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Levett Seminar file 1, edited copy

Chairmen's Seminar: 12/12/1984, at Padmaloka
'On the Death of Dr Levett': by Samuel Johnson

Present: Sangharakshita, Ratnavira, Aryamitra, Susiddhi, Subhuti, Kulamitra, Vessantara,
Padmaraja, Devamitra, Tejananda, Devaraja, Vajrananda, Dipankara.

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[f1 p2]

On the Death of Mr Robert Levett Practiser in Physic

Condemned to Hope's delusive mine,
So on we toil from day to day,
By sudden blasts or slow decline
Our social comforts drop away.

Well tried through many a varying year,
See Levett to the grave descend;
Officious, innocent, sincere,
Of every friendless name the friend.

Yet still he fills affection's eye,
Obscurely wise and coarsely kind;
Nor, lettered Arrogance, deny
Thy praise to merit unrefined.

When fainting nature called for aid,
And hovering death prepared the blow,
His vigorous remedy displayed
The power of art without the show.

In Misery's darkest cavern known,
His useful care was ever nigh,
Where hopeless Anguish poured his groan,
And lonely Want retired to die.

No summons mocked by chill delay,
No petty gain disdained by pride;
The modest wants of every day
The toil of every day supplied.

His virtues walked their narrow round,
Nor made a pause, nor left a void;

And sure the Eternal Master found
The single talent well employed.

The busy day, the peaceful night,
Unfelt, uncounted, glided by;
His frame was firm his powers were bright,
Though now his eightieth year was nigh.

Then with no fiery throbbing pain,
No cold gradations of decay,
Death broke at once the vital chain,
And freed his soul the nearest way.

Samuel Johnson

[f1 p3]

Sangharakshita: We have already studied one poem by Dr Johnson the Ode to Friendship and so I thought that this poem, Johnson's Lines on the death of Dr Robert Levett might make a suitable companion piece. I also thought it would be suitable to study the text of a poem by Dr Johnson inasmuch as tomorrow will be the two-hundredth anniversary of his death; and this poem seemed the right length for two study sessions [i.e. a weekend]. As I think we will see, the subject matter links up, to some extent at least, with that of the Ode to Friendship. The Ode to Friendship seems to have been written when Johnson was quite young, perhaps even before he left Lichfield for London, whereas the lines of the death of Levett were written towards the very end of his life. It is significant that both poems have to do with friendship; the first in a rather idealistic, general way, but the last deals with an actual friend and is written on the occasion of Levett's death. It is interesting to see who that friend was, because he was a quite unprepossessing character. He was not young or good-looking; he was a very old man, even older than Johnson, and he had lived in Johnson's house for twenty years. He was not at all an attractive character. Very few people, apart from Johnson, seemed to see any good in him at all. But that was characteristic of Johnson, because he had at all periods of his life especially after his wife's death quite a collection of odd and difficult characters living in his house, whom only he would put up with; and Levett was one of the less obnoxious of them. I thought I would read an account of Levett, just to give you a bit of background, and also to underline the fact that it is possible to develop very warm feelings of friendship towards someone who is not, superficially, a very attractive person. Friendship, especially when continued over the years, goes beyond such considerations. There are a number of accounts of Levett from different sources, and I am going to read the oldest one I have, which is, I think, in some ways the best. It is from Hawkins' Life of Johnson, which came out before Boswell's, and has only been reprinted once, but it is a very interesting account of Johnson's life from a rather different point of view [from Boswell's]. I am not going to read all that Hawkins says about Levett it is rather long but I am at least going to read an account which Hawkins quotes from The Gentleman's Magazine, published shortly after Levett's death, together with a letter of Johnson's to Dr Lawrence, notifying his death. The Gentleman's Magazine writes: Mr Levett, though an Englishman by birth, became early in life a waiter at a coffee-house in Paris. The surgeons who frequented it, finding him of an inquisitive turn and attentive to their conversation made a purse for him and gave him some instruction in their art. They afterwards furnished him with the means of other knowledge by procuring him free admission to such lectures in pharmacy and anatomy as were read by the ablest professors of

that period. Hence his introduction to a business which afforded him a continual, though slender, maintenance. Where he spent the middle part of his life is uncertain. He resided, however, above twenty years under the roof of Johnson, who never wished him to be regarded as an inferior or treated him like a dependant. He breakfasted with the Doctor every morning, and perhaps was seen no more [f1 p4] by him till midnight. Much of the day was employed in attendance on his patients, who ere chiefly of the lowest rank of tradesmen. The remainder of his hours he dedicated to Hunter's lectures and to as many opportunities of improvements he could meet with on the same gratuitous conditions. 'All his medical knowledge', said Johnson, 'and it is not inconsiderable was obtained through the ear: though he buys books, he seldom looks into them or discovers any power by which he can be supposed to judge of an author's merit.' Before he became a constant inmate of the Doctor's house, he married, when he was near sixty, a woman of the town who had persuaded him, notwithstanding their place of congress was a small coal-shed in Fetter Lane, (Laughter) that she was nearly related to a man of fortune but was injuriously kept by him out of large possessions. It is almost needless to add that both parties were disappointed in their views. If Levett took her for an heiress who in time might be rich, she regarded him as a physician already in considerable practice. Compared with the marvels of this transaction, as Johnson himself declared when relating them, the tales in the Arabian Nights Entertainments seem familiar occurrences. Never was infant more completely duped than our hero. He had not been married four months before a writ was taken out against him for debts incurred by his wife. He was secreted, and his friends then procured him a protection from a foreign minister. In a short time afterwards, she ran away from him and was tried, providentially in his opinion, for picking pockets at the Old Bailey. Her husband was with difficulty prevented from attending the court in the hope she would be hanged. She pleaded her own cause and was acquitted. A separation between this ill-starred couple took place and Dr Johnson then took Levett home, where he continued till his death, which happened suddenly without pain, January 12th, 1782. His vanity in supposing that a young woman of family and fortune should be enamoured of him, Dr Johnson thought, deserved some check. As no relations of his were known to Dr Johnson, he advertised for them. In the course of a few weeks an heir at law appeared and ascertained his title to what effects the deceased had left behind him. Levett's character was rendered valuable by repeated proof of honesty, tenderness and gratitude to his benefactor that is, Johnson As well as by an unwearied diligence in his profession. His single failing was an occasional departure from sobriety. Johnson would observe he was perhaps the only man who ever became intoxicated through motives of prudence. He reflected that if he refused the gin or brandy offered him by some of his patients he could have been no gainer by their cure, as they might have had nothing else to bestow on him. This habit of taking a fee in whatever shape it was exhibited could not be put off by advice or admonition of any kind. he would swallow what he did not like, nay, what he knew would injure him, rather than with an idea that his skill had been exerted without recompense. Had, said Johnson, all his patients maliciously combined to reward him with meat and strong liquors instead of money, he would either have burst like the dragon in the Apocrypha through repletion, or been scorched up like Portia by swallowing fire. But let not from hence an imputation of rapaciousness be fixed upon him. Though he took all that was offered him, he demanded nothing from the poor nor was known in any instance to have enforced the payment of even what was justly his due. [f1 p5] His person was middle-sized and thin; his visage swarthy, adust and corrugated; his conversation, except on professional subjects, barren. When in dishabille he might have been mistaken for an alchemist whose complexion had been hurt by the fumes of the crucible and whose clothes had suffered from the sparks of the furnace. Such was Levett, whose whimsical frailty, if weighed against his good and useful qualities, was floating atom, dust that falls

unheeded into the adverse scale, nor shakes the balance by ringing it. To this character I here add as a supplement to it a dictum of Johnson respecting Levett, viz.: that his external appearance and behaviour were such that he disgusted the rich and terrified the poor... But notwithstanding all these offensive particulars, Johnson, whose credulity in some instances was as great as his incredulity in others, conceived of him as of a skilful medical professor and thought himself happy in having so near his person one who was to him not solely a physician, a surgeon or an apothecary, but all. In extraordinary cases, he, however, availed himself of the assistance of his valued friend Dr Lawrence, a man of whom, in respect of his piety, learning and skill in the profession, it may be almost said that the world was not worthy, etc., etc. There is a letter from Johnson, I think in Boswell, announcing the death of Levett. He says, writing to Dr Lawrence: Sir, Our old friend Mr Levett, who was last night eminently cheerful, died this morning. The man who lay in the same room, hearing an uncommon noise, got up and tried to make him speak, but without effect. he then called Mr Holder the apothecary, who, though when he came he thought him dead, opened a vein, but could draw no blood. So had ended the long life of a very useful and very blameless man. I am, Sir, Your most humble servant, Sam. Johnson. Shortly afterwards, he wrote this poem [on Levett]. Johnson himself was over seventy at that time. We shall read out a verse at a time and then discuss each verse line by line.

On the death of Dr Robert Levett,
Condemned to Hope's delusive mine,
As on we toil from day to day,
By sudden blasts or slow decline,
Our social comforts drop away.

S: I must observe, before we start considering the verse, that the poem was almost immediately published and reprinted in many sources, and Johnson dictated a number of copies to different people, so there are a number of different versions. They don't differ greatly, only in quite small particulars, but the version given here and the variations that are also given is the standard one. So: Condemned to Hope's delusive mine,/ As on we toil from day to day,/ By sudden blasts or slow decline/ Our social comforts drop away. The first verse is a general statement, of which the rest of the poem is an exemplification. You could even say that the first verse gives much of Johnson's whole philosophy of life, and it gives it especially in the [f1 p6] first two lines by means of a powerful image, which is echoed in several other verses. Condemned to Hope's delusive mine. What sort of image does that conjure up? Johnson thinks of us as being like prisoners who have been sentenced to work in the mines. This is his very sombre image of human life. We have been condemned to work in the mine: the mine of hope. This raises all sorts of questions. What does Johnson mean by hope? What does he mean by fear? It introduces the question of imagination that is, imagination in the sense in which Johnson usually uses the term; as, for instance, in *Rasselas*, where he speaks of "a dangerous prevalence of the imagination". Johnson thought of imagination as a very dangerous faculty, because imagination not only emancipated one from the conditions of present existence but enabled one to indulge in all sorts of compensatory fantasies which removed one from the problems of real life. Johnson does sometimes use the word imagination in a more positive sense, but more usually he uses it in what we would regard as a quite negative sense. He says, as it were, that we don't stay close to the facts of experience; we indulge in all sorts of daydreams, fantasies, wish-fulfilments, all sorts of Walter Mitty type episodes. We imagine ourselves very rich, famous or powerful, or we dwell on the past in a neurotically nostalgic way; and Johnson considers all that extremely

dangerous. Therefore, when Johnson speaks of the mine of hope, this is what he has at the back of his mind. You get the image of prisoners, convicts, working in the mines. What are human beings mining? They are mining hope; but the mine is a delusive mine, the hope is an unreal hope. It is as though the convicts are working hard all day, mining away, but they never actually strike ore. Johnson is saying we are just like convicts working in the mine, down in the darkness, and we are constantly trying to get something which we never actually manage to get, which we never achieve, which escapes us. In this way we are condemned to the delusive mine of hope. We don't actually ever get anything, because we have all sorts of unreal expectations, unreal hopes which are not fulfilled. There is a reminiscence here, one might say, from a Buddhist point of view, of the Vipariyasas, [the 'Four Perverted Views of Conditioned Existence': seeing the painful as pleasant, the impermanent as permanent, the insubstantial as substantial & the ugly as beautiful]. We are trying to get from conditioned things what you can only get from the Unconditioned. This is the way Johnson sees life: people are as condemned by their own ignorance to go in blind pursuit of objectives which can never, by their very nature, be fulfilled.

Subhuti: Does [Johnson] see any alternative? Starting off "Condemned to Hope's delusive mine" suggests that somebody has condemned you, rather than you have condemned yourself.

S: I don't know how literally that part of the image can be taken. Johnson was a Christian believer, so he obviously doesn't believe that this is the whole story. He has sometimes been described as a Christian Stoic. It is significant, as we may see later on, that though this is a poem about death and a close friend, there is no word about heaven. It is not suggested that Levett goes to heaven in the end, which is perhaps significant. Johnson doesn't bring in any element of Christian consolation, though he was a believing Christian. In some ways, it is a rather grim little poem. In the next verse, he speaks of Levett 'descending to the grave', and in the last verse he speaks of his soul being 'freed'; but he has no word to say about heaven. Perhaps, in view of Levett's personal character, whether he would go to heaven was rather doubtful, so Johnson [f1 p7] preferred not to dwell upon that aspect of the matter. But the poem could well have been written by a Stoic.

Subhuti: He is just freed from toil; not freed to anything.

S: Yes, freed from. The soul is mentioned; but, after all, the ancient Greeks mentioned the soul being released from the body. The first two lines give us a very powerful image of Johnson's vision of life, unilluminated by whatever Christian hope he might have had. Condemned to Hope's delusive mine, / As on we toil from day to day. This is how he sees human life, at any rate to the extent that it is devoid of any element of religious comfort or consolation. He does not introduce that in this poem at all. At the end of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, he says: Where then shall hope and fear their objects find? that is, their true objects. He does believe that there is a true object for hope, but it is not to be found in anything on earth.

So before Johnson goes on to speak of Levett at all there is a very abrupt, uncompromising statement of the general human situation. The poem has, so to speak, a very sombre frame. Condemned to Hope's delusive mine, / As on we toil from day to day. There is no respite. We have to work everyday. He is not thinking of ordinary, bread winning work: he is thinking of toil in the delusive mine of hope. We never give up these false hopes, these unreal expectations. They are a constant feature of our lives. Johnson seems to have been very

sensitive to this aspect of human existence. It is repeatedly mentioned in his essays.

Aryamitra From a Buddhist point of view, would just staying within these hopes all the time be the non-experience of dukkha? And maybe an experience of dukkha would be a slight realization that [these hopes are delusive]?

S: Well, no doubt there is an experience of dukkha, but people misinterpret that. They think that dukkha is due, not to the unreality of their hopes or expectations, but simply to the fact that they have not been fulfilled. They hope that tomorrow things will be different. It is just like the gambler: he hopes that tomorrow he will win that the next time he stakes some money he will be more lucky. He doesn't think that the suffering comes from his actual desire for gains through gambling. There is an experience of suffering, perhaps, but no real understanding of why the suffering comes about. You find this in relationships. People have, perhaps, a very stormy relationship with another person a sexual relationship, probably in which there is a lot of suffering, and eventually it terminates. But within a matter of days, they start up another relationship. They don't see that the pain and suffering were due to their neurotic craving for something which no human relationship could give them. They think they were just unlucky that time, or that it was the other person's fault.

Aryamitra: Yes: that it wasn't the right person.

S: It wasn't the right person, or the right situation, or the right time, or whatever. So, though there has been an experience of pain and suffering, there has been no understanding of what that was really due to. (Pause) It is this sort of thing that Johnson is referring to when he speaks of hope, and also fear, as being delusive. He doesn't actually mention fear, [f1 p8] but it goes along with hope. You have delusive fears just as you have delusive hopes. 'If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars'. But do you see much of this sort of attitude in everyday life nowadays? (Murmurs of assent.) So one would think the situation described in the first two lines sufficiently serious. But Johnson goes on, in a way, to make it even worse. He says: Condemned to Hope's delusive mine, As on we toil from day to day, By sudden blasts or slow decline Our social comforts drop away. What are these social comforts, do you think? What is he referring to?

Subhuti: Health no, contacts with other people.

S: Contacts with other people, yes. 'Our social comforts' are the comforts, the consolation, the positive experience that we get through our contact with others. Even in the mines there is some fellowship among the convicts. You become friends with fellow convicts. That is at least some consolation: even within that quite tragic context, there is a sort of friendship between convicts. That is, so far as ordinary life is concerned, at least you share your delusions! But even that respite is not granted to you for long, because By sudden blasts or slow decline/ Our social comforts drop away. Perhaps the image of dropping away is significant; it is as though the convict working by your side in the mine just drops. Either he dies suddenly or he just wastes away, and you are left without your social comforts. It is interesting that Johnson mentions 'social comforts'. He doesn't mention religion or anything like that. It is almost as though friendship were the sole redeeming feature of a very tragic human situation. This is what he is indirectly saying: that here you are, condemned self condemned to the delusive mine of hope. You are toiling on day by day. But there is at least one comfort, and that is of a social nature: your contact with your fellow convicts. He sees

that as an alleviation. But even that doesn't last; you are not allowed to enjoy it indefinitely, because, either on account of a sudden blast a sudden storm or sudden attack or a slow degeneration, decline or deterioration, that companionship is lost to you.

Vessantara: It seems a very clear description of the position of old age, very often, As you go on, life becomes harder and, one by one, your friends drop around you.

S: I am not all that old, but I have become conscious in the last year how many of my old friends or people I've known have died. I can hardly open the 'Buddhist Magazine' these days without finding obituaries of people I have known quite well. there's my old friend Bhikkhu Jinrassana, the General Secretary of the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta, who died a year ago. Then there was Mrs Quitna, connected with the British Maha Bodhi Society, who I knew quite well the first two years that I was back. Then there was somebody else

Subhuti: Joan Pope.

S: Yes, there was old Joan Pope, General Secretary of the Buddhist Society for years and years, whom I knew reasonably well when I came back in 1964 [f1 p9] and was staying at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara. Then there was someone I didn't actually know, but I made contact with, who died prematurely Dr Laumani Joshi, the author of two books. And a couple of years ago there was Christmas Humphreys, who I knew really quite well. And I get letters from other friends. I got a letter from Lama Govinda, saying he is now partly paralysed and confined to a wheelchair. Another friend, Jack Austin, has had a stroke; he is unable to write letters, his wife was writing for him. So this is the human situation. Very often, as Dr Johnson did, you outlive many of your friends. He outlived Goldsmith, he outlived Garrick, he outlived Levett, and many others. But this is something you don't really appreciate until you start getting a bit old. So: Condemned to Hope's delusive mine, /As on we toil from day to day, /By sudden blasts or slow decline, /Our social comforts drop away. You can see that, in this verse, every word is considered, every word is weighed. Every word has a meaning, a place in the poem. Nothing is superfluous. Here you see the classic style at its best.

Kulamitra: Where it says social comforts drop away, could you also see that as being just getting out of contact with people, maybe through quarrels 'blasts' or through just not making the efforts; and one is gradually left alone?

S: Well, yes. The social comforts do drop away in all sorts of manners. But it would seem that Johnson has death particularly in mind, because he is writing on the death of Dr Levett, and that is the supreme form of separation. Once someone has died, no reconciliation is possible. They are gone. If you were not reconciled to them before their death, you never will be reconciled; it is no longer possible. So death, in a way, is the paradigmatic form of dropping away, even though people can drop away in other ways too by indifference, or moving away, or becoming preoccupied with their own concerns, wrapped up in their families, and so on. You can get out of touch in that way.

Devaraja: To 'drop away' seems a little bit like execution hanging.

S: yes, 'drop' away, and in the next verse it says see Levett to the grave descend; that is a rather strange image. Is there any further point about this first verse? It is very measured; even the metre is measured, isn't it? It is a very strongly marked rhythm. It strikes its characteristic

note immediately, with the very first word. There is much more art in it than appears at first sight. It would seem that Johnson composed it quite rapidly, as he composed nearly everything, but nonetheless the experience of a lifetime is in it. It is very condensed, concentrated, and emphatic. It makes its statement with great economy, but with great force.

Kulamitra: If Johnson had this view of life he seems to have lived quite a rich life, wrote a lot of poetry, and so on did he see any point in it?

S: He had a very sombre view of life. I think his view of life was very much that of Milton, but to an even greater extent. Milton, in one of his sonnets, refers to himself as working 'As ever in my great Task-Master's eye' [From the poem *On being Arrived at Twenty-three years of Age*]. Johnson, I think, had that sort of view also that there was a God, but God was a terrifying, rather than a comforting, figure. He was a taskmaster who kept watch over you, and you had to do your job properly, in fear and trembling. There is a reference to that later in the poem, when Johnson refers to 'the Eternal Master' and the parable of the talents. Johnson had this feeling that he had been given a job to do. He had [f1 p10] been entrusted with a talent, and he was very afraid that he had not used his talent properly. We shall see later that Johnson is making a subtle contrast between Levett's life and his own, not at all to his own benefit. In some ways, he feels that Levett has done better than he has done. This stems very much from his particular view of God and of the nature of Christian duty, and so on. I think we have rather debased the word social. We shall notice that about quite a few words used by Johnson in a meaning that is somewhat obsolete now. We must not forget that 'social' is connected with sociability. Poets in Johnson's time spoke, for instance, of 'the social hour', meaning the hour you spent in the society of your friends, or of 'the social bowl' meaning the wine that you quaffed in the company of your friends. 'Social' has a much more positive meaning here than our modern usage. It is not a question of social science or social studies; it is social in the sense of companionship.

Vessantara: It seems as if Johnson and Levett didn't spend much time talking and discussing. Their main contact seems to have been just Levett sitting at breakfast while Johnson quietly ate. But, over the years, that seems to have made a really strong link. One can imagine Johnson, after Levett died, sitting eating breakfast alone.

S: Yes. he really missed him even though he was not superficially a very attractive character. I think people do find, especially as they get older, that they miss someone who has been a constant companion. Perhaps it is only then that you realize that there was a definite bond of affection between you. There may not have been much in the way of demonstrativeness, and you may not have thought of that person as a great friend, but nonetheless first of all you get used to them, then you cease to dislike them (laughter), then you actually start liking them, perhaps without realizing it, and in the course of time a quite warm feeling can develop. But it does take time. Levett was under Johnson's roof for twenty years, and had known him even before that. So there is quite a moral here: as we have often said, friendships do take time to develop. And sometimes they steal up on you unawares. Someone whom you have not thought of as a friend maybe because they have just been around a long time and you have had regular contact with them actually does become a friend, whereas somebody else whose friendship you valued and with whom you tried to spend time, has not in fact over the years turned out to be much of a friend. That can happen. You can have very strong, enduring friendships, which just get stronger throughout your life, whereas you hectic love affairs not to speak of your lovers! come and go. And, in the end, perhaps they don't mean very much to

you.

Susiddhi Is there any relationship, do you think, between immediate friendships people that you choose, where there seems to be an immediate rapport and these more long-term things, which ((as)) you said, creep up on you?

S: The friendships which form very rapidly seem to be a bit more like love affairs. You fall into friendship like you fall into love. I think, if you are not careful, they can peter out. You can't maintain that level of intensity. I remember, in this connection, I saw an American film, years ago, whose theme was the friendship between two men who had been to college together, and it showed that relationship over 15 or 20 years. They weren't intimate friends, but they met periodically over the period, and when they [f1 p11] got together their usual topic of conversation was their current wife or girlfriend. Their wives and girlfriends came and went. In one very amusing episode, one of the two men is entertaining his friend and the friend's current girlfriend. The friend, by that time, is about 40 and has teamed up with a little hippie girl 20 years younger. He entertains them in the evening with a slide show, with commentary, of all the women in his life about 40 of them! That in a way encapsulates the situation. He has had some affair or relationship with all of them, and at one point a slide appears on the screen showing one of the previous wives of the friend, ((and he exclaims)) 'Oh no, that's a mistake, sorry! It didn't belong!' Then the girl gets up in disgust half way through and says, 'I don't like the vibes here!' (Laughter) It was interesting to see how wives and girlfriends had come and gone. They hadn't lasted, whereas the friendship with the other man, even though it had no romantic characteristics and didn't seem to go very deep, had persisted all the time. Perhaps they didn't consciously give it much thought; they just kept up contact. But it transpired by the end of the film that there was in fact quite a deep bond between them, of which neither was very conscious. They were mutual points of reference for each other, though their paths diverged.

Dipankara: I wonder whether that sort of thing is really friendship...

S: It's not friendship in the full sense, obviously. You could say the relationships with the wives and girlfriends weren't much either. But it does illustrate the fact that you need these more stable, though less spectacular, continuing relationships with people, and sometimes you have them without really appreciating what you've got. And sometimes they can develop into genuinely meaningful relationships, even though perhaps you haven't thought much of them over the years. Something like that seems to have happened with Johnson and Levett. Levett wasn't one of Johnson's prominent friends; he didn't have any great intellectual exchanges with him as he might have had with Burke, Gibbon, Wilkes, Goldsmith or Garrick. Johnson had a brilliant galaxy of friends, but nonetheless old Levett had a place, just because he was a fixture in the house for 20 years and Johnson saw him at breakfast virtually every morning. How many people have you seen at breakfast every morning for 20 years? It must have an effect.

Subhuti: It's more than just that he's a comfortable old piece of furniture, isn't it? ((Johnson)) has actually seen his human qualities.

S: Yes, he sees the human qualities through the very unprepossessing exterior. He sees that ((Levett)) has very genuine qualities, mixed up with some not very desirable ones. He is not blind to his weaknesses. Perhaps he overestimates his capacities as a physician, but

((perhaps)) that was an example of Johnson's charitable attitude towards people. But he had a genuine appreciation of Levett as a human being as a result of that regular contact. And it is because of that deep feeling he had for him, that he writes the poem. Johnson couldn't have written the poem which is one of his very best unless he had had that deep feeling. There are quite a lot of poems written by people after losing other people who were close or dear to them, but they are not always successful. It is interesting that Johnson's poem, though unpretentious, is completely successful as a poem, as a statement of his feelings.

Devamitra: Can we come back to the question of the lover and the friend? It seems that in human relationships the friend represents the element of [f1 p12] continuity and constancy, and the lover quite the opposite. But a lot of people actually try to combine the two in the one...

S: I think the most you can hope is that the lover will become a friend. It is almost impossible for the lover to remain a lover year after year. I don't think you can remain at that pitch of emotional excitement: it is too much for human nature, too much for one's poor nerves! So the most positive result you can hope for from a relationship with a lover is that the lover will eventually subside, so to speak, into a friend.

Subhuti: It usually subsides into a relationship! (Laughter)

S: No, what usually happens is that the relationship subsides into a *Relationship*! (Pause) I think one needs to be a little cautious with regard to these sudden friendships, because they seem more akin to falling in love than to friendship in the strict sense. Friendship, or love in the true sense, really needs to be based on knowledge, and it is not given to you to know someone completely all at once. You can't; you have to know them through regular, sustained contact and experience. This is why, perhaps, it is said that love is blind, so if you fall in love with someone you cannot be seeing them as they really are; there must be an element of projection. Whereas, in the case of friendship, you may not like what you see to begin with, but at least you see what is there to some extent, and you gradually learn to like it on account of its human qualities and human characteristics. In the case of falling in love, you like what you see, but what you see isn't really there! But, as friendship develops, you see ((and appreciate)) more and more what is truly there. That is the foundation of friendship, and also love in the more objective sense. (Pause) So it is quite significant that this poem should be dedicated to someone as unattractive as old Levett. Let us pass on to the next verse.

Well tried through many a varying year,
See Levett to the grave descend;
Officious, innocent, sincere,
Of every friendless name the friend.

S: Well tried through many a varying year that strikes the sort of note that we have just been talking about. Levett has been 'well tried'; what do you think that phrase means?

[f2 p1]

Devaraja: Tested.

S: What does one normally 'try'? What does the image come from?

Devaraja: Metal.

S: Metal. So where does metal come from?

Devaraja: The mines.

S: The mines! You see this subtle linking up of images. This is characteristic of poetry; there is an echo here. Well tried through many a varying year Levett had been tested. It is not perhaps too far-fetched to think that there is a faint suggestion of gold which has been tried, in the furnace almost; the man has been tested, the friendship has been tested, through many a varying year. So there is an antithesis: the man who has been tried and not found wanting, who has not changed; and the changing, the varying year. There is a sort of contrast or antithesis there.

Subhuti: There is also a suggestion that Levett has qualities that are not delusive, they are well tried. The mine isn't entirely

S: Yes, right. It is as though, even though you are condemned to the mine and working for illusory gold, the companionship of a fellow convict can contain an element which is not delusive. Well tried through many a varying year you get an impression of a friendship which is continuing year after varying year; some years are good, some are bad, there are times of sickness, times of health, times of good fortune, times of bad ((fortune)), but the friendship is continuing and being tested all the time, and surviving, showing itself to be a true friendship. The friendship doesn't change even though circumstances change. This refers to Levett: Well tried through many a varying year, / See Levett to the grave descend.

Devaraja: He's going down a mine-shaft.

S: Yes, a mine-shaft of another kind. It also links up with this image of social comforts 'dropping' away; he just dropped, he descended. To my mind this links up with the image of someone being hung; the trap-door gives way beneath their feet and they are just plunged down. Also I don't know, this is quite subjective it calls to my mind the image of a puppet on a string, descending. It's almost mechanical. It is quite strange how Johnson describes this: See Levett to the grave descend. Notice the inversion, which introduces a slight element of artificiality; it is as though there is some mechanical contrivance, on account of which Levett descends into the grave, as though someone cranks a shaft and down he goes. There is a suggestion of inevitability about it.

Devaraja: His name is actually quite mechanical, isn't it? Levett.

S: Yes, like a lever.

Kulamitra: This is what you actually see when people are buried, they are lowered by ropes into a grave. At that last moment, as soon as they are dropped into the grave, the earth is thrown on top, and that's it: they really are under then. Until then, it is almost like they haven't quite gone.

S: I have conducted funeral ceremonies and I notice that this is the point when people become really emotional, when friends and relations burst into tears and [f2 p2] so on. That is the

moment when they realize that that person is really gone. Usually, it doesn't really hit them until that moment. It is quite interesting to see this.

Susiddhi: There's another image; when you read 'Through many a varying year / See Levett to the grave descend' it is as if, when you're young, you are automatically going up, but when you're old you're automatically going down. It's only a matter of time before you sink below the horizon.

S: Yes, like the sun.

Subhuti: It seems a very Greek conception of death: going down to Hades.

S: Yes, he doesn't bring in his Christian belief, except in the later reference to the Eternal Master. So: Well tried through many a varying year, / See Levett to the grave descend. He is saying 'Look at this example'; he is coming from the very general to the very particular. Levett is an example of a 'social comfort' dropping away, and in his case, of course, it is by a 'sudden blast', as Johnson explains at the very end. Then there are two more lines about Levett: Officious, innocent, sincere, / Of every friendless name the friend. Here again, language has changed: officious, in Johnson's time, meant full of good offices; kindly, helpful there is a footnote here [to that effect] but already in Johnson's day it had started acquiring its modern connotation of rather forward, obtrusively helpful. But Johnson is using it in its original, classical Latin meaning. Officious, innocent, sincere, / Of every friendless name the friend. In some ways, that's a remarkable expression: 'every friendless name'. What do you think the significance of that is? It is clear who it refers to, but why did Johnson refer to them in that sort of way?

Kulamitra: As if, without friends, you are just a name.

S: Just a name, yes. He is the friend of those who have no friends, who are just names to him; they don't arouse any emotional response in him. Don't forget Levett was a physician, and the notice in 'The Gentleman's Magazine' described him as having his practice among the poorer kind of trades people. That is probably quite an exaggeration. He practised among what it would seem were the very lowest of the low, because even a poor tradesman could have given him something more than a bit of gin by way of payment. He practised, to some extent at least, among thieves, drunkards, prostitutes and so on; that was where his practice lay.

Officious, innocent, sincere, / Of every friendless name the friend. Not 'friend' in a gushing sort of way, not that he went round making great friends of people, but because of his services to them as a physician, doing the best that he could for them. He would go out with his bag in the morning and not come back until midnight. He was out the whole day, just making one call after another; perhaps, unfortunately, drinking one glass of gin after another.

Devamitra: hat line suggests to me also anonymity, in spite of that fact that they all have a name...

S: Yes. It is as though those two lines reflect back on the phrase 'well tried'. He is not only well tried in relation to Johnson himself and his friendship, but he is well tried in respect of his relation to people in general, even humanity at large.

[f2 p3]

Devaraja: This seems to me to be pointing out that you can't really see whether someone is a friend unless they are tried out in various circumstances.

S: Yes, this is what the Buddha says, in a way, somewhere in the Pali canon: it is very difficult to know a person. He said you can know them only after living with them for a long time, and even then it takes a wise man to know another person, not a fool.

Devaraja: But then we do have a way of knowing them, through their actions in relationship to you, whether they are actually responsive and consistent, etc.

S: But consistent suggests a period of time; someone may be quite good to you for a short period, but friendship means that they are good to you or behave well with you over a period, not just of a few days, but weeks, months, years. It is only in that way that one can really properly test them and try them. Almost anyone can be an agreeable companion for a few hours or days, but can't really say that they are a friend at that stage. They might have been very kind and helpful, but sometimes people do change. You might meet them as second time and they might behave quite differently or have quite a different attitude towards you. You might feel quite disappointed, quite hurt sometimes it happens that you have what you think is a friendship with someone; perhaps it has lasted for several years, but it has never been really tested, and when it comes to be tested you find there is no really deep friendship there. That person doesn't wish you any harm, but he is not going out of his way to help you. He will just say, 'Too bad, sorry! I can't do anything; hope you manage.' So there is a certain amount of good will, of friendship, even; but it doesn't go very deep, it's not very strong, so it doesn't survive the test that your need has imposed on it. So it is not [just a question of testing friendship over] a long period of time, but of changing circumstances. This is perhaps why Johnson says Well tried through man a varying year. Circumstances have changed, but the friendship hasn't changed. You know that one of the best means of strengthening a friendship is just living through very difficult conditions together. That often brings out the best in people.

Aryamitra So 'testing' would be that, say, if you were going through a bad time, they would still be around and [be willing to help you]. Is that what you mean?

S: What I am saying is that the circumstances of ordinary, everyday life do not call for any great sacrifices on a friend's part, so you don't know whether they are capable of that kind of sacrifice, therefore you don't know whether they are your friend to that extent. It is only when you have an occasion, when you need them and when you, as it were, invite a sacrifice on your behalf from them that you know whether they are actually capable of making that sacrifice, and whether, therefore, they are a friend in that deeper and truer sense. Of course, one shouldn't deliberately test or try friends, but usually the ordinary circumstances of life won't be enough. If you have just been jogging on together in the ordinary, undemanding circumstances, you can't really be sure that someone is your friend. You can only be sure when circumstances have arisen that have imposed a test upon them and they have passed that test, the friendship has survived ((that test)). You may be badly in need of money; if someone is a quite good friend he may say, 'I'd really like to help', and perhaps he would, but he says, 'I'm sorry, I just don't have any money, I can't help.' But someone else might say, 'Look, I don't have any money, but I've got a car. I'm [f2 p4] going to sell it and give you the money.' Clearly, he is more of a friend. So you see what I mean? He might even go and steal it! Some

people would.

Devaraja: I feel that, more and more, I want to state with people what my friendship with them entails, what they expect from me, and I want them to state that back. An obvious example is I feel very reluctant to expend my energy on a friendship with someone where if it came to the crunch the girlfriend would come before me!

S: But then you don't know. You can't say: 'Let's be friends, but are you going to put your girlfriend first, if you get one?' He doesn't know. Not only do you not know him; very often he doesn't know himself. He might say, with the best of intentions, 'Yes, you come first.' But he doesn't know that in three months time he's going to fall head over heels in love with some beautiful woman and will be prepared to throw over all his friends, what to speak of just you, for her sake. It is only a really integrated person who can really promise to be lifelong friends. This is why, unfortunately, you can't ask for a promise in advance. You can only find out as you go along.

Devaraja: his seems to be the principle underlying the duties of brotherhood. You should actually state what your degree of commitment is to each other.

S: But then you have to be honest and you can only be honest if you know yourself. You can't promise more than you really know you can fulfil. Sometimes people promise things lightly, in all sorts of areas. They don't know what they are saying. It is not that they are deliberately deceiving or misleading anybody; they just don't know themselves. You say, 'Will you undertake or organize such and such a job?' [and they reply,] 'oh, sure, I'll do it.' They don't even think what it involves. They just promise light-heartedly. And then the day comes and they don't do it, [and they say,] 'Oh, sorry, I was busy.' They haven't taken it seriously. It is not that they mean to be unhelpful or unfriendly; they are just not sufficiently integrated or responsible to be able to make a promise of that sort; and after a while you learn to recognize such people, and you don't expect too much of them, or if they promise to do something you don't take it seriously. Or you quietly ask somebody else to do it in case they don't! So I think it is very difficult to enter into any advance undertaking with someone who is not very responsible, mature and integrated. The same applies to marriage. A woman may promise to love, honour and obey, but does she really know her own capacities? A man promises: 'With all my worldly goods I thee endow' does he really mean it? Perhaps he has no intention of sharing all his wealth with her. Well tried though many a varying year: it is only many a varying year that can really test a friendship and show whether somebody really is your friend or not. Time is required. I think with the Friends people have found that, haven't they? (Murmurs of assent.) Those who have been around for ten or twelve years know by this time, I think, where they stand with regard to certain other people. They know the extent to which they can rely upon them. They know pretty well the degree of friendship and so on, whether greater or less. You know who will die for you and who won't.

Subhuti: Or [who will] kill you! (Laughter.)

S: You know who is ready to help you, provided he hasn't got anything else on hand, and you know who is ready to help you even at considerable sacrifice, or at least serious inconvenience, to himself.

[f2 p5]

Susiddhi : If you've done a lot of things with someone over past years and you've gone through a lot together, it's almost as if you have a bank account with each other on which, because of the past, you can draw.

S: A really Scottish metaphor! (Loud laughter.) Well, it's true; it's like joint punya. hat about these three epithets Officious, innocent, sincere? Do they convey any particular quality? They are very positive, but in the light of what I've read about Levett they are rather interesting. First of all, 'officious', full of good offices; 'innocent' harmless. You describe a child as innocent.

Subhuti: It is a quiet virtue.

S: Yes, a quiet virtue. Though he was such an old man, dying at the age of 80, he seemed to retain a certain childlike quality. He was innocent, he was sincere.

Devaraja: Even a little naive, perhaps.

S: A little naive, perhaps, yes. One knows that from the episode with the woman who he married really just a woman of the town, that is a woman of the streets he really thought she was an heiress and married her in that belief! That does show naivety, doesn't it? Especially when they were meeting in a coal shed! (Laughter.) He was sixty! (Laughter) Officious, innocent, sincere, / Of every friendless name the friend. The friend of all those anonymous people, so to speak, nameless people, who had just the bare name and no other friend.

Susiddhi You get the impression that in the medical sphere Levett was pragmatic. He saw things that needed doing and he didn't worry about the social graces.

S: Yes, that very much characterizes him, as we shall see in the next verse. He certainly wasn't a fashionable physician.

Aryamitra Isn't there a sort of archetype of a drunken doctor doctors often get drunk? [I've seen it] in certain novels and films...

S: The old ship's doctor, the army doctor; yes.

Susiddhi: More doctors, also, are alcoholics than any other [profession].

Aryamitra They have access to spirits, too.

Susiddhi: They have a lot of pressure on them.

S: Yes, especially army doctors, who in the old days drank almost to brutalize themselves so they didn't feel too much having to saw off arms and legs without anaesthetic and things like that. Yet still he fills affection's eye, Obscurely wise and coarsely kind;

Nor, lettered Arrogance, deny

Thy praise to merit unrefined.

S: Yet still he fills affection's eye. That is to say, since he is dead Johnson can't actually see him any more but he still remembers him. He still sees him mentally; not only that, but he still fills the eye of affection. To 'fill the [f2 p6] eye' means to be fully present to the sight, to the exclusion of all other objects. Even though he is dead, Johnson can't forget him. Someone mentioned about Johnson seeing Levett at breakfast every morning, so it is as though he is still there. On account of his affection for him, Johnson still remembers him. Yet still he fills affection's eye. You notice the impersonal nature of the statement. He doesn't say, 'I can remember him', which is rather a romantic type of statement. But he makes it impersonal, he sort of distances it; though, at the same time, it is definitely Johnson's own feeling that he is expressing: Yet still he fills affection's eye, suggesting, perhaps, that it is not only Johnson himself who remembers him out of affection but other people too.

et still he fills affection's eye, / Obscurely wise and coarsely kind. These are two quite interesting epithets. He was 'obscurely wise'. What do you think is meant by that?

Ratnavira: Subtly, or not obviously.

Subhuti: Not academically wise.

S: Yes.

Subhuti: .. more of life's wisdom than

S: Yes, intuitively, almost; instinctively [wise]. Not with much in the way of conceptual clarity. He was wise without knowing that he was wise, or why he was wise. He just instinctively did the right thing. You sometimes find that there are people like that: they say the right thing, their ideas are in fact right, though at the same time they seem enwrapped in a certain amount of intellectual confusion. They get the point, even though they cannot express it very clearly, or even though their mental processes are not easy to trace. But they manage to get the point; they 'hit the nail on the head', though they are not very logical in their approach.

Vajrananda Is that what is called intuition?

S: Well, to some extent. But even intuition suggests a certain clarity which is not suggested here. 'Wise' has a force of its own, and it usually relates to actual practical affairs rather than to matters of abstract thought, so he is 'obscurely wise': he knows the right thing to do, almost without knowing why it is right. He just does it instinctively. Perhaps it is instinctive rather than intuitive.

Vajrananda Do you think that that can go very far? When you say 'instinctive', it sounds sort of

S: Animal like, yes. I think, in practical matters, it can go a long way. There's a lot of practical men statesmen, politicians who are very effective, but couldn't give you any reasoned account of their actions; who instinctively respond to situations, give orders, arranged things, organize things. They haven't got it all worked out conceptually in an abstract way. They operate through action.

Padmaraja: Do you know any notable examples of that?

S: Well, you could say Napoleon maybe that is not a very positive example. I mean, such people are not very articulate.

[f2 p7]

Ratnavira Would you say operating in that way implies that they are not very self-conscious?

S: I think it very often does at least, not really reflecting. They don't stop and think. Maybe, in some cases, there is an element of intuition; they just see what needs to be done. They can't explain it or justify it, but they know that is the thing to be done and how to go about it.

Vajrananda What is the difference between 'instinctive' and 'intuitive'?

S: Instinctive is usually used with regard to animal functions, whereas intuitive is usually used in a more distinctively human sense, with regard to more distinctly human activities.

Devaraja: Could you just go back over that point and say something about why he distances himself? That, presumably, was a kind of tendency, a way of presenting things in [Johnson's] time.

S: I think it is characteristic of classic art, that you don't identify yourself too closely with your material.

Subhuti: It makes the point more powerfully, doesn't it? Because if it is just 'my' feeling, it's just my feeling; but if it's ... objective

S: It universalizes it. Yet still he fills affection's eye. You notice that, though affection is not printed with a capital 'A', it is a personification. Johnson makes great use of personification. Eighteenth century poetry generally makes great use of personifications, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. When Johnson speaks of Hope's delusive mine, 'hope' is personified. Some editions do in fact put capital letters. Then, later in this verse, we have lettered Arrogance, which again is a personification, capital A. Personification is also a means of distancing. You don't speak of your feelings, you speak of Affection with a capital A, so to speak. You personify affection, including your own affection, but not just your own affection.

Devaraja: What do you think are the spiritual advantages of operating in that way? You contrasted that with the [style of the] Romantics.

S: I think there is more control, for one thing. You have more control over your feelings and you place them more in a context, perhaps in a social context, rather than leaving your feelings suspended in a void, almost.

What about 'coarsely kind'? What do you think Johnson means by coarse?

Aryamitra No social graces.

S: No social graces; crude, not very refined, not elegant, coarse, clumsy.

Subhuti: Would 'coarse' not have had a social connotation?

S: Oh yes, very much so.

Subhuti: 'Coarse' has not quite got the same meaning as we would put on to it.

S: It is not necessarily coarse in feeling, but it is certainly coarse in behaviour. Perhaps he spat on the floor, or wiped his nose on his sleeve or dropped his h's coarse in that way. He had no social graces, he was clearly not a gentleman.

[f2 p8]

Subhuti: Rough.

S: Rough, yes. Perhaps nowadays we would tend to say 'rough' rather than 'coarse'. But 'coarsely kind'? He was kind in a coarse way; the kindness was genuine but it was not accompanied by any refinement or grace. This is an important point, because just as you can sometimes think somebody is not wise because they are obscure, in the same way you can sometimes think somebody is not really kind because their manner is coarse or rough. Johnson himself was like that: he had some social graces when he wished to have them, but he was often gruff and short with people, or even rude. But there is no doubt about his fundamental kindness of heart. On the other hand, you can have someone with all the Chesterfieldian social graces but with fundamentally quite a cold heart.

Kulamitra: Maybe without being coarsely kind Levett could not have attended to the sort of people he did. They must have needed quite direct, even rough, treatment.

S: Perhaps they would not have felt at ease with a doctor of a more elegant kind.

Subhuti: Is there not an alternative reading of 'obscurely', as in 'obscurely wise', that he was not acknowledged to be wise? As if it is saying that he was unremarkable and nobody would have really thought of him as wise or kind.

S: Yes, that could be: that he himself was obscure.

Devaraja: Maybe he was [obscurely wise] in the areas that people would not recognize as being worthy of the epithet 'wise'.

S: Mm. I think nonetheless that 'obscure' does primarily refer to the quality of his wisdom, because that gives you another idea, whereas if it were simply that he himself was obscure, the fact that 'lettered Arrogance' should not deny him its praise would be a duplication, to some extent, of that idea, and Johnson doesn't seem to duplicate any of his ideas in this poem.

Kulamitra: So obscure wisdom and coarse kindness are attributes of a certain type of person who is not well brought up and so on, but nevertheless has good qualities.

S: Yes. 'Obscurely wise' refers, no doubt, to the intellectual side of his nature, and 'coarsely kind' to the emotional. He was coarse in manner just as he was obscure in his thinking processes. But he was wise and he was kind; and that should not be lost sight of. This is often what we tend to do: we judge by appearances.

Vajrananda [Levett was from Hull.] Would the fact that he was from the North be noticeable

to a southerner in those days?

S: Probably, because Dr Johnson, throughout his life, retained a Staffordshire accent. Boswell gives several examples. He used, for instance, to say 'poonch' instead of 'punch': 'Let's make some poonch'. I think provincial accents were much more common then than they are now. Let us go on to the next two lines: Nor, lettered Arrogance, deny, Thy praise to merit unrefined. [f2 p9] Here Johnson is directly addressing this personification, 'lettered Arrogance', and this creates variety in the verse. He says, 'Do not deny your praise to merit simply because it is unrefined.' What does on mean by 'lettered Arrogance'? I think 'lettered' can mean two things. It can mean literate lettered in that sense; or it can mean with letters after one's name. The one doesn't exclude the other. Probably there is a greater reference to the better qualified doctor, who had taken his degree in medicine and had MD after his name, because the next verse goes on to speak of Levett's actual skill as a physician. But it certainly is not confined to that. The more literate, perhaps arrogant person, should not deny Levett's merit simply because he was unrefined or because his bedside manner was not very attractive; nor should the better qualified doctor deny Levett's merit as a physician just because he was not so well qualified. This is quite strong: Nor, lettered Arrogance, deny / Thy praise to merit unrefined.

Kulamitra: Doctors [regard themselves as] being almost a professional guild that is the attitude they often do have as a collective, isn't it? that anybody who has not had their training and been officially accepted is

S: (Interrupting) a quack, yes. Attitudes have changed to some extent, even during my lifetime. A few decades ago, doctors were even more exclusive in their attitude than they are now. During the war, when I was going to the Buddhist Society, Christmas Humphreys was very interested in osteopathy. That was something really 'way out' in those days. He told me that he was friends with a certain osteopathic practitioner who always consulted him about practising because she had to be very careful not to risk prosecution. This was forty years ago. But now osteopaths have their own [recognized] association and everything. So, even in Johnson's day, though medical training was not as highly organized as now, there was still the tendency on the part of better qualified doctors, and maybe doctors of better social position, to look down on men like Levett. Barbers were still often surgeons, weren't they?

Vajrananda: Is it clear whether Levett was an actual doctor had degrees and so on?

S: He had no degrees. As the extract which I read made clear, he started off as a waiter in a Paris cafe [frequented by] surgeons. Surgeons, mind you, not physicians and he seemed a likely lad and picked up things from their conversations, so they encouraged him to attend a few lectures, and he started practising on the basis of that degree of knowledge. (Laughter) He was probably a complete quack, but no doubt he was quite helpful and useful to people on a very low level of subsistence, who could not afford a proper doctor; at least he could give something to kill pain, or treat a blister or lance them or bleed them or whatever was necessary. He could function on that sort of level.

Kulamitra: A lot of the 'proper doctors' were what we would think of as complete quacks!

S: Yes, indeed.

Susiddhi: It needed quite a lot of money to study. You had to have quite a bit of capital.

S: I think also, in Johnson's day, the profession of doctor was changing in England. Formerly, no gentlemen would consider practising as a doctor. Doctors were not professional men in the way that lawyers were, or clergymen. It was in the course of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth that [f2 p10] the medical profession progressed socially, until it became a profession a gentleman could take up. That being the case, they were rather sensitive to the existence of these low-level practitioners with no social graces who very obviously were not gentlemen; because they were trying to get the medical profession accepted as a profession on the same footing as the law, the church and the army; and eventually they succeeded. This is shown, for instance, in the case of the army itself. If a clergyman joins the army, he is automatically given a commission. In the same way, doctors are commissioned officers. In a way, there is no reason for them to be, but they are, because they come from the social level that the officers used to come from. But it is only comparatively recently that they have won that status. (Read verse again.) You have to be able to distinguish the gold from the dross, genuine merit under an apparently unattractive surface appearance. A lot of people can't do that.

Subhuti: Is there a hint of indignation here?

S: I think there is, because of the direct address. It is not that Johnson is merely saying, 'Please don't do such and such'. The implication is 'You are doing it. Please stop it'.

Subhuti: As if people had not really understood why he had taken up Dr Levett.

S: Yes, or they sneered at Levett.

Subhuti: You get a hint of that in the biography, don't you?

S: Yes, and I'll read you another bit. This is from Mrs Thrale, who was also a friend of Johnson's, but she was a middle-class lady, and this is what she thought. This is from Thraleana, based on her diary. She says: Dr Johnson has been writing on his old inmate, Mr Levett, he tells me. That poor creature was 84 or 85 years old this winter, when after an uninterrupted series of health, he died suddenly by a spasm or rupture of some vessels of the heart. He lived with Johnson as a sort of necessary man or surgeon to the wretched household he held in Bolt Court, where blind Mrs Williams, dropsical Mrs Desmoulins, black Francis and his white wife's bastard, and the wretched Mrs White and a thing that he called Poll shared his bounty and increased his dirt. Levett used to bleed one and blister the another and be very useful, but I believe disagreeable to all. He died while his patron was with me in Harley Street, and very sorry he was, in his way of being sorry, and he wrote these verses. (Laughter) That's Mrs Thrale! She didn't seem to appreciate Mr Levett very much, did she?

Kulamitra: These other people she describes were also resident at Johnson's house, is that right?

S: Oh, yes, he had a whole collection; you can read his life story.

Kulamitra: So his more sophisticated friends just thought of those people as a sort of menagerie, almost.

S: Yes, no doubt. But he did value them. For instance, 'blind Mrs Williams'; whenever he got home in the evening, however late, even in the middle of the night, he always went in and said hello to her and had a cup of tea and a chat, and then went to bed, and she always sat up for him. She was the distressed daughter of an old friend of his; he maintained her there for years together. They were always quarrelling among themselves, and when he was away he gave [f2 p11] them a regular allowance, because they had no other source but himself. So he had this genuine kindness. Who Poll was I don't remember; she was probably someone rather questionable.

Devaraja: A lodger?

S: Yes. And there was his black servant, Francis, whom he made his heir, rather to people's surprise (Laughter) He left nearly everything to Francis. He was quite an interesting character, a freed slave who had become his servant, general cook and factotum, and looked after such household as he had.

Susiddhi: What as Dr Johnson's income?

S: At this stage, he had his pension from the government, which was given when he was about 57; a Civil List pension as we would call it.

Susiddhi: And he supported all those people?

S: Well, he had some income from his writings, though not all that much; but he was very generous, and living was cheap in those days. Nonetheless, he supported, usually, four, five or six people.

Susiddhi: It sounds a bit like an Indian family.

S: Yes. They weren't always very grateful, and they were always quarrelling. Once, on a well-known occasion, someone complained to him that he was a fool to support these people, and asked why he did it. He said, 'Well, there is nobody else to support them. If I don't support them, they'll perish, so I have to support them.' But, apart from that, there is no doubt that he was quite fond of them, in at least some cases. They lived there year after year and he had got used to them! He himself sometimes gives quite amusing descriptions of them in his letters, especially of their quarrels. But he remained on quite good terms with them all. But then, you see Mrs Thrale's attitude to Levett: very hoity-toity, as we would say. She probably almost resented the fact that Johnson felt so strongly about Levett.

Subhuti: She seems to be trying to justify his presence in terms of his usefulness. She doesn't want to acknowledge any...

S: Yes, she doesn't mention the fact that he is out all day, every day, making his rounds. Perhaps he had Mrs Thrale in mind when he said Nor, lettered Arrogance, deny...! because she was something of a literary lady. Yet still he fills affection's eye you notice 'fill'? fills affection's eye,/ Obscurely wise and coarsely kind; / Nor, lettered Arrogance deny / They praise to merit unrefined. Merit is still merit, even if it is unrefined; that is perhaps easy to forget. In the FWBO, one knows that there are certain people who are popular, but it is often because they may have good qualities but they also have certain graces, as it were; and there

are others who may have equally good qualities, if not better, but they are not appreciated so much because of a certain coarseness or clumsiness or something of that sort in their manner or appearance. It is very easy to judge by appearances and even to be misled by appearances in that way.

People like people who are 'fun'.
When fainting nature called for aid,
And hovering death prepared the blow,
His vigorous remedy displayed
The power of art without the show.

[f2 p12]

S: Here Johnson is as it were summarizing, or paying tribute to, Levett's effectiveness as a physician. When fainting nature called for aid in extremity, when nature was fainting and called for aid that is to say, when someone was very seriously ill and on the point of death And hovering death prepared the blow. He imagines death as a sort of winged skeleton with a scythe, hovering overhead and getting ready to strike. At that moment, when things seemed very desperate and the patient seemed in a precarious position, His vigorous remedy displayed / The power of art without the show. There was no show of skill, and maybe he did not have much in the way of instruments or anything of that sort, but he was very effective as a physician. At least, that is what Johnson believed. 'The art', of course, is the art of medicine. The vigorous and effective nature of the remedies and the treatment he prescribed showed the power of his art, his skill in the exercise of medicine, without any of the usual medical show. And when did he do this? When fainting nature called for aid; in a crisis or a dangerous situation, where the patient was in a very weakened state and badly needing assistance, in danger of death. It was then that Levett showed the power of his knowledge of medicine without any of the usual show. He just did what was necessary, with no bedside manner or anything of that sort. One can perhaps give this a wider or more general application; not just to a doctor but to someone who is effective in the affairs of life, without any show or superficial graces. They do what is necessary.(Pause) It also suggests Levett was always ready to attend any emergency.

Susiddhi: The word vigorous is interesting. You get the impression that he could be a wee bit too vigorous sometimes!

S: You notice also that there is an antithesis of 'fainting nature' and 'vigorous remedy'. It almost suggests that there is an energy emanating from the doctor himself, almost independently of whatever medicines or treatment he prescribed. Often that may be the case: the positive and affirmative nature of the physician does have a rallying effect on the patient. It could be that Levett was a vigorous and healthy person well, he lived without illness until he was 80 and that had an invigorating effect on the patient, quite apart from the medical treatment that he gave. At least he was there, he was healthy and positive; and he was giving care and attention. That must have had its own value, apart from the medicine itself.

Susiddhi: You get the impression, too, that these patients would have had either Dr Levett or no doctor...

S: And also that he was often called in only at the last minute. They tried to do without a doctor, maybe because they could not afford one or because there was nobody to bother. It

was only when someone was on the point of death, apparently, that Levett was called in, but even in that extreme situation he was still very effective. (Reads verse again.)

Kulamitra: Again there seems to be some suggestion of Johnson holding Levett up as an example. Going back to that very first verse, if that was his view of the world, well, here was someone who had just been quite plain and true, as compared to all these fancy but unreal type of doctors who were just all show.

S: Yes, there were fashionable physicians in those days as in this. There were doctors who attached themselves to the very wealthy.

[f2 p13]

Susiddhi: Remedies were vigorous in those days, when you think of bleeding and purging and the rest of it. Sometimes it didn't have much of a rational basis; it was psychological.

S: But I heard on the radio only yesterday that bleeding is being reintroduced. Phlebotomy, it's called. Apparently, there are some people with too many red corpuscles in their blood, and they are draining off some of the blood now.

Subhuti: They are even using leeches again.

Susiddhi: Well, leeches have always been used in such cases.

S: It must be admitted that blood-letting, as it was called, was often applied indiscriminately. Byron probably died because of that. Some biographers believe that his physicians killed him, literally, by bleeding him when he least needed to be bled, when he was in a weakened state through fever, and bleeding just finished off the job, as it were. But they were no doubt convinced that they were doing the right thing, and that they knew what they were doing. But, in my own case, from an early age I have had the conviction that doctors do not know what they are doing. In most cases they quite literally do not know what they are doing. It is guesswork, and you just hand yourself over to them in absolute faith that they know what they are doing; but they don't. was brought up against this fact quite early in life, because I was supposed to have heart disease, and the doctors disagreed as to whether I had it or not. The doctors who examined me said, 'He must have had rheumatic fever when he was a child', and our family doctor, who had attended me since I was born, maintained that I definitely had not had rheumatic fever. So there was disagreement. The family doctor kept me confined to bed without moving for several years, and later on the specialist said that was the worst thing that could have been done; I should have been up and on my feet. But other doctors said that if I was allowed to walk I might even drop dead! So my father had to choose between these different verdicts. Eventually he chose a middle way, because he thought that I wouldn't have much of a life lying in bed all day for the rest of my life, so it was better to take a small risk, cautiously. Then, of course, when I had my army medical, I was told there was absolutely nothing whatever wrong with my heart! (Laughter)

Vessantara: Did you feel a bit peeved to be told that?

S: Well, yes. I had the medical and they said there was nothing wrong with my heart, so I told them my history. So, to make sure, they sent me to a specialist, who spent exactly thirty seconds examining me and said, 'No, there is absolutely nothing whatever wrong with your

heart'; and I was graded B2 having considered myself an invalid when, years later in Calcutta, I came to know two Bengali doctors, a father and a daughter, who came to the Maha Bodhi Society. The father had actually trained under the specialist who examined me when I was a child. They both examined me and said, 'No, there is nothing wrong with your heart whatever.' But it still constantly misses beats and does all sorts of odd things. So I don't know whether I have ever had anything wrong with my heart or not. I am no nearer to enlightenment on that subject than I was when I was eight or nine. But that gave me, from that age, a deep and quite conscious distrust of doctors and a belief that they very rarely know what they are doing. They are treating this very complicated organism, which is the human body. I have seen more recently how difficult it is to find out what is wrong with a car, which is very [f2 p14] simple compared with the human body; but often people just don't know what is wrong with it. Even Subhuti can't find out what's wrong with it!

Subhuti: Specialism!

S: But in India I have travelled in jeeps and taxis, in Kalimpong and Darjeeling, and sometimes there has been a breakdown and I have seen the driver get out and kick the car vigorously, and then it goes. This is the sort of empirical treatment that doctors often give; maybe even Levett did this sometimes, and it worked. But the Nepali driver didn't usually know why it worked, only that it did work, sometimes. He might, of course, have been doing deeper damage without knowing it. And I think this is often how doctors function. Sometimes they really know what they are doing, if a very exhaustive examination is made. But very often they change their diagnosis, don't they? Or one [doctor] gives one diagnosis and treatment and one another. Another thing I notice is that the quacks are no better. Some people transfer their blind faith from orthodox medicine to unorthodox medicine. The acupuncturists, in my opinion, don't know what they are doing any more than the other medical practitioners; and of that, too, I have personal experience. You just deliver yourself into their hands; you lie there and they do things to you, but they don't know what they're doing. They produce some result, but whether the result is curative, or a further complication, nobody really knows. In America, I think, it has been found that 50 percent of people who are treated by doctors get well, and 50 percent who are not treated by doctors also get well. (Laughter) So what is one to think? It is the whole question of the expert; and no doubt there are experts, but there are lots of people who profess to be experts but are not.

[f3 p1]

Levett Seminar File 3, Edited Copy.

Saddhaloka: The grand show that doctors often put on is precisely [to cover up their lack of knowledge about what they are doing]. They are actually taught to put on a show of confidence to cover up their lack of knowledge.

S: Even their terminology sometimes [is part of the show].

Devaraja: here was a good example of that when Yashodeva had his blood platelet disorder. He was very seriously ill, and the technical, Latin term for the disease was basically 'a blood disorder of which we do not know the cause'. (Laughter) They were proffering this around very knowledgeably among themselves.

S: They say "we know what it is", but they are really no wiser than the layman.

Subhuti: ((People who are ill)) often mistake the fact that an effect is produced for the fact that...

S: (Interrupting) A cure has been effected.

Subhuti: Yes, or that the person knows what he is doing. I notice this with acupuncture in the Friends that people are very impressed by the quite remarkable effects that acupuncture can produce even if the effects are for the worse! (Laughter)

S: Yes. It all ties up with their feelings of guilt: 'it must be doing me good because it's so unpleasant', or 'it's bringing things up'.

Devaraja: 'It must be doing me good because it's costing me so much money, and I'm feeling so much worse than I did before.'(Laughter)

S: Well, I am not denying the theoretical basis of acupuncture. I am merely saying that the practitioners of it don't really know what they're doing. They don't really have enough knowledge of the way energy currents work to be able to manipulate them in a completely positive and helpful manner. They just have a good old kick; you know, stick the needle in here or there. It really is amazing how people in the FWBO have transferred their blind faith from ordinary doctors to fringe medicine. It's the same blind faith transferred to people who, perhaps, are even less qualified in some ways. That's regarded as 'enlightened' or 'liberated', etc. They look down on people who are still loyal to the medical establishment, but they are in no better position; often they are in a worse position. really feel that it is very undesirable for you to be treated by a doctor who does not know you personally. I think the personal factor is very important. That is why it is a great pity that the old-fashioned relationship with the family doctor has more or less broken down, because he has known you perhaps all your life and he becomes acquainted with your system, and knows what works for you and what doesn't. have seen a case of this sort recently: my mother suffered from swellings in her legs. Her current doctor gave her all the prescribed treatment and nothing happened. She kept saying, 'If only I could see my old doctor!' Eventually, she insisted on seeing him he had moved somewhere else and he gave her a few tablets and the next day the swellings had subsided and she was all right. She had been taking other medicine from the other doctor who, no doubt, was equally well qualified for about six months, and things just seemed to be getting worse and she was in pain, but the medicine from her old doctor, in whom she had great faith, worked the very next day! It may have been a faith [f3 p2] factor, or it may be that he just knew her system much better, having treated her for about 20 years in India, I never let a doctor whom I didn't know treat me, with one fatal or near fatal exception. When I was in India not the last time, but the time before I had bronchitis and a bad throat when I was staying at the Siddharth Vihara, which is really a student's hostel, and they had a sort of quack Indian doctor there. He had probably done a year at medical school, but I am sure he wasn't qualified, though they called him 'doctor'. I was in quite a bad state, and he came along and said, 'I'll definitely cure you. You'll be fine tomorrow morning, I guarantee.' I was very dubious and reluctant. He produced a great big antibiotic pill which he forced me to swallow; I couldn't really refuse without being quite rude in front of a lot of people, so I thought, 'Well, let me take it and hope it doesn't do any harm,' but I really suffered that night; I almost felt as though as I was dying, with terrible pains in my bowels and various other complications. I know it was that pill. It did me quite a bit of harm. So I resolved after that, 'I will never allow anyone to treat me like that again. On the other hand, on the visit before that, I was in

Ahmedabad, and called in an ayurvedic doctor, and I found him very good. He was very sensible in his approach, and we discussed the symptoms and he tried to find out about my basic system in terms of ayurveda the three gunas of Indian philosophy and that all made a lot more sense to me. So I accepted his treatment. I knew, in any case, ayurvedic treatment is quite gentle, and so on; they don't use antibiotics.

Subhuti: (That is reminiscent of) the four humours.

S: Yes. I am much more at home with that sort of theory, and it seems to work better! That is an example of the expert [The expert] has passed his examination, he has a lot of knowledge, a lot of information; but does he really know how to apply that to the problems of a living organism? That is quite another matter. It could be that someone who is technically a quack and has not had much more than an empirical experience is actually a better doctor. It may even have been without idealizing him that Levett was something of that kind.

Kulamitra: here is something I have noticed about experts which may be of general [interest]. We often lack expertise in the Friends, so we want to call on an expert. But, if you are going to use an expert well, you have to be able to say 'no' to them.

S: Yes, you must use him You mustn't surrender yourself to him. You must cross-examine him, ask him what conclusion he has come to and why, and what treatment he is giving you, what effects he hopes to bring about. Most doctors would regard that as almost impertinence on the patient's part.

Kulamitra: But not just doctors: lawyers, accountants, people like that.

S: Oh, yes, indeed, I think this is very important. You hire them, and you are making use of them. You take whatever professional advice they give you into consideration, but you are not ruled by them. I think this is very important in all one's dealing with professionals.

Kulamitra: I think there is still a tendency for a lot of people to say, 'He's the expert, we do whatever he says.'

[f3 p3]

S: Yes, and you surrender responsibility. It is the same not only with the doctor but the 'shrink'! You surrender responsibility to your shrink. So, in the case of people in the States, I believe, their lives are completely dominated by their lawyer, their accountant or tax expert, and their shrink; not to mention their wives. No wonder they have nervous breakdowns.

Subhuti: There seems to be a minor tendency in the movement towards taking up courses in alternative medicine. I sometimes feel a little suspicious of people's motives, partly [because] it seems to be a desire for status, without going through the really arduous training of a doctor; you can quite quickly become an expert.

S: A short cut. Though it is not always all that short, especially if you are not all that bright and have left it rather late in life. (Laughter) Then it may take you six years to do a three-year course! Also, in the case of people, even within the 'Friends', going into alternative medicine gives you power over people.

Subhuti: These people we mentioned lawyers, doctors, accountants are all the ones who play God.

Devaraja: I tend to think the interest in alternative medicine is an example of a 'near enemy' of the spiritual life.

S: Yes. I have sometimes said, in the case of women it is women, in many cases, who are taking up these things that the career is the near enemy of the spiritual life. A man takes a career of some kind for granted; in the case of a woman, it can appear as something fascinatingly new until she has been working for a few years.

Aryamitra: Where does the desire for power over people come from? Is it lack of personal power?

S: Well, one might act devil's advocate and say it is sometimes necessary [to have power over other people], to prevent others doing harm to you. Because other people do threaten you, sometimes, even quite objectively, and you may not feel it is enough just to keep them at a distance; you may feel the need to control them so they don't get in your way and do you any harm.

Devaraja: Can you expand that a bit more?

S: Well, there is a lot of competition and conflict among people, and often the weakest goes to the wall. So, often, you have to fight off interference from other people. As long as they are at large, you are always liable to be interrupted or disturbed or interfered with, so you might, in the end, almost on rational grounds, come to the conclusion that the only way you can be safe from them is to have them thoroughly under control. One might think that is almost legitimate; especially if you are dealing with irrational, unpredictable people, who insist on getting in your way in a quite unjustified manner. [That applies, too,] if you are conscious of being more clever than they are. On the other hand, you may have certain ambitions, certain things which you cannot achieve without the co-operation of other people, and you may not trust them to the extent of being willing to enlist their co-operation through discussion and convincing them; you may just want to bring them under your control, so that you can harness them to your projects. You may bluff them to bring them under control, make them false promises and so on. This is what [f3 p4] political leaders often do. And sometimes [the desire to control others] can spring up from the intensity of your paranoia.

Kulamitra: [I want to say] something about the alternative medicines. It seems to me that they are seen as 'healing arts', and the people who gravitate towards them are often quite weak or meek, so it is almost a way in which the meek can inherit the earth right now! They would never gain status in business or something like that, but they can become gentle acupuncturists and still be respected.

S: Look at astrologers and mediums. I am sure that many of them are people who enjoy having power over others, guiding them and dominating them in their lives, influencing them in one way or another. Recently it came to my notice that a woman Order Member was still having recourse to astrologers and mediums and being quite influenced by them. I was really quite surprised by this, and wrote an appropriately strong letter. Something of this is still around, it seems.

Subhuti: In some people's minds the 'alternative' is not clearly differentiated from the spiritual, from the Dharma. They actually think that they are part of the same thing.

Vajrananda: I suppose they're both alternatives, aren't they?

S: Yes, there is a sort of lump of alternatives, differing widely from one another. Not everything is alternative in the sense that, say, Buddhism is alternative, simply because it features in the Mind, Body and Spirit Festival. We have done about half the poem, so we have got already quite a good picture of Levett and what Johnson feels about him. But there is still quite a bit more to the poem: not simply in the sense that there are still five verses left, but that Johnson still has to make his central statement. We haven't yet reached the culmination of the poem.

Susiddhi: There is quite a big contrast between line 2 of that verse and the rest. Hovering death prepared the blow. You can imagine death preparing Dr Levett's potion.

S: Displaying his remedy, yes.

Vessantara: If Johnson is very concerned about the dangerous influence of the imagination, that must have been very much in evidence in the relation of many medical patients to showy doctors. They gave them false hopes. But Dr Levett was not showy; he was down to earth and was actually effective.

S: He would probably say, 'I think you'll die tonight, but I'll do my best!' (Laughter)

Kulamitra: There is still a lot of dishonesty from that point of view now, with doctors. They won't really tell you supposedly for your own good how serious your condition is.

S: They don't always know. Even the vet that came to our 15 year old cat, Maisie, who was ill a few months ago, was pretty certain she was going to die. He practically said, in so many words, 'She'll die tonight'. I went in to say good-bye to poor old Maisie, and I thought, 'She's not going to die!' That was my feeling just when I stroked her, and from the way she looked; my feeling was, [f3 p5] 'There's too much energy there, too much life; she's not going to die', though she did look quite unpromising! (Laughter) And in the morning I went and stroked her, and she stretched and got out of her little basket and had a walk round. So I thought, 'Well, she's not dead yet!' And she slowly recovered. So even the vet couldn't really tell whether she was going to die. Although he implied that it was practically certain she would die that night, she is still around. She has had a second stroke, so she won't be around much longer.

DAY TWO

In Misery's darkest caverns known,
His useful care was ever nigh,
Where hopeless Anguish poured his groan,
And lonely Want retired to die.

S: This stanza continues the description of Levett as the physician; it describes the circumstances under which he worked, the sort of people whom he assisted. What do you

think is meant by these 'darkest caverns' of misery? What sort of image does that bring to mind?

Susiddhi: Slums?

S: Slums, yes. There is also again echo of mines, because a mine and a cavern are not dissimilar. Also, it is usually not human beings but animals that live in caverns or caves. So there is a suggestion of a bestial sort of life, not worthy of a human being; yes, a slum life, where people live in misery. Levett penetrated there; he practised and he attended people living under the worst possible conditions. The caverns, no doubt, are dark not only literally but metaphorically. This is an instance of Johnson's economy of phrase. he generalizes; in a way, he personifies. Misery is a sort of personification the 'darkest caverns known' of misery. In other words, he attended upon the most miserable people living in the most disgusting conditions, just like animals.

is useful care was ever nigh. The epithet 'useful' is interesting. Johnson does not exaggerate; Levett was just 'useful'. He was always there when wanted; he was always to hand; he was always nearby. Even under the worst possible conditions, in respect of the lowest class of people, living in misery, he was always available; 'his useful care' was always at hand.

Subhuti: Care isn't necessarily useful, is it? You can care without actually doing anything about it.

S: Yes, that's true.

Vajrananda: If 'Misery' is a personification, wouldn't that suggest that 'darkest caverns' is to do with a mental state?

S: I think it is both mental and physical. I don't think that the physical is excluded. You could be living in a 'miserable' condition, meaning that your [f3 p6] physical conditions are miserable, in the sense that they are extremely bad, deplorable.

Vajrananda: he darkest caverns of misery, [doesn't that refer to] the depths of one's misery?

S: Yes, but it is misery which is partly due to material conditions: people living a miserable life, not in the sense that they were unhappy but that they were deprived of things like material comfort and even convenience. If you say that someone is living 'in misery', you don't merely mean that they are mentally unhappy but that they are living under very squalid conditions as well. In Misery's darkest caverns known, / His useful care was ever nigh, / Where hopeless Anguish poured his groan, another personification; anguish is personified. Anguish is even more extreme than misery. For Johnson to refer to 'hopeless Anguish' is a very strong statement indeed. It is hope that relieves the misery of life, and if there is no hope, life is miserable indeed. Where hopeless Anguish poured his groan. 'Poured his groan' that is a highly metaphorical expression. I think there is a biblical echo, isn't there? To pour your groan is to groan repeatedly and vigorously; your pour out your groans like pouring out water. It is a slightly Augustan idiom.

Subhuti: There is an echo between 'useful care' and 'hopeless Anguish', isn't there?

S: I suppose there is. He was there, as it were, attending even quite hopeless cases. He gave his 'useful care' to those who were living in misery, but he was also near at hand even in the case of those who were groaning in anguish without any hope at all, who were definitely going to die. And 'Lonely Want' retired to die. So there is a sort of crescendo of misery, anguish and then death. 'Lonely Want' 'want' is again a personification, meaning people in want: people dying, maybe dying of starvation, completely alone, and he was there too.

Do you notice that the picture, in keeping with the more classical tradition in literature, is very generalized, but none the less effective?

Kulamitra: It sounds very similar to the sort of conditions that you here about Mother Teresa trying to minister to in Calcutta, 'lonely Want retiring to die'.

S: Yes. (Reads verse again) This [verse] gives a very graphic picture of the conditions under which he worked. Let us go on to the next verse, which gives more insight into Levett's character.

No summons mocked by chill delay,
No petty gain disdained by pride;
The modest wants of every day,
The toil of every day supplied.

In a way, this summarizes his whole way of life. No summons mocked by chill delay whose summons?

Subhuti: he needy, the sick.

S: Yes. And he didn't 'mock' the summons 'by chill delay'. What is this a reference to? It is a reference to the behaviour of more indifferent, more prosperous, physicians: a summons comes, someone is very ill, but they mock it, [f3 p7] as it were, by coldly delaying their visit. That sort of thing happens, even today. Relations and friends are very desperate and send to the doctor, 'Please come immediately' and he just doesn't. Sometimes, perhaps, he is busy attending other patients, but sometimes, again, it is just out of coldness and indifference. So it is as though the 'cold delay' of the doctor is mocking the summons that comes to him from the sick person. He is showing a complete lack of humanity. Levett was not like that. No summons mocked by chill delay. In his case there was no question of his mocking a sudden call by delaying out of coldness of heart. If he was called, he went at once, whoever it was, at any time of the day, any time of the night. No petty gain disdained by pride. He wasn't too proud to take whatever was offered him, which meant he was quite willing to attend on the poorest people. 'Petty' means small, insignificant. No petty gain disdained by pride: if you offered him a shilling he wouldn't be too proud to pocket it, or if you just gave him a loaf of bread, he would take that in payment or a glass of gin! Johnson doesn't actually mention the gin, but he was not so proud that he would not accept [such] insignificant payments from very poor people. No summons mocked by chill delay, / No petty gain disdained by pride 'disdained' means looked down upon contemptuously. The modest wants of every day / The toil of every day supplied. He went off each day on his rounds and whatever he made, whether it was more or less, it just covered his expenses for that particular day. This is the way many people live in India, as I have mentioned before, especially coolies. They work during the day; at the end of the day, they get their day's wages, and on the way home they go

and buy some food and give it to their wife when they arrive home, she cooks it and they eat. That is how they go on from day to day, a completely hand to mouth existence. This is how Levett lived. 'The modest wants' do you notice that? the very small, reasonable wants, or needs, of every day. The toil of every day supplied. And he lived like this until the age of 80. This, of course, presupposes a certain kind of social system, doesn't it? In the case of India, if you are a coolie living in this way, there is somewhere where you can go and get work on a casual basis and where you will be paid at the end of the day, and there is the bazaar or market that you pass through on the way home, and there is your wife ready to cook. These sort of conditions do not prevail everywhere, do they?

Devamitra: The repetition of 'every day' also suggests that he really was working continuously, for personal need and, presumably, also the need of others.

S: If one can live like that, under certain circumstances, it means the mind is very free. There is no planning, no bother. But, of course, you can get into serious difficulties; if the source of employment dries up it means literally starvation; you just have to beg. That happens too. You can see on Indian work sites, a hundred men may turn up looking for work, and the foreman or overseer will pick out perhaps ten.

Kulamitra: It's not that long since that used to happen in Britain, is it? It used to happen with the dockers even at the beginning of this century.

S: That's right, yes. In some ways, it is a bit like working in a coop, because you do your work and you eat at the end of the day and you don't have to bother about it. It is only the manager who has the overall responsibility. Well, in practice, anyway; it is not like that in theory.

[f3 p8]

Subhuti: It makes for innocence, doesn't it?

S: Yes, indeed. And he has been described as innocent.

Ratnavira: In the poem, to what extent is Johnson idealizing that as a way of life? Has Levett taken on [that way of life] as a reflection of his own benevolence, or is it more that they are the circumstances that he finds himself in?

S: To some extent, I think, the circumstances that he finds himself in. He is not highly qualified, perhaps not qualified at all. He is just an empiricist; he certainly has a lot of practical experience though there were quite socially successful doctors in those days who had perhaps no more training than Levett but he wasn't personally very presentable if you wanted to practise among more well to do people. Levett maybe had certain habits which were not very reputable; he tended to get drunk and so on. But he seems not to have been particularly ambitious. It seems as though if he could just live, he was quite happy. He is not presented as a feeling sort of person, but he must have had some feeling for people just to have gone out in that way and done his duty, so to speak. It was not as though he went out occasionally; by all accounts he went out every day and spent the whole day going from house to house or hovel to hovel, doing whatever he could, even at that advanced age. So it is as though there was some genuine kindness in him. Johnson says he was 'coarsely kind'. It is probably quite difficult to judge people like that. At any rate, in the next verse Johnson goes on to give us his estimate of Levett.

His virtues walked their narrow round,
Nor made a pause, nor left a void;
And sure the Eternal Master found,
The single talent well employed.

This brings in the parable of the talents. Do you know the parable of the talents? Can anyone tell it, for the benefit of those who don't remember?

Susiddhi: As I remember it, the master, as the Bible describes, went into a far country. He had different servants. He had a good servant who had proved to be efficient and imaginative, and he left him ten talents. To another he left five talents to do what he liked; and he left another servant one talent.

S: He didn't give them any money, he deposited it with them.

Susiddhi: So he went away for a long time, and he came back and asked them what they had done with the money he had deposited with them. And the chap to whom he had given ten talents had proved his worth, so to speak, by increasing that ten to a hundred. And I think the chap who had got five had doubled it. And the chap who got one had gone and buried it to make sure he didn't lose it! (Laughter) So he proudly turned up with his one talent.

S: So what did the master say.

Susiddhi: Well, he wasn't too pleased about the chap who had buried the one talent. He was very pleased that the chap who had been given ten had increased it to a hundred.

S: The word 'talent' is used metaphorically, isn't it? I have got an entry on this in the dictionary here: [f3 p9] 'Talent: ability, aptitude, a "gift" for something or other. The word is, borrowed from the parable in Matthew xxv, 1430, and was originally the name of a weight and a piece of money in Assyria, Greece, Rome etc. (Greek, talaton, a balance.) The value varied, the later Attic talent weighing about, 57 lbs Troy and being worth about \$250. 'So the idea is of a talent, in the modern sense, with which you have been endowed, so to speak, by God, as a sort of gift, which you have a duty to use. This idea is present in Milton's sonnet 'On his Blindness', where he says: 'And that one talent which is death to hide / Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent / To serve therewith my Maker, and present / My true account, lest He returning chide.' Do you remember that? Milton was very conscious that he had tremendous abilities, that a very big talent he modestly says 'one talent' had been lodged with him, and that he had to render an account to God for the use that he had made of that, but that, up to the time of writing the sonnet, he had not made much use of it not in his own estimation, anyway. Johnson had this feeling very strongly, and this was associated with his guilt feelings. This came out a bit in the play last night, didn't it? Johnson was conscious that he had above average abilities; that he had not done, he felt, nearly as much as he should and could have done, on account of indolence, laziness, sloth, procrastination, torpor; and he was constantly reproaching himself and promising himself to do better. He was always making New Year resolutions and always breaking them, and this gave rise to powerful feelings of guilt and denigration of self, and so on. This was a marked feature of Johnson's whole character; he really took that parable of the talents very seriously, and he felt that God was going to call him to a strict account and he felt very uneasy ((about that)).his lends additional significance, even poignancy, to his verse about Levett. He feels that Levett was entrusted

with a single talent, just one; he was not a very talented man; he was a bit good, not too bad, at medicine; but he had used that talent to the full. So Johnson is clearly, unconsciously, or consciously, contrasting himself with Levett, and in a way he feels that Levett was the better man, because he feels that Samuel Johnson, endowed with so many talents, has virtually wasted them, whereas Levett, endowed with just one talent, has used it to the full and therefore is very likely more pleasing to God than Samuel Johnson. This is Johnson's way of looking at the situation.

Padmaraja: Do you think there is any validity in Johnson's estimation of himself, or is it just irrational guilt?

S: There is some validity. he perhaps did not do as much as he might have done. It is difficult to know where the blame lies. His mother indoctrinated him with the belief in heaven and hell, and his fear of hell remained with him all his life. He speaks of God here as 'the Eternal Master'; God is the taskmaster as in Milton's sonnet [on his twenty-third year]. Milton tended to think of God in this way, and he spoke of himself as wanting to live 'As ever in my great Task-Master's eye'. Johnson was very conscious of the stern eye of God fixed on him, seeing whether he was performing his duty and making the best use of his talents. Objectively speaking, he didn't [do so]. His Collected Works are not all that extensive, really. But again, one says: was he really to blame, in view of the way he had been brought up, the temperament he apparently inherited from his father, the hereditary predisposition to melancholy, and so on; his very difficult childhood, his physical condition, his scrofula, his unpleasant appearance?

[f3 p10]

Subhuti: Maybe even the attitude that he had to his talents was not particularly helpful to their best use.

S: Yes, he strongly resented being told that he ought to do more. For instance, people who asked him when he was quite old and clearly at leisure, 'What are you going to give us next, Dr Johnson?' used to infuriate him. He once burst out, 'Am I always to be writing?' He was furious because he also felt, no doubt, that he ought to be writing. So he got himself, or was got by others or by circumstances, into a quite difficult position. Coleridge is very comparable, in a way. Coleridge was constantly reproaching himself for not having done enough, and he surely also was mindful of the parable of the talents. Johnson therefore says: His virtues walked their narrow round. In a way, Johnson had no illusions about Robert Levett. He realizes that he is a very narrow, circumscribed person, so even his virtues walked their narrow round; they were not virtues on a grand scale, they were virtues within or applicable to a very limited situation. They walked their narrow round; they went round and round in the same circle, as though he was like an ox at the treadmill. But it was his virtues that were walking 'their narrow round'. he exercised his virtues, that is to say, within a very limited sphere. Nor made a pause; what does that mean? While his virtues were walking their narrow round, there was no break, no interruption. Nor left a void; he had virtues, he exercised them, but it was in such a narrow sphere that even though he had exercised them uninterruptedly, when he died they just weren't missed. Nor left a void, when he was gone. At least, I think it is to be interpreted like that. I think there is another way of looking at it; he didn't leave, as it were, any empty [space], he left nothing unfulfilled. (Murmurs of assent) But I think there is also the suggestion that he was not really missed; though you could say his patients missed him.

Susiddhi: Isn't it because every time he went to a patient it was actually a gift? It was something they didn't really have a right to expect; he wasn't working for the government, they couldn't really call on him. And then, when he died, it was a gift that people didn't get; but they couldn't really expect it.

S: His virtues walked their narrow round, / Nor made a pause, nor left a void.

Aryamitra: Maybe it means that, although he kept practising his medicine, there was continuously illness there, so he never left a void in that sense. It was always there, however much and however constantly he worked.

S: I think that probably it refers mainly to his presence. The whole first half of the verse is concerned with his insignificance, the limited nature even of his virtues; so it is as though he was so insignificant and so limited, despite his virtues, that when he died he didn't even leave a noticeable void.

Subhuti: Isn't the purpose of the verse to contrast the narrowness of his virtues with their consistency and the degree to which he has exercised them? It is saying, in a way, that what is important is that he didn't leave a void. I doesn't matter that it was a narrow virtue; the important point is that he did carry it out.

S: Yes, Nor made a pause, even. You could say that Johnson is saying the same thing in terms of time and of space. And sure the Eternal Master found / the single talent well employed. Johnson is very sure about that: 'and sure', [f3 p11] certainly, 'the Eternal Master', God, 'found / The single talent', the one talent with which Levett had been endowed, 'well employed', made proper use of.

Vessantara: I would have thought Nor left a void harked back more to No summons mocked. He just had this one talent; it was adequate to supply the needs of his patients, he was always available.

Subhuti: It is also Johnson's own projection of the tasks that he never undertook.

S: yes, that is also true. [Levett] never left undone anything that he could have done.

Kulamitra: A question comes into my mind at this point. Johnson seems sure that Levett will go to heaven, and quite worried that he himself won't. But this is from his own particular interpretation of Christianity. From [a spiritual] point of view, how would one weigh up the comparative virtues of a Johnson and of a Levett?

S: (Pause) Well, one could say there is no doubt that Johnson was spiritually more developed than Levett, despite his, as it were, unevenness.

It is rather like comparing a human being with an animal. An animal is more perfect as an animal than a human being is as a human being. You don't get imperfect animals in the same way that you get imperfect human beings. But an imperfect human being is more developed than a perfect animal. So you might say, in the same way, that someone like Johnson, though imperfect, was on the whole more spiritually developed than someone like Levett, even though Levett, on his own level, had achieved a more complete or consistent development.

Perhaps one cannot make the comparison too literally in those terms. I think it is too narrow to think simply of exercise of talent; that is too narrow. It is more to do with wholeheartedness: not just exercising a talent in a narrow sense a talent for painting, or poetry, or medicine but putting yourself wholeheartedly into those things in which you believe, those things which are genuinely skilful. Levett was, as it were, wholehearted (though within very narrow limits), in a way, perhaps, that Johnson was not. Or one might say that, other factors being equal, an undivided and integrated character can do much more than a divided character; though even that perhaps requires serious qualification, because sometimes a very divided character will make tremendous efforts to overcome the division; perhaps not really overcoming it, but nonetheless engaging in all sorts of activities which may even lead him to paper over the division. There can be neurotic, compulsive activity which is in a sense very productive. But perhaps it isn't the highest kind of productivity.

End of Levett Seminar file 3]

[f4 p1]

Levett Seminar File 4, Page 1 Edited Copy.

Devamitra: Would that tie up with [something] you mentioned some time ago - I think it was at Tuscany 2 - about creativity from frustration and creativity from fulfilment? You mentioned Shelley and Shakespeare. You said Shakespeare created, for the most part, out of fullness and fulfilment, and Shelley out of a sense of frustration. (S: murmuring agreement)
So, although Shelley was creative ...

S: (interrupting) - he was not creative in the full sense that Shakespeare was. I think the question that really arises here is: is there a moral obligation to exercise such talents as you do have? This, I think, is the crux. Supposing you definitely do have a talent for painting: have you a moral obligation to exercise it?

Subhuti: [That way of putting it] seems not to leave room for any objective question, of what is actually [needed].

S: You have to see your own life, your own personality and character, your own individuality, as a whole. You can't consider only that talent for painting. And you also have to consider the context in which you live and operate.

Devaraja: I think it is not actually useful to think in terms of a talent. It is much more useful to think in terms of cultivating certain human virtues, which are things that are exclusively human.

S: In a sense, perhaps, one mustn't take the parable too literally. The talent is you. Do you see what I mean? The talent is you, the sum total of all your human capacities and abilities. And if you have any sort of moral obligation, it is to develop yourself, to use yourself to the utmost possible. One is not to think in terms simply of using or developing specific talents, because the exercise of one talent may well conflict with the exercise of another.

Aryamitra: Would it not be that, if you really are using yourself you will be using that talent as well?

S: Possibly. It might depend on circumstances.

Kulamitra: I remember reading a story about someone who was practising Zen and who had developed very, very well as a poet, who decided that he had to give up his poetry in order to make more progress as a Buddhist.

S: So it was not a question of weighing the talent for poetry against the talent for Zen. It was a question of his overall, all-round development as a human being, presumably. (Murmurs of agreement) Therefore, I would say that talent is not just some great skill you have; the talent is you; you are your talent or talents. If there is any question of moral obligation, it is to use or develop yourself as a whole person to the fullest extent that you can. You have a moral obligation to grow; which may, of course, involve the actual cultivation or exercise of talents in a more specific sense.

[f4 p2]

Devamitra: Why do you say we have a moral obligation to grow?

S: This raises, of course, the whole question of moral obligation in general, but what I mean is that, if you don't grow or if you refuse to grow, you are not really fulfilling your nature as a human being. So one can speak of a moral obligation to be a human being. One can, of course, repudiate the whole notion of moral obligation. Some people do, in which case there won't be a moral obligation to grow or to do anything else. One can see it perhaps, not in terms of moral obligation but of true fulfilment: that you have got to truly fulfil yourself (though maybe that is a bit subjective), and unless you do develop to the utmost of your ability you won't be happy.

Kulamitra: The good thing about the language of moral obligation seems to be that it implies that you don't just let down yourself if you don't grow; somehow there is a wider process to which that growth is important.

S: [It is important] as an objective standard. It is as though the world, other people, even the universe, has some sort of claim upon you which you cannot ignore, and that can be expressed in terms of moral obligation. For instance, if you are in a situation where people need help, you are said to be under a moral obligation to help, but that sense of moral obligation arises out of your sense of solidarity with those other people. If you don't feel that, you won't recognize any kind of moral obligation.

What Johnson really felt, perhaps, was that Levett had made more of himself (though he was a much more limited personality) than Johnson had made of himself. Whether that was his 'fault' or not, is probably a far too complex question for us to be able to go into.

Kulamitra: Would you say, then, that if you felt a sense of solidarity with people in general, then you would feel that moral obligation to grow in order to be able to advance humankind, etc.?

S: Yes, indeed. [That applies] even in a particular, specific sense; if you [see] a specific need you would perhaps feel a moral obligation to train or develop yourself in such a way that you can meet that specific need.

Devaraja: Do you think that is the case with Levett - that he actually felt a solidarity with those people? (Not that he had) a particular medical talent that he had to somehow exercise ... [his medical work] was just the means of acting-out his solidarity.

S: It was a means of livelihood, clearly. He started off as a waiter in a French cafe where surgeons went, and he showed an interest in their conversation; he was interested in surgery and medicine. The nature or source of that interest we don't know. But perhaps he did have a sort of obscure [desire] to help people in that way, for he certainly did help people later on in life by being a doctor. I think: it would have been very difficult for him to have led that sort of life, going out among the poor under the worst possible conditions for a mere [f4 p3] pittance, day after day and year after year, if he had not had some feeling for the people among whom he was working. And Johnson does specifically say that he was genuinely kind. Johnson is clear that he was coarse, but he is no less clear that he was genuinely kind.

Subhuti: You get an impression of unselfconsciousness, don't you? In Johnson's case, he was highly conscious of his own talents, and his failure to exercise them to the full, whereas with Levett events just unfolded themselves in a certain direction, and he didn't really know where he was going.

S: It is interesting that he is described as not having any conversation, apart from his profession. He was 'barren' as regards conversation in other fields. He had a one-track mind, one might say.

Kulamitra: You get the impression that Levett couldn't have told you why he did what he did.

S: Yes, but Johnson could certainly have told you very clearly why he (Johnson) did not do what he ought to do. (Laughter) He was very, very aware of that.

Devaraja: That contrast of the two different types of people (i.e., Johnson and Levett) is something quite strong in Christianity. The ideal Christian is almost unselfconscious, like a little child: they don't think too much, they just do what they are told.

S: And they go straight to heaven,

Aryamitra: But it's (like being) a sheep, isn't it? You have to be like a sheep to be a Christian.

S: It has become clearer, in more recent decades, that Johnson in some ways changed a lot in the course of his life. He himself says that he was mad and desperate as a young man. In some of the books written about him in more recent years, especially one called Young Sam Johnson, he comes across as quite a desperate sort of character, quite reckless and wild in a way. To some extent, he became subdued later on, though (the wildness) was always there beneath the surface. He was a quite tormented character, in a way. And so (he was) very, very different from Levett. He really was, as a young man, an angry young man; that description fits really well. In the play last night, one of the characters describes the shock the first time he met Johnson; having read his writings and expecting a staid moralist, he found a very different sort of character.

Kulamitra: (Looking at the) comparison between Johnson and Levett: it sometimes seems that, through a misconception, the more self-conscious (type of person) can look back to the

more unconscious (person) in an idealized way, rather than looking forward.

S: It is probably impossible for someone with Johnson's talents and qualities to be like Levett; in the very nature of the talents with which Johnson was [f4 p4] endowed, including self-consciousness, it was impossible [for him] to live like Robert Levett. He couldn't just unselfconsciously do his duty steadily day by day. Johnson was certainly capable of working hard, but he also had terrible fits of indolence, for weeks, and in some cases, years on end, during which he didn't do anything. He habitually stayed in bed until 12 o'clock, and he was always bitterly reproaching himself about staying in bed till 12 o'clock and always resolving to do better and to get up early, but he hardly ever did! (Laughter) So there was a very deep division, or cleavage, somewhere, wasn't there? A very strong conflict between duty and inclination. (Laughter)

Dipankara: So he never resolved that wildness of youth, that desperation?

S: In a way, no. He could still have violent outbursts of temper, even as an old man.

Devamitra: Would you say that the conflict between duty and inclination was inherent in the whole process of spiritual unfoldment? (Laughter)

S: I think it is. If it becomes too extreme, it is very crippling. It did cripple Johnson to some extent, I think

Subhuti: So the extent of his talents made him see his duty very clearly, presumably?

S: Yes, or what he thought to be his duty, But also it raises the question: in what does a man's achievement consist? Sometimes I think people almost mistake their talents. I am thinking more of Coleridge than of Johnson here. Coleridge was convinced he ought to be writing more books, and his friends also thought so, and he felt very guilty, especially when people were supporting him, and he kept announcing books - he had this great weakness; he was a bit like Nagabodhi in a way, except that Nagabodhi [announces books by other people] (Laughter) - but Coleridge was always announcing that he had such-and-such a work 'in the press', ready for publication, just as we have had the Memoirs 'in the press' for about six years now! I certainly didn't announce it as 'in the press', but somebody did. Coleridge was always trying to push himself (to work) in this way. He announced at various times that he had a two-volume work on the Logo 'in the press' and on the point of publication, when actually he had not written a line; but he said this to stave off the sense of guilt that he had not achieved more. He didn't attach much importance to, say, conversation with people, but the things that he said to different people at different times had a tremendous effect upon them, a lot of his conversation was recorded; his notebooks have been preserved, and some very valuable ideas are found in those. So, in a way, he achieved a lot; not by writing books but by talking and making notes and things of that sort.

Another example, which I was reading about recently, is that of Petrarch. Petrarch seemed to think it was his duty to write lots of Latin poetry and popularize or revive the Latin language, so he wrote Latin epics and so on. He did not attach much importance to his Italian poetry; he just did that on the [f4 p5] side, as it were, but it is his Italian poetry that has survived. His Latin poetry just hasn't (survived); it is not read even by specialists in that field, whereas his Italian poetry, which he valued very little, is a permanent part of Italian literature.

So one does not always have a correct idea about one's talents, and therefore about one's duty. Was it Johnson's duty to write? Was he under a moral obligation to produce more books, simply because he could have produced more books? Some people saw it like that, and he felt that way to some extent, but there were other talents. He was very good at giving advice; he was a very good counsellor, to Boswell, for example. He was always helping people with their books, writing prefaces and, in some cases, virtually writing the book for them. It is known now that he practically wrote or dictated Chalmers' Lectures on Law as Ninian Professor of Law at Oxford; the whole series of lectures was virtually produced by Johnson, dictating them, because he had a vast knowledge of law as well as of literature. This is all gradually coming to light; you see Johnson's finger in all sorts of literary pies.

So one does not always know what one's talents are or therefore what one's duty is, or even what one's achievement is. You may have devoted your life to something you think very important, but posterity may not attach importance to that at all; it may attach importance to some little doodles you have left. They will perhaps inaugurate a new development in art, or something like that.

Vajrananda: What can one do about that? (Laughter)

S: One can only try to be more objective, and perhaps listen to one's spiritual friends. But it is not easy to know oneself in this way. There is a problem that confronts Order Members very often. There are all sorts of things they can do, all of which are perhaps quite good, but which should they do? Should they pursue the thing that they are best at, or the thing that there seems to be the most need for; and whose need where, when? If there are different needs, how does one compare those needs? Think of Virabhadra in Poona, who can keep himself occupied examining children and prescribing vitamin tablets and so on; but he can also keep himself pretty well occupied giving Dharma lectures. How does one weigh one against the other? It is not a simple matter. You can talk in terms of exercising one's talents, but which in fact are one's talents?

Kulamitra: I always used to envy the people at school who just had one really obvious strong point, and it was obvious what they were going to do with their lives.

S: There is a tale, I think by Hilaire Belloc, about someone who, by the time he was 20 and at university, knew that he wanted to devote himself to the study of Norman fonts, (Laughter)

Devaraja: Who is this Norman Fonts? (Hearty laughter)

[f4 p6]

S: Belloc called it satisfying to have one's life's ambition settled at such an early age in that way, and go full pelt at it - Norman fonts! It describes his in the evening; it goes something like: 'He gives his Ovaltine a stir, and nibbles at a petit beurre. So satisfying fleshly wants. He settles down to Norman fonts.' (Roars of laughter) It sounds a bit like Robert Levett, doesn't it?

Anyway, we can see that the significance that Levett's limited but responsible life had for Johnson, conscious (as he was) of what he felt were wasted talents, missed opportunities and so on. This is why he writes on this particular theme. This was partly why he was inspired to write the poem on Levett at all. His virtues walked their narrow round, / Nor mace a pause,

nor left a void; / And sure the Eternal Master found / The single talent well employed. That, of course, has tremendous implications, if the Eternal Master is pleased with you rather than displeased. Johnson doesn't need to say that Levett went to heaven. It is pretty certain that he did, because he used his single talent properly.

S: (In a recent radio play on Johnson, he is shown as writing) to Mrs Thrale that she had 'soothed twenty years of a life radically wretched'. Johnson uses his language very carefully. He uses 'radical' in the strict literal sense of 'right down to the root' - 'radically wretched'. We use the word radical very loosely; we say, 'He's a radical', but when the Victorians said that, it meant 'He's a radical reformer', one who wanted root-and-branch reform. The word has lost its force now. It is from a word meaning root. When Johnson says that his life is 'radically wretched', he means that it was wretched from the root upwards, as it were; in other words, totally wretched, wretched in the fundamental sense. One notices this with Johnson. His language is very precise, though it is often, even in his prose, highly metaphorical. But it has been argued, and I think I tend to agree, that he had basically poetic temperament. His prose writings are full of metaphor, in a way that they could not have been if he had not had a deeply poetic temperament.

Aryamitra: His friendship with Boswell came across also, even though it was just briefly (dealt with) - 'Bozzie (he called him),

S: (Agreeing) Of course, Mrs Thrale disliked Boswell. There was a polite duel going on the whole time, even after Johnson's death. She corrected him on various points in his biography, and he corrected her on various points in her reminiscences. They were always very polite to each other, but at daggers drawn, you could see that.

Kulamitra: It was difficult to see from the play what interest Johnson had in Mrs Thrale. She came over as not a very pleasant character.

S: I must say that I thought that the play was not altogether fair to Mrs Thrale. Though a lot has been written about that relationship, I think it has become more and more obvious that his friendship basically was with Henry Thrale, who he esteemed quite highly, and who esteemed Johnson, and after her husband's death Mrs Thrale did run a little wild and eventually married an [f4 p7] Italian music master. Johnson was very annoyed about that, as were a number of people, including her own daughter. It is quite clear that Johnson's friendship with the Thrales meant a lot to him, not only because he esteemed Thrale himself, but probably because they both looked after him quite well; he could always stay at their house and did so for long periods, and went with them on their travels to Wales or France and so on. They looked after him in a way that he had never been looked after before from a material point of view, and he was very grateful for that. He was devoted to the whole family, especially to the children. This did not come out at all (in the radio play), there wasn't room for it; he took a fatherly interest in the children, and those that survived remained friends with him, even after the breach with their mother.

But he seems to have developed some kind of suppressed romantic feeling for Mrs Thrale, which was well within the bounds of decency but nonetheless there was some element of attraction, so her remarriage after Thrale's death was a great disappointment to him. There was even talk among their friends of Johnson marrying her; whether he ever seriously thought in that way is not known. But it was not just that; he was an old man, and he had become

accustomed over twenty years to their joint friendship and being looked after at Streatham and all the facilities he enjoyed there. However, when it comes to the point, his relationship with Thrale seems to have gone deeper than his relationship with Mrs Thrale. Nonetheless, the relationship with her was also very important for him.

There is another aspect, too, which only came out later. It seems that Thrale was very much the master in his own house: he kept Mrs Thrale in order, and she seems to have resented that. She even resented to some extent some of the things she had to do for Johnson - this came out in her memoirs afterwards - Sitting up late and drinking tea with him, when he was melancholy. She did it at the time, but it seems there was sometimes an element of resentment in it.

On the other hand, it has been argued that you can't blame her because she had a quite difficult life; she lost at least four or five children at an early age and was nearly always pregnant and had difficult childbirths, and the menfolk were not always considerate of her at such times. So the argument has gone on to and fro among scholars for a couple of hundred years now as to whether Mrs Thrale was to blame and what was the precise nature of the relationship between her and Johnson.

It seems he confided a lot to her that he did not confide to anybody else, especially his fear of madness. Madness was treated very badly (in those days), and he was very afraid of losing his reason. This comes out in Boswell very clearly. There is a mysterious episode: it seems that, at one time, he gave Mrs Thrale a padlock and chain, and made her promise that if he did lose his reason and become mad, she would herself lock him up and have him confined at Streatham in their house. Apparently the lock and chain survived and was among her effects, labelled 'Johnson's lock and chain', when she died, and it was auctioned off. No one knows who bought it. But this shows that there was quite a lot going on between them, and that she was very much in his confidence; and [f4 p8] after her husband's death she became so infatuated with this music teacher that she just wanted to go off with him, forgetting, so to speak, not only her old friends including Johnson but even her three daughters; and this was all quite a shock to Johnson.

Kulamitra: It seemed to be suggested in the (recent radio) play that it was all a sort of petulant ploy (on her part), as if she expected Johnson's response to be Don't leave me, don't leave me.

S: There was that element, but it has been suggested that she made that an excuse; she had already made up her mind she was going to marry Piozzi, the Italian music teacher. It is as though she was looking for an excuse to break with Johnson, because in the new life that she wanted to lead he had no place. She was much younger than her husband; she was only about 40 when he died, and she outlived him for another 40-odd years.

She was a lively character, quite a talented lady, but rather flippant and superficial in many ways. But there is no doubt that she and her husband did quite a lot for Johnson over quite a long period, and he was always very grateful for that. After Henry Thrale's death, the whole menage broke up and Johnson was included, so to speak, in that break-up. She remarried and started a completely new life in which he had no place. No doubt there is much to be said on both sides. Human relationships are very complex things, as we all know.

Saddhaloka: Johnson never had any children himself?

S: No. He seems to have been very fond of children. He certainly took a great interest in the upbringing and education of Thrale's children. Many of his letters to them when they were children are extant.

Quite a lot of new books on Johnson are appearing during this year: I have seen three of them. There is the Penguin Personal History of Samuel Johnson by Christopher Hibbert, a quite lively resume of his life, including all well-known stories - the jokes about Scotsmen and all the rest. But it is not an in-depth study.

Kulamitra: I get the impression - I don't know how true it is - that his wife was another of these quite unselfconscious, simple but well-meaning sort of people.

S: Not much is known about his wife, because she died before he became really well-known. Garrick had known her. She was very much older than Johnson, though not as old as Johnson's mother must have been, but she is described as old enough to be his mother! And it is pretty clear from the researches of modern scholars that she became practically alcoholic and that their last few years together were not particularly happy. She also took large quantities of opium.

Aryamitra: Did Johnson also take opium?

[f4 p9]

S: Only occasionally, but as part of a medical prescription. It was very much used in those days. But Mrs Johnson apparently just spent the whole day in bed, drinking and reading sentimental novels.

Susiddhi: In the programme someone said, 'why don't you take a little wine?' and Dr. Johnson said, 'I can't take a little: that's why I don't take any.'

S: Yes, he was a very extreme person in many ways, so towards the end of his life he often abstained totally.

(Pause)

Devaraja: (Johnson's) Dictionary is out in paperback, I have seen it,

S: I think it must be a selection, not the whole of it. The whole work is two folio volumes.

Kulamitra: Was that literally the first ever dictionary?

S: Oh, no, there were others before. But it became the standard one. His definitions are still used.

Kulamitra: Is it a dictionary that you like yourself?

S: Oh, yes, because he illustrates each word with quotations from standard English authors. That is a quite useful part of the Dictionary.

(Pause)

Susiddhi: All these things that Johnson said to Boswell about Scotsmen - I got the impression a lot of them were leg-pulls. (Laughter)

S: No, I think some of them were very serious. There were one or two which must have been leg-pulls, jokes. (For instance, in the radio play), in either Johnson's or Boswell's journal of their tour (of Scotland), some Scotswomen say, 'Mr Johnson is said to be the greatest man in England, except for Lord Mansfield!' Mansfield, of course, was a Scot! He became Lord Chancellor. So that was a little dig at the Scots: Johnson was the greatest man in England, except for Lord Mansfield; the greatest man had to be a Scotsman. It has been commented that for someone who disliked the Scots he had a remarkably large number of Scottish friends, Boswell wasn't the only one.

Vessantara: I think five out of the six clerks he had helping him on the Dictionary were Scots.

S: That's right. He got them cheaper! Also the Prime Minister of the day was a Scot, as well as the Lord Chancellor - (Lord) Bute.

(Pause)

[f4 p10]

Devamitra: Do you think Johnson will become very popular in the FWBO in Scotland?

S: Boswell could hardly be unpopular in Scotland, eh?

But there is another strange thing. The theory has been advanced by some biographers that Dr Johnson was out in '45. He was a great supporter of the Stuart dynasty; he was anti-Hanoverian, especially in his early life, and we have no knowledge of what Johnson was doing, in '45. And the theory has been advanced that his Stuart sympathies were such that he actually did go to Scotland and fight for Bonnie Prince Charlie.

Kulamitra: How old would he have been in '45?

S: He would have been 36. Also he met Flora MacDonald, don't forget, in the course of his journey. Boswell took the opportunity of finding out from her the full details of how she assisted in Bonnie Prince Charlie's escape after his defeat.

The busy day, the peaceful night,
Unfelt, uncounted, glided by;
His frame was firm - his powers were bright,
Though now his eightieth year was nigh.

S: The busy day, the peaceful night. You notice the antithesis: when he was very busy throughout the whole day, the night was peaceful; Levett slept peacefully. He was tired out after his labours. So the busy day and the peaceful night glided by 'unfelt' and 'uncounted'. What do you think is meant by them being unfelt?

Subhuti: Unnoticed.

S: He wasn't in a way conscious of the passage of time. He didn't count the days. He didn't

think in terms of 'I have been working for so many weeks or so many years'. He just didn't take any note of time. One notices this very much on retreat, doesn't one? If one is on retreat long enough, with the same programme every day, just as Levett did the same things every day, after a while you stop counting, you stop feeling that there is a passage of time, because each day is in a way a repetition of the last. So, in a sense, time isn't passing. It is a quite strange experience, as I think most people know.

Kulamitra: Again, it suggests a certain unconsciousness, which Johnson seems to be almost wistful about - if only he could have that experience!

S: 'Glided by'; they pass smoothly and quietly. In a way, monastic life is very much like this. The day is busy, the night is peaceful, and one doesn't really feel the passing of time and certainly doesn't count the days or the nights as they glide by.

[f4 p11]

Subhuti: No prickings of conscience, either. Peaceful nights.

S: Quite, yes.

Susiddhi: It is as if Levett was inside his lifetime, and Johnson, because of his greater awareness and self-consciousness was always outside things.

S: Yes, looking at it. Also you count the days or weeks when you are looking ahead, when you are looking forward to something, which suggests at least a slight dissatisfaction with the present. If you stop counting the days you are fully immersed in what you are doing; you are happy, content and satisfied. You are not counting 'Only 10 more days to Christmas', or 'only 32 days to the end of the retreat', or 'only 120 days before I go to India.' If you are counting in that way, to the extent that there is an element of anticipation of the future there is an element of dissatisfaction with the present. I think people notice this on the three month ordination course in Tuscany. After they have been there a couple of weeks, they know that a couple of weeks have gone, but they don't really dwell upon it. They don't think in terms of 'I've been here now, say, three weeks and there's so many weeks now to go', at all.

Dipankara: The only people who thought like that were people with family responsibilities back here.

S: Well, perhaps there is a moral there! (Reads verse again)

His frame was firm. 'Frame' means his body, his physical constitution: it was firm. And his powers were bright - what does that suggest?

Subhuti: His faculties were intact.

S: But 'bright' - bright is quite a good word. This may be a little fanciful, but to me it suggests also his polished surgical instruments, all bright and ready for use. His powers were bright just like his instruments, I mean he had some but they probably weren't bright, they were probably dirty and [far from aseptic]. His powers were bright, 'polished'. Though now his eightieth year was nigh. The 'now' brings you to the poetic present, when Levett's death occurred.

Johnson was very aware of the fact that people were always projecting satisfaction forward into the future; they were always hoping in that sense, and that is why he refers at the beginning to Hope's delusive mine. He is very conscious, it seems, that Levett didn't do that. (Levett) had no hopes or fears for the future; he just lived from day to day. He didn't think about the passing of time, he didn't count the days or the years.

Subhuti: It is a bit difficult when you have to plan, because then you do have, objectively speaking, to project into the future.

S: Having planned, you can forget about it until the particular day comes. Though, very often, that doesn't happen. One is thinking about it, anticipating it, fretting about it, and so on.

S: Let's come to the final verse and see what Johnson concludes.

Then with no fiery throbbing pain,
No cold gradations of decay,
Death broke at once the vital chain,
And freed his soul the nearest way.

S: There seems to be a sort of emphasis on the 'Then'; because the previous verse says 'Though now his eightieth year was nigh. Then with no fiery throbbing pain, / No cold gradations of decay, / Death broke at once the vital chain, / And freed his soul the nearest way. So 'Then', at the time when his eightieth year was near, without any fiery throbbing pain, without a long process of illness. Death broke at once - broke at a stroke, as it were - the chain of his life, the chain that bound him to the body, and 'freed his soul' in the quickest and easiest way. He died, apparently, of a stroke in the night, without any illness or even previous warning. Johnson seems to consider that sort of death for someone like Levett - who was prepared for death in the sense that he was in a state of grace, one might say, due to his whole way of life - to be the best possible death. He didn't need any preparation. His whole life was in a sense preparation. He didn't suffer; there was no fiery throbbing pain. Johnson contrasts 'fiery' and 'cold'; he didn't grow older and weaker and colder and gradually fade away. Death broke the chain of his life suddenly, abruptly, without delay, and 'freed his soul' in the quickest way possible. Since Johnson has already said that Eternal Master surely found / the single talent well employed, he doesn't need to say where the soul goes, or what happened to it.

(Pause)

Subhuti: The 'chain' reflects the theme of the mines, doesn't it?

S: Yes. 'Vital' means, of course, pertaining to life - the chain of life itself. It is as it were the soul that is imprisoned in the mine; the mine of the body and at the same time it is the human state itself, or the un-Enlightened human state. Yes, the prisoner has been freed.

Susiddhi: That phrase 'fiery throbbing pain' sounds as if it were something Johnson had experienced himself, or seen someone else suffer.

Devaraja: [The recent broadcast] said he took opium for his chest or something.

Susiddhi: That's right, yes.

S: What are one's overall impressions, then, of the poem, now that we have gone through it? As a poem, it is not the sort of poetry that is very popular [f4 p13] nowadays, is it? It is very Augustan, very Eighteenth Century, very Johnsonian also.

Kulamitra: There is far more in it than I would ever have suspected reading it on my own.

S: In some ways this is characteristic of all Johnson's work. It is very dense, so perhaps one cannot estimate the amount of his works by the number of volumes in his Collected Works. His essays are very condensed indeed, usually; they are full of thought. He has a reputation for verbosity. It is occasionally justified, but only very occasionally. Generally, he is very concise, very condensed in his expression; very precise also.

It is interesting to compare this poem, as I mentioned yesterday, with the much earlier one, the 'Ode to Friendship'. The 'Ode to Friendship' is very idealistic, a young man's poem. It is rather general, in a way rather abstract. But this poem, which is also in a way about friendship, is much more specific. It is about a particular person.

Ratnavira: Was Johnson's poetry read very much in his day?

S: Oh yes. He became very quickly known for his poetry - that is for the two major poems, 'London' and 'The Vanity of Human Wishes'. He didn't write much more than that, only a few short poems, but some of those, like this one, are very good. He has been appreciated in this century as a poet. There is a quite important essay by T.S. Eliot - I think it is just on the Vanity of Human Wishes, or it may be on his poetry in general - but Eliot seems to have appreciated Johnson as a poet and has a very high regard for The Vanity of Human Wishes.

It is also interesting that his Complete Poems have been brought out in Penguin. There must be some demand, even if only from students of English literature at universities. He handles the heroic couplet in his two long poems very well indeed, quite differently from Dryden or Pope or Goldsmith; he had a definite style of his own. He handles it in a very powerful way. And then he draws some very vivid pictures in both of those poems, especially the second.

Dipankara: So what, after two hundred years, does posterity consider to be Johnson's prime achievement?

S: Well, in the last century, I think mainly on account of Macaulay's famous essay, Johnson was generally regarded as not very important in himself from a literary point of view, but important through the biography that Boswell wrote about him. He was important as a subject of perhaps the greatest biography in the English language. So Johnson's reputation is to a great extent ascribed after his death to Boswell's biography. But in this century that judgement has been very much questioned and even reversed, and especially since the war. There has been a Johnsonian revival, and Johnson has been more and more valued for his writings: for the essays, for Rasselas, for his poetry, and for his [f4 p14] contribution to the understanding of Shakespeare. So the balance is being redressed. It is not any longer just Boswell's Johnson who is valued, not just a prominent English eccentric, as it were, but Johnson as a writer, and even, quite recently, Johnson as a thinker, almost as a forerunner of psychoanalysis. The psychological analysis in his writings is sometimes very acute indeed,

and he had quite a deep understanding of mental states, especially of Madness and things of that sort.

So he is one of those thinkers who have come up even more solidly established than before, against all expectations. Milton is another. T. S. Eliot wrote one of the most fatuous things that anybody ever wrote in this century - something about 'the dethronement of Milton had been effected with remarkably little fuss'. Well, far from having been dethroned, Milton has been valued since then more highly than ever, and there is a flood of books about him, even more than about Johnson. *Paradise Lost* is being more and more studied, and studied in greater and greater depth. But [so are] all of Milton's works. And something of the same sort has happened in Johnson's case. So there must be something of real permanence in both of them.

In Milton's case, it is easy to identify, but it is rather more difficult to identify what it is in Johnson that people find so appealing. He is important as a character. People become very interested in his life, his doings, his sayings, his little weaknesses, and his friendships, his adventures and journeys; people are really interested in all those things, but at the same time his views on literature and art and politics and life are being considered more and more seriously. Probably the consensus is that he is the greatest of British moralists. He saw life very decidedly in ethical terms.

Kulamitra: What is it that you find most interesting in Johnson?

(End of Levett seminar file 4)

[f5 p1]

Levett Seminar file 5, Edited Copy.

S: I think in more recent times it is very definitely his view of human life; his consciousness of the extent to which people deceive themselves; the extent to which people allow themselves to indulge in vain hopes and pursue delusions. He is very aware of all those things in almost a Buddhistic way, despite his theism and his Christianity and so on. I find his use of language very stimulating; his precision and weight and imagery. I consider him a very poetic writer. I cannot open a page of his works without coming across several effective and powerful images. He also himself had a strong ethical sense. You could say he was in many ways a very good man. He had strong and genuine feelings of compassion and he was very slow to condemn anybody; he was quite indulgent, in a sense, towards the poor or the wretched. One noticed that, right at the beginning of the [recent radio] play when he and Garrick arrive in London and Garrick says 'Why are you giving pence to people like that who will probably go and spend it on drink?' and Johnson's response is quite sympathetic: 'Well, you can't blame them [for making] any sort of alleviation of their misery.' Although he was a moralist, he wasn't a moralist in a narrow sense. There is a well-known story of how he found a prostitute lying in the gutter, and put her on his back and took her home and looked after her, and tried to settle her in life after she had spent a few weeks at his house. He did things like that, as though he had a very strong humanitarian feeling, and that comes across very much in his life and writings: perhaps in his life, through various incidents, even more strongly than in his writings. He had a strong sympathy for the underdog, and he had a very close personal acquaintance with the seamy side of life, the Bohemian existence. All this is compressed into the comparatively few pages of Boswell; a lot has been unearthed about it in

more recent years. Boswell didn't know much about that side of Johnson's life, though Johnson gave him a few anecdotes... In Johnson's own writings, that side of his life comes out most closely in his *Life of Savage*, because Savage was a friend of his, and they were often destitute together; they often slept out in the open because they had nowhere to go. This was before Johnson became well-known. He was in London on his own. So it is quite interesting to read the *Life of Savage*, because it is written in Johnson's best style, a very stately, dignified style, but he is describing a way of life which is far from stately and dignified, and there is a quaint contrast between the two. [f5 p2] One can probably say, then, that one of the things that people have consistently found appealing about Johnson is his humanity, his strongly human feelings for other people; and along with that goes a strong sense of the value of friendship. There was clearly a neurotic element in it, because he couldn't bear to be alone; but nonetheless he was a genuine and warm friend. He would go out of his way to help people in difficulties, whether in writing a letter or lending them money or doing them some other service. It is also noticeable that he could always rouse himself from his indolence to do something for other people, whether to write a letter or go and see someone on their behalf, not out of a sense of duty or guilt, but out of a genuine sense of friendliness, a desire to help. He was very uncensorious, even though he had strong convictions and didn't hesitate to condemn certain things, but he was slow to condemn, or even criticize, human weakness. He had strong feelings that 'There but for the grace of God, go I'. He sometimes helped some of those people in very dreadful circumstances, like Dodsley who was going to be executed for forgery. Johnson had a close contact with him. There is a quite interesting episode in his life, about what he did for Dodsley before his death. He tried to calm him down and did his best to get him pardoned, but did not succeed. He did not believe in the death penalty, by the way. There is a *Rambler* essay written against the death penalty, which is quite unusual for that age. Boswell used to go and see people hanged; it was part of the sights of London in those days. People were hanged every week at Tyburn. It was a sort of holiday outing for respectable families to go and see half a dozen men hanged. The eighteenth century was quite a tough century. But Johnson did not share those feelings, though he had one or two outbursts on the subject of capital punishment. He does seem to have felt, once or twice, that certain people deserved it; but, broadly speaking, he was quite against capital punishment, especially for minor offences and at that time, of course, I believe there were about 230 capital offences, including, I think, stealing handkerchiefs. This is why Levett's wife could have been hung for pick pocketing. You could be transported for stealing a sheep.

Subhuti: It is strange that he seems to have combined these strong humanitarian feelings with great irascibility.

S: I think the irascibility was very often [aroused] when his feelings of guilt and inadequacy were touched.

[f5 p3]

Dipankara: It's funny how people's idea of compassion is something fairly meek and mild. There doesn't seem to be any good reason why that should be.

S: Also, he was very much against cant that is, utterances which are the sort of thing one [convincingly] says but have no real meaning. He often rebuked Mrs Thrale for that. For instance, when she said, 'Oh, how terrible that So and so has died!', he said, 'Madam, you don't really think it is terrible. You will eat your breakfast with just as much appetite as ever.' He was not sentimental; he was quite realistic in his approach to life though, at the same time,

quite deeply compassionate, with a strong feeling for the nature of human life and the human predicament. He certainly had his limitations and his prejudices, but they were honest prejudices, you might say.

Devamitra: What's the difference between an honest prejudice and a dishonest one?

S: Well, his heart was in the right place! Perhaps that is what people respond to, apart from his actual literary excellence the fact that he was such a deeply human person. That sort of person is not really all that common, especially in literary circles. At the same time, it probably would not be an exaggeration to say that Johnson was quite a neurotic character. He had many neurotic characteristics: his twitchings and convulsions, his odd behaviour when he walked along the street, avoiding stepping on certain lines in the pavement, and sometimes going back and counting again; making all sorts of strange whistling noises in company, apparently quite unconsciously (Laughter); drinking cup after cup of tea. He was also quite fond of animals. He had a cat called Hodge, and he used to go and buy its fish himself because he thought, if he asked the servant to do it, the servant might not like going to buy fish for the cat, and he might therefore ill-treat the cat.

Kulamitra: Because the cat, as it were, getting better fed than the servant?

S: No, I think just because the servant would think it demeaning to have to go and buy fish for a cat. So he was thoughtful in that sort of way.

Padmaraja: What do you think the fear of madness was based on?

[f5 p4]

S: Well, fear of madness, I suppose! He knew people who had gone mad, like Smart, the poet, who went mad and was confined in you can't call it a mental hospital in Bedlam. We know from Hogarth's prints how people were treated there, in the last but one print of *The Rake's Progress*: Tom Rakewell in Bedlam.

Subhuti: He suffered from intense mental conflict?

S: Yes, he often felt himself to be on the brink of madness. He felt madness as a real possibility. This is why he was terrified of the irrational; he was conscious that it could break through at almost any time.

Padmaraja: Do you feel that there is an aspect of himself that he was not experiencing as a result of that? Do you feel that he would have been a greater person had he been able to experience his own irrationality?

S: It is quite impossible to say. It depends on what you mean by 'a greater person'. He could have been a greater person but not, perhaps, have written anything.

Padmaraja: It seems that that is what the Romantics did. They actually harnessed that ((irrationality)).

S: Well, some of them did. Johnson at least lived to be 75, whereas a lot of the Romantics didn't. At least he managed to survive, by whatsoever means. But I think it is generally

accepted now that the eighteenth century was not quite so much the century of reason as we used to think. It is as though there was madness below the surface, and this was due, perhaps, to quite fast historical developments. Don't forget, the eighteenth century was the century in which the Industrial Revolution began. Johnson was very aware of all those developments. He had intense scientific interest; he was very interested in chemistry, physics, and mechanics and had a lot of knowledge about such things. He had a very good knowledge of machinery. For instance, he was shown a piece of machinery by Arkwright, who invented the Spinning Jenny, and Arkwright remarked that Johnson was the only man who had understood the principles on which it worked the first time it was shown to him. [f5 p5] He was very versatile in that way and well aware of important developments like that perhaps not of their overall significance, but he knew what was happening in the world or in England at that time in such areas. He was very interested in mechanical processes of every kind. He jots down descriptions of them in his diary, for instance. When he went to France, he wrote down a detailed description of the process of making glass mirrors. He was very interested in law and in medicine and he picked up a lot of knowledge about them. Boswell used to ask him for his opinion on complicated legal matters, and he would dictate an opinion to Boswell; and some of his opinions Boswell produced in court in Scotland, as a means of influencing the judge or of making his own position clear.

Subhuti: Did he produce them as Johnson's own opinions or as his own?

S: I believe, in some cases at least, he produced them as Johnson's opinions. Someone once told Johnson that they thought he could have become Lord Johnson if he had had the right sort of education, but this upset Johnson intensely. Though it was meant to please him, it didn't please him in the least. (Laughter) He saw it as proof of his wasted life of what he could have done, if only he had had a bit more money and been able to spend a couple more years in Oxford, instead of just that one year which was all he had. It is interesting how many writers in the eighteenth century suffered mentally much worse than the Romantics. There was Smart. There was Cowper; Cowper had serious mental breakdowns. There was Swift. It is said that this is one reason why Johnson was so hard on Swift; he identified with him unconsciously, fearing he might go the same way. Of course, there was George III himself, though they know now that his madness had a physical basis, but he had to be restrained for years on end.

Devaraja: Usually his response to Berkeley was quite flippant. Did he have much contact with him?

S: No, he disliked him intensely because of his attitude to the Christian religion; similarly Hibbert, he disapproved of him very strongly. He doesn't seem to have made a special study of philosophy, though his one philosophical contribution his review of (Soane?) Jennings's Essay on the Origin of Evil is quite a trenchant piece of work. It is considered that only he and Voltaire, [f5 p6] strange to say, saw through that sort of superficial philosophy, that shallow optimism; the overall view being that evil was necessary to contribute to the perfection of the whole, so if your life happened to be part of the evil bit you mustn't complain. Johnson criticized the whole theory of what is called 'the Chain of Being' quite trenchantly. But he doesn't seem to have been much inclined to pure philosophy; he was definitely a moral philosopher. He had very definite views about the limitations of human reason. This tended to throw him back on revelation. But it is notable that he does think of God very much as a judge, as a lawgiver. And there are very few references to Christ in his

writings, except purely formal ones like, in his prayers, 'For Jesus Christ's sake, Amen'. It has been commented on that he seemed to have very little sense of Christ as a person, as depicted in the Gospels. He was much more conscious of God, God the Father as it were, the Eternal Father, the Creator and Judge. He doesn't seem to have had much sympathy with mysticism. Though he was an Anglican, he seems to have been somewhat sympathetic to Catholicism [or at any rate], he would not condemn Catholicism. He thought that the doctrine of purgatory, for instance, was quite reasonable; he says it seems quite obvious that very few people are so bad as to go straight to hell or so good as to go straight to heaven, and it seems reasonable to suppose an intermediate state where they are purified before being admitted to heaven. It was quite unusual for an Anglican in those days to admit the possibility of the doctrine of purgatory.

Padmaraja: And yet there was this fear, horror, of death. If it was as reasonable as that, why this terror of death?

S: No, he wasn't afraid of death as such; he was afraid that, because of his shortcomings, his sins, he would just go to hell. There was that little episode in the play where Boswell asks him, 'What do you mean by hell?' and Johnson says, 'To go to a place of suffering and stay there for ever.' He had a very real fear of hell on account of his shortcomings. It has been suggested, and it seems pretty clear, that he had a very strong sense of sexual morality. He wasn't married till he was 25, and it is believed that he had no sexual relations of any kind until he was married, that he [f5 p7] remained completely faithful to his wife and that, very likely, he had no sexual relations with anyone after her death. But it seems pretty clear that he had very strong sexual feelings indeed, and also that he had frequent recourse to masturbation, which he considered a sin. This was one of the things strongly contributing to his sense of guilt. He sometimes refers to these things in his diary, in an abbreviated form and always in Latin, but it is quite clear what he actually is talking about. And in the same way as he tried to overcome his indolence and did not succeed, he tried to break himself of this masturbatory habit and failed again and again, and this contributed to his feeling of worthlessness and sinfulness, because he believed it was wrong; he believed it was a sin. He was, generally speaking, a man of very powerful passions. He ate his food, according even to Boswell's subdued account, in a quite animal like way, tearing at it and making grunting noises (Laughter), so that the perspiration stood out on his forehead. He ignored everybody and wouldn't converse with anyone while he was busy eating. He wasn't a dainty feeder at all. He was a man of very vigorous, not to say violent, passions, which he kept on the whole very firmly under control; this clearly gave rise to tremendous tensions, sometimes so great that he feared a complete mental breakdown. One can't help feeling that maybe, with a different kind of religious education and even a different kind of religion, he would have been a happier man and perhaps no less creative; possibly more creative, though we can't be sure.

Padmaraja: You said the same thing of Coleridge as well, didn't you?

S: Yes, they were very similar, though Coleridge is a milder and in a way meeker character. But they are very similar in many ways.

Padmaraja: So you are saying his fear of a nervous breakdown was the result of his pushing his passions down, not being able to ((express them))?

S: I think that would be simplistic, but must surely have been one element in [his fear].

Padmaraja: That was the terror of his own passions?

[f5 p8]

S: No, I think that's a bit too 'Freudian'. He had strong passions, but he was not a fool, and at the same time he had a deep and genuine conviction that certain acts or a certain kind of behaviour were morally wrong. So it wasn't a simple question of allowing himself to do the things that he thought were wrong: he definitely believed that those things were wrong. What sort of man he would have been if he had not believed those things to be wrong, it is impossible to say. We just do know that there were these tremendous tensions, and his feelings of guilt, stemming from his religious beliefs, played a very large part. What sort of man he would have been without those convictions, without that sense of guilt, we just don't know; it is almost impossible to imagine. The point is sometimes made that he was born when his parents were quite old; that might have played some part in it. They were both very sombre characters; they were not happy together; his father was unsuccessful and a melancholic, and his mother was a quite narrow-minded, ignorant woman with a Calvinistic outlook. So that was not a very promising beginning, was it? And he was sickly. But, at the same time, he was a genius. What part all those unfortunate elements played in the fact that he was a genius, you can't really say. His ability showed itself from the very beginning. He was acknowledged as being quite outstanding, even when he was a boy; he was strong willed, stubborn, intellectually very sharp, but very moody. It is said that, until he married, he had never attempted to approach or propose to any woman because he was convinced that nobody liked him. He was quite surprised when he was accepted by Mrs Porter. It seems he had the courage to approach her only because she was older than himself and had been married before, and [he thought] maybe she wanted to get married and didn't stand much of a chance, and maybe she would accept him. He seems to have been quite attracted to her at the same time. But he told Boswell, year later, that he was convinced that nobody could possibly like him, and she was the first person who he felt liked him; that was her great significance in his life. So he grew up, and this was his way of thinking or believing that nobody liked him, mainly because of his physical appearance, due to the effects of scrofula. So that must have been a great handicap, to begin with. He didn't have a very easy life. He was very conscious of his great abilities, but very conscious of the restrictions the fact that he had not been able to spend more time at Oxford, and had no money to make a proper start. He did not [f5 p9] really start being successful as an author until he was in his early forties. Until then it was drudgery all the time. Even then, he was not financially secure until he got his pension when he was in his fifties. So one wonders how he managed to produce such good work under those conditions. If one weights his achievement against his difficulties, he didn't do so badly; though to what extent the achievement itself was due to the difficulties, again it is quite impossible to say.

Kulamitra: In the [recent radio] play, he kept saying over and over again that he only wrote for money; that he was spurred to it by his poverty.

S: There is some truth in that. On the other hand, he was easily satisfied; he didn't drive hard bargains. Even when he was quite well known and did not really need to write for money, he agreed to do the Lives of the Poets and just took what they offered, which was a reasonable sum but nothing special so much so that, later on, almost out of shame, they gave him something extra. But he certainly wasn't greedy after money, ever; he gave it away quite generously. One reason why people find Johnson interesting may be that we have such a full record of him. You can, as it were, get to know him because, apart from Boswell, so much

was written about him in intimate detail. And he is a person of some significance and weight in English literature, even in the history of English thought, especially ethical thought. He was also at the centre of a closely knit network of famous, prominent people. He was a close friend of Joshua Reynolds; similarly Burke and Goldsmith. These are major names in English literature and the arts. At one time they were all meeting together regularly round the same table, so it was quite a galaxy of genius. As the central figure of that group, he is significant from that point of view, too. [Johnson] touched the life of his times at many different points. he was in contact with a lot of the bluestockings, the learned ladies. He knew John Wesley and had a number of conversations with him; he used to grumble when Wesley came to see him, saying he could never have his talk out with Wesley because Wesley always had to leave after an hour to go and visit some old woman! He was a very great friend of Goldsmith; he had a very high opinion of Goldsmith at a time when a lot of people did not, he estimated Goldsmith's worth correctly. After Goldsmith's death, he said, 'Make no mistake about it; he was a very great man.'

[f5 p10]

Padmaraja: Did he know Alexander Pope?

S: No, Pope was an older contemporary; he died about 1740. But Pope, of course, praised the poem London. He was quoted in the play, saying 'He will soon be unearthed', because it was published anonymously. Some people thought it was actually by Pope, it was so good, though it was in a different style. Also, Pope wrote an English poem, not one of his best, on the Messiah, and Johnson translated it very competently into Latin, and that brought him to the attention of Pope. I don't think they had any actual personal contact, but certainly Pope knew of Johnson and esteemed his poetry quite highly. Johnson, of course, regarded Pope as a very great poet indeed.

Padmaraja: Did Blake ever give any opinion about Johnson?

S: I believe there are one or two references, but no more than that. Blake seemed to live in a different world; though it is interesting to reflect that they actually did live in the same world for a number of years, because Johnson died in 1784 and Blake was born in 1757. So, when Johnson died, Blake would have been in his late twenties, so he could certainly have met Johnson as a man and had a conversation with him. He might even have seen him, but there is no record. It is quite interesting just to think of those two men; maybe at the same time, let us say, that Johnson was writing the poem on the death of Dr Levett, Blake was writing the 'Songs of Innocence and Experience': what a contrast! The fact that the life of Blake overlapped the life of Johnson by so many years makes one realize that one cannot generalize too much about the nature or character of the eighteenth century. It was not only the century of Samuel Johnson; it was the century of the young Blake and of the old Alexander Pope; as well as the century of the Industrial Revolution.

Devaraja: And the American Revolution, too.

S: Yes.

Devaraja: Did Johnson talk about that at all, because that happened in 1776?

[f5 p11]

S: Oh yes, he was against it. He took the view that the American colonists, as he regarded them, had no right to object to being taxed because they enjoyed the protection of the British Navy. Also, as regards their call for freedom, he said that it was very strange to hear these yelps for liberty from the drivers of slaves: they were demanding liberty but, at the same time, they were owners of black slaves.

Devaraja: Had slavery been abolished in Britain [by] then?

S: yes, it had been abolished some time before Johnson wrote. But apparently, in Johnson's day, there were as many as 30,000 black ex-slaves living and working mainly as servants in London, and his servant Francis Barber was one of them. He had been born a slave and been released by his master, who eventually arranged for him to take service with Johnson.

Subhuti: They were completely absorbed, weren't they?

S: Yes, they seem to have been completely absorbed. they intermarried; Francis Barber himself had a white wife and a number of children. It is quite interesting, isn't it? There were 30,000 in London alone, and there must have been others elsewhere.

Subhuti: Which is quite a big proportion of the population at that time.

Kulamitra: So there must be a quite a lot of fully integrated British people with an element of Negro blood.

S: Yes, indeed; as is well known, the British are a very mongrel race indeed, a pool of very miscellaneous genetic material. It is also interesting that all the Romantic poets leaving aside Blake, who was an older contemporary were born within a few years of the death of Johnson, one or two of them before. I think Wordsworth was born just before. Coleridge must have been born before, and Shelley and Keats a few years later.

Devaraja: What about Burns? Wasn't he classified as a Romantic?

[f5 p12]

S: He is generally classified as Romantic, to the extent that he is classified as belonging to English poetry at all. Burns is unique. Johnson seems not to have heard of him; he was a bit later, anyway. he had a high opinion of James Beattie, who was a well-known Scottish poet and philosopher of that time. And he had a high opinion of Blain, another Scottish poet, author of *The Grave*, which Blake illustrated.

Devaraja: I heard a story I think I've got it right about when Hume was dying, Boswell tried to get Hume to recant, but Hume just laughed in Boswell's face.

S: I don't remember that story. It sounds like the sort of thing Boswell would do.

Tejananda: Johnson doesn't seem to have had much direct political involvement, from what I have heard.

S: No, he wrote several political pamphlets. He wrote a pamphlet on the Falkland Islands, which actually was referred to during the recent Falkland Islands war. It is quite interesting,

because the problem essentially was the same then as it is now. Johnson didn't believe that it was tenable certainly not at that time to try to hold the islands: they were too far away from the British Isles to be defended successfully, and that we ought to let Spain have them. (Laughter) That was his view. He wrote several political pamphlets, on the American Revolution, and on the Falklands war, and one or two others. But not much; very little that was important in the context of his work. There is a famous passage, though, which is often quoted in anthologies of his writing, called the Progress of a Petition, which is quite a comic piece of work. That is another side of Johnson's work which is not generally appreciated. I sometimes have had the impression that he would have made a very good novelist, because he had a strong sense of humour, which comes out in some of the essays in the Rambler, where he is describing particular people, certain types and their adventures. It is quite a humorous streak; rather grotesque humour, but humour nonetheless. If he had written novels, I think they would have been a bit like Smollet's, showing the rather seamy side of life. But he probably wouldn't have thought it worth while writing that sort of novel, though I am sure he had the capacity to do it. Some of those essays in The Rambler are not the essays which [f5 p13] you usually find in anthologies of his works, but they show a very wide acquaintance with all sorts of people of all sorts of occupations, ranks, and characters. He was a very close observer of the human scene. You can understand why he loved London so much. I don't know what he would think of it nowadays. He probably wouldn't have minded it! He rather liked the sound of traffic. It used to be thought that he didn't appreciate the countryside, but that has recently been shown to be a bit of a myth, as there are some quite fine passages in his writings appreciating the countryside; but he certainly appreciated the town much more. He liked the life of the town; he liked human company and he liked his clubs and social intercourse; he liked having his friends not too far away.

Devaraja: Do you plan to do any more on Johnson?

S: I can't say 'plan', though it's not impossible that we could do something else. My only real plan is to get on with my memoirs.

Susiddhi: I get the impression you enjoyed the study of Johnson as well [as we did].

S: Yes. Well, first of all, it makes a change, in a way. I think also it is important to establish the link between literature on the one hand and philosophy and religion on the other. One cannot really separate them. I think one can induce quite a few worthwhile ideas or principles just from trying to go a bit more deeply than usual into certain poems and stories. I wouldn't mind doing *Rasselas* some day, but that is a major undertaking, so it is not a plan; maybe an odd chapter or two sometime. Anyway, if anyone is interested in pursuing the topic, there is first of all that Penguin volume of *The English Poems of Samuel Johnson*, which is well worth getting. Then, of course, there is always *Boswell*, but if *Boswell* is a bit much for you, there is this new Penguin biography, *The Personal History of Samuel Johnson*. And there are various selections from his writings. I think there is a Penguin selection, isn't there?

Subhuti: There is an *Everyman* one.

S: There is an *Everyman* selection from *The Rambler* only, and there is a *World's Classics* volume of selections, and there are several others, especially *American*. [f5 p14] Of course, there is the great Yale edition of the *Complete Works of Samuel Johnson*, which I believe is still proceeding. They have produced a very fine, very minutely annotated edition of his

works, or rather they are in process of producing it. Scholars in England tend to feel it is over edited, over annotated, but that is the way the Americans do things.

(End of Levett File 5.)

End of Seminar.

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