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Dharma Adviser

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GROWING PAINS, FRESH GROWTH

Western Buddhism continues to struggle through its early adolescence. Maybe these growing pains are only mistakes along the way; some however, may become more serious. We have to keep in mind that while errors of individual leaders only make small waves, the faults of institutions can create a storm.

Two large institutions of British Buddhism are under fire from the press and fellow Buddhists, and there is an important underlying reason for concern. Large institutions may inadvertently or deliberately promote a form of spiritual hegemony by claiming to represent Buddhism to official bodies concerned with religious education in schools and elsewhere.

Risks of hegemony need to be countered especially when there is serious doubt about an ethical stance based not in the Dharma but in some particular individual's interpretation of it.

These problems in Western Buddhism are addressed in several articles in this issue which attempt to contribute positively to this debate. Master Sheng-Yen, the Dalai Lama in conference with Western teachers, a comment on the Precepts and John Crook's editorial and review of recent problems all deal with aspects of this theme.

More cheerfully, we present our own plans for leadership training, retreat reports, one of them concerning a Dzogchen retreat with Lama Surya Das and an account of life in a Hong Kong monastery.

There are good grounds for optimism. As these seeds of fresh growth begin to sprout, we continue to water them.

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A SMALL INSECT CANNOT STOP A CHARIOT¹

Master Sheng-yen

Even if an iron wheel whirls in your head perfect clear samadhi and wisdom are never lost.

You cannot cling to the idea that the genuine wisdom of enlightenment has concrete existence. Yet, if you accept and realise Dharma, then you will never lose this precious gem. The iron wheel is an ancient weapon, a spinning, red hot wheel with sharp blades that will cut and sear anything it touches. Once you attain the gem nothing can deter you in your practice, not even this frightening weapon whirling around your head.

We should have confidence in the Dharma and we should be willing to do anything to protect it even though there may be external forces trying to keep us from practice. External forces may be strong enough to cool the sun or heat the moon but determined practitioners will not let them interfere with their endeavour.

Once upon a time a king was riding in a chariot and noticed a praying mantis standing on its hind legs in the road trying to block his progress. He said, "How can such a small creature stop my chariot? It has no idea how powerless it is!" There may be those who misunderstand the teachings but they are not capable of overthrowing Dharma.

One cannot judge enlightened people by their actions. One cannot say whether they are sinful or sinless. Sages appear no different from ordinary people, yet indeed they are. This may create problems. Since the time of Buddha people have found faults in the actions of saints and sages by relying on their own, narrow-minded world view. Sages and sound practitioners are open-minded and have no concern for conventions others may prize highly.

An elephant treads a wide path. Prejudiced people are like rabbits that scamper along narrow paths and hide in burrows. The rabbit thinks the elephant is clumsy because it cannot walk down the narrow track and fit inside its burrow. A person who has never left a windowless room has no idea what the sky looks like. If he bores a small hole in the wall and peers through a hollow reed to examine the sky he will conclude that the sky is a little round patch of blue. If you tell him about the sun and moon, the galaxies, clouds, rainbows and stars he will think you crazy.

Yet, although a teacher may sometimes be eccentric or outlandish, he should not feel he is free to do anything he wants. Only under extraordinary circumstances should a master use special methods to instruct his followers. Unusual circumstances demand extraordinary methods. If, however, a master believes he or she is enlightened and can transcend the precepts, doing or saying whatever he pleases, then he is not a true master.

When Kumarajiva went to China in the fourth century, the Chinese Emperor thought that such a wise person should produce descendants to perpetuate his wisdom. So he gave concubines to Kumarajiva who had no choice but to accept them. Later his disciples, who were avowed celibate monks, asked him, "Can we have relations with women too?" Kumarajiva said, "Sure, but let me show you something." He took a handful of needles and ate them as if they were noodles. When he had swallowed the last one, he said, "If you can do that, then you can have relations with women!"

I hear many stories about immoral behaviour of masters in the West today. My attitude is this: if what is said about these teachers is indeed true and if they did indeed break the precepts and harm others then they are not true masters. None the less they may have served a good purpose in bringing the teachings to the West. They have given others an opportunity they may never have otherwise had. Their personal lives are their own problems but people should be grateful to them for their contributions. Unless action is required leave bad karma where you find it.

EDITORIAL FROM THE CH'AN HALL

What a mess!

A casual observer surfing the Buddhist scene in the West might well come to the conclusion that the whole thing was a mess. Indeed, some of us who feel ourselves to be serious practitioners may be beginning to feel like retiring to the hills. Yet that was not the Buddha's way. He stood by principle and stayed in town.

Holding fast to the Dharma brings us up sharp against Samsara within the Buddhist world itself. Nothing could be more absurd than the current Shugden controversy about the value of a medieval ghost, nothing less edifying than the apparent state of the FWBO, little less informative than disputes over whether Roshi Kapleau completed more than 32 koans, and there is no enthusiasm to be found in the dereliction from duty of corruption-prone sectarian leaders. Those of us who are happy in our simple-minded attempts to follow the Way may well be distressed by these news items that read like soundbites in the gutter press.

Perhaps it is as well to be brought to earth with a thud. There is nothing special in institutionalised Dharma: reeking of ignorance it evidently perpetuates the mental suffering of disputants ego-anchored in opinion and prejudice. Where, one may ask, are the effects of following the path of wisdom and compassion to be found if not in the lives of its prime exponents? Is this all mere hypocrisy?

We need a pause for reflection. Buddhism is a growing force in the West and as it grows it picks up the prevailing trends of our culture. This is no new thing. It has happened throughout history as Buddhism, or indeed any other code of behaviour and belief, enters a world in which it is a stranger. In the late twentieth century an Eastern Way relatively unchanged since medieval times is encountering the full tide of Western capitalism and consumerism running as a cross-current through all its ancient values.

Westerners are increasingly educated to cultivate the independent self as an agent in an uncertain world in which fierce and unremitting competition sieves the talented from the less able, in which life-long employment is unlikely, in which state provision for accident and ill health is increasingly a thing of an out-dated socialist path and in which the 'post-modern' relativity of values means that any system of belief or behaviour is seemingly as good and as relevant as any other. In such a world any system of belief soon constitutes a 'market' to which 'consumers' come in hopes of a good 'buy'. And the first thing a consumer wants is concordance with his or her pre-existing comforts, beliefs or prejudices. Someone coming to a Buddhist group wants to buy a sense of understanding, belonging and uplift related to the ideas they hold on entry.

Where standards are so variable that no cultural anchorage is available, the lost will grab at a straw. Strong minded, assertive individuals who appear to 'know' are exceptionally attractive in such a situation. A self-promoting teacher with the gift of the gab easily acquires charisma and followers and can infect a developing organisation of the 'faithful' with his or her own viruses. In Western Buddhism a common institutional structure is one in which a charismatic leader has full control of a blossoming, wealth-creating organisation without any form of check or balance from an evaluative membership. No one else 'knows' and the tin pot gods and goddesses of cults are created. This has occurred again and again on both small and larger scales. The loss of deep-rooted cultural means and standards for the evaluation of spirituality lies at the core of the problem. In so far as all of us are embedded in this world, the problem infects us all.

I was reminded of this in conversation recently with a young Californian social anthropologist engaged in Himalayan research. Kimber Haddix (of University of California, Davis) was comparing West Coast Buddhist centres with the small, home-spun village parish where her father, a Christian, ran the church. She told me that in the old time East Coast parish there was a real sense of community, people popped into each others' houses and helped one another, telephone chats were common on a "How are you?" basis. Families cared for their

neighbours and the priest was a central facilitator for his small community of parishioners. Yet in all of this there was little talk of 'spirituality' and certainly no debate about God or theology. By contrast, in the Buddhist institutions each individual was chasing his or her own version of 'enlightenment', the key emphasis being essentially doctrinal and practice-oriented and there was remarkably little community feeling as such - more like the crew of a ship with a voyage to make and skills respected.

Similarly our own 'Community Experiment' for this June had to be changed into a shorter Ch'an retreat because an insufficient number of participants were prepared to spend longer time on a less intensive, community-building programme. In fact the extra two days some four of us spent together showed exactly what could be achieved: greater personal tolerance, liking for idiosyncrasy, respect for difference and a willingness to adopt a degree of discipline (spaced periods of silence) to sustain these things. Most of us are still gunning for the quick therapy of an enlightenment process - although without any real understanding of what such a process requires.

There is a paradox here because one of the reasons for forming the Western Ch'an Fellowship was because many people were asking for a greater sense of community. I put it to you that the 'consumer' attitudes that swamp most of our better feelings act unconsciously to prevent community developing. The reason: plain old, unconscious ego-indulgence.

There is a real danger that many beginners in Buddhism are being sucked into organisations that skilfully provide for their wants without the kind of self-confrontation that the Dharma demands. Lots of verbal 'teachings', visualisation practices involving creative fantasy; assertive even domineering leaders with strong sectarian partialities tend to produce uncritical dependencies in which a false, unchallenged self can flourish. When such an institutionalised view is challenged the adherents may defend it to the hilt because an assumed identity is now under threat.

And so we find seemingly rational Westerners engaged in the defence of protective visualisations involving a medieval and revengeful ghost or tolerating practices in which homosexual relationship is confused with spirituality or the value of the feminine ridiculed. The Buddha might well have been exasperated with bhikkhus who got involved in such things. And indeed there is ample evidence for this.

If we look into the Sutras we come to realise that stupidities of this sort existed even in the Buddha's time. At first there were no rules, a group of friends constituted the early Sangha. As the teachings spread and numbers grew, so accurate understanding of the Buddha's message was less immediate and the Buddha was repeatedly confronted by silly things his followers did. The Vinaya as a code of conduct was essentially a developing case law emerging from events in which the Buddha made a behavioural ruling to safeguard the spiritual progress of the monks.

If, therefore, we are faced merely by a modern version of innate stupidity what can we do about it ?

The first thing is to remind ourselves of compassion, of Avalokitesvara weeping over the innate stupidity of the world. Tara was born from his tears. True Bodhisattvas do not lose patience; knowing ignorance to be pervasive he and she take it lightly and engage only mindfully in debate. This mindfulness does not mean a lack of critical acuity. There is a real risk that as large hegemonic Buddhist institutions, possessors of sometimes dubiously acquired wealth, might seek to dominate the rendering of the Dharma in the state, (in education for example) so governmental acceptance could lead to the purveying of false or inadequate Dharma in schools and the undermining of the true Way. The critical Bodhisattva will have to stand up and oppose such developments with all the skills that persuasive argument can deploy. If this means unfavourable assessments of some Buddhist institutions so be it. The name 'Buddhist' does not imply anything sacrosanct, indeed sadly, at present, sometimes the reverse.

At another level, close attention needs to be paid to developing a mutual accountability between teachers and taught. Our own constitution is an attempt along this path and we must watch carefully to see how it works out. Authority needs to be appropriately employed. Thus the interlinking of the authority of the teacher to provide Dharma and the authority of an

Executive Committee and Advisory Board in examining the means need developing as twin poles of a safety-conscious structure. It is exactly in this constitutional area that so many Western Buddhist institutions are currently severely incompetent. An institutional Vinaya needs to be debated and put into practice (see discussions with the Dalai Lama, page 10 and the article on pages 31-41).

We cannot ignore the world. Samsara and Nirvana are twin perspectives on one whole. What goes on in the world requires confrontation - even as the Buddha, a skilled politician, had to confront it. Yet it needs a quality of ego-disengagement if one is not merely to contribute to destructive debate. And here practice becomes all-important. It is essential to examine one's own life in the light of the Eight-Fold Way with great care. In particular, to know that only through concentration and meditation is underlying falsity disclosed and the Way made plain. To construct institutions without a personal humility, to advocate practices that are nonsensical given the state of Western scientific and psychological knowledge, and to engage in vicious and aggressive defence of held-onto positions is to undermine the whole project. Ultimately, true teachers have an option to retire to the hills and await those who seek truth to come to them. In such an option may lie the salvation of the Way. We have not come to that yet. Watch out !!

John Crook

Ch'uang Teng Chien Ti

SHAPING THE FUTURE?

Western Buddhist Teachers Meet the Dalai Lama

Dharamsala, India. March 23-22, 1993

Stephen Batchelor

Before our formal sessions with the Dalai Lama began, we gathered for a preliminary meeting. "I'd like to suggest an exercise," announced Jack Kornfield, "Close your eyes and imagine the kind of Buddhism you foresee in 20 or 30 years time. The practices, the centres and the world itself ... What role does the Dharma have in such a world?"

After fifteen minutes we opened our eyes and returned to the brash furnishings of the Surya Resorts Hotel in McLeod Ganj, the former British hill station above the town of Dharamsala where the Dalai Lama has been living in exile since 1960. The rain was still streaming down the windows while we took it in turns to present our visions. For the Americans, the Buddhist future unfolded as a kind of hi-tech Walden Pond peopled by Dharma-intoxicated Bodhisattvas. The disquieting features of contemporary institutions - sectarianism, scandal and all the things we were here to talk about - had conveniently evaporated. The Europeans were more cautious. "In our cities we are dominated by a thousand years of history," pleaded Sylvia Wetzel from Berlin. A history set in stone; and if history teaches only one lesson, it is this: no one ever guesses the future.

Two decades previously, almost to the day, I had arrived in this same Himalayan village to embark on a course of study, monastic discipline and meditation. Older, balder, disrobed and married, my enthusiasm well-tempered by the cynicism of experience, I had now returned along those same dizzying hairpinned roads for the first time in 18 years, filled with a mixture of nostalgia and trepidation. The rhododendrons, the snow-speckled rock wall of the Dhaoladhar range, the pine forests, the sheets of rain and mist, the tattered prayerflags - none of this had changed. But the village had become more packed, its puzzle of buildings scrambling ever further up, down and along the hillside, its smells more pungent and its roofs had spawned satellite dishes.

At the instigation of a burly, bearded American lama called Surya Das, 22 of us were gathered here for nine days of discussions, four of which would be with the Dalai Lama. We represented most of the Buddhist traditions: Theravada, Zen, the Tibetan schools. We had all been involved full-time with the Dharma as students, teachers and writers for most of our adult lives. Some of us bore titles and robes, some had founded centres, some had explored more than one tradition, some had spent years in retreat, some had authored well-known books. Within the course of our first session together it became clear that a common experience united us far more than our different traditions divided us.

The first couple of days were spent preparing for our eight two-hour sessions with the Dalai Lama. Our task was to define the themes for each session and select people to summarise our perceptions to His Holiness. The ensuing debate generated myriad hand-scribbled sheets of paper taped to every available beam and pillar in the room. Out of this chaos emerged the issues of primary concern: adaptation of the teachings, tradition versus culture, sectarianism, the role of the teacher, the use of psychotherapy, sexism, monasticism. And the monster that kept rearing its head: teacher ethics - alcohol abuse, "sex in the forbidden zone."

We wait, sunken in capacious armchairs, in a tall, chilly room decorated with thangkas of the 16 liberated saints of the early Buddhist tradition, listening to the squeak of shoes of a solitary attendant on the polished wooden corridor outside. Then a rumble of invisible voices and footsteps, the attendant urging us to stand, our own fumbling and coughing, while, at the head of a coterie of officials, a slightly stooped monk in burgundy robes and tinted glasses, grinning hugely, bursts into view. As with many who have ascended to the god-realm of media celebrity, the Dalai Lama seems oddly diminished in the proximity of the flesh. He takes his seat and looks around. With polite prompting he closes his eyes, sways from side to side, and grumbles a prayer.

The discussions proceed hesitantly and uncertainly at first. Through probing the boundaries of real and imagined protocol, we gently relax into the confidence of familiarity. The man emanates an almost restless energy, switching effortlessly from intense inner reflection to bubbling laughter. His smile floods you with a gaze of such warmth and openness that it is hard not to avert your eyes. When excited the pitch of his voice rises to the verge of a shriek, the staccato firing of English syllables breaks into a torrent of Tibetan, his hands chop the air with conviction. Then he pauses - silence - laughs, grins and beams at his interlocutor: "Yes? All right. Next?"

The Dalai Lama is simultaneously a pre-eminent upholder of the historical Dharma and one of the foremost interpreters of its meaning. He is at once highly conservative in matters of ethical orthodoxy while radically liberal in terms of doctrinal interpretation. Not only does he brush aside as trivial the adoption of Asian names, the wearing of Eastern dress and the attachment to Oriental rituals, he dismisses traditional cosmology as invalidated by science, and questions the need for belief in rebirth (while stating that ultimately meditation will lead to conviction about it). But as soon as the ethical precepts and monastic ordination as detailed in the Vinaya, the Buddha's teaching on monastic and lay moral conduct, are challenged, one hits a brick wall.

Which is what happened to Dharmachari Kulananda when he presented the reformed model of Buddhism found in the British-based Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). The Dalai Lama nodded approvingly. "I love it." he interjected as the activities of the Order were described, only to become stern and withdrawn as Kulananda outlined a form of ordination that was neither monk nor lay, based on commitment to the Three Jewels rather than a lifestyle governed by certain precepts. Yet his difficulty with the FWBO's approach should, in principle, be the same as he would have with any of the Japanese Buddhist schools, which have likewise relinquished adherence to the traditional Vinaya: although he might feel that Zen Buddhism, for instance, is too well-established to ignore. His sympathies clearly lay with the Theravada monks present, whose truly ancient and traditional opinion on such matters he invariably sought.

He confessed that after 34 years in exile, his relations with Christians were far better than those with either Theravada or Zen Buddhists. He had met with little success in his urging of Tibetan lamas to study the other schools of Tibetan Buddhism - let alone Theravada or Zen. Yet he encouraged exploration of other traditions and the acceptance of whatever was of value in them, provided it did not entail belief in a Creator God or a soul - views incompatible with an understanding of emptiness. While expressing his own preference for Buddhism, he warned against using Buddhist ideas to disparage other religions. Again this tension: openness combined with reserve.

The complexity of his position is further compounded by his twin role as preserver of Tibetan culture in exile and visionary for an independent, democratic Tibet of the future. In respecting the conflicting demands of the conservative old-guard and the young Indian-educated radicals, not to mention those Tibetans born in a Chinese Communist-controlled homeland, he has to address very different constituencies and somehow represent them all. His success in sustaining this balancing act for more than 30 years has helped forge a strikingly independent personality, at the root of whose actions lies a transparent faith in and practice of the Dharma. Having as a young man been abruptly propelled from a medieval to a modern world while carrying on his shoulders responsibility for millions of men and women, he has had to put this faith to test in the treacherous arena of international politics. Herein, I suspect, lies the key to his undeniable authority.

Yet when he responds to our presentations he insists that he is only giving his own point of view which he does not want people to follow simply because "the Dalai Lama has said it." Often it is not so much what he says that impresses, but the integrity of the standpoint from which he says it. His authority is not so much commanding, although one is aware of a strong temptation to take it that way, as it is confirming. In acknowledging his own thinking to be based on the Geluk tradition of Tsongkhapa while clarified by insights from other Tibetan

traditions, he tacitly confirms our own appreciation of the entire Buddhist spectrum available in the West. "I always remember the Buddha-nature," he remarks at one point. "It gives me great hope." He likewise affirms the Bodhisattva's powerful self-confidence. For without such a will to enlightenment, one lacks the strength to confront the negative ego. "Selflessness," he insists, "does not mean something weak."

Between these sessions in the palace, rain and hail permitting, we leave the cluttered, muddy village of McLeod Ganj below us and walk in the hills. Around Tushita Retreat Centre I frequently meet the fresh, eager faces of another generation of Dharma students, propelled along the mountain paths by a tireless resolve for more teachings. As I sit on a rock to catch my breath, they whizz by enrapt in earnest discussion. There is something reassuringly recurrent about these flashes of the past. For, in coming to India, many of us have returned to the very source of the meandering that has led to our being here now. And it is this very meandering that unites us; this ever more subdued questioning that renders these poignantly ambivalent conversations with the Dalai Lama significant.

Ostensibly, we have returned not as students but as teachers, our relationship with tradition switched from that of recipient to donor. We are aware, nonetheless, that to be a good teacher requires that one never ceases to learn. Some of us took enthusiastically to the teaching role, some were pushed into it reluctantly, some gradually evolved towards it, one refuses to accept that she is a teacher at all. Yet a teacher, by definition, is anyone who has students. And it is the student, the Dalai Lama declares, who ultimately invests the teacher with authority by placing him or her in that role. By acknowledging that a teacher does not exist as such in his own right, one empowers the student.

Why, then, in a relationship of mutual dependence, have certain teachers (of both Eastern and Western origin) in America and Europe over the past few years become embroiled in scandals? Why have they been able to exploit and abuse their students with such ease? This was an issue about which the Dalai Lama was deeply concerned. He had received letters from people who were confused and disillusioned about the behaviour of their Buddhist teachers. He wanted to know what was going on.

There are many factors involved here. The student, he noted, often fails to examine sufficiently a person's ethical and spiritual qualities before accepting him (it's usually 'him', there are as yet not so many 'hers') as a teacher. Yet the Tibetan traditions state clearly that one should devote up to 12 years of close scrutiny before taking such a step - in particular with a tantric teacher. The Dalai Lama declared bluntly that one should "spy" on one's potential teacher to perceive his merits. He compared the promotional methods of contemporary, jet-setting lamas flying around the world freely bestowing initiations to that of Chinese Communist propagandists. (Except, he chuckles, when the Dalai Lama gives the Kalachakra empowerment.)

The fault can also lie with the teacher. The Dalai Lama observed: "Many of my friends I knew here were very humble, but in the West they became proud." A simple monk catapulted from an impoverished settlement in India to a city in Europe or America to be revered and showered with wealth would understandably be prone to let such treatment go to his head. "Alcohol," His Holiness commented, "is often at the root of these problems." Of course: a tempting strategy for someone uprooted from his home-culture and thrust into a bewildering and demanding world for which he lacks the necessary social and emotional skills to cope.

This would be all very well except for the fact that most of these Asian teachers (and their Western successors) were supposed to be enlightened. But what does 'enlightenment' mean if those who have it are still subject to those less than edifying forms of behaviour from whose grip we poor unenlightened souls are struggling to be free? At the very least, one would hope, enlightenment would imply a degree of contentment. But if someone were contented, why would they succumb to the conceit of self-importance? Why would they become dependent upon alcohol? Why would they indulge in a series of transient sexual encounters and financial irregularities? Even unenlightened contented people have no need for these things.

If a teacher's actions are unethical, responded the Dalai Lama, then, even if they have practised for many years, their practice has been wrong-footed. Quite simply, they lack a proper understanding of the Dharma. There is a "gap" between the Dharma and their lives. He challenged the idea that once one has insight into the ultimate truth of emptiness, then one is no longer bound by the norms of morality. On the contrary: through revealing the web of relationships that ethically connects all living beings, the understanding of emptiness does not transcend morality but grounds it in experience.

In both the Vajrayana and Zen traditions, however, one finds historical instances of enlightened teachers, whose actions have been both unconventional and, by normal standards, unethical. It is argued that since such actions were motivated by profound compassion, precisely suited to the spiritual needs of the student, they are to be regarded as eminently appropriate. As a Vajrayana master himself, this is not a possibility the Dalai Lama could ever rule out when judging the conduct of a Tibetan lama today. For he belongs to a tradition that, in order to create the kind of faith needed for Vajrayana practices to be effective, states that any unethical traits observed in one's tantric guru must be interpreted either as projections of one's own impure vision or the incomprehensible activities of Buddhahood.

As an example of how he himself has dealt with this dilemma, he spoke of his own relationship with one of his teachers. We presumed this was his first tutor and regent Reting Rinpoche, a sexually promiscuous Gelugpa monk who, in 1947, plotted to launch a Chinese-backed coup to regain the regency. In the privacy of his meditation, the Dalai Lama continued to regard his tutor as a Buddha, while in public he condemned his actions. Likewise, he admitted, "Mao Tse-tung may have been a Bodhisattva, but I had to criticise him because he destroyed our religion and independence."

What is at stake here is the standing and repute of Buddhism itself, which, for the Dalai Lama, serves not least as a crucial component for our times in creating peace in the world. Even if one has received great personal benefit from a teacher - even if one has taken tantric vows of discipleship with him, the integrity of the Buddhist tradition must take precedence over guarding that teacher's reputation when he is justly accused of ethical misconduct. When there is incontrovertible evidence of wrong-doing, then it is one's responsibility to take action. "Make voice!" he insisted. "Give warning! We no longer tolerate!" The Dalai Lama encouraged us repeatedly to criticise such behaviour openly, even, when all else fails to "name names in newspapers." As his own example showed, this does not mean that one has to abandon one's spiritual relationship with that teacher. Such actions are of course, hardly likely to endear one to him. So what to do? The Dalai Lama had a simple answer: "Pack your bags. A teacher can kick out your body, but he cannot kick out your mind."

Although such measures may be appropriate as a practical solution, they still fail to address certain underlying ethical questions. As long as one admits of the possibility that a Vajrayana teacher behaving 'unethically' may be an enlightened tantric saint, one acknowledges a double standard: actions that are immoral for an unenlightened person can be moral for an enlightened person. And if one can never be sure whether a person is or is not such a saint, then there will always be a loophole, an escape clause, that can never be definitively closed.

At the root of this, do we not encounter a clash between the ethical norms of a feudal society, with its *droit du seigneur* (the right of a lord to deflower a vassal's bride), and those of a secular democracy in which all are equal in the eyes of the law? To what extent are Tibetan lamas and Japanese roshis still living within the context of a feudal morality? Should one be surprised that they expect privileges which their upbringing and society deem to be theirs by right? Are we not simply the victims of our own naivety in assuming that the norms of modern Western society are somehow intrinsically 'right' and must apply equally to pre-modern Buddhist cultures?

These profoundly difficult questions of cultural and ethical relativity were those which, from the point of view of our needs, we were least able to address satisfactorily with the Dalai Lama. While he stressed that the life of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, should serve as the ideal ethical model for Buddhists, he acknowledged that tantric yogins should be judged

by Vajrayana standards. While unfamiliar with Trungpa Rinpoche's concept of crazy wisdom¹ ("weird," he commented to our surprise), he pointed out that a genuine tantrika should be as eager to ingest urine and excrement as alcohol. "So what your Holiness is suggesting," called out the irrepressible Robert Thurman, "is some kind of taste test." Exactly how this would be administered was not discussed. A more delicate proof of tantrika status, His Holiness added, would be the absence of seminal emission during sexual intercourse. When asked how many Tibetan lamas today fulfilled such criteria, he confessed that while he personally knew none, there were monks in the caves above Dharamsala whose practice was such that his own, in comparison, dwindled to insignificance.



The Dalai Lama was prepared to agree with the Indian scholar Lal Mani Joshi that one of the reasons for the decline of Buddhism in India may have been the popularisation of tantra. Could this not be why the Vajrayana tradition itself declares the importance of keeping its practices strictly confidential? But when, as in Tibet, tantric teachings serve not only as the underpinning of a popular religion but have been institutionalised into a socio-political structure, can the genie ever be put back into the bottle? The Dalai Lama certainly recognises the dangers to the future of Buddhism through the behaviour of lamas who believe their actions to be justified by Vajrayana ethics. So could it not serve in the interests of the tantric tradition in the West that it be challenged precisely in order for it to assume its rightful position underground?

In response to accounts of the ethical misconduct of Zen teachers in the West, His Holiness expressed concern about the nature of the Zen experience of satori. On occasion, he suggested, it is confused with either a deep state of concentration (samadhi) or simply a state of nonconceptuality, neither of which in themselves imply transformative understanding. Moreover, by focusing so intently on a single practice, as often appears to be the case in Zen, one lacks adequate tools to deal with the whole range of spiritual dilemmas. "Because mind is so complex and powerful, one single practice cannot match that." (A point he returned to in

his discussion of psychotherapy.) Alternatively, the emphasis in Zen of high-levels of enlightenment experience might well entail the danger of leaving lower-levels of common, neurotic behaviour untouched. He likewise wondered about Chinese Buddhists he had met who talked of experiencing emptiness but who seemed to lack human warmth. This indicated to him either a meditative lapse into sheer non-conceptuality or mental “sinking” (a subtle form of dullness) “Therefore,” he concluded, “I prefer the gradual path. A big question-mark over Zen understanding of shunya (emptiness).”

Bodhin Kjolhede Sensei from Rochester spoke for many Zen teachers in the West by acknowledging that while these objections may be very true in certain cases, as a broader picture they present an oversimplification of the actual complexity of the Zen tradition. They might also detect an apparent double-standard and bias; for whereas a Tibetan lama who abuses his students might be a tantric saint, a Zen Master who does the same is more likely to suffer from a deficient practice. The Dalai Lama’s views on traditions other than his own were understandably less well informed than those on the Tibetan schools.

Face to face in conversation with the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet one speaks with a person who is a living myth. Does this explain that strange polarity one feels between the shocking practicality of his remarks and the longing to sustain one’s own internalised mythology of the man?

Indeed, much of what one observes supports the myth: the boundless energy, the radiant warmth, the razor-sharp intellect. But often I have witnessed him address gatherings of his own people in his own language where the myth has obliterated the man. I have heard him berate crowds of Tibetans in no uncertain terms, criticise their attachment to traditional ways and their failure to adapt. In response, they worship him tearfully, seek refuge in his Holy Presence, chat with one another, play with their children, nibble at their picnics - but ignore what he says. Is there not a tendency for us also, in our own peculiar ways, to reduce his voice to that of one crying out in a wilderness? To honour what he says but fail to realise its implications - let alone put them into practice? Listening to the Dalai Lama is to discover that “Buddha-nature” might be just a fancy word for common sense.

When asked what in Buddhism can really transform a person, he replies simply: recognition of the four noble truths, discernment between what is relative and ultimate, an altruistic attitude, insight into codependent-emergence, adherence to the five precepts, honouring the Buddha, kindness. “Most effective is thinking about the suffering nature, recognising how we remain a slave of ignorance. Our real master is ignorance, not the lama or guru. ... Ignorance is very clever and seems very kind. ... Less hatred, less desire in the mind is the mark of nirvana.” A Buddhist approach to life should be one “based on reality”, on uncovering facts through investigation. “If an instruction contradicts the Dharma, then reject it.” And: “it is not our responsibility to increase the number of Buddhists but to make a better and happier world.”

I doubt that I would be alone in confessing that the primary value of the meeting lay in the opportunity to spend a total of 16 hours in the presence of this man together with only a few other people. Although, at first naively, I may have expected that he would provide solutions to all the problematic issues on the agenda, in fact he offered a model of Buddhist integrity by which to reflect on and question my own integrity. In responding to issues he repeatedly emphasised basic Buddhist doctrines rather than suggest radically original solutions. When asked to visualise systematically a Buddhism in which all the great teachers including the Buddha and Her Holiness the Dalai Lama - were women, he smiled in acknowledgement of the validity of the exercise, but had no great insights to offer on the subject of sexism or feminism. While promising to do what he could to rectify current injustices, such as the lack of support for Western monks and nuns, he could offer little apart from raising the issue at high-level Asian Buddhist congresses. The meeting was as much an exchange of perspectives as a frank and open discussion. Again and again, he threw the ball back into our court.

It would be a travesty of what the Dalai Lama stood for to treat some of his remarks as divinely ordained commands from a Buddhist pope. I am no longer convinced, for example, that much good would be achieved by naming names of miscreant Roshis and Lamas in

periodicals. For this could too easily degenerate into a self-righteous witchhunt. Far more effective, I believe, would be to try and create in the West a Buddhism rooted in its own blindingly evident principles. As a possible step in this direction we formed the 'Network for Western Buddhist Teachers' as an on-going and expanding forum to continue such discussions and thus create a new and dynamic ethical consensus.

Our days together, someone remarked, "had a bone-deep sense of rightness" about them. The meeting with the Dalai Lama was compared to an empowerment, an initiation in the true sense of the word. Above all it served as a confirmation of something we had intuitively known to be true all along but had found neither the courage nor the words to express. The connections we formed with one another disclosed a whole new dimension of the term 'sangha' - spiritual community. "Past is past," said the Dalai Lama on the last day. "What is important? The future. We are the creators. The future is in our hands. Even if we fail, no regrets - we have to make the effort."

LEADERSHIP TRAINING IN THE WESTERN CH'AN FELLOWSHIP

John Crook

This article begins the process of establishing appropriate training for those wishing to teach meditation and run groups or retreats under the auspices of the Western Ch'an Fellowship. This text deals with preliminary orientations and the task of teaching meditation in local groups. Other articles will follow. We are publishing it here so that group participants and beginners know what is expected of their local teachers and the training they are required to undergo .

Part 1 The Meditation Group

Introduction

The Western Ch'an Fellowship provides training in the practice of Ch'an/Zen. What is Ch'an all about? Most of us live lives that are to varying degrees unsatisfactory. It may be that we suffer considerably from personal disabilities, problematic relationships, troublesome family or social situations or from anxieties that our own minds generate. It may be no more than a vague feeling of unsatisfactoriness; that there ought to be more to life than the humdrum mundane existence some of us feel we endure from day to day. Maybe we feel ourselves victims of our life circumstances and feel resentful. Maybe we have not been able to achieve what we expected, or done something we regret, and then experience guilt or shame because of that. All of this the Buddha termed suffering (*dukkha*). The purpose of training in Ch'an is to lift the burden of such suffering through the discovery of a fresh way of being.

The method is based on the original formulation of mindfulness by the Buddha. Mindfulness means being aware of what is going on inside one's mind and also the influences that impinge upon it. Mindfulness requires paying attention to what is actually happening, not only through intellectual examination but through direct experience. In Ch'an/Zen this approach is especially emphasised and the training is focussed initially in 'sitting' (*zazen*). The mind is calmed and then inspected as to its activity. There are a number of methods. These are, however, not ends but means to cultivating a dynamic attitude of attentive appraisal in all aspects of life. In the end the everyday life is Zen.

It must be understood that a brief experience of 'enlightenment' does not remove all traces of suffering from our lives. Various difficulties remain and need continuing attention. Yet the determined treading of the Buddha's way leads to new realisations about oneself and the Universe in which we dwell and to new experiments in being. It is not the case that we have to create an extraordinary mind; rather we have to drop illusions that maintain unrealisable desire and in that letting-go we find out what an everyday mind free from such illusion can become. There is a task of clarification here and, as we progress, we may find we wish to help others on their way. The essential feature of Ch'an/Zen is enquiry.

Local groups usually form around those enthusiastic enough to offer time and space to set up sitting sessions. Soon a leader will be asked to offer instruction in sitting meditation and perhaps some teaching on Buddhism. It is important that he/she should be able to respond with some authoritative teaching that will be helpful rather than inventing some plausible story out of their own limited experience. Within the Western Ch'an Fellowship a number of local groups are now developing centred on the longer retreats at the Maenllwyd. It is essential that these local groups cover the same or similar ground in providing practice and training.

Likewise, the offering of Western Zen Retreats (WZR) and Ch'an Retreats requires facilitation by someone who knows what he/she is doing. In both these forms of practice participants may come across memories or states of mind that are vexatious or distressing. This is inevitable when a key motif in such retreats is a confrontational examination of self. Help may be needed and the facilitator who leads such groups needs experience to handle these occasions. At present only one qualified teacher leads such events within the WCF. To allow the fellowship to develop, training of new leaders in all these ways of exploration is

becoming important. This article begins the examination of what is needed for the facilitation of local groups by Meditation Instructors acting as group leaders. Part 2 (not provided here) will discuss training for retreat facilitation .

Local groups

Someone offers time and place for others to gather together and 'sit'. Initially that may be all and a group of friends may be quite happy with their own practice. One day a newcomer arrives and says he or she wants to learn. The initiator now has the responsibility of explaining to the beginner how to start. The WCF needs to have a policy that ensures that the guidance offered in such circumstances is reliable, conforms to a lineage and is not merely idiosyncratic. We are suggesting, therefore, that local leaders should attend a number of events exploring this question, during which they will learn how to meet the demands that may be made upon them. In particular they will need to know how to present what they know effectively and how to resist speculating about aspects of the path they may not have experienced or only read about. When a leader has shown suitable understanding, he or she may receive authorisation to teach meditation within the WCF. The following paragraphs list issues that need to be addressed in any syllabus for such training.

1 Find out where the questioner is coming from

Let us suppose that Mary appears at a session for the first time. Why has she come? How has she heard about the group? What does she want? What does she know already about Zen? Has she attended such a group or a retreat before? All these questions need to be explored in an introductory 'interview' which is best conducted privately in an atmosphere of confidentiality. The very asking of such questions requires that the leader show him/herself to be an open, friendly person who is quite happy if Mary remains reticent and does not wish to be very forthcoming about herself. After all she may, quite reasonably, only wish to dip her toe into Zen at the moment. The merely curious should be encouraged to sit and find out through experience what the group is 'on about'. Those who have come out of some painful experience may need time to disclose their pain. Time must be allowed. People should never be pushed into disclosure nor should exaggerated enthusiasm for Zen allow a leader to suggest that phenomenal results may be obtained by sitting. That may by no means be so. Cautious and kindly sharing is the best way to allow Mary to disclose, in her own way, whatever it is she wishes to explore.

2 The enquiring mind

Mary may not know why she is there. Whether she does or not, the first step must be the cultivation of mindfulness. Mindfulness is simply knowing where you are, what you are on about, what you want, need or fear. Later on it concerns the states the mind may be experiencing and recognising what these may be. A practitioner, whether experienced or a beginner, needs to know what she is doing at the very moment of asking herself the question. Pretences, avoidances, self-delusions need to be recognised and, whether the experience is pleasant or unpleasant, it is essential to say "This is what is going on now: this is my experience now." Whatever that experience may be has to be accepted as what it is. If she rejects her experience then she must learn to say "Right now I am rejecting my experience, that is my experience now." From such a place one can begin.

Mary needs to understand this before she begins to sit. Sitting is above all a form of enquiry. It is never a descent into a sort of trance - if that is what is happening the practice is incorrect. From the first the beginner needs to understand this point and the leader must represent it to her.

3 Calming the mind

The essence of sitting is to begin at the right place. If the mind is agitated, preoccupied with an issue, or grinding an axe in some form of self promotion, then the first thing is to challenge that very preoccupation. This is done by calming the mind, for which the time-honoured methods of samatha are useful. For beginners, many sessions will be taken up in establishing a relatively calmed mind. In weekly groups most people will be coming in from busy days and cannot expect to do much more than that in two half-hour sessions. None the less this is valuable. This process needs to be presented with accuracy and care.



4 Investigation

The group leader will have some knowledge of *tsan* (investigation) from retreat experience. It arises when a calmed mind gazes directly into its own condition. Shi fu's discussion of this in connection with Silent Illumination is important here (NCF 15). Some beginners may be able to begin this inner research and the leader needs to know how to advise them and how to use a koan-like question to assist in understanding. The leader needs to know when it would be advisable for the sitter to attend a longer retreat with an accredited teacher.

5 The use of ritual

The leader should provide simple texts for use in a short ritual with the stated function of motivating the practice and inspiring the endeavour. Ritual helps to provide the sense of a sacred space and time in which a particular activity is being undertaken. Respect for the sacred space in which the sitting session is being carried out needs to be expressed in bowing or prostration as taught appropriately.

Although Ch'an practice itself is relatively culture-free and we are engaged in establishing it in contemporary Britain, the attitudes to be cultivated had their origin in Indo-Tibetan and Sino-Japanese environments and this should be acknowledged and understood. Ritual establishes some contact with the historical and cultural context of Ch'an /Zen. The leader needs to make clear, however, that such ritual is to facilitate the practice and to create the thought as to how it may be maintained in everyday life. Ritual is a means, not the expression of some end.

6 The leadership of local groups

The task of a local group leader is to:

- Provide a relaxed setting for learning and practising Ch'an meditation, ensuring that the facilities are appropriate. Avoid overcrowding and accept that a very small group of two or three people is quite acceptable.
- Welcome participants in a friendly, open manner and attend to their needs during the event. Remember that newcomers may be shy, unsure of themselves and probably full of misunderstandings.
- Indicate the appropriate attitude to adopt, namely a light but serious mindfulness, awareness of others and a silencing of the over-active chatty mind. There should be respect for the place, the occasion and the needs of others for inwardness. The atmosphere should be cheerfully contemplative.
- Provide instruction in sitting (*zazen*) for those who request it, while allowing those who already sit to 'do their own thing'. An enquiry as to the acceptability of an individual's practice within a Ch'an event is none-the-less important and everyone should disclose what they are doing on the cushion. For example, petitionary prayer is not a Ch'an activity.
- Always remember to offer the Dharma. Do not act as a salesman advocating Ch'an in a persuasive manner. The offering should be low key, allowing practitioners to come forward for instruction or discussion in their own time.

- Do not get disappointed if people come and go.
- Do not talk about aspects of the Dharma or meditative practice that you do not understand, nor discuss states of mind you have not realised or had confirmed.
- Do not encourage or allow gossip about spiritual matters, institutions or gurus. Insist that the evening is intended for practice with a short period of teaching, reading, or discussion.
- Always remember that you are representing the Western Ch'an Fellowship and the lineage of that fellowship. This means you should never mix your evening with other activities however competent you may be in them. Leaders may well be skilled in areas such as Counselling, Psychotherapy, Tai-chi or Yoga and these are fine things to do elsewhere. Do not mix these activities with Ch'an, in some way grinding your own axe and creating some bastard activity of your own invention. If you do this, your certificate as a WCF Meditation Instructor will be withdrawn.
- Keep in touch with the WCF teacher and ask for consultation whenever in doubt about your training, your presentation of Dharma or the problems of your group participants. Attend retreats offered by the WCF to sustain your own training.
- Remember that, as a leader in a spiritual endeavour, you may attract some dependent characters who may wish to rely excessively upon you and who will attribute charisma to you until perhaps you need to confront them. Such a person can then turn quite nasty, falling back into their own paranoia. Be very careful not to allow dependencies to develop; while being empathetic and kind, hand back the problems of others for them to solve. Do not let other people's problems become yours.
- Avoid establishing a relationship, especially a sexual one, with a group member. This will compromise your role as a group leader.
- Be aware of counter-transference in situations where you may be consulted by a participant about emotional problems. You should know when these should be referred to an appropriately trained counsellor or therapist. Maintain an attitude of humility towards your own abilities.
- Unless you are yourself trained in *dokusan* (ie Zen interviews) as a counsellor or as a psychotherapist, do not provide individual interviews. Group discussion, allowing the group to frame its own interests and conclusions, is usually helpful and you should provide facilitation and guidance where Dharma understanding is weak. Avoid argumentative intellectual debates which create competitiveness within a group.

7 Teaching meditation

When you start a group make sure everyone is appropriately motivated, respectful of the occasion and of the 'sacred space' and knows how to 'sit'.

Provide the texts for a simple liturgy and encourage others beside yourself to bring short readings to share and discuss.

You must know how to provide instruction concerning :

- i) The posture and the permissible variants.
- ii) How to focus the attention and hold awareness steady.
- iii) The deviations from effective meditation through fatigue, drowsiness, sinking of energy and wandering thoughts.
- iv) Use of breathing and exercise to reduce sleepiness and sinking.
- v) Watching the breath, counting the breath etc as a means for reducing wandering thoughts.
- vi) Kinhin practice and exercises for use before or between sits.
- vii) Take care not to be drawn into intellectual discussions where your understanding may be defective or misleading. In discussion, keep the focus on practice, emphasising discovery through experience rather than through reading.
- viii) Emphasise the key point in Western Ch'an teaching - that it is the expression of Ch'an in everyday attitudes that is crucial and, in the end, more important than 'correct' sitting. When

Ch'an is well-expressed off the cushion and without dependency on either group or individual retreats then a practitioner is certainly getting somewhere. Furthermore he/she will then be providing unspoken teaching for others.

8 The Event

You may construct your event according to your own genius and insight concerning your particular group. It is better to stay simple than to become too complex with respect to ritual, teaching or meditation instructions.

The Bristol Ch'an Group evenings usually begin with a short ritual (copies available and based on Maenllwyd practice) partly in English but including some Chinese chanting. There are then two half-hour sits with kinhin between. After a short closing ritual the leader will present either a short talk (if qualified to do so) or give a reading from a well-known author or from the sutras or Ch'an scriptures. This may be followed by discussion, which the leader should guide without being dogmatically assertive. People have to find their own way to the central ideas of Buddhism and this usually only occurs effectively when based on a developing meditative experience.

Variants on this theme can be constructed to provide a custom-built approach suited to the participants who join you. When your group is well-established, has accumulated some effective practice and has reached around a dozen members you may want to provide occasional weekend or residential retreats. Initially these can follow the pattern already established. Retreats will however make greater demands on your own understanding and the WCF will expect you to attend further training sessions in the setting up and running of retreats. Discussion documents on this will be prepared as Part 2 of this paper.

INTOXICATION AND THE PRECEPTS

Ned Reiter

At the culmination of retreats lead by Shi-Fu the opportunity is usually given to participants to take the Precepts. Retreatants are told that they may take all the precepts, or they may choose to take only some. I think without exception participants unhesitatingly recite their intention to keep all the Precepts until the recitation reaches the Precept that states the intention to “refrain from the use of intoxicants”; there is always a noticeable drop in the volume of voices at this juncture as a sizeable proportion of the congregation become mute. What exactly is happening here, and, more importantly, what is the meaning of this particular Precept?

At first glance, the matter seems pretty clear. In our society, the non-excessive use of intoxicants, particularly alcohol (although increasingly also ‘soft’ drugs such as marijuana) is regarded as quite acceptable. Compared to the admonitions against killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct and the harming of the Dharma, a little tittle now and again seems pretty innocuous. Many practitioners reason that a glass of wine with their meal, or a beer or two with the odd pub lunch, is hardly likely to cause any major harm.

Surely the Precept is concerned only with excessive use leading to severe clouding of consciousness, the loss of inhibitions and thus potentially the conditions that might lead to the breaking of the more ‘serious’ Precepts. It could be countered that there can be no gradation of a Precept. If the same principle were applied to the other Precepts, then we might say that killing a ‘lesser’ sentient being (e.g. a fly), stealing an ashtray from a pub, lying about our age, or indulging in a little light hearted flirting are all right. But this seems a rather pedantic interpretation, and the Precepts, as is the case generally with Buddhadharmas, are essentially a practical tool rather than a set of rigid dogmatic laws.

A more fruitful line of enquiry arises if we stop to consider exactly what is meant by the term ‘intoxicant’. We assume the word alludes to alcohol and other substances/drugs, but is this all that is referred to? I do not know how the original Pali/Sanskrit/Chinese terms are defined, but in English ‘intoxicate’ comes from the Latin term meaning ‘to poison’. An intoxicant may elate, inebriate, overwhelm, stimulate or confuse. Anything in our lives that may cause such unbalanced states of mind could be termed thus.

Immediately it becomes apparent that ‘intoxicant’ need not refer only to substances that we physically ingest. If we look at the modern Western world, we can see a great many situations, commodities and social structures that fulfil the definition. Television soap-operas, obsessive shopping, fanatical support of a football team, sexual titillation, addiction to constant news updates, the National Lottery, the incredible and quite irrational level of choice in consumer goods (I once counted over thirty kinds of toothpaste in a large pharmacy), all these might act as intoxicants to the unguarded mind. It is not difficult to think up a great many similar examples.

Bearing this in mind, the Precept against indulging in intoxicants takes on new meaning. It is not primarily a proscription against any particular substances; rather it is a warning against indulgence in harmful, addictive and mind-clouding activities, whatever their nature. In taking this Precept, we are undertaking to root out whatever activities and habits exist in our own individual lives that cause the clouding of consciousness and thus the obstruction of Buddha-nature. To avoid taking this Precept in the mistaken belief that the occasional alcoholic beverage disbars one is to deny oneself an invaluable aid on the pathless Path.

SAI BABA - IS HE REALLY THE 'MAN OF MIRACLES'?

Susan Blackmore

We welcome this critical examination of the teaching behaviour of a well-known Indian guru. It is important to note that there are many ways of understanding such a teacher. One is to visit the ashram and become familiar with the setting, the clientele and the methods of the teacher. This might be called a social anthropological approach and requires an empathetic understanding of the kind Carol Evans showed during her travels in India. Another method involves asking how the effects produced during teaching might have been presented and, where these appear supernatural, what basis for them may actually exist. Here parapsychologist Sue Blackmore brings her expertise to bear on claims made by the Guru.

There is however, yet another consideration. The behaviour of gurus is often a function of a culture where belief systems very different from those of the scientific West may be in operation. This makes judgements of the ethics of their actions relative. In the case of Sai Baba, we know he contributes to a lot of charitable work in India. Even if, in our eyes, some of his methods may be questionable, the way in which ordinary Indians may view this remains an open question (see also page 8).

The sleight of hand artist David Abram, who successfully demonstrates 'magic' under the very noses of critical psychologists, has pointed out that what appear to be magical feats teach us something about the limits of our perception. Indeed, a demonstration of the limits of seeing must make us wonder how far our normal vision is not also limited. We live in a virtual reality and 'magic' makes us wonder at the strangeness of the world. Eds

In the Spring 1998 issue of New Ch'an Forum Carol Evans wrote a most interesting account of her meeting with the Indian holy man, Sai Baba. She described the devotion of his many followers and her own reservations about their dependency on him. She also described some apparent miracles he performed in her presence, including the materialisation of *vibhuti* - or sacred ash, of sweets from his bare palms, and of a small locket on a silver chain. Carol Evans said that no concealment was possible and concluded that Sai Baba "transcends the known laws of matter". She expressed doubts about the genuineness of his compassion but added, jokingly, that he does not own a single Rolls Royce. I got the impression that, like many other people, Carol was prepared, in spite of her misgivings, to believe that Sai Baba is a genuine guru with spiritual gifts.

Readers may therefore like to know a little more about Sai Baba. He was born in 1926 of theatrical parents in a small village in South India. At age 14 he claimed to be the reincarnation of an Indian saint, and later of Jesus Christ. Over the following decades he built up a large organisation which now boasts six million followers and two thousand centres around the world.

Many questions have been raised about this organisation, for example over the death under questionable circumstances of six of its former top officials, and over the management of the well-endowed trust funds that are exempt from Indian taxes. The Indian magician and investigator, Premanand, has suggested that the valuable pieces of jewellery presented to some of Sai Baba's rich followers serve as a convenient way for wealthy Indians to own gold that would otherwise be prohibited under India's Gold Control Act. A good deal of controversy surrounds the financial dealings of Sai Baba in India today.

As for the apparent miracles, these have been investigated several times. Many magicians, including Premanand, have claimed that the miracles have many features of well-known magic tricks and that they could duplicate the feats using trickery, although other magicians claim to remain baffled by some of Sai Baba's feats. A few experiments have been done. For example, the production of large quantities of *vibhuti* from an apparently empty urn was duplicated by the American researcher, Dale Beyerstein, by baking liquefied *vibhuti* onto the inner surface. It could then be scraped off by moving the hand inside the urn as Sai Baba appeared to do.

In 1977 parapsychologists Erlendur Haraldsson and Karlis Osis tried to investigate the materialisations but were never allowed to get close enough to make detailed observations, nor to use a video camera they had taken with them. In spite of numerous requests over many years Sai Baba has never agreed to participate in controlled experimental tests of his apparent

abilities. However, a few videotapes have been made. An American team detected several instances suggestive of known conjuring tricks in one such tape but found no definite evidence of fraud. Then in 1992 an Indian newspaper the 'Deccan Chronicle' carried a front page story reporting that Sai Baba had been caught cheating on video, by secretly taking a gold chain from the hand of his assistant and then producing it in an apparently miraculous way. The story spread around the world and even appeared in British newspapers. The English psychologist and magician, Richard Wiseman, studied the tape and concluded that the hand movements seen would certainly have given Sai Baba the opportunity to use sleight of hand, but do not provide unequivocal proof that he did so.

Is it important whether these miracles are genuine or not? I say yes, because when people are convinced of a guru's paranormal powers they are more likely to believe his other claims, accept his religious teachings, or take his advice on matters concerning their lives or health. In doing so they may be seriously misled.

The greatest danger comes over healing, and Sai Baba is widely promoted as a healer. Premanand has listed several cases of promised cures that never came about and in which the patients did not seek medical treatment because of Sai Baba. Sai Baba told Carol Evans that if she were offered an operation for her ear complaint she should not have it and that he would heal her. She does not say whether an operation was ever recommended or whether she took his advice, but the danger is clear.

My own opinion is that Sai Baba is one of many people who successfully claim miraculous abilities and use those claims to gain power over their devotees, to build up vast organisations, and to accumulate wealth for themselves and their followers. They get away with it because people are reluctant to challenge 'spiritual' teachers, and sometimes because their devotees include rich and powerful men who can prevent their being challenged. In the process many ordinary people are deprived of both their money and their health, and some are sucked into overly dependent relationships with the guru which do not help them with their own spiritual endeavours, as Carol Evans clearly saw.

Fortunately these miraculous claims form no part of the teachings of Ch'an and are irrelevant to quiet sitting, to calming the mind, or to practising mindfulness in daily life. So whether we believe in Sai Baba's powers or not we can just get on with our own personal practice.

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LIFE AT PO LAM CHAN MONASTERY, HONG KONG

Eric Johns (Hin Lic)

Shortly before my fifteenth birthday I parted company with school. At seventeen I took karate lessons and at the end of each lesson we would practise zazen. I enjoyed this so much that I asked for more. The instructor suggested I go find myself a Buddhist group and I was prompt to act upon this advice.

When I was 20 I came across *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation*, a book by Charles Luk. It contained a photo of the most Venerable Ch'an Master Hsu Yun - 'Empty Cloud'. Seeing this photograph changed my life. It sparked something in me, a quest for the answer to the problems of life.

I found that another of Charles Luk's books was dedicated to an Englishman, Bill Pickard of the Mousehole Buddhist group at the far end of Cornwall. When I reached 27 I decided to pay him a visit. I harnessed my horse, strapped her in the shafts of my bow-top caravan and set off on a voyage of discovery that was to become a life-long adventure.

Three months later I arrived near Bill's house, having walked all the way from the Midlands. The meeting inspired me and soon I sat my first week-long meditation retreat. One day, returning to my horse and wagon, I stood by the stream to fill my kettle - and there it was - just the stream. The retreat had enabled me to let go of all the things in my mind that had been churning around obscuring that which I sought. Everything was clear and perfect - just as it was. There had been no method and no result. Just the stream running.

That was enough for me. I sold my horse and wagon and a couple of days later I was in Hong Kong at the Precious Lotus monastery (Po Lin) which I had spotted in a travel brochure a few days before. No one spoke much English but this didn't matter as I already had a feel for the thing.

After a few weeks the Master whom I had chosen as my teacher took me to his smaller more secluded monastery, Precious Wood Temple (Po Lam) about a mile from the bigger establishment, the bus stop, the tourists and the sightseers. I liked it and decided to stay. I moved into the meditation hall and sat for a couple of years during which time I was ordained as a Chinese monk, having twelve marks burnt with incense onto my scalp.

Every day followed the same pattern:

3.30 am. Get up

4.00 Morning chanting

5.00 Meditation

5.30 Breakfast and work period

9.00 Chanting the Diamond Sutra

12.00 Main meal. Siesta

15.30 Afternoon chanting

17.30 Supper (Optional)

Evening meditation followed by bed at no fixed time.

Sometimes there were no visitors for weeks. It was as though the world had forgotten us and we them. Only a dozen or so old and largely illiterate nuns and one slightly mad monk lived there. The monk worked hard maintaining the footpath up to the road. The Master, who was abbot at the Po Lin monastery, divided his time between the two places. One time John Crook visited for a couple of days. That was our first meeting.

Sitting all day in the Ch'an hall made me quite unfit so I started helping the nuns cut brush and scrub grass for the cooking fire. It was our only fuel. I carried provisions for them down the arduous footpath from the road. I swept the courtyard and did minor repairs and decorating. When some new monks came I started to learn Cantonese. They were young and had a modern outlook, giving the place a fresh feel.



On the edge of the wood - the gateless gate.

We all ate a special diet strictly following the rule excluding onions, garlic, leeks and eggs. Vegetables were grown in the gardens fed by our night soil. The mosquitoes loved that. Water came from a mountain spring. There were large and dangerous snakes on the mountain but, after having lived in my wagon, it all seemed quite luxurious and easy for me. I really felt at home.

Master Hsing Yat is an unusual man. He told me he would like to help me but that he was unable to do so. He would only say where I went wrong. Right from the start he advised me to go to Songgwang Sa in Korea where Westerners were training. He told me that the standards there were the best in the world and that I should practice with others of my own kind. Eventually, a couple of years later, I got there but the abbot, Kusan Sunim, had died. I did a three-month retreat with some Americans and then went to Japan.

Finally I decided to return to England so I disrobed and came back, yet continuing to practice and keeping more or less to myself. I had to let all the excitement and pride at having been a fully fledged monk settle down and, putting it aside, I continued looking at the mind before thought with which I was becoming familiar. During my attempts at Ch'an I noticed that the best insights usually came off the cushion rather than on it. Sitting on the cushion was preparatory work and training. Insights were always spontaneous and entirely natural. Many Japanese Zen books miss this point although nowadays they are improving.

Master Hsing Yat at Po Lam taught by actions that had to be understood intuitively. He rarely said anything to me and gave me no particular instruction or method. All he did was to snatch away anything I had done or thought about, even clarity and stillness. He was particularly down to earth and practical, having a Chinese Buddhist sense of humour that allowed a lightness of touch and being at ease with a situation. Now he is quite old and has retired from being the abbot at Po Lin.

Today a large airport has opened down below at the foot of the mountain and the noise is disturbing. I was fortunate to have been at Po Lam when I was. It seemed as though I had stepped back several centuries in time only to return with a clearer understanding of the stillness I had known before that running stream of my first retreat. Nothing learnt, just a jumbled mind cleared for a timeless moment or two.

THE NATURAL GREAT PERFECTION

A 3-week Dzogchen retreat with Lama Surya Das, Canandaigua, New York, 1997

Nigel Farrar

Perhaps it was hearing John Crook talking about the Tibetan practice of Dzogchen which first sparked my interest. For some time I had been practising Tibetan Buddhism in the Karma Kagyu school, finding its gentler approach a welcome complement to the more rigorous practice of Ch'an/Zen. Dzogchen, which is sometimes referred to as 'Tibetan Zen', seemed like it might encompass the best of both worlds.

Right from the start, I knew this retreat was going to be different from the Ch'an and Zen retreats I had attended. When being shown around the centre we were told: "It's your retreat, enjoy it"! Enjoy a retreat! What a concept! This idea was soon in evidence: private rooms, all sitting periods voluntary, all food prepared in the typical smorgasbord 'horn of plenty' American style by the centre's staff. These 'luxurious' conditions, in comparison with the stoic Ch'an/Zen style, fit well with the general approach of Dzogchen, at least as it is taught by Surya Das: everything is already perfect, you are already perfect, there is nothing to do other than just 'be'. Nothing to struggle for, nothing to overcome.

Surya Das looks more like an American football quarterback than a spiritual teacher, and speaks with a Long Island Jewish-American accent. His list of teachers reads like a who's who of Tibetan Buddhism, including the Sixteenth Karmapa, Dilgo Kyentse Rinpoche, Dudjom Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama. He completed two back-to-back traditional Tibetan three year, three month retreats in Dordogne, France, although the second turned out to last three years eight months, since Kalu Rinpoche, running on 'Tibetan time', turned up five months late to close the retreat. This Tibetan sense of time also made its mark on our three week retreat: Sonam Rinpoche, who was scheduled to help guide the retreat, at first postponed his arrival, and then halfway through the retreat we were informed that he was unable to come at all.

The core Dzogchen 'method' which Surya teaches is 'sky gazing'. The posture is open, with the hands on the knees, the eyes are wide open and look straight ahead, and the mouth is open. The gaze is unfocussed, and the feeling is of being relaxed, allowing things to just be as they are. Samadhi-like states are discouraged, as is remaining in and indulging in the blissful states that can (and for me did, frequently) arise. The sky gazing is broken up every fifteen minutes or so by singing/chanting a mantra (Chenrezi, Padmasambhava, Vajrasattva or Tara mantra, or simply the one syllable mantra "AH"). At other times the disruption during the sitting periods is more abrupt, with the sudden shout of the word "Phet!", although in deference to Western weak hearts, this would be preceded by a brief "one-two-three". The exception to this was once, in the middle of a sitting period, when Surya suddenly sneezed into his microphone which someone had forgotten to turn off. I'm sure the person beside me rose at least six inches off her cushion in fright, the entire hall broke into laughter, and Surya simply smiled sheepishly and said in a small voice "phet...". (Interestingly from the point of view of Zen, after the Phet 'wake up call', Surya urges looking into who or what just got a surprise - what he refers to as a "laser-like" question, which could be seen as Dzogchen's version of the universal koan).

Humour could be called an essential ingredient of Dzogchen practice, which Surya admits he took some time to learn: he recounted how a former girlfriend used to call him "Serious Das", and a "dharma drone". Now his talks are humour filled (something I have noticed with Buddhism in general, that one mark of a good teacher is an ever-present, down-to-earth humour): when encouraging his students in singing mantras Surya reminds them "there's no need to be shy, after all, it's a Buddhist prayer: nobody's listening".

Two other teachers assisted Surya during the retreat: Charles Genoud, a softly-spoken Swiss, and Brandon Kennedy, a Korean-American who is also a student of the Dalai Lama.

Charles has developed a form of 'moving Dzogchen', which he calls the "gesture of awareness", and if it could be said to have a goal, it would be to extend the sky gazing practice into one's every movement, really being in the present moment, without an agenda. On one particular occasion, he had everyone sit behind the wheel of a car and just 'be', rather than the more usual practice of being merely physically there and mentally already at one's destination.

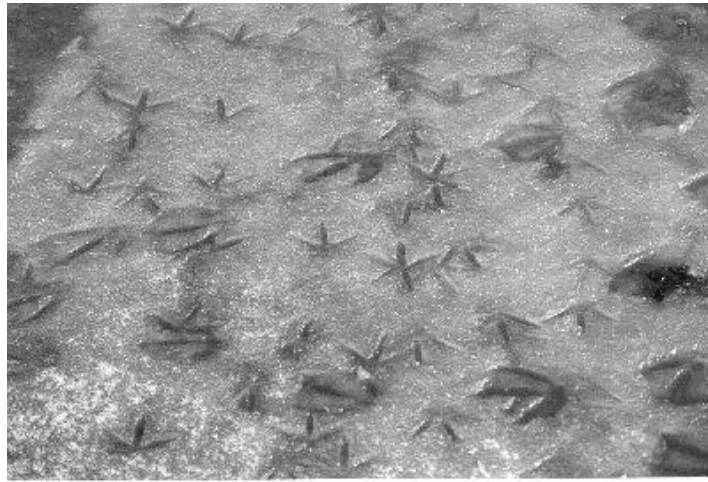
Brandon has an emaciating illness, collected during a trip through India and Tibet 20 years ago. Despite this affliction which on many occasions leaves him struggling for breath, he is also humour-filled, and even thanks his illness for helping reduce his self-described over-inflated ego. After succumbing to pressure from the participants, one afternoon he told his remarkable life story, which ranged from his childhood as an orphan in Korea, through befriending US soldiers and being adopted by an American family, careers in photography and downhill ski racing to his discontent with his success and worldly achievements, and his subsequent trips to India where he met Surya and later the Dalai Lama. His descriptions of his harsh treatment as an orphan at his countryman's hands (which have left him with a croaking voice, the result of attempts to retain his unbroken singing voice by forcing him to continuously scream), leave one in awe of his gentleness and lack of resentment.

In addition to the sky gazing, and teachings from Charles and Brandon, Surya gave progressive instruction each morning on Tibetan Yoga and would give talks in the evening, although these would more often principally be question-and-answer, a format he prefers. During these talks and particularly during question time, it was clear that Surya's theoretical knowledge of Buddhism is encyclopaedic, although he prefers to address issues in his own words and from his own experience, and avoid simply repeating what he had read or someone else had said. (Interesting exceptions to this were his occasional citations of Zen masters, particularly Dogen and Suzuki Roshi). Two of his senior students on the retreat were Professors of Buddhism, and would every so often ask theoretical questions, or pull Surya up on particular points he was making. Surya's responses to them, which invariably cut directly through the theory to the living heart of the matter, clearly showed his intimate knowledge of the subject matter, which can only come from direct personal experience.

If I were to have any reservation about Dzogchen for myself, as it is taught by Surya, it would be that I found the relaxed attitude in a sense even more demanding, in that it replaced an externally-derived discipline with the need for finding the application within oneself and, being rather prone to laziness, I still feel the need for the discipline of Ch'an/Zen. I also find great benefit in the calmness and insight that extended periods of uninterrupted Ch'an meditation can bring.

The three weeks passed surprisingly quickly. Other high points included sky gazing sitting outside the retreat centre, where the wonderful 180 degree view of the lake below greatly enhanced one's overall feeling of wellbeing; and one night when the participants gathered on the hill overlooking the lights of the houses reflected on the lake, and sang the Tara mantra continuously for about an hour. At the end of the retreat I really felt that at least some part of the view of everything already being perfect somehow stayed with me, and gave a wonderful feeling of release. This has become an integral part of my meditation method, when occasionally I simply let go of all methods and just 'be'. To give the last word to Surya: "Its like playing basketball on a court where the hoop is bigger than the court itself: you can't miss".

Anyone wanting to know more about Surya Das and his teachings, may wish to look at his website, where you can download many of his talks: www.dzogchen.org



Book review

Awakening the Buddha Within - Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World

by Lama Surya Das

Published by Bantam Books £8.99

Pamela Hopkinson

Not living very close to a local group, I place great store by the books I read on Buddhism. I picked this one up because Surya Das has constructed the book following the Eight-Fold Path, and I'd been meditating on parts of this for a long time.

Inside I found one of the liveliest and most enjoyable books on Buddhism that I have read for a long time. With the aim of providing Westerners with a from-the-ground-up introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, Surya Das has written a book that is part guide for living and meditation instruction, part background to Tibetan theology and thought, part autobiography and reminiscence. He's tried to give the reader as much as he can and for me, interest in the book's 450-plus pages never flagged.

Surya Das has some great reminiscences, he's studied with many many masters - not just Tibetan, but Zen and Burmese as well. He was involved in establishing one of the first Tibetan centres in the US. He writes about his first experiences in a Tibetan monastery, Kopan in the Kathmandu valley in 1971: "We didn't think about it then, but the bridge that would help the Dharma cross from East to West was being constructed right before our eyes and under our noses."

There are quotes from many other Buddhist teachers, meditation instruction and a wide variety of exercises. At the end of the book is an overview of Buddhism in the West where Surya Das identifies ten emerging trends. There's also practical advice on finding your own path.

The warmth of the Tibetan path shines through every page. My battered paperback copy quickly became a well loved friend, and the book I would most recommend to anyone who wanted to know about Tibetan Buddhism.

The editors welcome reviews of books on Buddhism and related themes. Please include details of full title, author, publisher and price, and submit your reviews to Pamela Hopkinson, address on page 38.

RETREAT REPORTS

We are grateful to retreat participants for writing so honestly about their experiences on retreat. This gives us valuable help in understanding the retreat process. These reports also provide some insight into the difficulties and benefits of attending a retreat. We continue to publish these accounts anonymously. We regret that we are unable to publish everything that we receive.

Immeasurable Sweetness

A Ch'an Retreat

*Pale light after dawn
Low clouds scudding over green fields
Weathervane - SSW*

*Nine cars
In the yard
Tathagatas*

*Welsh hills in June
Misty rain
Wet tents*

*Sunbeams at dusk
Reaching round the corner of the hill
Only this week the sun so far*

*Cutting the tall grass
goggle eyed frog leaps for safety
Sorry !*

*Round the temple chanting
Koonyam poussa koon yam poussa
Outside cuckoos calling*

*Morning mantra
Stadies
My nerves*

*Light on rising
Light at bedtime
What between ?*

*Sitting in the Ch'an Hall
Buddha's face in the corner of an eye
One thought for a thousand years*

*That old-time sculptor
Never knew I read his mind
Now*

*Like the stream
No start No end
No stop*

*The mountains are doing zazen
Everything is doing zazen
—us ?*

*Someone has noticed
His presence on the cushion's
Not essential*

*Outside the Ch'an Hall door
Manic laughter
I needn't ask him why.*

*This one has spotted something odd-
Others exist.
For how long I wonder.*

*Old doctor
Speculates
On the physiology of the brain*

*Dharma discussion-
Monkeys begin
Falling out of the trees*

*Last cars go down the winding lane
Gates close behind them
Clearer now the birdsong in the yard*

*Everyone gone
Retreat ended
Owl returning to the woodshed*

*Dusk
By an open window
Midges
1998*

Going on into the snow alone

WZR 1998

The opening words of the retreat “Where the path stops, you go on into the snow alone” have an enormously powerful effect on me and the combination of the clear Welsh air, the burning incense, the peace, and the clarity of the bell bring tears to my eyes and a lump in my throat so that I am unable to join in the words myself.

The retreat begins, the guest master cheerfully and conscientiously marking the passage of time in ways that become familiar and comforting. The spring weather is beautiful and whilst there is something mystical about Maenllwyd in the depth of winter illuminated in the gloom of firelight and candles, there is also a magic about the liberation of summer; the blossom; the carpets of bluebells; the lambs and their mothers endlessly seeking one another; the riot of birdsong, that brings the Universe to me. Not that it has ever gone away, but sometimes I have difficulty in finding it.

The group contains fewer regulars than usual. Quite a number had come as a result of the radio broadcast ‘A Place of Silence’ and some had not anticipated the rude accommodation. Even though I had been before and knew what to expect, I cannot say that I enjoy the physical limitations. Despite ten years at boarding school, embracing the austerity of a monastic retreat does not mean that I enjoy a stranger snoring during the night well within the territorial limits of my personal space, or that I can then find the strength of character to sleep despite the noisy intruder. This time I brought a tent which becomes my monastic cell. I relegate all the junk to my car leaving myself only the essentials. Peace in the open air lulls me to sleep at night to awake refreshed in the morning. We also erected John’s spectacular Tibetan tent that rapidly became known as ‘the lama tent’ and was where some of our meditation sessions took place. The tent was very striking against the hillside and must have aroused renewed speculation amongst the villagers far below. The new composting toilets were a great success and engendered queues, whilst the ordinary flush toilets remained vacant.

I had come to the retreat with a lot of pressure from work and a couple of difficult decisions to make. I do not think I meditate very well and I was a dismal failure at the Silent Illumination technique. But I sat and sat and eventually the mind settled and the problems of the world resumed their proper perspective. On the second morning I was timekeeper. I had never done this before and I was keen to get it right. I found myself worrying about the ending of a session. “Would I time it correctly, was it one, two or three rings, would I drop the bell, would I . . .?” and then it dawned on me what a daft thing I was doing . . . fretting the time away in the now so that I could achieve an effect in the future. As far as time was concerned, there is no difference between the last minute of a session and the first, so why should it be so for me? It was my anxieties, my projections, my fears that were spoiling the present moment.

After that, things became easier. With some guidance from John, I was able to look at things differently. I resolved my career dilemma to my entire satisfaction in a most surprising way. It does not matter what I do as long as I can stay me. End of problem.

Issues of time preoccupied me considerably: “What is life, where does my life fit in the great scheme of things, where was I before I was born and where shall I be after I die?” John had earlier spoken of a Chinese poem describing a river flowing with “no front, no back, no stop”. Since death is inevitable and our progress towards it so inexorable, why are we so worried about it? Is this simply my old timekeeper problem again?

After some changes, my koan becomes “What is Now?” I realised that Now is so small yet so infinitely precious. A drop from the river of time. It defines life. Yet so often have I deferred Now in favour of Later. Now is when I am alive, even lunch is history. I can define my life in terms of the absence of Now and I see the need to change. During one communication exercise I stated inadvertently “I need to play with this question”. Now opens up all sorts of possibilities. Is it living Now that enables me to lose myself and burst into floods of real tears during the afternoon chant, to feel the sound of the conch resonating in my being, to feel overwhelmingly grateful during the grace after meals with “the universe as the boundless sky”?

At one with the food we eat we identify with the Universe. The Universe is as the boundless sky, always moving. Whenever now arrives it has gone. Thus come, thus go. What can we do with that ?

A little story to conclude. After the retreat there were several large rubbish bags needing disposal. I put some in my car but failed to find the Rhayader dump where I had been told I could deposit them So there they sat all 150 miles home where I called in at our municipal tip. When I met my wife I told her that I had brought a whole load of rubbish back from the Maenllwyd but had managed to off-load it in the local dump .

“Well in that case it was obviously a very good retreat !” she said.

An experience with Mahamudra

November 1996

A particular attraction of this retreat was for me the possibility of examining the stages of meditation as it deepened. In order that the process of moving towards a reasonably quiet and spacious state could become rather less haphazard, I had been trying to identify progression in my own meditation. I found the Mahamudra immensely helpful in this respect, clarifying the exact point where it is natural to bring forward the questioning frame of mind.

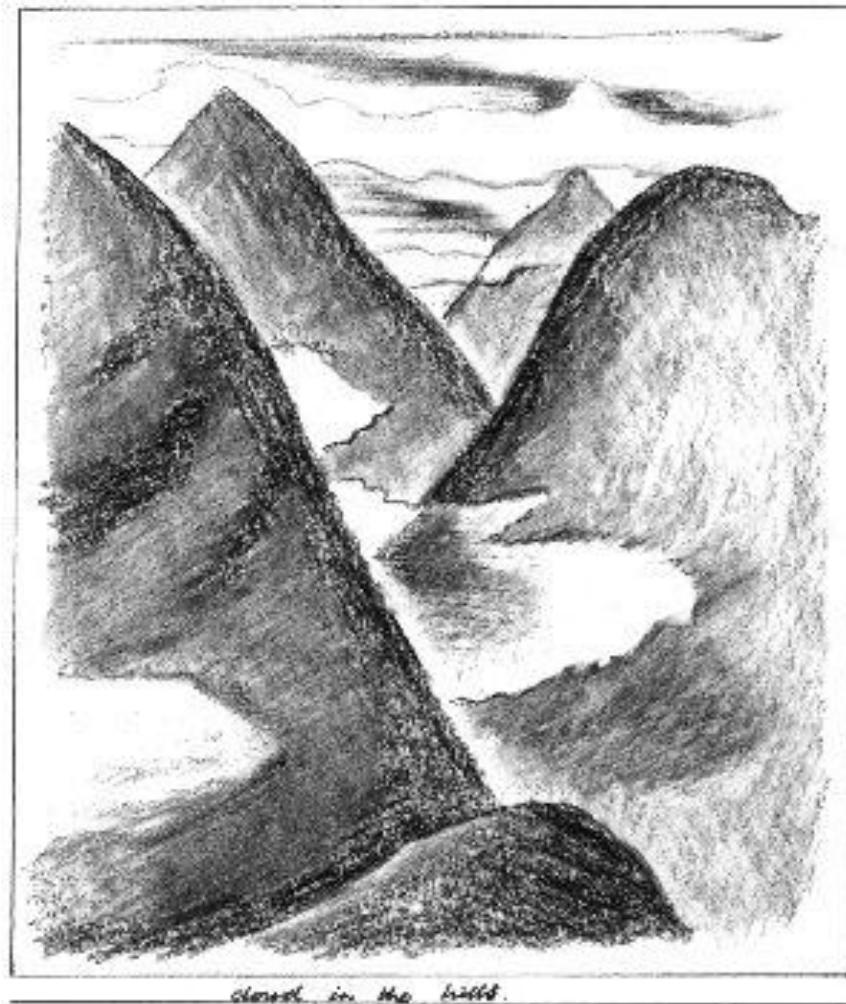
The concept of ‘one taste’ was new to me, and yet recognisable from within meditation. I have often puzzled over the way in which meditation affects our emotions. There are obviously various ways in which one might become steadier, calmer etc, but the idea of ‘one taste’ gets at the more fundamental shift that I sometimes sense is there, and sometimes get my ‘tongue’ around. All the feelings are still there, but they are going on in a much larger space, in which attraction and aversion fade away. This kind of experience seems quite different from being mindful of emotions, it’s more that the whole problem of liking and disliking seems to fade away. This is something I only dimly understand, but ‘one taste’ brought my diffuse intuitions into focus.

As well as the gradual clarifying and appreciating of Mahamudra, I had some unusual experiences which seemed to begin with a quite blissful state. One evening I felt a continual sense of real warmth, flowing through my veins, with an almost sexual intensity. This went on for the whole evening. The following morning came what felt like a backlash, the opposite of the relaxation and acceptance that allowed the blissful feelings, an angry rejection of the whole process that encouraged, forced me, to come on retreats. “I hate Buddhism!” I remember thinking as this came to a head and then ebbed away.

A little after this, during the break between sittings, the buildings in the yard began to look ‘insubstantial’. I cannot think of a better word. They had a transparent, paper-like, quality. I began to cry with a feeling of release, and, not wanting to return to the meditation hall to sit in floods of tears, I turned away and walked up the valley. There was no misery in this weeping, or indeed any images or thoughts that I recall - just crying, and wanting to walk on up into the landscape.

Halfway up the valley I looked over at the hill, to see that it had become a wave. The wave was huge, powerful, curving towards me, but nevertheless still a hill. I don’t recall any thoughts at this point or even being there at all to reflect or think about it, but later the image that came to me was of the photographs of massive waves around Cape Horn with tiny boats climbing up the side of them. They had for me the same awe mixed with fear at the power of the wave.

The next thing I recall is walking with the landscape moving through me, rather than my body through the landscape. Then looking down across the valley and finding that the whole landscape had this wave-like quality, an enormous power as if the land had thrown off a net that had been restraining it.



It's a problem to convey this now. There were no images or words at the time, just the landscape showing its power, movement and the life that is usually hidden.

During an interview shortly afterwards I struggled, and I suspect failed, to convey something of what was going on. I was still partly in the experience and could not really reflect on it or make any sense of it. I remember John saying that it sounded like I had solved the koan of the eastern mountains moving towards the western shores, but I didn't know how seriously to take this. I also remember him saying something to the effect that when the 'eagle starts flying', the landscape moves, which I took (later) to mean that the experience was familiar to him. Looking back now this is encouraging, because I feel that experiences that are complete and become familiar seem to be the ones that change one's understanding.

DANGERS IN DEVOTION:

BUDDHIST CULTS AND THE TASKS OF A GURU¹

John Crook

Western Buddhism: problems and presentations

In recent years a number of cases of individual corruption in sexual and financial matters have been exposed in Buddhist organisations, usually the result of the behaviour or indiscretions of individuals in leadership roles². Ken Jones' recent discussion³ has raised further important issues concerning the development in Britain of large Buddhist organisations that appeared to him to resemble cults more than they did a traditional Buddhist Sangha.

Two substantial articles have appeared in the national press⁴ suggesting that Ken had every reason to be alarmed. The articles present a view of institutional Buddhism in Britain (the New Kadampa Trust and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) from the critical, debunking perspective characteristic of contemporary journalism. We live in a post-modern world of ethical relativity in which any creed or custom is easily interpreted in terms of ego defensive and self-serving motivations. Cynicism abounds as the ethics of religious forms are called into question in numerous ways. While the press functions in justifying the scepticism of non-believers in the mediocrity of contemporary religion, it none the less also calls attention to the very real problems faced by those inspired by forms of spirituality that still seem relevant to our time.

Then, early this summer, a large, carefully printed pamphlet, anonymously authored, hit my desk. The 'FWBO Files' is a point by point, blow by blow, examination of the problems the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order presents to its colleagues in Buddhism. If it is to be taken on trust, there is clearly a very great deal amiss and it is right that these matters should be widely examined. If misrepresentation of the Buddhist tradition is actually occurring it needs to be exposed.

The Files make five main charges alleging:

- that the FWBO founder, Sangharakshita, lacked adequate training in the Dharma in India where his sexual activities came close to causing scandal;
- that Sangharakshita put together an idiosyncratic version of Buddhism which has become the central doctrine of the FWBO;
- that sexual experimentation within the order led to abuse of power and personal distress of heterosexual young men persuaded into a homosexual life style;
- that a misogynist and anti-Christian viewpoint dominates the teachings;
- that financial irregularity contributed to the FWBO's success.

The FWBO Files and the FWBO Response⁵

Reading the 'FWBO Files' is as distressing an experience as is the reading of the 'Response' in its defence put together by leading FWBO members. The tone of the two documents is very different. The Files presents a case for the 'prosecution' in a forthright style lacking in compassion but impassioned by a desire to put the record straight. The persistent anonymity of its author weakens his/her case but also raises suspicions about the possible coercion he/she appears to fear. The Response is surprisingly reticent, concedes that all has not been well in the organisation but insists that at heart the FWBO remains a substantial contribution to the spreading of the Buddha Dharma in the West and that its various experiments in social living are justified. It does not seek to whitewash the behaviour of its charismatic leader Sangharakshita, but rather to contextualise it with understanding. Sangharakshita himself continues to say nothing nor has he given any opinion on a dispute that centres upon his personality.

The assertiveness that some see as characteristic of the FWBO comes over strongly in the Response. The compilers argue "... some readers may feel that the mere fact of controversy

lends credence to the accusers: 'there's no smoke without fire!' We would ask readers to pause before making this essentially lazy assumption and carefully consider what issues of substance actually remain..." And in Appendix 3 it is argued that the FWBO is the victim of a smear campaign rather than an organisation which has plausibly brought its troubles on itself. Given the strength of the prosecutors' case (and independent evidence from other sources⁶) few will doubt that the smoke has a genuine origin in fire. Yet the significance of the conflagration does remain in question.

A careful reading of the two documents leads me to a surprising conclusion. It is not a question of one being true and the other false. Both statements actually support one another in a variety of ways and on a variety of matters. Of course they draw different conclusions from their contrasting presentations and the Response succeeds in showing through textual quotes that Sangharakshita has in places been misinterpreted. Even so the documents often point to a common issue. I am concerned here with the questions concerning the representation of the Dharma and the problem of personal ethics shown by teachers. On the other issues readers of these documents must make up their own minds.

The pivot on which both presentations revolve is the person of Sangharakshita himself. As a charismatic leader his influence is all-pervading and appears to determine the argument wherever one arises. Who Sangharakshita was and what he has become are thus critical matters, as is the issue of his position in the institution both in the past and at the present time.

It is clear that his behaviour in India was not that of a normal Theravadan monk. Seeking to find the common roots of the Buddhist tradition he explored Theravadan, Mahayanist and Vajrayana approaches and sought to discover the quintessence of Buddhism. His restless exploratory mind thus showed a marked individualism and a failure to adopt the social identity of a conforming and practising monk. He remained an individualistic robe-wearing Westerner sincerely on a personal quest. Inevitably, given the vast scope of the Dharma, the diversity of its range of philosophical insights and practices, he necessarily picked and chose until he was personally satisfied. It remains a matter of debate as to whether he found a core to the diverse forms of Buddhism and particularly one which could be the foundation for a new order or for a Western Buddhism as such.

In fairness to Sangharakshita it must be said that such a quest is quite usual among Westerners attracted by Buddhism, and Sangharakshita's writings certainly show an impressive depth of scholarship. After World War II Christmas Humphreys had travelled widely looking for points in common between various traditions. Stephen Batchelor has investigated parallels between existentialist Western philosophy and Buddhism⁷ and many writers, including this one, have explored parallels between Buddhist practice, psychotherapy and Western psychology⁸. There is, however, a distinction to be made between these personal and intellectual explorations and an ideological closure around a viewpoint subsequently made basic to the doctrines of an institution claiming to offer Buddhism to the West⁹.

Sangharakshita's moral behaviour during his time in India remains debatable but it seems unlikely that any conclusive evidence concerning his private affairs will emerge. It is clear, however, that from the time of his return to England he was a controversial figure generating both powerful support and opposition. These controversies did not only concern his views on the Dharma and the nature of Buddhism in the 'hippy period' but extended to his life style. It is acknowledged that he experimented with sexuality in ways unacceptable from a professed monk but characteristic of the 'permissiveness' of the time. What does remain strange is that he continued to wear robes, hold a title and appear frequently in the guise of a monk even though his behaviour was typical of a young Western lay person of the period.

Sangharakshita's powerful and persuasive character led him into the role of leadership and once he had become the guru of the FWBO his views and attitudes necessarily began to colour those of his followers. I accept the Response's defence that his homosexual orientation probably never had the deliberate and coercive motivation imputed in the Files but it would be natural that his inclinations would influence those near to him. If his intentions had been more self-reflective and critical it is doubtful whether his sexual affairs would have generated so much distress.

On this matter the Files uses a highly personal approach documenting individual experiences in close relationships with Sangharakshita. The Response tends to side-step such personal accounts but admits that “there have been instances in the FWBO when relationships of *kalyana mitrata* have included a sexual element ... these instances have involved homosexuality. Some people will consider there is no place for this, and may even regard it as inherently abusive.” The discussion then becomes general, outlining the common experience of Westerners during this period remarking that “the best safeguard against people being hurt through their sexual activity is maturity, awareness and the cultivation of keen ethical sensitivity.” While this may well be what “the FWBO seeks to encourage,” the Files suggest such qualities were singularly lacking in Sangharakshita himself.

The problem here is that it becomes impossible to separate the FWBO from the personality of Sangharakshita. Individualist, scholar, homosexual, idealist, charismatic leader, authoritarian, prickly and often strongly liked or disliked, Sangharakshita emerges as an important figure in Western Buddhism. Such an influential person placed in charge of an institution inevitably affects his followers, especially those close to him in temperament and viewpoint. The result is the gradual formation of an institutional climate expressing not necessarily merely the informed, indeed scholarly, views of the leader but, more diffusely, his personality. If lacking in a necessary humility, the shadow side of such a leader may become expressed institutionally with little awareness of the process among devoted followers. Every human being has a ‘shadow’ and we are usually unconscious of its underground activity. It requires exceptional awareness to gain understanding of the transference and counter-transference that soon comes into play among mutually dependent persons seeking to create an institutional perspective under the eye of a powerful leader. In this area the FWBO continues to show a blindness reflected in the way both the documents under consideration focus almost exclusively on the person of the leader rather than on the institution and its organisation. It is this that leads many of us to see the FWBO more as a cult than as a Buddhist institution or school in accordance with tradition.

Cultic Buddhism : a brief analysis

In his book ‘Religion in the Modern world: from Cathedral to Cults’ Steve Bruce¹⁰ argues that contemporary religion has moved away from monasteries, churches, denominations, to a predominance of cults, usually of the type designated as ‘New Age’. Bruce is concerned primarily with Christian history but his analysis is useful here. He argues that the fragmentation of modern societies and the relativity of all ethical systems since the post-modern turn makes the institution of a widely relevant and meaningful “church” untenable. Cult, according to Bruce, is a “small loosely-knit group organised around some common themes and interests but lacking a sharply defined and exclusive belief system. Each individual member is the final authority as to what constitutes the truth or the path to salvation.” A cult “hardly has members, instead it has consumers who pick and choose those bits of the product that suits them.”

Most cults focus on some ‘mystical’ practice that seems to be the way to salvation. It is togetherness in a self-serving practice that forms the core. Bruce does not however discuss a further dimension of the ‘cult’ - that is, its leadership. When the ‘mystical’ activity is prescribed by an individual of persuasive mien he or she quickly becomes the exemplar to whom charisma is attributed by seekers who rapidly develop dependencies, since to lose the affiliation with the leader would be to abandon a project in which self-identity has become deeply involved. Cults with such leadership soon create formulae for attitudes, behaviours, rituals and relationships inevitably reflecting the character of the ‘guru’. And as a number of examples have shown this can lead to extraordinary collective action including millennial group suicide. Buddhism in the West has gone through parallel phases. An intellectual interest in Buddhism among non-Christians seeking a spiritual Humanism led to loose groupings of independent individuals exploring Buddhist ideas. As Eastern teachers, particularly Zen masters and Tibetan lamas, appeared or were invited into this scene a gradual growth in the traditional ‘Buddhist churches’ took place and today every city has its Zen or Tibetan temple and small groups of practitioners. But not all such teachers remain true to the strict discipline of the Eastern institutions to which they belonged.

In Britain the Tibetan lama Geshe Kelsang Gyatso broke away from the tradition of the Gelugpa Order to found the New Kadampa Trust of which he is the presiding authority and teacher. The purpose was to find a digest of the Tibetan Dharma best suited to Western consumption. Like Sangharakshita, the Geshe is a fine scholar and his publications continue to pour forth from an enthusiastic editorial team. He is alleged to allow his followers to consider him to be a Buddha and has authorised active disputes with the Dalai Lama over the nature of a protective “deity”, the ethics of which are questionable. The cult surrounding him has cut itself off from the parent tradition and has become a free-floating institution dominated by his personal influence.

The FWBO has, on a similar pretext, created an institution which was at first very attractive to free-floating quasi-Buddhists and which has proven to be creative in spawning businesses and charitable enterprises of several kinds, many of which are beneficial. Its increasing authoritarianism and social biases which eventually led to the problems detailed in the Files may be attributed to the dominance of one individual. It therefore also has the form of a ‘cult’ independent from other forms of traditional Buddhism.

These Buddhist cults resemble the guru-based institutions of Hinduism more than they do their Buddhist origins. In Hinduism, gifted and charismatic gurus become the focus of a personal cult of devotional practice and at any one time there are many of these for potential devotees to choose from. The loose framework of Hindu belief and practice allows a high level of personal choice in such matters but not all gurus are free from the many forms of ethical corruption. How do such ‘cults’ arise? The psychology of such processes has become clear in recent years. Individual identity requires the formation of key values for which social approval is given and without which an individual experiences painful alienation. Traditionally these were given by the society in which a person lived, and we had monolithic religions dominating large areas of the world. Since in contemporary society the philosophical basis for values has become culturally relative and science has for many removed the belief in supernatural forces, individuals are forced to choose between a range of equally valid interpretations of the cosmos and of the way to personal salvation. Once a ‘way’ is chosen it becomes an area of profound psychological investment so that anything that threatens it also threatens the self. On accepting an institutionalised value system personal identity is largely replaced by social identity - that is the individual identifies with the social norms of the group.

Value systems are based in what Muscovici¹¹ has called social representations. These are ideas and attitudes that are seen to represent the “real” and which are believed to be the truth. Social identity is rooted in the adoption of representations of “truth” and anything that threatens their credibility thus comes also to threaten the person. When the fount of wisdom is a particular individual, an unthinking devotion may develop which in worst-case scenarios leads to the establishment of an accepted tyranny. When an individual finally rumbles what is happening and attempts to break away into independence and an acceptance of his or her existential aloneness the reaction of other believers is apt to be intense. The question must therefore be asked whether cults of this kind and with this psychological causation are compatible with traditional Buddhist understanding in which freedom from suffering remains the goal. This question is vital not only in relation to the institutions which we have been discussing but for all attempts to form an organisation in which ‘enlightenment’ is sought and within which teachers and their shadows operate.

Open Buddhism in the context of Practice

On his deathbed the Buddha told his followers to use the Dharma as a guide not the teacher. His profound advice throws the individual back into himself and his questioning appraisal of what Dharma can be. It does not lie in the views of a teacher, however helpful these can be and however fine an exemplar he or she is, but in the heart where the meaning of selfhood resides. The path to such understanding is essentially a lone quest, just as it was for the Buddha. Guidance lies in the teachings not in a teacher. Essentially the Four Noble Truths, the principles of impermanence, emptiness and the law of interdependent causation lie at the heart of the matter and require experiential realisation not mere intellectual assent. While vehicles for the transmission of the Dharma are essential, realisation is essentially an individual matter in which clinging to identity and all forms of representation is abandoned.

What then is the role of the teacher? The vehicles (Theravada, Mahayana, Zen etc.) are perspectives on the Dharma with the power to induce realisation. The teacher is a facilitator of

this individual process. Any attempt to be an authority on the scriptures, a paragon of virtue, or a defender of a faith misses the point. A great lama or a solitary yogin consulted in some remote cave only have Buddhist validity if they facilitate the insight of others. There are many skilful means, as the Lotus Sutra makes clear. There is no absolute truth which has to be believed. All views disappear in absurdity. Attachment to any representation is thus an error. Krishnamurti was right in arguing that any institutionalisation of religion becomes divisive and yet a vehicle for the Dharma needs a structure.

All schools of Buddhism hinge upon and return to the understanding of emptiness. This insight is conveyed in a variety of ways and nothing can be picked or chosen as more relevant than anything else. That which is relevant is that which works. As Wittgenstein advised - look for the use and not the meaning. If a device or an idea works that is enough, for there is no ultimately discoverable meaning. This means that when a great Zen master and a fine lama meet there are no barriers between them. Although one may be riding a horse and the other a camel they both survey the same view. If this is not the case, understanding of the Dharma has at some point been lost.

The implication of this is that the Buddha Dharma must be 'open'. Even though individuals may subscribe to contrasting traditions of practice and viewpoint if there is openness to the underlying empty vision then understanding can arise. We need therefore to cultivate a tradition of 'open Buddhism' and only if we manage to do so will the Buddha Dharma find a place in the West free from cultic factionalism and argument.

It follows that all would-be teachers must understand what being a facilitator rather than an authority means. Essentially a Buddhist teacher is what in Christian terms is called a "spiritual director". It may therefore be valuable to consider the 'Code of Ethics for Spiritual Directors' compiled by the staff of the Center for Sacred Psychology in California¹². They are concerned about what code of practise should determine the qualification for a person with this title. Although Christian in focus this document can help us formulate a Buddhist perspective on the same problem. This is not a matter of dictating how teachers should be but rather of defining their commitment to society in a way that people can understand and respect without fear of abuse. The following paragraphs are thus tentative suggestions concerning the attitude to be adopted by anyone attempting to be a Buddhist teacher in the West.

- i) The essential relationship is a unique one-to-one, face-to-face confrontation or meeting between two people. One is acting as a facilitator while the other is seeking spiritual insight based in his or her own resources. This definition covers Zen interviews and consultations between lamas or monks and those seeking their guidance. A teacher may also provide instruction on meditation techniques and Buddhist philosophical psychology to groups but his or her essential function remains in a personal ministry in the context of the selfhood of another. The activities of meditation instruction and Dharma teaching are distinct from those of spiritual ministry but it is in the latter that the critical function of the teacher resides.
- ii) A Buddhist teacher has felt a 'call' to such activity through personal experience in the Dharma. The call needs to be authenticated through experiencing transmission from a 'master' or 'lama' in which the latter affirms the experience and understanding of the teacher and expresses faith in his/her ability to facilitate others.
- iii) Teachers need at all times to examine their own lives and personal relationships. Everyone has a shadow side and experiences psychological difficulties arising from their karma. These need to be seen, understood and accepted to whatever degree is possible. Help in this task from a practitioner of a Western psychotherapeutic process or counselling is a normal requirement for a teacher and should be entered into willingly. Western insights into the self process are now profound and Eastern practices do not replace this. Of course interaction with a traditional Buddhist teacher (as ii) is likewise essential.
- iv) In an interview the teacher is first and foremost a skilled listener who can experience others as themselves and not through his/her own interpretation due to theoretical or personal bias. It is the other engaged in his/her own exploration that is the focus. The teacher may be able to draw on his/her own experiences in discussion but must be aware of allowing these to intrude on the otherness of the other.

- v) Essentially the interviewee discovers his/her own solution in solitude and walks his own path. The teacher can, however, draw attention to the pitfalls, ego indulgence, failures to confront the self etc. that will be inherent in the interviewee's presentation. This requires skilful means in relation to the other's receptivity. The relationship involves an implicit power imbalance in which one is a teacher or facilitator and the other to some extent a recipient. This imbalance creates numerous interpersonal consequences concerning which the teacher should be watchful and aware.
- vi) Even an experienced teacher should seek occasional supervision in which problems in his/her work can be discussed with an advisor.
- vii) Confidentiality in the relationship is essential and must be preserved. Furthermore the teacher should be aware of the phenomena of transference and counter-transference which inevitably occur in this work. In particular no sexual interaction should take place and if such seems to be consensually appropriate the relationship of teacher/ taught should be abandoned and the implicit power imbalance removed.
- viii) Teachers should be aware of other techniques useful in this art but take care not to turn the session into psychotherapy. The latter is essentially a means for adjusting the self to existing conditions of life and to better functioning in the social world. Buddhist spiritual counselling challenges the very nature of the self process as illusion and seeks to go beyond self concerns. It is transcendental work.
- ix) Teachers need to know when an interviewee requires help from other services and to feel free to recommend such help.
- x) Teachers and recipients should evaluate their relationship periodically, change it or terminate it as seems appropriate. Choice of a guru is mutual. The teacher has the option of accepting or rejecting those who wish to receive interview. Likewise the recipient needs to feel free in evaluating the teacher and in expressing his thoughts and feelings in this area.

These ten points have much in common with codes of conduct used by therapists. This is appropriate since, although the goals differ, the therapist and the spiritual counsellor are both facilitators and facilitation of another's process in each perspective has many features in common.

Democracy in Buddhist institutions

There remains one final point. The problems of many Buddhist organisations have rested on the unlimited authority of the guru. This has often extended to matters of belief, practice, financial control and property. It is hardly surprising that mistakes have been made which have usually been as much a result of devotees' lack of responsibility as it is due to the leader's failure in self control and insight.

Cults can be profitably undone by democracy. All that is needed is proper attention to the creation of an institutional structure in which the power relations between guru and followers is balanced, in which problems and disputes can be raised and discussed and in which the formation of appropriate committees allows decision making processes reflecting the wishes of the membership. Many Buddhist institutions lack proper constitutional organisation and a prime recommendation may be that this issue be immediately addressed.

This task is not simple. The teacher is often the bearer of a lineage of teaching going back many centuries, maybe even to the Buddha himself. The teacher has received some form of transmission from his own guru to pass the way on to others. Those who have not received such transmission are hardly in a position to criticise the essential message. Too much democracy could mean that anybody's version of what the Buddha may or may not have said could gain equal credence with an inevitable regression to an ill-prepared salad¹³. It is rather the manner in which teachers present themselves, their attitude to others, their ethical stance and correctness in relationship and in financial concerns that become the legitimate focus of committees set up to monitor an institution's well-being. It is to this concern that an institutional constitution should be directed¹⁴.

Given the nature of the psychological process active in cults such a change may not be easy. It will often require grassroots action within the institution. Indeed, if these institutions are to survive, this will become essential. Further publication of destructive arguments such as those we have discussed here will be to the detriment of all Buddhist institutions in the West. It is time to set our houses in order.

This paper has been much exercised with the internal affairs of the FWBO. My intention has not been to denigrate this organisation but to explore two of the wider issues to which the disputes within and about the FWBO draw attention. The FWBO has been and remains an important contributor to Buddhism on the world stage. Its social and sexual experiments have proven valuable to many¹⁵. There will be many Friends who are puzzled by the current uproar, many teachers entirely innocent of the errors that have been described. The position of their leader at the present time remains unclear. The whole matter is to be much regretted, yet the Files have drawn attention to abuses of power and to the serious problems facing any major 'spiritual' organisation today. It is to be hoped that the grassroots membership of all such organisations will from now on insist that social accountability be made a prime focus of attention. We can all then focus without dissension on the central task - the practice of Dharma itself.

Summary

This paper discusses recent controversies concerning the activities and orientation of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order in the context of the character of institutionalisation in Western Buddhism. The two sides in the controversy show considerable convergence focusing on the role of the teacher and the authority of the teacher.

The nature of cult-like institutions in Buddhism is discussed and the role of teacher examined. It is suggested that teachers should function as spiritual facilitators and not as institutionalised authorities and that an 'open Buddhism' is required if Western Buddhism is to be true to its roots and thrive without bitter controversy.

Democratisation of many current Buddhist organisations is seen as an essential prerequisite to change needed at a structural level, yet this is a task that will require careful understanding of the social and personal forces at work before it can be successful.

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3 Jones, K. 'Movements in British Buddhism'. *New Ch'an Forum* **13**, 1996. Also: 'Response to Vishvapani'. *New Ch'an Forum* **14**, 24-25 (1997).

4 *The Guardian* 6th July 1996 and 27th October 1997. See also a reply by Vishvapani, 8th November 1997.

5 Anonymous. *The FWBO Files*. Distributed by post. Available on the internet. *The FWBO Files: a Response*. FWBO Communications Office, 1998.

6 Personal statements made privately in interview by former members of the FWBO on retreat and in unsolicited email correspondence with two Americans detailing their reasons for leaving the Order.

7 Batchelor, S. *Alone with Others: an Existential Approach to Buddhism*. Grove Press Inc, New York, 1983. and *Buddhism without Beliefs: a Contemporary Guide to Awakening*. Bloomsbury Press, London, 1997.

8 Crook, J.H. and Fontana, D. *Space in Mind: East-West Psychology and Contemporary Buddhism*. Element, Warminster, 1990.

9 This is not the place for an extended analysis of Sangharakshita's views. A taste of his approach can be seen in a 48-page justification entitled *Extending the Hand of Fellowship: The relationship of the Western Buddhist Order to the rest of the Buddhist world* (Windhorse Press), which makes his claims clear.

10 Bruce, S. *Religion in the Modern World: from Cathedrals to Cults*. Oxford, 1996.

11 Muscovici, S. 'The phenomenon of social representations'. In Farr, R.M. and Muscovici, S. (eds) *Social Representations*, Cambridge, 1984.

12 Hedberg, T.M. and Caprio, B. *A Code of Ethics for Spiritual Directors*. Dove Publications, Pecos, New Mexico, (undated). Available from The Center for Sacred Psychology, Box 643, Gateway Station, Culver City, CA 90232, USA.

13 Indeed, this may well prove to be the defect of attempts at "mainstreaming" the Dharma through teaching meditation practices without acknowledgement of their roots in specific Dharma.

14 The Western Ch'an Fellowship has been much concerned with this issue. The constitution on which its charitable status is based is available in *New Ch'an Forum* **16**:11.

15 See for example: 'Dhammadinna. Sexual Evolution'. *Dharma Life*, Summer 1998. Also published in the FWBO Response as Appendix 1.

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