

Extract from 'Moving Against the Stream: The Birth of a New Buddhist Movement'

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Chapter Two THE STORY SO FAR

Though north-west London was *terra incognita* to me I nonetheless was a Londoner, having been born in Stockwell and brought up in Tooting, not far from the famous Broadway. When I was eight I was diagnosed as suffering from heart disease and for the next two years was confined to bed, not being allowed even to sit up by my own efforts. I saw no one except my parents and the doctor and had nothing to do all day except read. Fortunately I was already something of a reader, having worked my way through Andrew Lang's *Fairy Books*, and therefore devoured, during those two years in bed, whatever reading matter my hard-pressed parents were able to provide me with, from boys' papers like the *Wizard* and the *Hotspur* to classic English novels such as *Pickwick Papers*, *Jane Eyre*, *Hypatia*, and *The Last Days of Pompeii*. My biggest single resource was a complete set of Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*, the gift of a kindly neighbour, every one of whose sixty parts became as familiar to me as the owl clock on the wall, whose eyes clicked from side to side with the swing of the pendulum, or the nasturtium-and-trellis pattern of the wallpaper.

I have more than once reflected that the two years I spent confined to bed, alone with a few books and the *Children's Encyclopaedia*, must have had a decisive influence on my character and thus on the course of my whole life thereafter. Until then, so far as I know, I had been just an ordinary boy, indistinguishable from other working-class Tooting boys. Like them I loved playing in the street, was not particularly fond of school, got into scrapes (and fights), and was overjoyed when I could go fishing with my father on a Saturday afternoon. The discovery that I had heart disease put a stop to all that. From a lively, occasionally naughty eight-year-old I was transformed, overnight, into a bedridden invalid who was scarcely permitted to move his arms freely. Abruptly and drastically, the current of my youthful energies was dammed and redirected. Strange to say, I cannot recall ever resenting this, or even feeling frustrated or restless: perhaps I was sedated. I may even have been quite happy, in a way. Yet such a lengthy period of enforced immobility could not but have affected me radically.

From a distance of more than sixty years I can see it as having affected me in at least three ways. It forced my energies inwards, towards the world of thought and imagination, making me more introspective than was normal for one of my years or than I probably was by nature. Then the fact that I was scarcely permitted to move my arms freely meant that I was obliged to be conscious of what I was doing. This was even more the case when I came to graduate, at the end of the two years, from bed to wheelchair and when, later still, I started using my legs again. There was always a voice in my ear – my mother's or father's – warning me to be careful, or not to move so quickly, and I may have ended up internalizing that admonitory voice. This constant need to be aware of what I was doing had both a positive and a negative effect: while it made it easier for me, years later, to cultivate the Buddhist virtue of mindfulness, whether of bodily movements or mental states, it also tended to check any spontaneous physical expression of my feelings. Finally, my confinement to bed not only cut me off from contact with boys of my own age but made me feel separate and different. This feeling of separateness and difference persisted after my eventual return to school, for I was not allowed to take part in games or to play with my schoolfellows.

The habit of reading that I had acquired during my period of enforced immobility remained with me even after my return to school. No sooner was I able to get out and about on my own than I started spending my pocket money in the woefully inadequate bookshops of Tooting, as well as carrying away from the Tooting Public Library every week the armful of books I had borrowed using my father's ticket. My principal interests were Ancient Egypt, the Italian Renaissance, and what Dr Johnson called 'the biographical part of literature', and in all these fields I read as widely as I could. Later I added to the list philosophy, poetry, and painting, and the Greek drama. Fiction I hardly ever read and anything of a scientific nature I instinctively avoided.

On 1 September 1939 the air raid sirens sounded for the first time: World War II had begun, and eight or nine months later I was evacuated to North Devon. In the course of the next three years I left school, worked in a coal merchant's office in Torquay, returned to London in time to experience the last of the Blitz, and joined the staff of the London County Council as a clerical assistant. During this period I continued to read avidly, and after my return to London developed a passionate love for classical music and, though to a lesser degree, for the theatre. I also had a series of realizations that exercised a decisive effect on the whole subsequent course of my life. I realized there was no reason why I should confine myself to the literature of Europe; I realized that I was not a Christian; and I realized that I was a Buddhist and had, in fact, always been one. The first of these realizations came when I read Mme Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, especially volume two, *Theology*; the second, when I read the *Diamond Sūtra*, of the ineffable truth of whose teaching I at once had an immediate apprehension. The way for this last realization may have been prepared by certain experiences of a 'mystical' nature that had befallen me several years earlier.

Three months after my eighteenth birthday I was called up, having been found fit enough for the army despite my history of heart disease. 'You can make yourself comfortable even in hell if you go about it in the right way,' says a Tibetan proverb. The Signals Unit in Surrey to which I was posted was certainly not hell, yet army life was so different from anything I had hitherto experienced that for the first two weeks I was in a state of shock. But youth is resilient, and eventually my numbed faculties revived. I made friends, went home on weekend leave, joined the London-based Buddhist Society, borrowed rare books on Buddhism from the Society's library, continued my practice of writing poetry, and in short led my own life to the extent that the army permitted me to do so. One weekend I arrived home to find my father contemplating what remained of our house, which half an hour earlier had suffered a direct hit by a flying bomb. Luckily no one was inside at the time. A few weeks later the Unit was ordered to India, and I celebrated my nineteenth birthday on a troopship bound for Bombay. After three months spent at the Unit's headquarters in Delhi I was posted first to Colombo, then (at my request) to Calcutta, and finally to Singapore. While I was in Ceylon, Germany was defeated, Japan surrendered after the dropping of the first atom bomb, and World War II came to an end.

Wherever I happened to be, whether in Delhi or Colombo, Calcutta or Singapore, I spent much of my free time visiting mosques, temples, and viharas and making the acquaintance of Hindu swamis and Buddhist bhikshus. I also bought books on Buddhism and Hinduism that were not available in England and experimented, at times with results I had not foreseen, with different methods of meditation. During my stay in Ceylon I saw less of Buddhism and Buddhists than I had hoped, though I was able to visit the Tooth Relic Temple in Kandy and pay my respects to the historic Tooth. But if I saw less of Buddhism and Buddhists than I had hoped, of Hindus and Hinduism I saw more than I had expected. In particular I got to know two Indian swamis belonging to the Ramakrishna Mission, and soon was spending several evenings a week at their ashram. My friendship with them led to introductions to their brethren in Calcutta, where I met my mother's youngest brother and his family, and these in turn led to my being introduced to the rich cultural and religious life of the city. In Singapore I met Sinhalese and Chinese Buddhist monks, and was a regular visitor to the newly revived lodge of the Theosophical Society, as well as to the local branch of the

Ramakrishna Mission, which had somehow managed to function throughout the Japanese occupation. I also became a vegetarian, much to the amusement of the Unit's Indian cooks, wrote a good deal of poetry, and started giving public lectures.

All this was good in its way, and my year in Singapore passed quickly enough. But the war was over. My twenty-first birthday had come and gone, and I wanted to get on with my own life. I wanted to be a monk and devote all my energies to the study and practice of Buddhism, and while still in Ceylon I had written to my parents informing them of my intentions. Initially I had assumed that after being demobilized in England, and spending some time with my family, I would be able to return to India and there don the saffron robe. I now discovered that this would not be possible, as the new Labour government was discouraging any drainage of manpower out of the country. The discovery gave rise to a feeling of desperation – a feeling that recent developments within the Unit did nothing to assuage. Discipline had been tightened up, and such things as parades and fatigues increased, as if to remind us that although the war might have ended we were still in the army and were not going to escape from it so easily. Not wanting any more of my life to be wasted painting rings on fire buckets or preparing for yet another inspection, I decided to take drastic action. I would apply for six weeks' leave in India, on the grounds that I had an uncle in Calcutta with whom I could stay, and that at the end of that period I would not return to Singapore. Instead, I would melt into the Indian background – and disappear. Technically I would be deserting, and could be court-martialled if ever I was caught. Convinced that what I was doing was morally justified, I was prepared to take the risk.

In Calcutta I lost no time contacting Robin Banerjee, the idealistic young Bengali whom I had met in Singapore. He was there as part of the Congress Medical Mission to Malaya, we had become good friends, and on the Mission's return to India we had agreed that as soon as I was free we would meet in Calcutta and somehow work together. When my leave ended I therefore said goodbye to my uncle and his family, and Robin and I moved first to the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture and then, a month or so later, to the Maha Bodhi Society. We were not very happy in either place. In neither of them did we find the sort of conditions that were, we believed, essential to our ethical and spiritual development. Moreover, towards the end of March, when we were staying at the Maha Bodhi Orphanage and looking after the boys, there occurred a renewal of the communal rioting of the previous year. Throughout the city Muslims attacked Hindus and Sikhs, and Hindus and Sikhs retaliated by attacking Muslims. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, were killed, and I witnessed more bloodshed and violence than I had ever seen while in the army. Calcutta was not a particularly healthy place to be just then. But the Maha Bodhi Society's headquarters, to which the orphans had been removed for their safety, was not a particularly healthy place either, morally and spiritually speaking, and the longer my friend and I stayed the more we became aware of this unpleasant fact. When I left Calcutta the following month to attend an inter-religious gathering in Ahmedabad, on the other side of the country, as a representative of Buddhism, it was therefore with the hope that I would be able to contact other Buddhists and make arrangements for us to join a more genuinely Buddhist organization.

At the week-long Dharma Parishad, which was dominated by Hindu holy men of various colourful persuasions, I met Pandit-ji, an aged Bengali scholar of venerable appearance who had plans for the revival of Buddhism in India. He invited me to accompany him to Kishengunj in the UP, I accepted, and not long after our arrival there we were joined by Robin. Pandit-ji had assured me that his plans had the approval and support of Anandamayi, the famous Bengali mystic, who was then staying at her ashram in Kishengunj with a band of devotees; but as the weeks passed it became obvious that Anandamayi, many of whose followers believed her to be a divine incarnation, had not the slightest interest either in Buddhism or in Pandit-ji's schemes. She was an orthodox Hindu who insisted on the strict observance of the caste system. But Pandit-ji refused to give up hope. When Anandamayi left for her ashram in Raipur we left for Raipur too, and when

she left Raipur for Delhi he and Robin followed her there. I remained in Raipur, studying and meditating, and after a week or so Robin rejoined me. Eventually the three of us were reunited in Kasauli, a hill station in East Punjab where Anandamayi had stayed the previous year. Here Robin and I discovered that none of Pandit-ji's schemes (he now talked of starting a girls' boarding school in Anandamayi's name) had ever progressed beyond the fund-raising stage and that the old man was well known for his chicanery. Shocked and horrified, we decided we would have nothing more to do with religious organizations of any kind. We would give up the household life and go forth as homeless wanderers in search of Truth. Having shaved our heads and dyed our clothes saffron (I had already adopted Indian dress), on the morning of 18 August, three days after Independence Day, we accordingly left Kasauli on foot for the plains. The path of our descent was spanned by a series of double and even triple rainbows, through which we passed as though through a triumphal arch. It was an auspicious beginning.

But the auspiciousness did not last. Our intention had been to study Buddhism in Ceylon and perhaps become monks there, but as we had no means of identification and refused to disclose our nationality (we had decided that as sadhus we had none) on our arrival at Colombo we were not allowed to land and had to return to India by the same boat. Disappointed but not downhearted, we therefore travelled to Cape Comorin, the southernmost point of India, and having paid a visit to the famous Kenya Kumari temple started walking up through what then was the princely state of Travancore, eventually settling at Muvattupuzha, a subdivisational town in the interior, where we took up our abode in a deserted ashram situated on a low ridge amid rice-fields.

We stayed in Muvattupuzha for about eighteen months. During that time we learned something of the history and culture of the state (now part of Kerala), and came to appreciate its distinctive character; we also picked up a little Malayalam. The reason for our settling in Muvattupuzha was that we wanted to deepen our experience of meditation, which we had not been able to do while on the move, and our day was organized accordingly. We meditated in the morning, rising before dawn, and again in the evening, sometimes sitting on until quite late. During the day we studied (Buddhism in my case, English in Robin's), paced up and down the veranda, or sat contemplating the view. We also experimented with periods of fasting and silence, and once or twice a month we went calling on the ashram's supporters, some of whom we got to know quite well. This arrangement suited me perfectly, but it soon proved too restrictive for Robin, who for a while therefore put his abundant energies into plans for starting an industrial school at the ashram, leaving me to my studies and literary work.

I was thus enabled to reflect on the Dharma uninterruptedly for long periods. Six years ago I had read the *Diamond Sūtra* and realized that I was a Buddhist. Since then I had delved not only into Buddhist but also into many Hindu scriptures, as well as into Western philosophy and Christian mysticism, and though my commitment to the Buddha and his teaching was basically unimpaired I needed to get the various spiritual and intellectual influences that had been impinging upon me into some kind of perspective, especially as I was now living in a predominantly Hindu environment. I needed to clarify my doctrinal position as a Buddhist. This I did with the help of the first fifty discourses of the *Majjhima-Nikāya* or Collection of Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, Śāntaraṣita's encyclopedic *Tattvasaṃgraha* or Compendium of Principles, and Mrs Rhys Davids' meaty little book on Buddhism in the Home University Library series. I concentrated on three basic formulations of the Buddha's teaching: the doctrine of dependent origination (or conditioned co-production), the Four Noble Truths, and the Three Characteristics of Conditioned Existence. Though all three formulations were well known to me, I had not previously given them much systematic attention; but at that juncture, as I have written elsewhere, 'they occupied my mind virtually to the exclusion of everything else. Besides reflecting on them during the day I meditated on them at night. Or rather, as I meditated, flashes of insight into the transcendental truths of which they were the expression in conceptual terms would sometimes spontaneously arise.' By the time these 'sessions of sweet silent thought' had come

to an end, and Robin had switched his energies from plans for an industrial school to the intensive practice of hatha yoga, including prāṇāyāma or breath control, I had succeeded in clarifying my ideas on a number of important doctrinal issues. As a result, my approach to the Dharma changed, becoming as much a rational understanding of principles as an emotional response to an ideal.

Our eighteen months in Muvattupuzha were followed by six weeks in Kanhangad, in North Malabar, with the famous Swami Ramdas, and six weeks in Tiruvannamalai, in the Tamil country, with the still more famous Ramana Maharshi. In Tiruvannamalai we stayed in a cave on the slopes of Arunachala, the Hill of Light, from which we had a panoramic view of the courtyards, shrines, and gopurams of the great Shiva temple below. Once a day we descended to the town for alms, and every few days we walked round the hill to the ashram, in the hall of which the Maharshi sat giving darshan to sixty or seventy inmates and visitors. One night I had a vision. I saw Amitābha, the Infinite Light, the Buddha of the West. Ruby-red in colour, he sat cross-legged on an enormous red lotus and held up by the stalk a single red lotus in full bloom. The lotus on which he was seated floated on the sea, across which the light from the red hemisphere of the setting sun made a glittering golden pathway. Visions had come to me before, but this one was unique, and it stirred me deeply. I took it to mean that our apprenticeship to the homeless life had come to an end, and that it was time for us to return to North India and seek ordination in one of the Buddhist centres there.

But we did not leave the South immediately. Friends we had met at Tiruvannamalai invited us to Bangalore, and from there another friend took us on a ten-day excursion into the heart of what then was the princely state of Mysore. We drove through vast sandalwood forests, visited marvellously beautiful Hindu temples, and spent a night at an important centre of Jain pilgrimage, where a 60-foot nude statue of Gomateshwara towered against the sky. We even penetrated into the Sringeri Math, the Vatican of Hinduism, and met the Shankaracharya. In Bangalore itself we made the acquaintance of Yalahankar Swami, a one-eyed guru with highly unconventional methods of dealing with his disciples' egos, who was reputed to be 600 years old. At his suggestion we spent some time in the nearby mountains, where we found shelter in a ruined temple that at night was surrounded by leopards. We then left for Bombay.

In Bombay we stayed with a devotee of Swami Ramdas, who besides taking us to see the Kanheri Caves, an ancient Buddhist monastic complex, also bought us tickets for our journey to Benares. From Benares, after spending a few days sightseeing, we walked out to Sarnath, where the Buddha had first taught the Dharma and where we hoped to be ordained. We were disappointed. The Sinhalese monks of the Maha Bodhi Society wanted nothing to do with the two barefoot, penniless strangers (since leaving Kanhangad we had not been handling money), and we therefore decided to walk up to Kushinagar, where the Buddha had died, and seek ordination there. It was the worst time of year to be doing so. The hot wind was blowing, the temperature was 120°F or more, and people were dropping dead from the heat. But there was no alternative. Doing as much of our walking as we could in the early morning, and at night staying at temples and ashrams, we covered the distance in ten days.

The Burmese senior monk in Kushinagar received us kindly, ordained us as *śrāmaṇeras* or novice monks on Vaishakha Purnima Day, the anniversary of the Buddha's Enlightenment, named Robin Buddharakshita and me Sangharakshita (previously we were Anagarikas Satyapriya and Dharmapriya), and told us to go and preach the Dharma to his disciples in Nepal. Up through the jungles of the Terai we therefore went, still on foot, but now carrying bowls with which to go for alms in the traditional Buddhist manner. We spent two months in Nepal, in the course of which we visited Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, and ministered as best we could to the spiritual needs of the tiny Buddhist communities in Butaol and Tansen. Longer we

could not stay, as the autocratic Rana regime was still in power and our unauthorized presence aroused the suspicions of the local police.

Buddharakshita and I therefore returned to Benares. Here we parted company. Buddharakshita left for Ceylon, while I went to live with Bhikkhu Jagdish Kashyap at Buddha Kuti, his cottage on the campus of the Benares Hindu University, where he was professor of Pali and Buddhist philosophy. I was sorry to lose my friend, but also relieved. The practice of *prāṇāyāma*, which on Ramdas's advice he had given up, had inflamed his naturally hot temper, and relations between us were at times strained. I stayed at Buddha Kuti for nine months, studying Pali, Abhidhamma, and logic, and making extensive use of the University library. With a monk from Sarnath, I went on pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya, the scene of the Buddha's Enlightenment. When spring came, Kashyap-ji showed me the Buddhist holy places of his native Bihar, after which we travelled up to Kalimpong, a cosmopolitan little hill station in the eastern Himalayas, not far from Darjeeling and within sight of Tibet.

In Kalimpong my teacher left me, with the parting injunction that I was to stay there and work for the good of Buddhism.

I stayed in Kalimpong for the next fourteen years, working for the good of Buddhism as best I could, getting to know the local people, both Buddhist and Hindu, and being uplifted and inspired by the sight of Mount Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world, dazzlingly white against the blue sky. In the course of my first seven years in the town I founded a Young Men's Buddhist Association; started a monthly journal of Himalayan religion, culture, and education called *Stepping-Stones*; was ordained as a bhikshu or full monk by an international sangha; organized a public reception for the relics of the Buddha's two chief disciples, then touring India amid scenes of wild popular enthusiasm; found a kindred spirit in Lama Govinda, the German-born artist and scholar; re-established contact with the Maha Bodhi Society (conditions at its headquarters had recently changed for the better); and became well known as a lecturer not only in Kalimpong and the surrounding area but also in Calcutta, Bombay, and Bangalore.

But if I was not to work for the good of Buddhism at the expense of my own good, spiritually speaking, I needed to have a means of uniting the two. I found this in the Bodhisattva ideal, especially as presented in Śāntideva's *Śikṣā-samuccaya* or Collection of Teachings: the ideal of the one who strives for Enlightenment not just for his own sake but for the sake of all living beings. It was not that the Bodhisattva literally gave up the prospect of Nirvāṇa for himself in order to remain in the world and help others achieve Nirvāṇa, as in the popular version of the ideal, but rather that he saw no difference between striving for his own Enlightenment and striving for theirs. He saw no difference because he had transcended the dichotomy of 'self' and 'others'; and it was this very dichotomy that was the real obstacle to Enlightenment. Some years later I affirmed my allegiance to the Bodhisattva ideal by taking the Bodhisattva ordination. I took it from Dhardo Rimpoche, a Tibetan incarnate lama who had arrived in Kalimpong shortly before I did, whom I gradually got to know, and whom I came to revere as a living embodiment of the Bodhisattva ideal.

During those first seven years in Kalimpong I operated from a succession of borrowed or rented premises. In March 1957 the generosity of friends enabled me to buy a small hillside property on the outskirts of the town and there establish the Triyana Vardhana Vihara, the Monastery Where the Three Yanas Flourish. It was the year of the Buddha Jayanti or 2,500th anniversary of Buddhism, a year that was important for me on a number of counts. Besides establishing the Triyana Vardhana Vihara, I toured the Buddhist holy places as a guest of the Government of India together with Dhardo Rimpoche and fifty-odd other 'Eminent Buddhists

from the Border Areas'; took part in the official Buddha Jayanti celebrations in Delhi; met the Dalai and Panchen Lamas; and had the satisfaction of seeing my book *A Survey of Buddhism* published to widespread acclaim. Most important of all, perhaps, I became involved with the movement of mass conversion of so-called 'ex-Untouchable' Hindus to Buddhism.

This historic movement had begun in Nagpur, where Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of the ex-Untouchables, had embraced Buddhism with 400,000 of his followers. Six weeks later he died suddenly in Delhi. I happened to arrive in Nagpur less than an hour before the news of his death was received there, and that night I addressed a condolence meeting attended by 100,000 grief-stricken and demoralized new Buddhists. Ambedkar was not dead, I assured my audience. He lived on in them, and his work – especially the work of conversion – had to continue. In the next four days I visited practically all the ex-Untouchable ghettos in the city, made more than forty speeches, and initiated 30,000 persons into Buddhism. By the time I left for Calcutta I had addressed altogether 200,000 people, and given them renewed confidence in their future as Buddhists. Leading members of the community declared that I had saved Nagpur for Buddhism. That may or may not have been true. I had certainly forged with the Buddhists of Nagpur, and indeed with all Ambedkar's followers, a link that was destined to endure.

In the course of my second seven years in Kalimpong I developed the Triyana Vardhana Vihara as a centre of interdenominational Buddhism. Thai, Vietnamese, and Tibetan monks came to stay with me, and there was even the occasional Western Buddhist. Much of my time when I was actually in Kalimpong was spent at my desk, and my literary output during this period included the books later published as *The Three Jewels* and *The Eternal Legacy*. At the suggestion of a friend I also started writing my memoirs. When not in Kalimpong I was usually to be found either in Calcutta, editing the Maha Bodhi Society's monthly journal, or touring central and western India preaching to the followers of Dr Ambedkar. The fourth and longest of my preaching tours lasted from October 1961 to May 1962. In those eight months I visited more than half the states of India, gave nearly 200 lectures, and received 25,000 men and women into the Buddhist community.

But there was another thread running through the fabric of my life, during that second seven-year period: the colourful thread of the Vajrayāna. Since the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese in 1950, there had been a steady trickle of refugees into Kalimpong, and in 1959, when the Dalai Lama himself fled to India, the trickle became a flood. A number of the refugees were incarnate lamas. Naturally I got to know these, and between 1957 and 1964 received from some of the most distinguished of them various Vajrayāna initiations. Among my Vajrayāna gurus were Dilgo Khyentse Rimpoche and Dudjom Rimpoche, both of whom subsequently became well known in the West. The Vajrayāna being nothing if not practical, I naturally came to devote more and more of the time I spent in Kalimpong to deity yoga and to the Four Foundation Yogas, especially to the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice centred upon the figure of Padmasambhava, to whom I had felt strongly drawn ever since my arrival in the Himalayan region. As though in recognition of my connection with him, in the course of one of my initiations I was given the name Urgyen, Padmasambhava being known as the Guru from Urgyen or Uḍḍiyāna.

In 1963 the English Sangha Trust invited me to spend a few months in England. Prior to that I had not thought even of visiting the West: my life and my work lay in India. Two considerations induced me, eventually, to accept the invitation. The first was that my presence might help resolve the differences that had arisen between the two principal Buddhist organizations in London; the second, that my parents were growing old and I ought to see them. After several delays and postponements, and one more visit to western India, in August 1964 I therefore returned to England after an absence of twenty years.