

**A Talk by Sangharakshita at the celebrations of his 75th birthday at Aston University,
Birmingham, UK**

26th August 2000

Order Members, Mitras, and Friends, The first thing I want to do is to thank people for this celebration. I want to thank especially those who organised it so beautifully, so efficiently, and so punctually. I also want to thank all of you for attending. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who have given me presents on the occasion of my birthday cards, presents, all sorts of gifts and offerings, not just from people gathered here but from quite a number of different parts of the world, for all of which I am deeply grateful and appreciative. Now, I am not going to say very much this evening. I might even say that for once I find myself rather at a loss for words – which is a rather unusual experience for me, in view of all the millions of words that are on tape, and now on disc.

The first thing to say is that it seems quite unbelievable, quite incredible, that I am now seventy-five. The time seems to have gone so quickly. In fact it is as though the last seventy-five years of life have been but a dream, a dream from which you wake up in the morning. It does seem very, very strange, even incredible, that I should have had seventy-five years of life. It also seems quite incredible that our new Buddhist movement, the FWBO, has been in existence for more than thirty years. I remember in the very early days, when we had been in existence two years, we used to say to ourselves ‘We've been in existence now for two whole years!’ – and now it is thirty-two whole years, in fact a little more. It also seems quite incredible, in a way, that today I am publicly handing on the last of my formal responsibilities.

For quite a few years I was President of all FWBO centres – all that then existed. I handed on that particular responsibility ten years ago. I also conducted all the ordinations, the private ones and the public ones, and of course I handed that responsibility on too a few years ago. But today tonight I am handing on the Headship of the Order. Now, I know there has been quite a bit of speculation, quite a bit of discussion: ‘who is going to be that favoured person...?’ I also know that some people have been rather dreading that they might be landed with that particular responsibility! I have of course been thinking about this for quite a while. In fact only yesterday someone handed me a confidential file, and on looking into it I found a letter I dictated something over twelve years ago, just before I had my prostate operation, a letter with my sort of 'last instructions' about the Order, just in case I didn't survive the operation. And on reading it I was a bit surprised to find how I had it more or less worked out even at that time. So this goes to show that I have been reflecting on this particular item, the handing-on of my remaining responsibilities, for some time, and that I have been reflecting on it along more or less the same lines.

One of the things I decided quite early on was that I wasn't going to hand on the responsibility for being the Head of the Order to any one person however talented, however gifted, however capable. I felt it would be almost unkind to hand the quite weighty responsibility for being the Head of the Western Buddhist Order just to one person.

So, if it's not going to be handed on just to one person, well, to whom, or to what, is it going to be handed on? So let me not keep you in suspense any longer: the responsibility I am handing on to the College of Public Preceptors.

That College has at present eight members and it may grow. I am going to read out their names, in order of seniority within the Order. First of all, there is Dhammadinna, ordained in 1973, in August. Then there is Subhuti, also ordained in 1973, in November. Next comes Sona, ordained in 1974, after which we have Srimala, ordained in 1975, followed by Padmavajra, ordained in June 1976. Next comes Surata, ordained in August 1976, and Sanghadevi, ordained 1977, and eighth and lastly, Suvajra, ordained in 1978.

So together with the Presidents of certain centres, these Order Members make up the Preceptor's College and Council of the WBO/TBM. At present there are nine such Presidents who are not also Public Preceptors, and I will tell you who they are also. In order of seniority within the Order, they are (1), Nagabodhi, ordained January 1974, Devamitra, ordained January 1974, Vessantara, ordained August 1974, Kamalasila, ordained November 1974. 1974 seems to have been a very productive year! Fifthly, there is Dhammarati, ordained 1976, followed by Kovida, ordained 1978, Kulananda, ordained May 1977, Cittapala, ordained 1982, and Moksananda, ordained 1985.

So, the College of Public Preceptors will have a Chairman, who will also be the Chairman of the combined College and Council. I am using the word 'Chairman' quite provisionally, because this and other nomenclature may be changed in due course. The Chairman will be elected, from among the Public Preceptors, by the whole College and Council. He or she shall serve for a term of five years and will be re-electable. The first Chairman is, however, being designated by me, and the first Chairman is Dharmachari Subhuti. New members of the College of Public Preceptors will be appointed by the existing members of that College. Presidents are of course elected by Council of the Centres concerned, and such Presidents may be invited to join the Council at the discretion of the College of Public Preceptors. Other matters of internal organisation will be settled by the College, or by the College and Council, as appropriate.

Perhaps I should also mention that three Public Preceptors are also Presidents these are Subhuti, Sona, and Sanghadevi, and for the time being there are also two members of the Council who are neither Public Preceptors nor Presidents. These are Lokamitra and Ratnaguna. Thus we have two separate but closely related bodies: the College of Public Preceptors and the Council of Public Preceptors and Presidents, and it is to the first of these, the College of Public Preceptors, that I am handing on the Headship of the Order.

So much then for the structure of what I have set up in order to ensure the continuance, the

consolidation, and the expansion of the WBO and FWBO after my death, whenever that may be.

So, two questions remain to be answered. One, what exactly will be the function of the College of Public Preceptors? And two, what will Bhante be doing now that he has handed on the last of his responsibilities? With regard to the first of these questions, it is the Public Preceptors of course who have the ultimate responsibility for accepting

people into the Order, and that responsibility they are already exercising. I have decided not to define their function any further than that, except to say that the College of Public Preceptors will be doing whatever I have been doing over the years. If you like, you can say that the College is the collective reincarnation of Bhante. In other words, they will be functioning in the same spirit that I have been functioning all these years. For the last five years most of the Public Preceptors have been living in Birmingham, either at Madhyamaloka, or at the Park Hill community, and the other Public Preceptors have visited from time to time. In this way they've got to know one another even better than they already did, and they've also had regular contact with me. So they know my mind. The Presidents have also been living in, or visiting, Birmingham, and they too have got to know one another better. They too have had regular contact with me. Not only that. The Public Preceptors and the Presidents have been working harmoniously together. And this gives me great satisfaction. It augurs well for the future health of the whole Movement.

So finally: what will Bhante be doing? Now that he's handed on the last of his responsibilities. Well, he'll certainly not be disappearing from the scene. At least, not for the present. He'll not be retiring to the Bahamas or the South of France. He won't even be going for a holiday! In fact, I will be doing many of the things I've been doing for the last few years: writing memoirs, reading page proofs (Windhorse Publications keeps me fairly regularly supplied with page proofs these days!), going for walks, visiting second hand bookshops, appearing at centres for book launches, poetry readings, etc., meditating, listening to music, perhaps writing a few more poems. And of course, I shall also be seeing people, and in this connection I want to clear up what seems to be a misunderstanding. From time to time a little rumour goes round which says that Bhante is not seeing people any more, not giving any more interviews, even, that Bhante does not want to see people. That is certainly not the case. I have always seen people, and I want to go on seeing people, both in groups and individually. Of course, it is not always possible for people to see me immediately, but if you do really want to see me, don't hesitate to write and ask. And if it is possible, if I can fit you in, I will gladly do so.

That's really all I have to say. As I said at the beginning, it seems incredible that I am now seventy-five. I can't say that I really feel seventy-five, but that's neither here nor there. My birth certificate says quite clearly that I am indeed seventy-five! And fortunately my health is good, apart from a little high blood pressure, so I may be around for a few more years: I don't really know. Death of course may come to any one of us at any time. So let us make the most of one another while we have the opportunity. Let Kalyana Mitrata flourish amongst us more and more.

note: When he delivered this talk Sangharakshita inadvertently missed out one name from the list of Presidents. He has corrected that omission in this printed version.