

our work as teachers and practitioners

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overview

This talk presents the suggestions of a team of senior Order members for a new meditation training programme. It contains my personal view of some faults in our approach which the programme is designed to address.

Readers should bear in mind that this originated as a spoken talk. In attempting to consider certain group tendencies, I often make generalisations which may not apply to individuals.

introduction

the essence of Buddhist practice

Over the last few years, as most of you know, I've been exploring Mahamudra and Formless meditation, and it was on the basis of what I'd learned in that field that I undertook my long retreat which ended a couple of years ago. More recently I've been wondering how to bring that way of seeing things in line with more mainstream FWBO teachings. And one thing I've been trying is a comparative study of the Satipatthana Sutta with a text called the Mahamudra Pranidhana. Pranidhana means Vow or Prayer, so that's 'Prayer of Mahamudra'.

In some ways you could hardly find a greater contrast. The Satipatthana is very analytical. Essentially it's a four part list to memorise – of what you need to be aware of in order to gain Enlightenment, and the manner in which you need to do that. First you need, the Buddha says, to be aware of body - of your body breathing, your body posture, your body activity, your body's anatomy, of the four physical elements - and to contemplate the impermanence of all that (using, as meditation object, a decomposing body). Then you need to be aware of each feeling - how pleasant or painful it is, how worldly or unworldly it is. Thirdly, you need to be aware of your mind state - is this ordinary greed hate delusion, or is it less ordinary - is my mind concentrated, become great, or even liberated. And fourthly, you need to be aware of the objects of your mind's attention, moment by moment, and check them against various dharma categories - ask, is *this* mental object one of the five hindrances, or the five skandhas? If it's a sense experience, will it give rise to one of the ten fetters? Or to one of awakening factors, the *bodhyangas*? And how does it relate to the Four Noble Truths?

And the manner in which you should be aware of body, feeling, mind and mind-object is with a fiery diligence for actualising the Path: that is, (in Pali) with *aatapii*. You should be fully present, right here, on the ball, in the present moment: in other words, should have *sati*. And you should clearly know exactly what you are trying to achieve in each moment in view of the Path: that is, have *sampajaana*. And finally, if you are actually going to be able to do that, effectively, you have to be quite unpressured by desires and discontentment.

That's a brief content summary of the Satipatthana. It's a text we all know. It is basic dharma; mindfulness is also *the* essential Buddhist practice. It's the core practice without which there can be no progress on the path. Mindfulness is not easy, actually. Or at least, many of us don't find it so. I sometimes even get an impression that some people feel guilty about their inability to practice mindfulness. And then I sometimes wonder if there is something about the Satipatthana's form of instruction, or at least in the way we in the Order tend to interpret that instruction, that is a little discouraging. Maybe even somewhat uninspiring. Mindfulness is undeniably a good thing, yet here it may start to appear unpalatable, somehow.

That's partly why I was interested in the Mahamudra Pranidhana. Its language is so very different, even though it also tells you what you need to be aware of, and it also tells you in what manner you

need to be aware. It is amazing that it contains essentially the same instruction, but couched in language that is highly inspirational. Each verse is a prayer: May I always meet and never stray from the unerring dharma, the Twofold Reality, the ground of experience that is the heart-mind, free from ego positioning, that is clarity and emptiness both at once. May I gain certainty in this, and may the Dharmakaya, which is the heart of all experience whatsoever, be revealed by this great Vajra Yoga.

That's the flavour of the text. Long ago I was in conversation with Bhante and some others. We were talking about how difficult it was to practice mindfulness – yes, a perennial topic - and I had a flash of inspiration. I said 'it's because we don't actually *want* to do it. You have to want to do it'. Bhante thought this was a good point, and I've been working on it ever since, with varying degrees of success! But what struck me about the Mahamudra Pranidhana verses is that they are all about wanting. A prayer is a wish; it's very much from the heart. Oh, may I always meet the dharma, face to face. May I always realise that my immediate experience is none other than the Dharmakaya. My working ground, my point of practice is always *this*. May I realise what that means, in all its amazing significance, all the time. May this be the case. May I gain certainty in this truth. It is what I really really want, I never wanted anything else but I keep forgetting. May I never forget this again.

I find this pranidhana very inspiring. It helps me feel inspired about Satipatthana, too.

Recently I have been thinking about the characteristic flavour of the FWBO approach to the Dharma. What is it? What's our dharma? Is it mindfulness? Probably it should be, but if it's not, let me suggest *interconnectedness*. That may not have occurred to you before, but consider it for a moment, anyway. Interconnectedness is an important Mahayana way of looking at ultimate reality – an expression of the ultimate vision of pratityasamutpada or universal conditionality. The absolute interconnectedness of all dharmas, all things whatever; their interpenetration, their interbeing. It's Indra's jewelled net. It's the Avatamsaka view of simultaneity and Totality. It's the universe in a grain of sand. It's I am you and you are me, and we are we, and we are all together (as John Lennon once said).

No doubt we have some way to go before so exalted a viewpoint could be said to be characteristic of us; but certainly in the WBO we have always had a very strong emphasis on *connection*. It's very noticeable from the outside. I recently visited a Buddhist friend in Bristol who teaches in the Dzogchen tradition, and as well as talking a lot about the dharma we of course got on to the subject of the FWBO. What he wanted to know was, how do we do it? What is it that draws so many people? And more than that, what is it that keeps us together? I said an important reason is the sense of connection we all have with everyone in the Order. And we have always emphasised this. We meet one another and we commit to one another. It's an important part of being an Order member that we have weekly Order meetings, and all kinds of larger Order gatherings. We have Shabda every month – it's a magazine of personal reports – all about maintaining connection. We Order members really get to know one another extensively, continuously, over our whole lives. We track one another, we feel that we practice alongside one another. We are continually providing reference points for one another.

the need for harmony amongst teachers

This deep connectedness acts as a 'container' that can hold, and eventually allow the resolution of disharmonies that will inevitably arise amongst such a diversity of Order members. There is currently an important example of this. There seems to be quite some discrepancy between teaching work done at Centres and what people can learn on retreats led by OMs not affiliated to any particular centre. Someone coming on one of my retreats might learn the six element practice. On Vasumitra's, they'll get perfection of wisdom style dialogue. Or Viveka will teach them Dzogchen; or Padmadevi will teach Pure Awareness. From Sona, they'll get Anapanasati in 16 stages. Then they'll go back to their local centre. And the Order members there, who may be quite new and inexperienced, may have to deal with some rather specialised questions about meditation. Of course the local teacher may be very experienced, but still know next to nothing about Anapanasati or Dzogchen.

This discrepancy can create misunderstandings. Centre teachers can view these independent teachers as individualistic, ego building, teaching inappropriately to newcomers, just confusing them. Independent teachers can then feel distrusted. In turn, they can start resenting some centre teaching

work because it can seem so limited, so lacking in perspective. It can look like empire building; it can look like meditation taught by the book. This in turn may also create distrust. Forgive me for exaggerating the polarity somewhat; and no doubt the real situation at centres is more complex. But there does seem to be an issue, and when I first saw it, it really gave me a big nudge. The suggestions below (under 'evolving a fresh view') are conceived as a way to establish greater harmony amongst us.

the issue of insight training

There have been other nudges as well, indicating deeper elements of disharmony still contained within the Order's web. The element that has most struck me arose along with the great process of review that has been under way since Bhante started passing on his responsibilities. I don't really like to raise the spectre of the FWBO Files, but I believe they have played an important role in our process. I know in many ways it was an odious document - its intention seemed solely to harm, it used highly improper arguments, its author hid under a cloak of anonymity, etc. Nonetheless, from its own perhaps rather rigid point of view, it seems to have been sincerely motivated. And that raised important questions about Bhante and his relation to the Order – questions we had not faced before, questions which might have remained unfaced had we not been publicly attacked.

One's enemies can sometimes prove helpful; for despite the hostile presentation of the Files, they forced us to look at issues that genuinely troubled some of our fellow Buddhists. The issues may have been wrongly conceived, but before we could feel comfortable dismissing them, we needed to understand them. That's why the Files caused such an upheaval: when they appeared in 1997 it wasn't at all easy for us to understand what was coming at us. For thirty years we'd remained in virtual isolation from the growing western Buddhist world, while at the same time being vocally critical of many of its aspects. This stance was no doubt justified in some ways, and other Buddhist groups had operated similarly. Yet it was inevitable this would eventually meet some kind of retribution; it was bound to cause confusion and misunderstanding, both within and without our movement.

Most of us disagreed strongly with the idea that Bhante's Dharma training was inadequate. His own account shows that as a monk in India he'd been self trained to quite a large extent, but we didn't see that as an inadequacy. It seemed to many of us that his very independence qualified him as a teacher. We knew Bhante had special abilities as a communicator and interlocutor, qualities that would enable him to discover the truth. And wherever he'd got it, he'd clearly acquired deep spiritual experience, kindness and commitment. He had obviously learned richly from his teachers. And to prove it, he had received their blessing to act as a Dharma teacher. So all this amounted to sufficient qualification for Bhante to teach us the Dharma. Thus I, for one, didn't need Bhante to have had the monastic or yogic training of a Tibetan tulku. Such things seemed of little relevance. There is emphasis in certain Buddhist circles of the essential need for an 'authentic teacher' – which is perfectly right, but it seems to me that authenticity has little to do, necessarily, with training. I see an authentic teacher as one who is both realised and able to communicate the realisation, at least to some people. This is something Bhante is, and it is what he has done. How he managed it is a secondary matter. I think I speak for others in saying that what I needed from him was not to be a monastic or a yogin - but to have a fine brain, to be very articulate in English, and to have a deep, extensive and emotional understanding of both European and Buddhist cultures. I needed him to be available, and to teach abundantly; he did all that.

Bhante had been fortunate to know personally many eminent teachers and to receive many important teachings from them. The alleged disqualification seemed to be that he hadn't received from them a thorough monastic or yogic training - the kind he would have obtained had he been born, say, in Tibet, or lived in a monastery over many years – a degree of training that has been made available to westerners only in recent decades. It seems to me that such training is secondary to one's overall Dharma training, and my impression is that Bhante received the latter especially from his teachers Yogi Chen, Jagdish Kasyap, Kachu Rinpoche and Dhardo Rinpoche. It seems, moreover, to have been well understood, deeply reflected upon, and transmitted with integrity.

Everyone has limitations. Not having a full monastic or yogic training must represent a limitation of some kind - but how is one to assess its effects? Bhante received from his teachers a training that

was full and deep, but non-specialised. What we received from him were basic principles that would need to be filled out gradually as the movement developed. And that was very appropriate for our needs in the 70s. Most of us were young and naïve, and Bhante quite rightly trained us in basic dharma – not in esoteric teachings we would be incapable of putting into effect. We were well educated in dharma study, meditation and ethics, with a stress – at least, by the 80s - on teaching others.

Maybe that outgoing Mahayana emphasis absorbed too much of our energy. For in the 90s an inconsistency came into view as we emerged into the light of world Buddhism. Insight is fundamental to Buddhist realisation, the basis of the Buddha's Enlightenment and his path leading to Enlightenment. But we were not emphasising training in insight. We clearly taught the principle of insight, but we did not emphasise training in it. This has, in my view, led to some dilution of confidence in the effectiveness of our methods as means to Enlightenment.

I think this may be one of the reasons why some Order members have resigned in recent years, why a number have apparently taken a diminished interest in the Order, and why quite a number are exploring teachings outside it. As an Order member myself, while I feel a deep loyalty and connection with our Dharma teachings and Sangha, I feel uneasy that there is so little emphasis on insight training. It can make it seem that our teachings and lifestyles are only theoretically about actual realisation of Dharma. Where there is little emphasis on insight training, our friendly centres, community houses and workplaces may appear disappointingly lacking in spiritual edge.

In saying this I do not feel at all unappreciative of the many inspiring aspects of our work. Yet vipashyana alone is what turns 'Buddhism' into Buddhadharma. It is not that we do not teach it in the FWBO, nor is it that we do not try to practice it. It is of course implicit in all dharma teaching, and we do, generally, try to practice vipashyana. Yet generally, I believe, both our teaching and our practice has tended to be hampered by the way we have imbibed it. Our way of transmission and practice is changing now, but there seem to have been strong conditioning factors.

I think these are worth exploring. I realise not everyone is going to share my reading of our past. I would welcome more considered attempts at understanding our roots, for we are all conditioned by historical facts and there is much we need to learn about what has happened. And I feel I must discuss this issue of vipashyana in the WBO in terms of our conditioning, even though my reading of the actual conditioning factors may be imperfect. So please be patient.

I feel we are strongly influenced by one fact in particular: Sangharakshita started the Western Buddhist Order on his own. Despite Bhante's inheritance from his own dharma teachers, and despite his enormous empathy and breadth of character, aloneness inevitably confers constraints. Members of traditional Buddhist groups usually have access to an extended Sangha of teachers with a variety of viewpoints and experience. That kind of Sangha is what the WBO is now developing into, but it has taken us many years to get to that stage. There is much further to go before our tradition is as rich in teachers. Yet we have taken some important steps on that road.

I started seeing our need for training in insight after living for a few years at Vajraloka. Indeed, it seemed that Bhante also saw the need, because at one point in the mid eighties he asked me to go and explore 'vipassana' meditation. This was the ten day retreat variety popularised in particular by S.N.Goenka, a lay Theravada teacher. Bhante had taught us vipashyana in seminars, in talks, and through personal example. But he now saw, it seems, our need to learn more thoroughly from those with special experience teaching insight. Speaking of Goenka etc., he said we should "Go and take a leaf from their book" (he intended that we should then place that leaf in our own book rather than discarding ours for theirs).

The vipassana retreat that I subsequently attended influenced me profoundly. Just to mention one example: I sat in meditation interviews for the first time. That was revelatory – and generally, I encountered a more direct, hands-on way of meditation teaching. But what impressed me above all was the insight perspective that was brought to the teaching. I was certainly shy of speaking about insight then; I'd been ordained only ten years. But in the FWBO of those days, such talk was almost a complete no-no. The fear then (and even now its ghost persists) was that any such talk would imply a claim to some degree of insight – and any such claim, even if merely implied, would be the height of

bad taste.

Though I saw the underlying point, I began to question that way of thinking. It seemed to derive from the movement's birth in 1967, the year of flower power, when every acid-head in London thought he might be enlightened. People had stopped doing that kind of thing years ago; and in any case, surely one can expect at least some minor insights from regular dharma practice. Indeed, surely one ought to expect some major ones. Why else would one be practising?

So I learned, from that ten day retreat, how vital the insight perspective is for communicating the nature of any dharma practice, even of basic topics like ethics, which are often presented as having little connection with Enlightenment. What I mean by 'an insight perspective' is that one teaches in a manner that communicates that Buddhist meditation leads to liberation. You assume that liberation is what your students need, and indeed expect, from meditation. Of course you don't present insight meditation to your students in an insensitive, fire and brimstone kind of way; it is simply built into the way you yourself think about the dharma. You know from your own experience that all beings suffer from their self-identification, their fixed habits, and their lack of courage; you know that the dharma, and hence the meditation, is all about dismantling those three fetters. So that's the way you think. It's your view of the Buddhist path, so naturally it's the way you teach it.

The more you know from experience that your view is true, the more convincing you'll be in your communication of it. For it is experience that really communicates; people know intuitively when you're doing it by the book. That's why at first I was shy of talking in terms of insight. But then I realised that doing it by the book can be OK – and that I *had* to do it by the book to some extent. It would send very odd signals if I pretended I knew everything I was talking about. It seems to me that honesty is not only best policy for teachers, it is actually a practice that encourages insights. I realised that if I always tried to learn from others, I'd always be open and in that way, able to communicate. Of course the particular words you utter do have some effect - but it seems that what most comes across to others is who you are, and your attitude to what you are doing.

Sangharakshita says that as a teacher it is very important to clearly state whether one is speaking from personal experience, from one's own reasoning, or from tradition.

I had to learn all that for myself. I learned Buddhism from Bhante, in theory and practice. I also learned from his example as a dharma teacher and meditation teacher. But I didn't get any special training in teaching insight meditation. He did not advise me how to conduct meditation interviews, or what to say when people started telling me their meditation experiences. I did ask him about these things, and would have appreciated some training, but no doubt there simply was no opportunity, since Bhante's work was largely in town where the people were, and mine was at a specialist and relatively inaccessible retreat centre. For whatever reason, I had to provide my own training from my own experience. That is fair enough, no doubt. I feel I have managed it to some extent. Anyway for now, until our own training is more established, that's what we all have to do.

Meditation interviews are, of course, just one method that a teacher can use. There no fixed rules about it. But some kind of collective understanding of principle is needed. And there has, in fact, been training available in the Order for many years. Vajraloka I think have held dozens of teachers' retreats – at least for Dharmacharis. They've often not been popular, I'm told, which makes one wonder why. There are various occasional forums and meetings for teachers. There is an online meditation teachers' forum. There may be more resources I don't know about... But I do feel that we have not yet created an engaging platform for meditation teachers. On the whole each Order member has learned teaching in his or her own way, independent of other teachers in the Order. Using Bhante's term, we tend to be individualists. It could be that our penchant for encouraging almost all Order members to see themselves as meditation teachers has furthered this tendency.

Bhante distinguishes 'a meditation teacher' from someone who simply teaches basic meditation at a centre. He calls a 'meditation teacher' someone widely recognised as having had long experience both in practising and teaching meditation, and who has taught in a variety of different venues. So any Order member might aspire to be a centre teacher, but a meditation teacher, in Bhante's view, is someone who has made a special emphasis on meditation in their own life. They are also a dharma teacher, not just a teacher of dhyana meditation, and therefore need to be an exemplar of both

shamatha and vipashyana.

I said earlier that our independence as teachers can in some ways condition disharmony. We have to take responsibility for this. Bhante has now retired and now we all share collective responsibility for the spiritual vitality of the Order. It's good that this comes at a time when many of us have ample experience of the Buddhist Path. So now's clearly the time to create a more dynamic platform for dharma teachers.

evolving a fresh view of meditation teaching

Last year Subhuti spoke of the need for a coherence. I agree that's desirable, to the extent it's possible. So when Subhuti and I got together last year, we were looking out for what would enable that. We said we'd like to change the way we all relate to one another as dharma teachers and students. We'd like more connection, we'd like to encourage individual practitioners to have their own dharma teachers and mentors (as they need). This very much includes the teachers. That seems very important. If we connect up more, there will be more mutual respect, and more opportunities for teachers to learn from one another. I think we can all help each other in that way.

Subhuti and I also decided we'd like to evolve a new overview of our meditation teaching. Evolve it through dialogue, especially with practising dharma teachers. This overview clearly needs to *incorporate the concerns and discoveries people have made in recent years*. A lot of good things have emerged, just to give one example, from the explorations of Pure Awareness meditation. But also, we thought that our system needs to *honour the tradition of meditation given us by Bhante*. We will have to acknowledge our roots if we're ever to grow any new branches. We need to honour our root teacher for the considerable understanding that he has passed on to us.

Then we thought it wasn't enough that our tradition of meditation should have room for recent discoveries. It should also have *room for new discoveries*. It needs to be open, capable of further development, not a closed book. And finally, we thought this overview of meditation needs to be *comprehensive and easy to understand*. Obviously. We don't want it to be obscure and complex.

Actually it strikes me that for us Order members, there isn't really much wrong with Bhante's good old 'system' of meditation. Concentration, positive emotion, spiritual death, spiritual rebirth and just sitting. It emphasises vipashyana as well as shamatha. It honours Bhante's tradition. And it is easy to understand, because we are all familiar with its principles.

I like Bhante's 'system' because it's so concise. But maybe for practical teaching, it's a bit too concise. We thought we needed to flesh it out a bit. So to start the dialogue going, we met with Tejananda and Vajradaka to ask this question: what do all meditators need to train in, right from the start, from a beginner's level on? And our discussion produced seven trainings, plus that idea of teachers connecting up.

So let me know what you think of these.

the suggested seven trainings

First we thought there is what we could call the spirit of practice. This is how practice is seen, our attitude to it. Part of our practice is our dharma view. It is Right view, in fact. There's a vision which sparks the energy we need actually to travel the dharma path. This spirit is ethical, and also it's existential-cum-visionary. I think beginners will always get this in some form, good or bad, in their very first class. They will automatically get some sense of our dharma attitude. But if we appreciate it ourselves, we will improve the way we transmit it.

Second comes faith, or confidence, or *shraddha*. No doubt this is linked to right view, but it's a whole way of practice in itself. People do need encouraging and inspiring, and it's something that needs taking into account right from the start. I think for example it's worth making something of the link with Buddhist tradition, however lightly we do that. Just to mention we practice as part of a living tradition, even just in passing, creates a tiny channel down which inspiration can flow from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. And as people make progress there are many ways to increase their ability to find self-confidence. This is of course the link into chanting, puja and devotional practice. In principle though, it's however we refresh our connection with the living tradition.

Third comes mindfulness. Awareness itself. The root practice within which the whole path comes

alive. Mindfully I breath in and out, mindfully I link into metta for all beings and notice my reactivity, mindfully I recollect the impermanence and emptiness of everything. Mindfully I recollect my Buddha nature, my potential that is actual - here, now, and always. The dharma is present all the time. We all think that mindfulness is intrinsic to the path of meditation and that it should be introduced in some way right from the start.

Fourth comes reflection on the dharma. Each of the three aspects I've mentioned introduces the dharma to some extent. The spirit of practice introduces the dharma, maybe simply in spirit, though it could also be more theoretical. Faith, courage, empowerment comes *from* the dharma, it needs to be recalled to make it work. Mindfulness actually *is* the dharma; it's where we bring a dharmic reality to life.

But we also need a more formal introduction to its conceptualisations of ultimate reality. People need to be offered specific dharma ideas to consider and have turning over in their minds. Like impermanence, emptiness, compassion, non-self, and non-violence. Ideas like these can be introduced in some form, even just in seed form, for reflection, right from the start, right in the very first class, and we thought they should be.

Fifth, sixth and seventh in our suggested list of universal trainings are - the practices. Fifth the anapanasati or mindfulness of breathing; sixth the metta bhavana or development of universal love, and finally just sitting. I'll go into each of these in a minute. Let me first explain that the seven are not listed in a particular order. I've ordered them in a way that highlights the spirit of the practice flowing through to influence the practice itself. You could equally put it all the other way round. And we didn't include more specialist practices like sadhana here, since this is a set of basic trainings. There are many ways all this could be used, and remember it is suggested in a spirit of inclusion of discovery and exploration.

So on to *anapanasati*. Over a very long period, right back to the early eighties, concerns have been voiced about the FWBO approach to what has been called 'bhavana' meditation - which means meditation through which one aims to *develop* some quality or other, rather than exploring and experiencing the mind's nature as it is. In the case of the anapanasati, one is usually *developing* concentration and dhyana – though that is not the only possible approach.

The concerns were mostly about what Bhante called wilfulness. That is, a hard, forcing approach in which one tries to make something happen without reference to one's present state of mind. Perhaps we could characterise wilfulness in terms of lack of respect for oneself. It is something one can do in a harsh and even violent way. Sometimes Buddhist teachings, and certain FWBO ideas, get interpreted in a way that encourages wilfulness. For example we have started to realise that the dhyana approach can be misunderstood. People who are inclined to self-hatred may easily misinterpret such teachings, for example. Rather than heeding the Buddha's parable of the Vina, whose strings should be neither overtaut nor too loose, it is amazing how harshly some people can talk to themselves in meditation. If I may exaggerate a little, someone might tell themselves, "Look, if you are not in dhyana, and you are almost certainly not, you are experiencing one or more, perhaps all, of the hindrances. And if that is the case, and it almost certainly is the case, your task is to work to get out of them. But you really have to know that doing that is a very considerable task which you almost certainly cannot do. It is traditionally said to be something few people achieve at all in their entire lifetime. So let's be realistic. For you it is hardly going to be achievable outside ideal retreat conditions. And you are not in retreat conditions, so you might as well give up. (Or, if you ARE in retreat conditions, you might as well go home, since you are clearly getting nowhere.)"

I am exaggerating. But we know now that many people have found our dhyana-centred approach terribly discouraging. They ended up forcing the pace which then produced a complex of unfortunate habits. And I think our vision of meditation has to bear that in mind. It's funny, this has been such a big issue, and I think a lot of it arose simply from our not acknowledging the problem. In a way it is just a little imbalance. In itself the dhyana model is perfectly OK; it is very traditional Buddhism and it is true that dhyana is an excellent support for insight. Neither dhyana nor vipashyana are easy of attainment; both require sustained application and effort. In Bhante's opinion, the greater danger is that of making too little effort. But effort needs to be of the right kind; the lute strings need properly

tuning. For some time we were too inexperienced to deal with westerners' problems in relation to effort and will. We avoided the issue and that led, I think, to narrowness and collusion. Some of us tried to fit into the accepted view and felt constrained to say only what we imagined we were supposed to say. It is of course understandable that people try to say what is right, but it is important to distinguish that from conformity.

One important issue that sprang from all this was the importance of language. The language we use as teachers affects so much the way people will talk to themselves in meditation; the way people try to articulate to themselves what is happening in their practice.

On the practice of anapanasati, we have seen some very positive new openings in the last few years. The main one has perhaps been the strong interest aroused by the 16 stage method that's found in the Anapanasati Sutta, and which has been popularised by modern Theravada teachers. Other openings have come through the multifaceted vipassana movement via teachers such as Goenka, U Bha Khin, Christopher Titmuss, Jack Kornfield, U Pandita and many others. Relations with outside teachers is an important topic which I will go into later. The main thing, perhaps, for our new openness to other traditions, is that we seek to integrate whatever we find useful into our overall vision.

On now to *metta bhavana*, the sixth area we thought all meditators should train in. There's less to say here because the main problem voiced in recent years seems identical to what we've just discussed in the context of anapanasati. It's wilfulness, forced practice and associated problems – which may, ironically, prevent meditators making effort in the right kind of way. I think that once something like that has been spotted, acknowledged and accepted as an issue, it's not a problem in the same sense. The teaching of the Vina can be applied, and wilfulness is exposed as an extreme that people will naturally tend towards. They just need warning about it. We just need to be given some model of right practice, some middle way teaching. Forced practice increases anxiety and distraction; on the other hand, if one took no initiative in meditation, one would become dull and doubtful.

Wouldn't one? Well... if I may be a little provocative for a moment, I'm not so sure we do have to take initiative in meditation, in a way. Why not just be open to what's actually there? Why cover over one's actual mental state with activity? This kind of conundrum is always there when we start thinking about what happens in meditation, and it makes a good transition to the seventh and final area.

That is, *Just Sitting*. We have neglected this part of Bhante's 'system' of meditation. And we even continued to neglect it when in recent years he redefined what he had originally meant by 'Just Sitting'. I would like us to take Just Sitting much more seriously. To my knowledge - at least until I went away on my long retreat - we didn't teach Just Sitting as equally important with the metta bhavana and anapanasati. We just did it if it seemed appropriate; it was definitely a secondary practice. It was sometimes done on special retreats, and occasionally at other times. But in Bhante's lecture 'A 'System' of Meditation', Just Sitting is not only of equal importance to other methods, it is stated to be what brings the system of meditation to completion. He says it's 'in this way [that] we achieve a perfectly balanced practice of meditation, and a perfectly balanced spiritual life'. I find it quite amazing that we missed that. I also have to say it seems amazing that he *let* us miss it for so many years!

In his lecture Bhante makes another statement about Just Sitting that reads very ironically nowadays. He says Just Sitting is very necessary because it's this kind of 'non-practice' that can counteract the possibility of wilful meditation. How ironic it is that after twenty years of unease about the wilfulness occasioned by our developmental style of meditation, to realise that he'd prescribed an antidote alongside them, right from the beginning, but we ignored it. For in his lecture, Bhante recommends alternating sessions of 'willed' meditation with sessions of Just Sitting.

We strongly suggest all meditators are introduced to this element of Just Sitting right from the start. Different 'kinds' of just sitting can be practised on different levels. It can be an initial period of quiet sitting to set up for meditation; it could be a post meditation session where you sit on in the state of calm it generates; or it could be a separate, formal session of just sitting after another meditation. And as our dharma reflection deepens, there will come a point at which a practitioner will become more

aware, at least in theory, that what they are just sitting 'in' is the nature of mind, reality itself. At this point just sitting becomes much more of an insight practice, and perhaps then it's appropriate to speak in the terms of pure awareness that we've been using.

(I don't know, I don't quite like that term. I think our terminology should be allowed to clarify in its own time.)

Anyway to summarise: we could say that at the initial stages of meditation, Just Sitting encourages an open, relaxed and spontaneous approach which counteracts the ego tendency known as wilfulness. And at more advanced stages it begins to assume a vipashyana dimension. By the way this very natural way in to insight, I would say, will help balance any ego tendency that might come from any seeking of forced vipashyana through thought based reflection.

So here for discussion is our suggested list of essential trainings – apart from the important issue of connecting as teachers, which I want to discuss in some depth (note that I get to my actual suggestion in the final page or so).

our work as teachers (and as students)

For me, this last is the most important of these suggestions. It is pointing at ourselves. The important thing in teaching meditation is not the categories we teach, or even the way everything fits together doctrinally. Those things are not unimportant - we have to use concepts on the Buddhist path - but what is important is how we ourselves make the path real through meditation. That is what we need to do ourselves, and it's that that as teachers, we then need to communicate.

At present, my general impression is that practice doesn't come across enough in our meditation teaching. The path itself is not made out to be sufficiently real. We are somehow not very rigorous about the point of it all. Maybe that has started to change in the freedom of the last two years. But we do need to talk more about it. It could be that our reluctance to walk that particular talk is a reason why there are so many people now training with other Buddhist groups who originally started with the Friends. They were happy with the way we introduced them to the dharma, but they eventually moved on to something they found more spiritually satisfying.

Now we have to recognise that's good for them. We did something important for them, and it's a case of rejoicing in merits all round. It would be inappropriately cult-like if we thought only in terms of keeping people. But still, this population shift seems to indicate something in our teaching we need to consider. Our Dharma teaching is excellent as a general introduction. But on the whole it later seems not to hit the deepest notes *in experience* - there's no question it does in theory. Some people don't get that sense that they are on a path to insight and enlightenment. We almost seem not to think in that way. Please understand that I am generalising, my experience of the movement is limited, and is certainly wrong in places. But I really don't hear a lot of talk about insight and enlightenment. We talk a lot about other things. We are quite talkative as a movement in fact.

I think the main motif of the WBO is friendship. That is no bad thing at all - *at all* - but friendship as a path to enlightenment does not speak to everyone. It doesn't inspire me, for example - not spiritually, anyway. I'm certainly into friendship. It strikes me that friendliness is a necessary aspect of Enlightenment... but Enlightenment is not necessary for friendship. I sometimes wonder if friendship has become some kind of substitute practice for us. As, in a similar way, I understand many Theravadins believe that in this degenerate age, full Enlightenment is no longer a possibility, so Buddhists should focus on generating merit rather than insight.

I hesitate to criticise our culture of friendship, because it's manifestly a good thing, it is what makes those all important connections, it's probably why we are all here in the first place... and it's the basis for a brilliant approach to western Buddhism. I appreciate all that and I want to protect it. I am a part of a movement of friendship and I love that. However, it's still helpful for us to see any limitations in that approach. As with many of our prominent ideas, it seems to derive, partly of course from Buddhist scripture, but also from Bhante's early perceptions and judgements. Our emphasis on friendship seems to have arisen, alongside our de-emphasis on insight, as a response to the English who were around in the early sixties. Many of these really seem to have been quite weird. The monks teaching at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, and the lay people who were attracted and

became their unfortunate victims... and ended up, we're told, in mental hospitals... we just don't seem to get people like that any more! Forty years have passed, and the 21st century Buddhist world is so different. It is so mainstream, so established, middle class and respectable - to an extent that I sometimes think we've gone too far (but then I am a sixties person). Buddhist people nowadays seem so, so normal and socially adjusted. Even in the FWBO, there are quite a few such people! I don't say this to imply that we don't all benefit from the emphasis on friendship. But some Order members still seem instinctively to distrust the notion of 'vipassana' or insight. For example, there still seems some over caution about the possibility of 'alienated awareness'. That was Bhante's term for a very extreme form of disconnection from feeling, which apparently was a common result of practices taught at the London Vihara. My observation is that it is pretty much a non-issue these days. I feel it's time we learned other lessons.

Before we can do so, though, I feel we need also to be more personal in our meditation teaching. This has not been Bhante's approach on the whole, and since his influence has been so strong, to change will require us to undo some collective conditioning. Now I have seen for myself how it works, I no longer feel critical of Bhante for taking the approach he did. For a while, when I first noticed this in the late 80s, I used to blame him, but now I think I understand his position better. I also don't think it is a problem – it's just something we need to adjust to.

I was the chairman at Vajraloka from the beginning of the eighties, and Bhante gave me a lot of encouragement to teach and take initiative, especially after I became an anagarika. On that vipassana retreat I mentioned, it was a revelation to me how the retreat leader took the role of *personal* meditation teacher. That was something completely new to me. Thereafter it slowly dawned on me that Bhante just did not do that in any ongoing way. (I mean, of course, that he did not do so with me. For all I know, he may have done with some individuals, or even deliberately trained certain people. He always seems ready to give helpful advice.)

At that time I was responsible for a great deal of meditation teaching. Bhante very much encouraged me in that, and his attention made me expect that he would advise me somehow. Of course he did so on rare occasions, but not in any ongoing way. He just seemed to trust me to 'get on with it' - which was rather flattering. Before the revelation that arose on the vipassana retreat, I had come to assume that my infrequent chats with Bhante about meditation practice 'were' the training. 'Get on with it, you're doing fine' seemed to be his style, and I felt no cause for complaint. I felt well affirmed by his attitude, and anyway there was plenty of excellent dharma to absorb. This was still the time when Bhante was regularly doing study seminars.

But of course, his style of education affected my own teaching and practice. Though Bhante was invariably kind and friendly towards me, he seemed disinterested in the details of my practice. Generally, his approach seemed to be to school us in principles, let us work out the details and ask any questions through our own practice. Fair enough; nowadays I have no quarrel with that. Then, I was confused about it, at first unknowingly. Clarity arose very slowly. It took me nearly twenty years of internal conflict fully to feel OK with that approach, and its implications. The discomfort was partly because I felt alone - during that time I heard of no-one else who found this problematic. I know now that others had similar misgivings, but it wouldn't have been an easy thing to talk about, even if one could have found someone to confide in. Within my own mind, I either couldn't articulate what the problem was, or insisted to myself it wasn't a problem. I took comfort in ideas that were true enough so far as they went, but which addressed the issue only superficially. I told myself that I didn't need a guru who would 'give me all the answers', and that having to work things out for oneself is always a good thing. Thus I reassured myself.

Well, of course what's false in being reassured by the latter notion is that one may not realise what one needs to work out. That's why I now think it is preferable, if possible, to work continuously with a teacher - better still a whole range of teachers, advisors, friends and mentors. Especially if one is teaching. But that may not be available to you, as I now see it was not available to me in the eighties. I can see now that I expected too much of Bhante. In founding a Buddhist movement in the west – alone - Bhante simply could not do and be everything to everyone. My expectation was naïve. In many ways the encouragement to work things out in my own way really appeals to me. By nature, I

am very capable of working things out for myself. To a fault. Anyone who knows me will confirm that I strongly resist taking advice. I am very stubborn; I am very individualistic. Yet I do meditate, so there is some element of reflection and self-questioning in me. I do know I need at least occasionally to bounce off others, to seek advice and take feedback. And my still recent long solitary retreat taught me even more about my relations with others. In a kind of deep-ecology, interconnected sense, being alone in nature taught me that you can never actually be alone, and that you ignore the fact of others' influence at your peril.

our place in the great mandala

Anyway, be that as it may, I had accepted some time before I went away on that retreat that Bhante could not be my personal meditation teacher. And why should he be, I thought. Moreover, why should I worry, because in any case there's a whole world of good advice out there, available to everyone.

If I look beyond the FWBO mandala wall, I see a far bigger mandala - and I see that - amazingly - I am already part of it. I've been playing a part in it for over thirty years. It was a wonderful realisation when I first saw that I am already established in this inspiring mandala. I don't mean I'd been in some special relationship with other Buddhists all that time. I'd been strengthening my connection with other Buddhists simply because I practice the dharma. It was like realising I already live in the Pure Land. Being a member of the WBO enriches my participation in that mandala. Being an Order member means I am connected to a vast number of human beings with whom I can communicate easily if I want; and with many of them, I can open my heart just as I can with many Order members. The heart link is in them as well as me, because they've made similar changes in their lives to those I've made. They too have been practising the dharma for years. I realise we are brothers and sisters in the great mandala, the Buddha Kula, the noble Buddha family.

In the years before I saw that, my thoughts about these dharma brothers and sisters were really quite strange. I have to acknowledge that. There is definitely some kind of inherited FWBO conditioning around other Buddhist groups. One day I'll try to work out what was going on. It is probably something we all need to do, but I'll leave this one up to you.

It was while living at Madhyamaloka that I started wanting to connect to other Buddhists. Several of the community were into making diplomatic connections and I found that very interesting. This was also the time when Tejananda and I were writing into Shabda about what Just Sitting meditation is. I was critiquing his analysis; I couldn't see that it was any more 'spatial' than 'developmental', or any less 'developmental', really, than any other practice. But then Tejananda came to Madhyamaloka and spoke to Bhante. I don't know if they discussed the nature of the practice, or agreed on Tejananda's analysis, but I was told that Bhante had agreed that Just Sitting should be promoted and done much more.

That gave me a big shock because I had been thinking the opposite. The shock made me realise that I hardly knew a thing about Just Sitting. I'd been writing into Shabda, debating with Tejananda some kind of understanding of what we were doing. Yet what ways did we have of verifying that understanding? What ways did anyone have - indeed, what ways did Bhante have, did Tejananda have? What was the value in discussing it, and promoting the practice, when we knew so little about it - when we had learned so little about it? Or so it seemed, at least. Bhante's teaching of Just Sitting had been extremely enigmatic: he'd usually chuckle and say there was nothing to be said about it, except perhaps that you just sit! I'm sure there was something in the twinkle with which he'd say that. However, lots of us had done lots of Just Sitting practice, over lots of years, and we were still practising it in the dark. I felt we needed answers to the questions that arose, or at least dialogue. I felt we needed a better context for understanding the practice. I mean, even nowadays a lot of Order members find the issue of 'pure awareness' baffling. In those days, we didn't even know what issue we were baffled by. All we, or at least I, could see was a forest of question marks—perhaps the first stirring of questions that eventually led to the explorations that people are doing now. It was not really useful any more simply to say - as we now said, of course, to those who came to our classes - 'There is nothing to be said - You Just Sit'. I wanted to know why, I wanted to know how. I wanted others to know, I wanted to know how to tell them. And I wanted not to have to work it out for myself

any longer because I had done that as much as I could on my own.

It wasn't that I felt especially confused. I felt, on the whole, that I had done some good thinking. However, I needed some kind of verification - some way to address my questions. And it seemed Bhante was not going to get into dialogue about them. He could be relied on to come up with answers *if* presented with properly formulated questions. But questions would need to *be* so formulated - intuitive gropings would be insufficient. So what if I didn't get the question quite right? My impression was that if a question was incoherent, Bhante might assume I didn't actually have a question. I wanted issues to be examined through dialogue, to find out in that way what my real questions were, and my underlying reasons for asking them.

About that time I realised I could seek guidance from other Buddhist teachers. That's how I came to study with Shenpen Hookham, for example. I met her when she visited Bhante - she's an old friend of his - and I'd studied a book of hers. *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness* had enjoyed a small following in the FWBO in the early 90s; many of us at Madhyamaloka knew it, and some of us, including Subhuti, had led study on it. And it had conveyed to me, more than anything I'd read, some kind of view of what Just Sitting is about. Moreover, I'd found the way it was expressed extremely accessible.

I was so struck by this quality of accessibility that when I realised I wanted some guidance I immediately thought of Shenpen. I wrote and asked her if she'd teach me something. She responded suggesting the two of us do a short retreat. She and her husband Mike Hookham, (a former student of Bhante's who eventually trained with Chogyam Trungpa), had recently established a retreat centre in Wales. When I arrived, she told me the programme - four sessions of Just Sitting meditation, three lasting two and a half hours, and one of two hours. Inwardly, I blanched. It is true I have occasionally felt inspired to sit for a full two and a half hours without getting up. But it'd never been exclusively the Just Sitting meditation on such occasions, and I'd certainly never sat that way four times in a single day. So I really wondered if I'd be up to it. But then I thought: look Kamalashila, perhaps we're in a bit of a magical realm here. If the teacher thinks you can, maybe you can! So I said nothing, and I was amazed to find that it was very easy to sit that long. I got into the practice and enjoyed it. We'd chat between sessions and I learned tremendously from those few days, I got so much - not only from what I was taught, but even more from the way it was taught. So that was the beginning of some very fruitful contact with a particular non-FWBO teacher.

training with other teachers: some issues

That obviously opens up issues for our meditation and meditation teaching. Because I haven't been the only one doing this in recent years. There has been quite a revolution as dozens, scores, and probably even hundreds of Order members have been realising that they no longer want to rely solely on the limited resources of the current Order. Realising that they positively want to deepen those resources, by getting more experienced advice in the field of insight meditation. Also that they want to explore other kinds of practice, and experience other teachers' perspective.

I realise that there are quite a few Order members who are not exploring like this, and who perhaps view all this spiritual promiscuity with alarm. Before we all polarise into camps, let me try to give some perspective. At this stage we need to step back from things and appreciate who we really are. First off, I do believe it has been perfectly reasonable for us, as for any Buddhist movement, to run a tight ship. Especially at the beginning when all your people are new and in training, you don't encourage them to try different styles whenever they feel like it. And it's the same universally. No Buddhist group encourages their committed students to shop around. Once someone has made a certain commitment, it doesn't make sense to stop and try other things all the time.

But times have changed, and nowadays there are a lot of people who may not be in training, or they may have done that training... perhaps did it years ago. Our 'regulars' these days include very experienced and respectable practitioners who are serious about spiritual life, but don't associate it with ordination. And they may well be interested in other teachers and other perspectives, like any experienced practitioner - just like an Order member in fact.

The part of the Sangha for whom explorations of non-FWBO Buddhist teachings may not be useful

are those who are in training for ordination, or recently ordained. There will be a time when most people want to focus on our tradition pretty exclusively. But then, there are other advantages of such explorations. For example it's good in itself to make contact with other Buddhists, because other Buddhists are our friends! And such friendship is good, not only for us, but for them. There's a real western Buddhism now, that is emerging globally - it isn't just the FWBO. We can no longer be so naïve as to think, as many of us did years ago, that the FWBO *is* western Buddhism! We have a lot to contribute now to an emerging, modern, global, Buddhism. I know that other groups are aware of us and admire many things we do. And we have much to learn from their experience as well. Many groups have been through similar problems to ours. Different groups have worked in different ways, and sometimes learned different things which can benefit us all. Nowadays some of the walls seem to be coming down between Buddhist groups – so let's take advantage of that while it lasts.

Perhaps the main advantage of this kind of networking is what some of us can learn personally. I think I am probably talking now about more senior Order members - but there are a large number of those. And I think they are an incredibly important resource. There seems still a tendency to value highly the fresh inspiration of the newly ordained, and pour scorn on the seemingly tired attitudes of old lags from the eighties and nineties. To me, that seems unhealthy – I suggest we have not acknowledged the issue. It looks to me like another negative inherited pattern, possibly the most polarising of all. The dharma practice of our experienced people is surely a very precious influence. We perhaps need to distinguish the inspiring clarity shining in the eyes of freshly trained Order members at the start of their Buddhist lives, from the far more difficult insights that come from applying the dharma over a lifetime.

I have been wondering if, as an Order, we have sufficient experience of the process of insight to ensure spiritual authenticity into the future. That question is really the nub of what I'm saying. For we have not received much personal guidance in that area – that hasn't been possible, for one reason or another. We have been instructed very clearly in what that area is, but we have not learned, on the whole, how to inhabit it. It's that more experiential learning that we need now. It is not that we *all* need to find an outside teacher who can give us that. I do also believe that we can train ourselves. But some will find another teacher useful. I think it can only be good if they can find someone suitable.

Though that may not always be straightforward; one has to issue a warning here. Other traditions may have very different – and subtly different - views and attitudes towards things like sadhana. It takes experience to be able to filter what is said. If we don't understand the way a traditional teacher is thinking, we can easily get confused and discouraged. Interestingly Bhante has, in fact, trained us quite well in avoiding getting bamboozled by traditional attitudes and assumptions.

connecting meditation teachers

If we are to become more authentic as dharma teachers, able to guide others towards a true realisation of the dharma, then probably the biggest need is for teachers to be in relationship with one another. In that sense it seems to me that we don't yet *have* a tradition. Dharma teachers, meditation teachers can all seem to be pulling in different directions. Members of the WBO are totally independent and that is wonderful. I love our diversity and variety and freedom. However we can lose sight of our connectedness in all that. I think teachers need to make conscious connections with one another as both teachers and students. All teachers naturally have students, and it seems no less natural for all teachers to have teachers. If we teach, we need channels for our own further learning. These days many of us feel able to give meditation interviews to retreatants, but who do we talk to about our own meditation? Who gives *us* advice? Is it our chapter? Is it Bhante? Is it our preceptor? I'd say probably not any of these. I think it is extremely rare for an Order member to have access to really good feedback on their practice.

This means that we rarely have any means of exploring in depth where we are on the path, whether we are developing any insight - whether we are opening up to reality, whether we are really changing. Of course even a teacher won't be able to tell us much about this directly. That isn't normally to be expected; such things are very subtle and difficult to read. What they provide that is so essential is contact with someone more experienced. It's from simply that connection that we gain

some sense of where we are at.

The real issue for the more experienced Order member is how he or she gets truly confident in her meditation and dharma practice, so that she feels courageous enough to let go the fetters. That confidence essentially has to come from ourselves, but we cannot get it entirely on our own. It's in that crucial sense that we all need contact with a personal teacher, at least occasionally. Chapters can do only a little of this work. I would say that all Order members need individual advice, but I would have thought it essential for meditation and dharma teachers, if we are fully to trust them as such. For if a teacher does not have a teacher, I cannot help wondering why not. If I know they do, this somehow enables trust. So this idea of mentoring is part of the set of suggestions that Subhuti, Tejananda, Vajradaka and I are making. I think it is the most important aspect, as I've said. In the end, the rest is just another useful list. The heart of the matter is how you actually practice, and you get to that heart through connecting with a teacher.

We find this a problematic area. There is especially the issue of recognising insight. Insight is the real reason why we meditate and teach meditation; insight and compassion are the spiritual aims of Buddhism. We will therefore expect from a meditation teacher some ability to help us with insight. Now, recognition of insight is a controversial topic in our movement. We've been schooled by Bhante to be very wary of claims to insight, or of anything that might be seen as such a claim. Of course it's right to be exacting, even suspicious, and to be even more careful of implying such claims ourselves. But I think we should not be suspicious to the extent that we do not believe it is even possible for us to gain insight.

I don't have any solution to this issue, but I do think we need to dare to talk about it – it seems somewhat taboo. Yet a way round the taboo may stem from something I remember Bhante talking about at Madhyamaloka. In the WBO we already talk about recognition in the context of going for refuge. We talk about recognising whether someone's going for refuge is effective or not. How? Well, I've heard some of the preceptors talking about their antennae, which enable them to sense whether someone's going for refuge is effective, or if it's not. But what about the real going for refuge? The real going for refuge is insight, and it is clear from Buddhist tradition that the real going for refuge can be recognised by another person. I think that the process of insight recognition is as organic and untidy as it is in the ordination process. It is not as though there can be some kind of mathematical, scientific, point-for-point positive verification. It is more a question of learning how to read the signals that your antennae pick up about a person's whole life. You just sense a kind of affinity because of your relatively deep experience. You can be wrong, and it is also possible to become skilled in that kind of recognition. I believe this is what happens when lamas and meditation masters affirm someone's insight. I believe that we, too, need to learn how to recognise and affirm another's insight, in a manner that is acceptable and avoids misunderstandings. I believe that is possible to evolve that collectively, though it may take some time. I believe we all need to learn a lot more if we are to communicate the spirit of meditation, and I believe we need that spirit to be there right from the start, right from the very first class.