

Sangharakshita

Recollections of my early life - and some reflections on rebirth

A talk at the Sheffield Buddhist Centre
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This evening I was having dinner with the Sheffield Evolution shop team and they were telling me and telling me rather proudly, that they were one of the five remaining Evolution shop teams in the FWBO which were manned entirely by members of the sangha. I was very pleased to hear that because team based right livelihood has always been very close to my heart and I was very glad to know that it is flourishing here in Sheffield along with the other FWBO activities.

In the course of the conversation over dinner somehow the subject of South London came up and, of course, I am from south London. I was brought up in Tooting. A lot of people laugh when they hear the word Tooting. I don't know quite why. But that is where I was brought up. I wasn't actually born in Tooting. I was born in Stockwell which is even worse. When I look back, how extraordinary it was, how extraordinary it is that someone whose life has been devoted to the Dharma and ended up founding a new buddhist order should have first seen the light of day in south London of all places. I was brought up in Tooting in a very ordinary working class family. My father was just a French polisher who was sometimes out of work and my mother was just an ordinary housewife. So it seems very strange that someone like me should emerge from those sort of surroundings.

From the very beginning there was a very definite direction of my life, of the whole force of my being. I remember I first learned about the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, when I was about eight or nine and confined to bed. I learned about him from the pages of an encyclopaedia. I also learned about other founders of religions. I learned about Mohammed and I learned about Zarathustra as well as about the Buddha. Mohammed didn't appeal to me particularly and I don't think even Zarathustra did but the Buddha certainly appealed to me. The pictures of the Buddha or rather images of the Buddha which I saw in my encyclopaedia stuck in my mind. A few years later I happened to be in Brighton with my family on holiday. I happened to see in the window of a bric-a-brac shop a small brass image of the Buddha. I think it must have been a very tiny replica of the famous Kamakura Buddha of Japan. I went into the shop and bought it with my pocket money. I must have been twelve or thirteen at the time. Not only did I buy the little image but I bought at the same time a few sticks of incense – which I later came to know as Indian incense – very black and very sweet. When we got home, I remember I used to put this little image on a table and I used to burn one of my precious incense sticks. I did this without really understanding the significance of what I was doing. My parents must have seen me doing it but they didn't make any comment. They were used to me having strange interests and strange ideas so nothing was said.

During the next few years I immersed myself in literature and philosophy and as a result of that reading I came to realise that I wasn't a Christian. I had attended a Christian church for a while but it hadn't made much impression on me. So, I think it was when I was about fourteen or fifteen at the latest that I realised 'I definitely am not a Christian!' That was quite clear in my mind. What was I? I didn't know. Not yet. But a time did come when, in the course of my reading, I came across books on Buddhism and, more important still, I came

across actual Buddhist texts or rather translations of buddhist texts. In particular I came across translations of the Diamond Sutra and the sutra of Wei Lang, the Platform Sutra as it is usually called, and when I read these, especially the Diamond Sutra I at once felt that ‘ This is what I really believe. This is what I have believed all the time. I have always believed what this sutra teaches.’ That was my actual experience, my actual realisation at that time.

I had not as yet met any other Buddhists. I was all on my own. I don’t think I talked about my reading or my interest in Buddhism with anybody that I knew. Eventually I came to hear of the London Buddhist Society and I started corresponding with the editor of their magazine and I started going along to their classes. This must have been in 1941/2. I made friends there and it was there that I started to meditate after a fashion. I can’t remember what sort of meditation we did but I do remember that the Buddhist Society had published a book called ‘Concentration and Meditation’ which I must have read. I also remember that Mr. Humphreys, the founder of the Buddhist Society, used to recommend that we started off with learning to concentrate on a matchbox – which, of course, some of us duly did. Of course by this time we were in the midst of the war and I was living in London still so I caught part of the blitz. I remember that on one occasion I was at the Buddhist Society’s premises, which were situated above a tea shop in Great Russell Street. We were just sitting on our chairs, not on our cushions of course, no one sat on cushions in those days, everyone sat on chairs, and we were meditating, at least our eyes were closed and we were inwardly concentrated – perhaps on a matchbox perhaps on something else. Anyway we were quiet. When suddenly there was the noise of a tremendous explosion. A bomb had fallen quite near and the windows were rattled but we didn’t move, So we weren’t doing so badly for beginners: we didn’t move.

Then along came the army. I was conscripted and I was sent to India. I wasn’t at all pleased to be in the army. I had not expected that they would take me in view of my medical history. Perhaps they were getting desperate so they took me. I didn’t like the army at all and ignored it as much as I could and pursued my own interests as best I could. I certainly continued to read books on Buddhism whenever I had the opportunity. I was very glad to be sent to India because it was the land of the Buddha. Many of my friends in the unit were dismayed when we heard that we were going to be sent to India. India was like going to the ends of the earth, so far away from their families. They weren’t at all happy but I was very pleased. Not that I was pleased to be separated from my family but I was pleased with the idea of actually being in India, the land of the Buddha. In those days there were very few Buddhists in India. Very few indeed. Hardly any. It was difficult to meet a Buddhist for some years so I carried on with my study of Buddhism in books. For about a year I was in Singapore, still in the army, and in Singapore I made friends with a number of Chinese Buddhists so I got to know something about Chinese Buddhism at that time.

Then, after four years in the army, I left and, as some of you know, those of you who have read my memoirs, I took up a sort of wandering life in India – not as a tourist. I did it properly so to speak : I became a wandering, freelance ascetic, shaved my head, shaved off the beard which I had grown by that time and donned the saffron robes of the wandering monk. So, with a companion, a Bengali companion, I spent a couple of years wandering around India, sometimes staying in ashrams sometimes staying in caves and devoting myself to meditation and to the study of the Dharma.

I came into contact with many, many Hindus. Of course Hindus were all over the place. Most of the people I came into contact with were Hindus. I came into contact with some

famous teachers and spent time with them. Though I came into quite close contact with some of those teachers my faith in the Dharma never wavered. I was always quite clear that it was to the Dharma that I wanted to devote my life. A sort of turning point came when I was staying in a cave on the Arunachala mountain and one night I had a vision, (which I have described in my memoirs) a vision of the red Buddha, Amitabha. It was a rather unusual vision I thought at the time because this red Buddha was seated on a red lotus and the lotus was floating on the waters of the ocean and this Buddha, in his right hand was holding a red lotus and behind him, to one side, the sun was setting and the light of the setting sun was glittering on the waves. This was a very vivid experience and I took it to mean that it was time that I should take monastic ordination in the formal sense. I thought that the kind of Buddha figure I had seen in this vision was not very traditional. I had never seen a picture of a red Buddha holding up a red lotus so for many years I thought this was something not quite traditional but not so many years ago someone sent me a picture postcard from Nepal. The picture was part of a thangka and there was the red Buddha with a red lotus in his hand, holding it up just as I had seen in my vision. So I realised that my vision wasn't as untraditional as I had thought. Not only that but somebody else, one of our friends, told me that when they visited Kalimpong and went to see the temple built by Dudjom Rimpoche they saw, amongst the murals, the paintings on the walls, again a figure of the same red Buddha holding up the red lotus flower. It seems as though my vision wasn't as untraditional as I had originally thought.

As I have said, I took this vision to mean that it was time I got myself properly ordained and joined the monastic sangha. I was ordained as a sramanera at Kusinara and subsequently as a bhikkhu at Sarnath. I was very fully on track so to speak. Then I spent some time with bhikkhu Kasyap studying Pali. He took me up to Kalimpong and left me there, exhorting me to stay there and work for the good of Buddhism which I proceeded to do by starting, among other things the Young Men's Buddhist Association which could be regarded as a sort of trial run for the FWBO. In the years that followed I continued to study, continued to meditate, continued to practise the Dharma and was so fortunate as to receive instruction and initiation from some very distinguished Tibetan lamas as well as from a Chinese hermit yogi. So fourteen productive years passed in Kalimpong. I did quite a lot of writing, including the 'Survey of Buddhism' and also got involved with the Movement of mass conversion in the plains of India – which had been started by Dr. Ambedkar. So, in fact, my life found a very definite force.

In 1964 I came back to this country after an absence of twenty years and three years later I started the FWBO and WBO. The rest of course is, as they say, history and a history of which all of you are now part. So, as I look back now as an old man nearly eighty three I can't help thinking that there must have been some reason why I followed that particular course without any real deviation. Even the army couldn't stop me studying Buddhism and I wasn't captured by one of those famous Hindu teachers. I stuck to the Dharma. The Dharma was my path. It was the Dharma that I wanted to immerse myself in. It was the Dharma that I wanted to experience. It was the Dharma that I wanted to communicate. This was always clear to me.

So sometimes I wonder ' Where did this tremendous urge come from? ' This urge which has played such a dominant part in my life for sixty years. I look back and think what sort of surroundings I was born into. Very ordinary working class surroundings in Tooting of all places. So what was there to account for my interest? I can only presume that in all likelihood it was some powerful samskara carried over from a previous existence which had impelled me to follow a path which I had followed before and to reconnect with teachings and

practices and experiences with which I had been connected in previous lives. So this has always been to me one of the considerations which has led me to accept the idea of rebirth. Now I deliberately used the word consideration because it isn't a proof. Many people might say that I am quite mistaken and that my interest in Buddhism and devotion to the Dharma could be explained by some sort of gene in my makeup but to me it doesn't seem like that at all. To me it really does seem as though I was following a path in this life which I had trodden in previous lives so it is one of the considerations on account of which I do believe in the fact of rebirth. Of course there are other considerations too. This is not the only one and, as I said, and I emphasise that my impression or my conviction that I must have followed this path before does not in any way constitute a proof, much less a scientific proof which might convince those who did not believe in the fact or idea of rebirth.

I am going to talk now a bit about dreams. I wasn't really expecting to talk much about dreams but I think I will. People are often interested in dreams anyway. According to some buddhist texts it seems that Siddhartha had quite a number of significant dreams before his enlightenment. In fact I wrote a poem on one of those dreams which some of you may have come across. Dreams obviously make up quite an important part of our lives. In India there is a traditional division of the human psyche into four parts. There is the waking state, the state of deep, dreamless sleep, the dream state and the state which covers all the higher meditative experiences. Dreams do make up a part of our experience, part of our personality almost.

Many dreams of course are just reflections, shadows of things that have happened to us in the course of the day. I personally believe that there are dreams of a quite different kind also and I've had many experiences of these dreams of another kind and perhaps some of you have too. I call these dreams archetypal dreams : dreams which are not just reflections of the day's events but which are of a higher or deeper significance. I've had these sort of archetypal dreams from time to time in the course of my life.

I remember in particular one such archetypal dream which repeated itself in various forms again and again in the course of a number of years. I remember the first time I dreamt this dream. It took this particular form. There was a mountain in the dream and it was in south India. (I had this dream, by the way, in India itself before I came back to Britain.) At the foot of this mountain there was an ashram and this ashram was open to the public and there were people coming and going. But behind the ashram there was a stair cut out of the rock, a sort of secret stair and this led up to another ashram much higher up and much smaller which people usually didn't know anything about and the stairs opened onto a wide platform. In the dream I climbed up these stairs and found myself on that platform looking out over a landscape.

It was a very broad landscape and there were several factories dotted here and there. At the top of the stairs there was a man, an elderly man in a white robe and behind him there was a sort of showcase like we see in Tibetan temples with lots of Buddha images behind the glass. So this was the image, this was the dream, the archetypal dream. The public ashram was at the foot of the mountain and the secret ashram which very few people knew about was at the top of the stairs above the ashram which was public and well known. The small ashram was distant or hidden or unknown or sometimes even in ruins and in some of the dreams people had forgotten about its existence.

I used to reflect on this dream quite a lot and ask myself what it could designate. I won't tell you the results of my reflections. They vary from time to time. Perhaps you would like to

reflect on that dream yourself and ask yourself whether you have had anything like it in the course of your own experience. That is what I mean by a sort of archetypal dream which has a deep significance perhaps.

I want to fast forward now to five or six years ago. Some of you know that five or six years ago I had a whole year of chronic insomnia for which we have never discovered the cause. It was quite extreme, quite severe, amounting in fact to what is known as sleep deprivation. It was a very painful period, a very painful experience. Since I wasn't able to sleep, or was able to sleep very little my energy drained away and I thought I might even die. I seemed to have so little energy and felt so utterly exhausted and friends were very concerned. I was quite well looked after during that period and also I was very much helped by acupuncture. Anyway, it was a quite painful period and all I could do was just to remain aware, practise patience and try not to get frustrated.

However there were compensations. In fact I might say there was a silver lining to that very dark cloud. Indeed I might say there was a golden lining because during that whole period I had some wonderful archetypal dreams which seemed to me of very great significance. It felt like a real gift, a real reward, a very positive even, I might say, a genuinely spiritual experience. These archetypal dreams took many forms, One form was that of all sorts of beautiful, brilliant jewels. I have always been fond of precious stones or semi precious stones for their beauty and very different colours. In my dreams I saw the most wonderful precious stones and semi precious stones of all colours all very magnificent and beautiful arranged in wonderful patterns and shapes. These were immensely inspiring. Again, I used to have archetypal dreams of wonderful scenery, very often mountain scenery such as perhaps doesn't exist on earth. Very often at the edge of the sea. Sometimes I would be high up in the air looking down on the sea, looking down on these mountains. Sometimes I would be in subterranean chasms which contained all sorts of fissures. I had many, many such dreams, all of which I found very inspiring and which helped to sustain me during that year of chronic insomnia, of sleep deprivation. You may wonder why I am going on about these dreams but I will come to something that you may find more interesting.

I also used to have dreams of my various teachers. I didn't have these dreams very often but they did come from time to time and they still come. Sometimes they are very vivid indeed. There was one occasion when I had dreams of all my teachers.

That was during the week before I handed on my responsibilities as head of the order to a small group of senior order members. During that week immediately preceding the handing on I dreamt of my teachers. Each night I dreamed of several of them and in the course of the week I must have dreamt of each and every one of them a number of times. These dreams were very, very powerful and of a sort of visionary brotherhood. I took them to mean that in handing on responsibility for the order I was doing the right thing and that, in fact, what I was doing had the blessing of all my teachers. So it was of great importance to me and perhaps of importance to the Movement as well, especially to the Order.

Let me now connect up with this question of rebirth. I have also had dreams, though relatively recently, which to me seemed like recollections of experiences in another life. Now, of course, I can't prove that they are such but some of these dreams have been of such intensity – not the same archetypal intensity that I've spoken about in connection with some of these archetypal dreams – it is quite a different kind of intensity as though they were actual recollections of things that had happened to me in previous lives. As far as I can make out,

thinking it over afterwards, I was living in the eighth or ninth century in this country at a time when England was divided into seven or eight independent kingdoms which were sometimes at war. I was the prior of a little priory, believe it or not, and I had under me twenty four monks. One day a representative of the king of the particular kingdom where I was living came and said

‘The king is at war with a neighbouring king. We need soldiers. You have got to send twelve of your monks to fight as soldiers for the king.’ So, sadly and without thinking, I had to part with twelve of my monks and send them off to be soldiers and fight for the king. A little later on (I don’t know exactly how much later on) the dream continued and I was in the presence of the king with other counsellors, advisers. The king was seated on his throne. We were all standing. We were addressing him in turn and it came to me to address him in my turn. Just after waking I could remember what I said to the king but it didn’t last and I can’t now remember but I spoke and I said something to the king with regards to the political situation.

These particular dreams were of a special kind, different from ordinary dreams, different even from archetypal dreams and I could only conclude that they probably were reminiscences of another life. So this is another of the considerations that leads me to accept the idea or the fact of rebirth. I think it quite likely that some of the things that people experience in the dream state are in fact recollections of events or experiences in previous existences. I think, as I say, I’ll call them considerations that lead me to believe in rebirth but they cannot be regarded as proof.

There are other considerations too. I don’t know if any of you have heard of an English Buddhist called Francis Story? He died some years ago. He spent much of his life in Sri Lanka. He was an anagarika and he was especially interested in this idea of rebirth. He wanted to see if it could be empirically verified. He did a great deal of research, mainly in Burma, where he also spent quite a lot of time. He investigated a number of cases where young children spoke about their having lived with some other family before, in some other place. He investigated a number of these cases and he came to the conclusion that, in some of these cases, the only possible explanation was that these children were remembering their existence in a previous life, usually in

Burma also and not very far away from where they had, so to speak, reincarnated in this current life of theirs. So Francis Story investigated these cases in that way and concluded that there was the possibility of an empirical investigation of at least some, of the truth of at least some of these alleged recollections of previous existences. So this is another consideration to be added to the ones that I have already mentioned and perhaps it is a consideration that has a little more weight than the others that I’ve mentioned which might appear to be of a rather subjective nature.

But we can go a step further. I have known at least two people who claim to have remembered their previous existence. One of these was Lama Govinda and the other was Dhardo Rimpoche. Dhardo Rimpoche of course was a tulku. I don’t know whether other tulkus had any recollection of their previous existences. When I was in Kalimpong I wasn’t especially interested in the question of rebirth. Perhaps I should say that it wasn’t so much that I wasn’t interested but I wasn’t interested in trying to establish it as a fact. I sort of took it for granted as did the Buddhists all around me. I do remember discussing it with Dhardo Rimpoche and he told me that he could in fact remember his previous life but the recollection faded when he was about seven. He seemed to think that was what very often happened:

before the age of seven one might well be able to recollect previous existences but that, well, the present life crowded in upon one and those old memories were overlaid and eventually forgotten. Apparently his mother remembered an incident where, when he was very young, he must have been less than seven or eight, a female devotee had invited him for a meal and for some reason or other she had the impression that the young Rimpoche was not very willing to go to her house for the meal. So she expressed that feeling and the young Rimpoche said 'Why should I be unwilling to go to your house for a meal? I have done it many times before.' His mother took that to mean that he was referring to his previous existence when he had in fact gone to this woman's house for meals quite a number of times. Dhardo Rimpoche himself confirmed, yes, this is what he believed had happened even though at the time that I spoke to him he didn't have any direct memory of that previous existence but only remembered that he had remembered.

Then there was the case of Lama Govinda. You may know that in his book 'The Way of the White Clouds' Lama Govinda discusses the question of rebirth at some length and he reports on some cases that he came across in Burma. I remember that one day in the course of conversation I happened to mention to him that when I read his writings they reminded me very much of some of the writings of the early German Romantics which I had happened to read when in my teens and he smiled and he said yes, that he believed that he had been Novalis – one of these Romantic writers in a previous existence and he said he had had a strange experience of reading something by Novalis and it was very familiar and it came back to him that he had written it.

So, all these considerations persuaded me that rebirth, or reincarnation, or metempsychosis is a fact not just a beautiful romantic idea.

There is something else to be borne in mind and that is that in many Buddhist scriptures we are quite clearly told that the Buddha did recollect his previous existences and was able to look out and see the births and deaths and rebirths of other beings. From a modern point of view, people are not easily convinced if one invokes authority – even the authority of the Buddha. Some people of course doubt that the Buddha himself really believed in rebirth. Sometimes they say that he simply adopted the teaching because it was current in his time, that everybody believed in rebirth and therefore so did the Buddha. But the fact is, as is clear from the Buddhist scriptures themselves, especially the Pali scriptures, not everybody in India believed in rebirth. Some of them were nihilists, materialists and the Buddha sometimes had to convince them. So one can't argue that the Buddha believed in or taught rebirth simply because it was the common ideology of the time in India.

These are some of the considerations which have led me personally to accept the idea of rebirth. Of course I am quite aware that for many western Buddhists and even for some people in the FWBO belief in rebirth is a bit problematic. In the course of the last so many years people have asked me whether it is possible to be a Buddhist and not believe in rebirth. My standard answer was 'Yes, you can be a Buddhist and not believe in rebirth but, as a Buddhist you accept full enlightenment as the goal of the Buddha's teachings so, if you don't believe in rebirth, if you don't believe you have another chance later on you have to go all out for enlightenment in this very life. You have to sacrifice everything, give up everything! That is the only thing you can do which is consistent with your belief in the Buddha as the Enlightened One and your lack of belief in rebirth.' That suggestion of mine didn't go down very well!

In fact some people, I think, are genuinely in a dilemma. They believe in the teachings of the Buddha up to a point and really do want to progress. They want to progress spiritually but they don't believe in rebirth. Of course Buddhists in the East do believe in rebirth and if you believe in rebirth you also believe that if you don't make it to the highest spiritual levels in this life you can carry on with the journey in a future life. The danger is, and this is a real danger in many buddhist countries, that people put off the real practice of the Dharma to some future life. It is a sort of get out. They find it too difficult in this life. Alright, they will do it in another life under more favourable circumstances and many of them in some Theravada countries believe that. They aim to be reborn when a Buddha is alive so that then they can hear the Dharma directly from a Buddha so it is much, much easier to gain enlightenment. So they don't care much about actual practice of the Dharma in this life they just aim to be reborn when Maitreya Buddha is around. That is a bit of a cop out of course. Nonetheless if as a western Buddhist you don't believe in rebirth there is a tremendous strain or tension that you have got to do it all now. No doubt if you were sufficiently determined you could do it all now. I think, in the case of those who don't believe in rebirth, that they are brought up against the fact that they have to do it all in this life now or not at all gives rise to a great deal of tension, even a great deal of anxiety and is rather counterproductive

The best way is to follow a sort of middle way. We do our best to progress spiritually as best we can in this life of ours but we are not too tense, not too much under strain believing that we have either got to do it now or never and perhaps to die, as it were, unfulfilled. If people have at the back of their minds the possibility of rebirth, but not like some eastern Buddhists, attach so much importance to the idea of rebirth and future possibilities of treading the path to enlightenment that we forget or neglect to do so in this life itself.

So, these are just some of the thoughts which have been stirring in my mind relatively recently. I think perhaps that we, in the FWBO, and the WBO especially, have to ask ourselves 'Do we accept the idea of rebirth or not?' I think we need to be quite clear about this. At least let us try to be clear about it because it isn't a very easy thing to be clear about. We owe to ourselves and to the Dharma even to ask ourselves what we really think, what we really believe. It will have its effect on our actual practice of the Dharma.

Perhaps I should leave you just with that little exhortation that we should give more attention to this particular issue and perhaps discuss it more.

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