the truth of the seed thought which we will be using in our meditation this evening: “I see, and when the eye is opened, all is light.”