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Questions and Answers with the venerable Sangharakshita on Canto 38, The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava

Rivendell, July 1987.

PRESENT: Sanghadevi, Vidyasri, Vajragita, Sridevi, Vidyavati, Punyamegha, Dayamegha, Ratnamegha, Tessa Harding, Christine McCluskey, Caroline Gutt, Maggie Graeber.

S: There are five questions. One is divided into (a) and (b). All right, first question: Is there a significance in Padmasambhava having close women disciples, say, in contrast to the Buddha? Maybe once again we have to look at the assumptions underlying the question. Is it true that the Buddha did not have close women disciples? What does one mean by close? He had arhant female disciples.

Dayamegha: I think it was more that it seemed that Padmasambhava's most immediate companions were Mandarava and ... where as the Buddha seemed to be surrounded more by ... There just seemed to be quite a difference.

S: Though, of course, in the case of Padmasambhava, he did have a long period as a monk, didn't he, and he studied at the Nalanda monastic university. Perhaps we are concentrating rather more on his later career? Also, in the case of the Buddha here I am just sort of, I suppose, questioning assumptions in the case of the Buddha's teachings, they were transmitted by the bhikshu sangha, weren't they? And even as transmitted by the bhikshu sangha, there are some accounts of the Buddha's teachings to his women disciples. But I wonder why the bhikshunis didn't transmit the teachings. That is a separate question, why they didn't, because there were lots and lots of bhikshunis, including theris, including arhants; why didn't they transmit a corpus of teachings, in the way that the bhikshus did? But, leaving aside the question of why they didn't do that, if they had done it they surely would have transmitted much more material about the Buddha's teachings to women and dealings with them than the monks had done, simply because they would have known more about the Buddha's teachings to them and contacts with them. No doubt the Buddha did go about during the latter part of his life with Ananda, not (so far as we know) with any bhikkhuni; but none the less, perhaps we shouldn't underestimate the Buddha's contacts with his female disciples. And, of course, there is this question of what one means by closeness; because there is spiritual closeness as well as physical closeness. And well, the Buddha said to one of his male disciples that 'If you want to be' (I am paraphrasing what he said) 'to be close to me, practise the Dharma. He who sees the Dharma sees me.' He says also that even if one was to follow after him holding the edge of his robe, but did not practise the Dharma, he would not be close to the Buddha, whereas one who lived many miles away but practised the Dharma would be close to the Buddha, would be near the Buddha. So we have to look at it in those terms too. It can mean inasmuch as some of his female disciples were spiritually developed, they must have been near, must have been close to the Buddha, in the sense which the Buddha himself considered important.

Dayamegha: It is just that perhaps the Buddha was not a good choice to compare with but it

does seem like Padmasambhava was a very macho-type figure. (Laughter.)

S: I hope not!

Dayamegha: I mean that in a very positive sense! ((Loud laughter.) ... that somehow it was interesting in that sense that he therefore had someone who was obviously also a very female companion, in that she is said to be very beautiful and all that sort of thing.

S: That was a pure accident. I have just read, in one of these chapters, that she disfigured herself in very monastic fashion. I am sure Padmasambhava didn't have her with him because she was beautiful

Dayamegha: Oh no.

S: but because she was a sincere practitioner of the Dharma.

Sridevi: One does get this impression that Padmasambhava did not have the same hesitation that the Buddha seemed to have to include women in the Sangha.

S: Well, yes and no: when you say Sangha, what do you mean? Because the context of most of these activities of Padmasambhava that we read about is the Vajrayana, where you don't have a Sangha in the Hinayana-cum-Mahayana monastic sense; you have the gana, you have the Tantric assembly, where you have men and women both. But when Padmasambhava was a monk at Nalanda, presumably he was a member of a monastic sangha which was quite separate from that of the women assuming theirs to have still existed, which it probably did. But, having said all that, there is none the less a difference of tone. I think one can't altogether ignore developments in Indian culture itself. Taking Padmasambhava's having lived in the what was it? eighth century that's 1300 years after the Buddha that is like the difference between, say, in European history, the third century and the sixteenth century: what a tremendous difference! I get the impression that the cultural atmosphere in the days of Padmasambhava was quite different from what it was in the days of the Buddha. That must have had an influence. There is a very good book by Lal Mani Joshi(?) called oh dear, I can't remember the title it's about Buddhist culture in the eighth and ninth centuries; it deals roughly with that Padmasambhava Santarakshita period. We don't have as much information about Indian history and culture as we would like, but he has gathered together quite a lot in this volume. We've got it in the Order Library, and it is generally available, it is in print. It gives a lot of Shantideva's background, too. It is roughly about Indian culture, especially Buddhist culture, in the, I think, eighth and ninth centuries.

Vajragita: Who is the writer?

S: Lal Mani Joshi. It is a very readable book.

Sanghadevi: Bhante, would you just say again something about the Vajrayana Sangha was it gana?

S: Gana (spells it). Sometimes it is called the cakra or the gana cakra. Gana simply means a group, but it was a term generally given to a specifically Tantric assembly, which

corresponded to the sangha considered as a more monastic type of assembly.

: Would that have been people who were practising on their own, mainly?

S: Well, no, it would have been people practising under a guru; because in the Vajrayana the guru is even more essential than other forms of Bodhisattva.

Dayamegha: Why do you think the bhikkhunis didn't transmit [teachings]?

S: I really don't know! Why is it that women do this or don't do this? It is very difficult to tell. But it does seem a little odd, if you look at it quite objectively, because there was a considerable bhikshuni sangha; even supposing it was smaller than the bhikshu sangha, it was still there. They did have teachings by the Buddha. They did practise the Dharma, they did gain Enlightenment. So why did they not, after the Buddha's death, have an assembly similar to that of the bhikshus and transmit the teachings that had been handed to them? It seems really quite odd assuming that they couldn't join with the bhikshus, they could have had their own separate assembly. They did have their separate assemblies on the full moon days, just as the bhikshus had; so it does seem rather strange.

Sanghadevi: Could it be that there was a ..., but because ... had been written down, that women tended to be illiterate and so they didn't have access, perhaps, to the written form later on?

S: There is no proof that women were less literate than men. In fact, in the Divyavadana I think I have mentioned this in The Eternal Legacy there is a reference to women reading the scriptures by lamplight. So they couldn't have been all illiterate.

Vidyasri: Is it they didn't meet with the bhikshu sangha during those assemblies?

S: Well, perhaps they didn't well, they probably didn't but why didn't they have their own assembly?

Sridevi: Wasn't it that they had to ask permission from the monks to do almost everything? Maybe because we know it was the men who wrote the scriptures maybe it's cultural

S: But then, many of those bhikshunis were arhants, so one would have thought that they were not limited by conventional considerations. So that is a bit of a mystery. But, leaving [that] aside, I get the impression that, by the time of Padmasambhava, there was a different cultural atmosphere in India, and perhaps women joined in things more freely than they had done in the Buddha's day and perhaps it was simply for that reason that Padmasambhava did have close women disciples, in a sense that the Buddha had not had. This is taking it that the biography of Padmasambhava is at least to some extent historical.

Dayamegha: We wondered also if it had anything to do with the atmosphere in Tibet at the time as well; given that he had gone to subdue demons, perhaps that pulverization(?) needed to be dealt with as well.

S: Well, the Buddha subdued demons! Also Padmasambhava was a representative of the Indian Vajrayana, and in having close women disciples he seems to have been following the

Indian tradition, and introduced that into Tibet. Of course, one could argue that perhaps conditions in Tibet are being reflected back into this biography. Do you see what I mean? Because the biography is a Tibetan composition, it is not a translation of an Indian work; and perhaps it does reflect conditions in Tibet rather than in India there is also that possibility. Because, in Tibet, as in Burma and as in Thailand, women have always been rather free as compared with those of India socially free, I mean.

Vidyasri: Also I have read that in the Vajrayana generally well, you mentioned this gana cakra that it did seem to be just more generally open to women, because of being less monastic.

S: Yes, that is true. Because, clearly, if one is trying to lead a strictly celibate life as a monk or a nun, a bhikshu or a bhikshuni, you will not associate very closely with members of the opposite sex. But, yes, as you say, the Vajrayana was much less a monastic movement and therefore would not have been so concerned about that. Some of the rules regarding the bhikshus are quite strict: a bhikshu is not supposed to speak more than two or three sentences, even of the Dharma, to a woman which does rather limit the possibilities of communication. They may not follow that very strictly in all Buddhist countries, not even in all Theravada countries, but there is a very definite barrier; there is no doubt about that. Except perhaps in the case of very old women. remember I had a friend, a Thai bhikkhu this was in India and he was a very good friend of mine, a very good sort; at present he is in America, and we have been corresponding a bit recently. And I once joked with him because he was talking of going to the West, and I said, 'Well, look: you will have to be very careful when you go to the West, be very careful of these Western ladies, because, believe it or not, when they meet you they might even want to shake hands with you!' He said: 'Oh no No!' So I said, 'Well, why not?' He said: 'Oh if a woman touched me, I should be on fire with passion!' So I said, 'Well, maybe you'd better not go to the West just yet! But I can't help thinking that if contact with a woman is going to upset you to that extent, well, perhaps you shouldn't be a monk at all; this is my view; it is just too difficult for you.' But anyway, that is a rather unorthodox point of view, in a way! It is all right to be celibate, but I don't think your celibacy whether you are a man or a woman should be such a delicate thing you can't dare to go near members of the opposite sex: I don't think that is good at all. So it is more as though, looking at it positively, in the case of Padmasambhava, say, taking it all literally, Padmasambhava and his female disciples were so committed to the Dharma, so deeply committed to the Dharma, they could just afford to have a close personal association. It didn't matter. Because we know that, in the case of Padmasambhava and Mandarava, well, there they were together; what were they doing? Meditating in cremation grounds. So if you are so committed to the Dharma that you can meditate in a cremation ground with a member of the opposite sex without your mind being disturbed, well, what's wrong with it? It is as though, in the case of the Vajrayana, they had that sort of confidence; they were committed to the Dharma to that extent. It wasn't that they were lax about sexual morality or anything of that sort; it is not to be understood in that way; but simply that they were so committed to the Dharma, their energies were so much directed towards it, that the question of male and female just faded into insignificance.

Vidyasri: Did the Vajrayana, although it was not monastic, value celibacy?

S: It certainly did not value celibacy as an end in itself. But, of course, this whole attitude of the Vajrayana can be misunderstood. I read a translation of a popular Tibetan biography of an allegedly great Tantric guru, and his ministry seems to consist in going from place to place, village to village, he meets a beautiful young maiden and says, 'Oh, that's a Dakini!', at once

has intercourse with her and gives her a mantra, and then goes on his way. I am afraid I tend to think of this as a degeneration of the Vajrayana. But it is a figure or type of approach that does seem to enjoy a certain amount of popularity with some people.

Anyway, enough about that one. 2) Do you think that the valid approach to the book, *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava*, would be to see the different characters as representing aspects of Padmasambhava's psyche i.e. king, queen, princess rather than historical persons? One can certainly look at the different characters in that way. In a way, it is like a dream. When you dream, you dream of all sorts of people, all sorts of beings, all sorts of things; but in a way they are all aspects of your own psyche. So you can see a work of imagination and *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava* is a work of imagination in a way in those sort of terms. But I don't think one should say, 'It is just that.' It is not a question of either/or. It is a way in which you can look at the work. Then the question goes on: Could you compare it with the way Shakespeare uses his characters *Othello*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*? I notice that whoever asks the question doesn't mention any of the historical plays; because, in the case of the historical plays *Henry IV*, *V* and *VI*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *King John*, *Henry VIII* and so on they deal with historical characters; but at the same time, in the play, those characters could be considered as aspects of Shakespeare's own psyche. So the fact that, in a work of this sort, the characters that appear can be considered as aspects of the author's or the hero's psyche, doesn't mean that they don't at the same time have some basis in historical fact. I don't know whether you can compare the different characters in *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava* as aspects of Padmasambhava's psyche with the way in which Shakespeare uses his characters. The two are very different types of work. *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava* is a sort of epic, I suppose; whereas Shakespeare's plays are dramas. But I wonder what was meant by 'the way Shakespeare uses his characters' how does he use his characters in this connection??

Christine: Well, actually, it's not quite my question, but when you were talking about it *King Lear* came into my mind and I sort of saw it here instead of acted out by a king ...

S: Well, he was a king.

Christine: Yes, right. his relationship towards Mandarava. I mean it wasn't well enough thought out, probably, but

S: You're sort of comparing Cordelia with Mandarava?

Christine: I'm not quite sure what I was doing, actually!

Sanghadevi: It was partly because someone mentioned an interpretation of the King and his ministers being ..., ministers being Buddhist or non-Buddhist and being in conflict

S: All that is clear, but then the reference is to the way Shakespeare uses his characters. I am just trying to get at what is meant by 'the way' he uses them, so as to make the comparison with *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava* more detailed. It is quite clear that, yes, in Shakespeare's plays the different characters may be regarded as aspects of Shakespeare's psyche, ditto for *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava*; if one wants to compare in greater details, what does one mean by 'the way Shakespeare uses his characters' apart from considering those characters as representing aspects of his psyche?

Christine: I was trying to ... the connections with fate and destiny. I don't know much of Shakespeare's works, but there are perhaps those two aspects there.

S: Fate and Destiny?

Christine: Yes, that was fate and

S: I wouldn't have thought King Lear; maybe Macbeth?

Sridevi: But don't you think Shakespeare wrote those plays much more consciously for the theatre as drama and literature, but I think The Life and Liberation is much more like ... inspiration has flowed out of somebody's consciousness. Would that be true?

S: I suppose that is supposed to have been the way that Shakespeare wrote. There is that famous conversation between Ben Jonson and Drummond of Hawthornden, when [Drummond] said that it had sometimes been said of Shakespeare in praise that he never blotted a line that is, never altered a line; and Ben Jonson said: 'I have said that I wish he had blotted a thousand!' But Shakespeare seems to have written everything very freely and easily, without labour, without correction. Sometimes it shows, I'm afraid!

Sridevi: But he did write specifically for the theatre which he acted in.

S: Of course, yes. But you could say that whoever composed The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava wrote that for a definite audience.

Sridevi: Yes?

S: Well, presumably.

: Didn't the question also partly come out of wondering what the king and queen stood for and Padmasambhava stood for? ...

Sridevi: If one takes it literally that it is a terma, doesn't that mean he wouldn't have known the audience if it was found hundreds of years later?

S: Well, how did he not know the audience? He is supposed to have been omniscient (Laughter) and buried his termas for the sake of definite people in the future, knowing that people were not ready for them just yet. If he knew that people were not ready for them now, but would be ready for them then, surely that assumes that he knew for the sake of what audience the termas were being composed and hidden and revealed?

Sridevi: He meant us, did he?

: So you would accept that probably most of these stories are based to some extent on historical facts ... ?

S: It is difficult to say, there are historical elements. We really don't know yet to what extent they are historical. Some are clearly historical, clearly symbolical and as it were mythological. We are not even sure to what extent Padmasambhava was a historical figure. He was

historical to some extent, but look at the varying accounts that the Tibetans give: some accounts speak of 18 months in Tibet, and some accounts speak of many, many years. One account, I think, speaks of 110 years in Tibet. And look at the way, as I mentioned the other day, the chronology is confused: Padmasambhava made a contemporary of Ananda. So there is some residue of historical fact, but it is mixed up with an awful lot of legendary and mythic and symbolic and archetypal material. It is probably going to be very difficult to disentangle the historical elements. But, very clearly, there is a very broad, almost cosmopolitan background, with references to all sorts of countries and kingdoms to China and Persia and so many other places. There is a much broader background than in, say, the Pali scriptures or even in the Mahayana sutras; so in a way there is a whole sort of international stage behind Padmasambhava. You are aware of Central Asia and China, as I said, and Persia, not just India.

Sanghadevi: You would think it could be that there was some teacher who somehow sparked off, must have triggered off this imaginative material

S: Oh, yes.

Sanghadevi: There was something about him that ...

S: Right. One always gets the impression of a very distinctive personality, despite all the myths and legends; there is nothing vague about the personality, and even with the iconography in any Tibetan temple the image or thangka of Padmasambhava is immediately recognizable. So I think there must have been a historical figure in the background somewhere that stamped himself on people's minds very powerfully. But if you look, for instance, at the figure of Christ, you get so many different kinds of Christ. He is represented in so many different ways; but not Padmasambhava. He is always represented in the same way, with the same expression. Anyway, let's move on. The first part of Canto 38 seems the most important, yes, it seems! But you never know with this work! And to communicate dharmic points. Oh yes! Dharmic points are very clear. But the title of the chapter refers to the incident of the king eating the flesh of the brahmin child. Could you say something about the symbolism of this part of the story and the significance of it appearing at this point? Oh dear, I am not sure if I can! I can give a few pointers or things to consider. So what happens? (Turning pages.) Yes: 'The queen sent the princess Mandarava to the market to buy meat' this seems quite inconsistent to begin with, because you have just been told, a little while before, that the king has set 500 people to guard her on pain of their life! But anyway, here is the queen sending the princess, of all people, off to the market to buy meat. Well, we'll overlook the inconsistency. 'It was raining in torrents' yes, that is probably historical fact! 'and the market was empty.' All right. It is rather strange the queen didn't know when it would be market day! 'As the princess was returning, at one side of the road she saw a dead child about eight years old.' Ah! symbolism here, you see: eight, eight years old. Padmasambhava was eight years old or he appeared as eight years old when he was born from the lotus flower; eight is half of sixteen, and a quarter of 32 isn't it? So eight is full of symbolism 'washed by the rain'. Hm, so we go on and on, and then: the flesh has a peculiar effect on the king. 'As he was digesting it, the meat burned his body like the fires of bliss. Jumping to the height of one fathom above the ground(?), he flew(?) like a bird. For this reason, he took the meat to be that of a brahmin seven times born.' Now, I don't know about the Buddhist Tantra, but in the Hindu Tantra there are quite a lot of references to people who have been brahmins for seven successive births and have therefore led a particular kind of life, a life devoted to sacrifice and

meditation and yoga, and who therefore are supposed, in that seventh birth of theirs, to be endowed with all sorts of spiritual qualities: so much so, that even their body becomes imbued with those qualities, so if you can get hold of a portion of that body and eat it it can have an extraordinary effect on you, as on the king. Those sort of beliefs are very common in India, even now. Mme David-Neel mentions a very strange case of a great teacher who was killed by his disciples so that they could imbibe or absorb his spiritual powers by eating portions of his body. So you are into something quite basic here, aren't you? There was ritual cannibalism; what about the symbolism of the mass? So I don't know, I can't tell what exactly this incident here signifies, but it is quite clear that there is a connection with a very deep layer of symbolism, something very primitive in which you either literally or metaphorically absorb someone's potency, someone's magical powers, by consuming his flesh.

Sanghadevi: You mentioned the mass, and actually at O Sel Ling, I went back ... after one of their Pujas, it was about three years back, and I had quite a shock because they started to pass round a small quantity of alcohol and a small quantity of I can't remember what it was, figs and dates, cakes

S: Mm, little cakes; these are these

Sanghadevi: consecrated.

S: Yes, these are tormas. Sometimes there are big tormas and you get a little piece.

Sanghadevi: I didn't actually understand the symbolism. I wondered if it was meant to be the same thing ...

S: Well, yes, in a sense; because in Tibetan ritual, Tantric ritual, a particular deity is invoked to descend into that torma; so that if you eat a portion of that torma, or all of it, you are in a sense eating that deity and what the deity represents. You are incorporating it. And the symbolism of the mass, or the elements of the mass, is much the same, and it must be based on a very basic, primitive cannibalistic belief.

Sanghadevi: Why do you say a primitive cannibalistic belief? because

S: Why do cannibals eat people? It isn't just for the sake of food. Very often a warrior ate his enemy, or he ate the heart of his enemy, so as to absorb his strength. Even very recently, there was the so-called Emperor Bokassa, who has recently been tried probably been executed by now in the Central African Republic, which he turned into an empire for a while; and one of the charges because he was on trial recently was that he had kept portions of the bodies of his enemies in the fridge, and he had eaten them. The same thing is reported of Idi Amin. It is still quite a common practice in Africa. So you touch here a very primitive stratum of belief this is just the point I am making. And these sort of primitive elements appear quite frequently in this biography. In a way, it is one of the strengths of the Tibetan Vajrayana that it makes contact with these very primitive beliefs, energies, archetypes and so on.

Vidyasri: So, in terms of symbolism, it's sort of symbolic of just incorporating these ... elements into yourself?

S: Yes, right. But what its significance is in this part of the story I really can't tell; it's all so

chaotic. But the question does ask: 'could you say something about the symbolism of this part of the story' I have said that 'and the significance of it appearing at this point?' The only connection, or the only reason I can discover, is that it seems to put the king in a good mood, and perhaps it makes it more easy for Mandarava to leave the palace and to go on her way. So it may be that she just happened to see the dead child on her way back from the market as a result of her good karma, as it were. Do you see what I mean? Because this is quite apart from any symbolical considerations about eight years old, and all that she finds this dead child, so she is able to obtain meat for her mother to give to her father, and it happens to be the body of someone who is a seven-times-born brahmin and therefore puts the king into this sort of ecstasy. That may have a special significance of its own, but in a more general sense it would seem that, since the king is in this better mood, it is possible for Mandarava to leave home.

: You don't think the phrase 'realizing it was the appropriate time' has any significance ...?

S: It is difficult to say, because it is a translation of a translation. It could be that she understands more of the situation than we are actually told in the text, or it could be just a quite ordinary phrase referring to the obtaining of the flesh. It is difficult to say without having the original text. Then, you see, at the end of this passage: 'Then the king said: Bring the corpse here.' He wants to get possession of the corpse! It is as though he is so preoccupied with that, he forgets about Mandarava; we are not told that, but then immediately afterwards no, at the beginning of the next chapter, it says: 'Then princess Mandarava escaped from the palace by a secret door.' The king is so pleased that he has discovered this body and got this flesh that it is as though he forgets all about his daughter, forgets all about detaining her, so the finding of the body, the finding of the flesh, has got that sort of significance, one could say. But the whole text is not very logically organized; that is perhaps deliberate, it is difficult to say.

Sridevi: Do you think it's advice how to deal with one's parents? (Laughter.)

S: Well, you could try a big box of chocolates! You can sometimes keep a person quiet with a box of chocolates. But reading these episodes, do you feel any sort of inner psychic resonance, as it were? Or do you just feel sort of disgusted, or that it is all rather irrelevant and just pass on?

Vidyasri: This particular passage?

S: Yes.

Vidyasri: Well, to begin with, we had passed it over to some extent. It seemed to have a meaning, but it just seemed so obscure that I

S: No, I am not thinking so much of the meaning, but its direct appeal the images, the idea of doing that sort of thing?

Sanghadevi: Meat!

S: Yes, well, meat and human flesh!

: I found it a bit disgusting, I must say.

Voices: Yes.

?Tessa: I found it quite shocking.

S: Yes. Well, taken literally, it is, obviously. But the fact that it has some impact, taken literally, means that there is some emotional connection, there is some emotional arousal, which can be relevant, perhaps, to the understanding of the symbolism itself. The emotions of disgust or whatever which are provoked by the imagery can be incorporated when you understand the significance of that imagery.

: It stirs your energy up, leads(?) your energies away.

S: Yes, yes. You can't really just pass it over as you can something purely conceptual which you don't happen to understand. You don't understand this, perhaps, but without your understanding it it has made a certain impact. It has got you below the belt, as it were the belt being your rationality.

Sanghadevi: Well, also one can't ignore the fact that it did have a very positive effect on the king, even though initially it didn't, so it is best to forget ... threatened...

Side 2

S: Yes, right. Well, perhaps we can discover the significance of the fact that it is the corpse of an eight-year-old brahmin child who is born a brahmin for the seventh time in succession.

Dayamegha: Are we actually told that?

Sanghadevi: Well, in the ... It is said that he was eight years old ... seven times born.

S: Yes. This is the interpretation the king gives to it, because he clearly is well aware of that tradition, that belief; and, experiencing the eating of the flesh in that way, he concludes that its effect is so extraordinary it can only be flesh from the body of someone who has been born a seven-successive-times brahmin.

Vidyasri: I wondered if this child had anything to do with Mandarava, and somehow like she brought it to the king and in some sort of way indirectly it was a I don't know, it was some sort of teaching or something to do with that quality that was affecting

S: Not impossible. It might have been Padmasambhava: again, one doesn't know. It is not a logical text.

Vajragita: Yes, but somehow ... keeps on coming back.

S: Right, yes.

Sanghadevi: Something sort of dormant well, the child was dead that had this arousing effect on the king, a sort of dormant energy; when it comes in contact he becomes aroused

S: Yes.

Sanghadevi: It also shows Mandarava standing outside convention as well, because seemingly most people, if they saw a dead child, wouldn't think of using it as food. It reminds me a bit of the lengths Padmasambhava went to in order to be exiled.

S: Yes, that's true, but then it is a Vajrayana context, in which very extraordinary things are ordinary. Anyway, perhaps you should ponder on it; perhaps you will get interesting dreams tonight.

Sanghadevi: ... quite mad ...

S: Anyway, question 4 this is just a factual question: At the end of Canto 38 are mentioned the mamo(?) and the marajit(?) dakinis. What are they? Marajit means conqueror of Mara, as I mention in my Wesak talk. So Marajit dakinis are presumably those dakinis who have conquered Mara, which would suggest that they are dakinis of the highest kind, Buddha dakinis. Mamos are a kind of female spirit in Tibetan belief. They are purely Tibetan. Mamo does not translate any Sanskrit term, apparently. So Mamos are, one imagines, lower in rank than the Marajit dakinis.

Vidyasri: Female forces, did you say?: Spirits.

Sanghadevi: Interesting name for ... isn't it, garland of joy?

S: Joy is associated with death and all that sort of thing, in much the same way that the king eating the flesh of the corpse is a sort of joy. The values are all reversed, everything is back to front.

Sanghadevi: Gives the irrational mind a

S: a good jolt.

Dayamegha: Interesting explanation, that he is so blissful that he wants to kill his wife and his daughter and get the corpses.

S: He does seem very irascible, because he threatens the 500 servants with death if they allow Mandarava to escape.

Sridevi: That line says he did it ... treasure ... garland of joy; it almost sounds like it would be symbolic of dhyanic experience. Do you think one could take it completely symbolically in that sense?

S: Well, it is, it is represented as a sort of dhyanic experience, isn't it, inasmuch as it is an experience of great bliss, and he even rises from the ground, as it were, in ... , as with a certain type of priti.

: ... control of it, so he can ... he wants to.

S: He has got the source. Yes, indeed. It just needs reflecting on. One can't sort of work it out conceptually. You have to sort of reflect on it and see how it affects you and what sort of associations it gives rise to. Maybe you should just read it over again before going to sleep!

: ...

S: I remember on retreat once with Vajrayogini, very many years ago the retreat was at Mamaki's(?) place somehow or other, we got talking about cannibalism. I don't know how it was. I think it grew out of vegetarianism. And you know what Vajrayogini is like; she was asking me whether I was so committed to vegetarianism that if I was shipwrecked on a desert island I would refuse to eat a rabbit, say, to save my life; and I said, 'Well, no, being quite objective, I would consider the rabbit's life as less valuable than mine, and so I would feel I was objectively justified in killing the rabbit and eating it to maintain my existence.' So she was quite satisfied with this answer. Then I went on to say: 'I'll even go further than that. If you were shipwrecked on a desert island, I would feel myself quite justified in eating you!' (Laughter.) So this really delighted her, and she said, 'But you would have to catch me first!' (Loud laughter.) So I said: 'I am quite sure I would not only catch you, but I should put you in the pot and I would curry you!' She said: 'I expect you are rather tough!' She really enjoyed all this; but it was interesting, the other people on the retreat were really all rather shocked and horrified. They didn't like this talk about cannibalism and my eating Vajrayogini at all!

: I'm terrified!

S: But Vajrayogini really enjoyed it. It was just the sort of thing she liked. Well, I mean, in theory provided you keep it strictly symbolical! But I was quite conscious of what I was doing in talking about these things. You certainly do release certain energies. Do you see what I mean? Or you bring up into consciousness certain taboo things. Because we are not even supposed to think about eating the flesh of human beings. There was an instance in the papers a couple of years ago: some people who were there was an air accident, wasn't there? And it came out afterwards that the survivors had eaten people who had died. And they were very, very emotionally disturbed because of that.

Dayamegha: You get this preoccupation with vampires as well.

S: Yes, indeed, yes. I mean where does all this come from? Well, there are all sorts of theories. Sridevi wrote [sent] me a book in which it is all explained quite clearly where it comes from! But none the less, what about all this vampirism and the walking dead and all that sort of thing? These sort of things seem to occupy a quite prominent place in people's psyches. So perhaps it is better to bring it all up into the open.

: It's probably ... the horror films Dracula

S: Mm. We must suppress so much. Perhaps that is one of the good things about the Vajrayana, about a work like this they bring all these things, but in a very positive spiritual context, which can absorb the energies which are conjured up, as it were.

: So is the aim not to have any taboos at all?

S: (Pause) I wouldn't say that, but one should not be bound by taboos. It may be useful or skilful to observe taboos, but one should not be bound by them. It is like, for instance, alcohol. Supposing one is a teetotaler and really believes in teetotalism: you shouldn't be so bound to teetotalism that you cannot even take a drop of wine, a single drop, you know, on your tongue.

Vidyasri: Why, because you would be sticking too much to the letter of the ...

S: Right!

Vidyasri: And actually it wouldn't have any effect on you.

S: Well, not only sticking to the letter, but you have sacrificed your freedom. Your teetotalism hasn't become a matter of choice: it has just become a matter of habit, a habit you are not able to break. Supposing you are a strict teetotaler but you happen to attend a religious ceremony where you are given just a little drop of wine on the tip of your finger, just to put on your tongue. Well, it's not going to do you any harm. But apparently you believe it can, you are unable to take it; so what does that mean? You have made your teetotalism an end in itself.

Vajragita: It could be the same with vegetarianism.

S: Yes, that's true, yes. A few years ago I discovered that inadvertently I had eaten some meat. I forget the circumstances: I think it was on a train, and it was in a roll or something. I just didn't realize. And afterwards I came to know it was meat. I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel any sort of revulsion. I ate it accidentally; I didn't consider myself morally at fault. I didn't consider I had broken any principle, because I had done it quite unknowingly. I certainly didn't start feeling sick, or anything of that sort. Whereas in India, in the case of some lifelong vegetarians, if they happen by accident to take, or to think that they have taken, a bit of meat, they will start vomiting and retching and they will bring it all up; which to me seems quite ridiculous. One of the things that the Vajrayana does, I think, in a way, especially with its symbolism, is to almost make you handle forbidden things. So if you do give them up, you give them up not because of any sort of compulsion or conditioning but because you just choose to give them up. That is why, to come back to the first question, Padmasambhava was able to have close women disciples. What does Nietzsche say about women? It isn't very complimentary, but it does contain an element of truth: he says, 'Woman is the most dangerous plaything' that is from the point of view of the man, of course. But here is Padmasambhava as it were having this plaything, and not being afraid to have it. One could look at it like that.

Vidyasri: In terms of that, you mentioned yesterday something about Mandarava; you said something like if she wasn't an aspect of Padmasambhava's, and you mentioned something like that something about her physically being an aspect of Padmasambhava.

S: Yes, one can certainly look at it like that, that she was as it were his anima. But I don't think one can reduce it to that; I think it is more than likely that she was also a historical character and has to be considered in those terms. Otherwise you explain it away, to a great extent, if you just make Mandarava into Padmasambhava's anima; then the question of the significance of his having close women disciples doesn't arise, you have explained it all away. He is just the same as the Buddha, he just doesn't have any close women disciples in that way. It is all symbolism. But I don't think that is quite good enough.

Dayamegha: Perhaps that is what we were trying to get at in that first question; it's like she is a very dangerous plaything for him.

S: But he is ready to face the danger, because he realizes it is not a question of playing safe; it

is a question of conscious choice all the time. Not many men can be Padmasambhavas, of course; and don't believe them if they tell you that they are! (Laughter.) We've got quite a few little mini Padmasambhavas who have come to grief in one way and another.

: Yes, that's quite true. And Mandaravas!

S: Some of them have been taught a good lesson by that dangerous plaything! They end up having quite a healthy respect for her! All right; there is the fifth and last question. 5) Do you personally believe that any miraculous births have really happened on the human plane, or is it purely symbolic? Could you say something about miracles generally, particularly collectively witnessed ones? How can we account for them? Hm. 'Do you personally believe that any miraculous births have really happened on the human plane?' I suppose one can't really rule them out. I wouldn't like to say that I definitely believe that this or that birth even Padmasambhava's was definitely miraculous, but I keep an open mind about it. I don't think that they are all necessarily symbolic. All sorts of extraordinary things can happen. Could you say something about miracles generally, particularly collectively witnessed ones? How can we account for them?' Lama Govinda writes about a sort of collective miracle, doesn't he, and I refer to that in the Survey, I think, before he wrote his full account. That is those what I call phantasmagoria created by the form of Tomo Rimpoche, which were witnessed by a few thousands of people for some hours. So how does one account for that? It seems one can only accept. And then there was the famous case, even today, in I think it is South India, near Bangalore, of the Satya Sai Baba. Have you heard about him?

Voices: No.

S: Well, his speciality is materializing things. If you go and see him, he will say, 'Oh, hello, hello,' and grasp your hand, and there will be a handful of holy ashes in it, or a little image or something like that. And it seems that it is not just a conjuring trick, it seems he does possess this power of materialization; and it has all been filmed, even, several times. And he is very famous, he is a successor or he says he is the reincarnation of the old Sai Baba of Shirdi(?). He is very well-known in India. He wasn't a teacher, but he was just a very extraordinary miraculous sort of person. You see his picture all over India. He is usually represented as an old man with a white stubble. He is sitting with one leg crossed over like this, and a sort of scarf round his head, looking about 70. Lots of taxi drivers have got his picture in the front of their taxis for luck. You didn't notice anywhere? Anyway, he lived in the last century, beginning of this, I think; and the Satya Sai Baba is his sort of successor. He is short and fat, and has lots of bushy hair, and very thick lips. He has got lots of followers. I don't think he has been to the West, but he is very well known. And, yes, he seems to have this power. Mme. Blavatsky seems to have had it, judging by various accounts. So one can't refuse to accept these things, or at the very least, keep an open mind about them.

Vidyasri: There was that miracle in Fatima, in Portugal, in which some children saw this vision of the Virgin Mary, and for something like three or four days thousands of people gathered and said that they also saw this figure appearing.

S: There is always the possibility, I suppose, of collective hallucination. Sometimes accounts do very much vary. But if you have got a solid material object, which has apparently been materialized, that is a rather different thing, isn't it?

: There is the case of ... and a friend going to see the mosaic that turned out not to be there. He and his friend sat and talked about it and looked at it for a couple of hours, apparently, and then he asked someone to get a postcard of it later, and it didn't exist.

S: Well, that could have been

Vajragita: a past life.

S: But if just one person, or a few people, see things, well, that could be just subjective, an outward projection of something that you perceive within. Sometimes you have that experience when you wake up from a dream; just for an instant you can see the figure in the dream sort of standing there. So one does possess this sort of objectifying capacity.

Sanghadevi: How does this tie up with there's something ... I think it was in the White Lotus Sutra series, and you were talking about this is more, say, the Transcendental, but [that] the universal could only be experienced through the individual, and that, well, an archetypal Bodhisattva could only manifest through an individual themselves contacting that ...

S: I think what I meant was that a Bodhisattva is a spiritual force, not a material force.

Sanghadevi: That wasn't this Tomo Geshe ? He had already died

S: No, he was alive. He was on pilgrimage, and all the people who were with him saw this phantasmagoria which they believed he created. Oh yes, I remember now: and lotus flowers came actually floating down and were quite tangible, could be picked up and felt, and they lasted for an hour or two. I actually met people, one or two people, who were with him on this sort of expedition. It took place in the thirties. And it is supposed to be depicted in a fresco on the walls of Domgro(?) Gumpa in Tshumpi(?) Valley, because he lived there for a long time. That is where the Dalai Lama stayed for a while. This is all sort of magical rather than spiritual, but it has its own significance, I think, on its own level, and I don't think we should sort of hastily deny it on purely rationalistic grounds. As I said, just keep an open mind. At the very least, it has a sort of symbolical value. Perhaps it does affront the scientific intelligence, but one day there may be a scientific explanation, who knows? had a slightly odd experience of this sort once at the house, or rather flat, of a friend. Some of you may have heard me mention my old friend Dinoo Dubash(?) anyone heard me mention her? She is a Parsi lady living in Bombay. I have known her for years and years; she is in her eighties now. I remember once I went to see her when I was in Bombay, and I found her a bit excited. So she said: 'I just want you to tell me if you can see something.' So I said, 'All right,' because she was a slightly eccentric character, and I knew her pretty well, so I was quite happy to go along with what she wanted me to do. So she made me sit in an armchair in her sitting room, and she had put the chair opposite the window, and in the window there was a little green Buddha image some kind of green stone, like jade. So she said, 'I just want you to sit there quietly, tell me if you see anything.' So I said, 'All right,' so I just sat there. And, after a while, I saw that outlining this little green image was a bright green light sort of fluorescent green, you could call it, very bright and sort of fluorescent. And I just went on looking, and then it sort of expanded and expanded, and eventually the whole room was filled with this brilliant green light. And, after a while, it faded away. So she asked me: 'Did you see anything?' I told her, and she said: 'Yes, that's what I saw. I wanted to know if anybody else would see it.' So we speculated that perhaps the image had belonged to a lama before, perhaps he had

meditated on it, or with it.

Vajragita: ... the energy centres.

S: Yes. I wasn't trying to concentrate, because she didn't give me any clue what she thought I might see, she just asked me to look at that little image, about so big. She has still got it, at least she had it the last time I saw her. She is a woman who meditated quite a lot; she was quite into that.

Vajragita: Do you think that anybody could have seen it [if they were] perhaps quite receptive and concentrated?

S: I don't know. Perhaps one has to be receptive or at least sensitive. It is difficult to say. I remember the light very clearly, because what struck me was it was like fluorescent lighting, which is in a way not exactly harsh, but you know the sort of thing it is not soft; and a very vivid green. I must admit I sort of glanced around the room to see whether there was any source it might have come from other than the image, but there wasn't. It was definitely coming from the image.

Dayamegha: Could she see it while you could see it?

S: I don't think she did, I don't think so. I think she'd seen it before. I think she was too excited sort of watching me! But there is another experience of materialization I didn't actually see this, but I heard it on very good authority, as it were. During my last years in Kalimpong, some of my students came to see me, and one of them told me that some big stones had been falling on his house out of the sky lots of them, and a lot of people had seen them, falling out of the clear sky; and their house or hut was surrounded by fields, and the stones couldn't possibly have been thrown, they came straight down, they were big and square. And some of them had the figure 4 on them, and others had a cross on them. And this went on for several days a lot of these stones had fallen. So they came to me to ask what they should do. So I said, 'Well, I don't know; I'll mention it to Dardo Rimpoche when I go and see him.' So I saw him just after that, and I told him exactly what had happened and where the place was, down at the Seventh Mile; and so he said, 'All right. I'll do something about it.' He just said that! and it stopped. So I asked him afterwards what actually it had been, and he said that the 4 and the cross both represented death, and that someone was wishing the family ill. He implied that it was some kind of black magic black magic being very common among the Nepalese. He didn't say what he had done; presumably he had just done some puja or whatnot to counteract it. But my students told me it had stopped the day after I saw Dardo Rimpoche. He had the reputation of being rather good at things of that sort!

Sridevi: You have told that story of how he provided everybody with incense.

S: That's right, yes.

Sridevi: Did you mean he had this power of materialization?

S: No, I think he provided himself

Sridevi: Forethought?

S: Well, this is how I saw it. Perhaps he did materialize, I don't know, but I took it that it was just forethought on his part. But then again, why should he have thought that? Because we were definitely told we were not going to a temple that morning; we were definitely told we were going to see a factory, or whatever it was. And we all accepted that; but he didn't, apparently. So either he was being very, very cautious, or else he did have some sort of intuitive understanding of what was going to happen. Difficult to say; but I remember him bringing out all these bundles of incense and candles from under his robe with a big smile, and giving them to all 50odd of us altogether 57 of us including him and myself!

Vajragita: A lot to carry!

S: That's true, yes; I hadn't thought of that. He seemed to bring it out from under his robe. Tibetan robes are very voluminous! We were all so disappointed when we arrived and realized it was a temple and we hadn't got any offerings. We had been misled by the man who was guiding us.

Sanghadevi: You said a bit earlier on that these phantasmagoria were magical, they were not spiritual; but

S: Well, they are not spiritual in themselves.

Sanghadevi: ... they couldn't make ... For instance, something which can actually be made useful. I mean, if it's a vision of a ...

S: Well, it's like a book; a book conveys a spiritual message, but the things of which the book is made are not in themselves spiritual; they are material. So, in the same way, the phantasmagoria can be of very fine, subtle matter as it were, but none the less convey a spiritual message. But it is good to have some of these more colourful elements, isn't it, rather than have everything dry and rational and conceptual? Even though one might find it a bit shocking at times especially those with a bit of scientific training. I don't know if there are any such? Yes, there are, aren't there, yes! I can remember a rather puritanical French nun she was a Buddhist nun at a certain Vajrayana Puja which she attended; I think this was in Sikkim. She was deeply shocked to see the officiating lama take a bottle of whisky and pour out some and then sprinkle it on the images, sprinkle drops. She was deeply shocked by this. But it was alcohol, and the alcohol was symbolizing amrit. It wasn't drunk, it was just used ritually in this way. If you have been brought up to think of alcohol as something disgusting, well, you would have that sort of reaction, but one aspect of the Vajrayana, one aspect of the Tantra, is to help you to get over those sort of conditionings. Some Indian Yogis do that sort of thing, and they really carry it to extremes. I mean some of them go to the extreme of eating dirt, for instance.

Vajragita: And does it help? Does it help them to get over it?

S: I think with some people it must have some effect like that. St. Catherine of Siena used to do things of that sort, didn't she, to overcome her likes and dislikes and feelings of natural revulsion. She used to have very strange experiences in connection with blood. She is a well-documented historical character; she was very well known at the time, and her biography was written almost immediately after her death by her confessor. Blood always made her think of Jesus and put her into a sort of ecstasy. She seems to have overcome the natural

revulsion to blood. There is a story which is quite historical, it is quite well documented: that she

was passing through the streets of Siena when she came across a young nobleman who was being led to execution, he was going to have his head struck off; he had been involved in some rebellion. So he begged her to be with him at the time of his death, because she was well known as a holy woman and people had great confidence in her. She was still only in her twenties, but she had been a famous figure for some years in Siena, quite a public figure. So she agreed; she accompanied the nobleman to the place of execution, and he knelt down, his head was struck off and she received his head into her hands, and prayed over it and went into a sort of ecstasy, according to her biographer. She had overcome one's natural revulsion to that extent. There are paintings representing this incident. She was quite an extraordinary I don't know if you've ever heard of her or read her biography? The house in which she was born in Siena is still there, it is now kept as a sort of chapel; a quite solidly built medieval stone building. Her father was a dyer, and she was one of 21 children. I think she was No. 20. Yes, people had large families in those days. Fancy having 21 children! How many of you are there? No, not even 20! Twelve, a miserable twelve!

Sanghadevi: I used to know a family with 21 children.

S: Yes; with the same mother?

Sanghadevi: Yes, and they ranged from a baby up to...

S: What an achievement! She should have a medal, shouldn't she? Or a pension.

Sanghadevi: She had a very nice ... children ... everything. People wanted to ... as well.

S: She was a sort of queen bee by that time.

Voices: ...

S: Having twins is cheating! I was reading in the paper the other day about a woman who had yes, she lived to be over 100 and she had, I think it was 41 or 42 children altogether, and she outlived 27 of them.

Vidyasri: She actually had 42 children?

S: Yes, 40. I suppose it is just about possible, if you start very early. It must be very exceptional.

Voices: ... (Laughter.)

S: ... I don't remember. It was in fairly recent times; it wasn't England, but it was certainly Europe, it wasn't the East. I just happened to read about it somewhere. I can't remember now. I read all sorts of things. You will be having nightmares! Well, since we are on sort of taboo subjects!

: Is that what you are aiming for to give us nightmares?

S: (laughs).

Voices: ...

S: Well, we haven't so far as I know had any miraculous births in the Movement! But you never know!

But it is quite interesting studying this sort of material, which is very different from, say, a Pali sutta, isn't it? (Laughter.) Even from a Mahayana sutra. They have their own sort of qualities, all these different kinds of material. I think it is quite good to be acquainted with them all.

: It feels more like the blood and guts of things.

S: Right, yes. Well, it is interesting that in the Vajrayana you have those sort of things, at least represented symbolically, of the eyes and the tongue and the nose and so on representing the five senses; they represent them in that very concrete sort of fashion; a sort of little cup or bowl, a skull-cup very often, with those particular organs literally there. Sometimes they are modelled out of barley flour: a pair of ears and a nose and a tongue. Tibetans really like this sort of thing, they go in for it a lot.

Sridevi: Do you think it is ... more than other things?

S: Perhaps. I think one has to take it quite seriously and not as it were play around with it.

Sanghadevi: We have done those offerings ... certain mantras.

Voices: ...

S: I remember once at Il Convento someone put some bones on the shrine as an offering, quite unexpectedly, during the evening Puja, and some people just didn't like it at all. They felt it quite inappropriate; and I think probably on the whole it was, on that occasion in that particular situation. I don't think it was a Padmasambhava Puja or anything like that.

Sanghadevi: You don't expect to have that sort of Puja in Italy.

S: Yes. For instance, in the case of Tara Puja and Avalokiteshvara Puja, one is supposed, according to tradition, to make predominantly white offerings: for instance, bowls of milk or curds and white sugar.

Vidyasri: Why is that?

S: Well, because Avalokiteshvara and Tara the White Tara, that is are essentially white; they represent purity and peace. Whereas in the case of wrathful deities, in the Vajrayana as practised in Tibet sometimes pieces of meat even are offered; sometimes it is just modelled out barley flour, but occasionally you get actual meat. But never to the so-called peaceful deities, only to wrathful deities. Yes, and white rice is offered. Sometimes it is said, if you are doing the meditation of Avalokiteshvara or the White Tara this is a sort of extra practice one can live on white things, white rice, white curds, white milk, white sugar, all white things.

Dayamegha: White cabbage.

S: Yes, indeed!

: So would this not follow with Green Tara?

S: Presumably not, no.

: Live on green things.

S: Green things, yes. I have sometimes thought that it would be good, experimentally maybe we do it to a small extent, but when you have, say, a Green Tara Puja, have everything green; even wear a green dress to tune yourself into the mood in a way represented by the Bodhisattva. It must have a different effect: colour is a very powerful thing.

: ... used to do that with Malini, with the different colours ...

S: Good, yes, that's good.

: It was very good, it was very strong.

Sanghadevi: We did that on a course here last year...

S: Ah. You can ask yourselves how you feel, say, when you are wearing everything green in a green room, and how you feel when you are wearing blue in a blue room, with blue decorations. There must be some difference. But I shouldn't have any preconceived ideas about it; just ask oneself, how do I feel? What difference does it make to me? How does it affect me? It may possibly vary from person to person. Anyway, perhaps it is time, is it? All right, then.

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