

MEDITATION AND OTHER PEOPLE

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This talk is about one of the most basic aspects of human life, and in fact it is probably the most important of all the vast range of topics to which Buddhism addresses itself. This topic, this question, this issue, is the issue of relationships. By relationship I mean the relationship which exists between ourself, as subject, and the rest of the universe, both individually and collectively. That is, our relationship to all the objects that exist in the environment around us, and to all the individual people that exist in that environment, ranging from those we actually know personally, to those we have only heard about, and in the end ranging all the way out to all those people, all those billions of people, that we only know about in theory, existing in the rest of the world. And we can't really exclude the animals and other creatures that our world includes, for we also have a relationship to them. We have a relationship to everything we encounter, to all these living beings - and we do so even if we have never met them physically, for even if they exist only as abstractions, as data, as population statistics, we at least know about them, and it is in that form that we encounter them. Even if we have never been to India, and even though our conception of the millions of beings in India might only be a somewhat abstract one, yet we still experience a certain kind of relationship to them. We may hear about the goings-on in the Middle East, and even though there may be no concrete connection with the people there, yet we will still be responding, in some way or other, to their situation. So in that way we really do have a relationship with all these people - it's a distant one, but nevertheless it exists, and it is obviously one we are affected by.

But of course, most of our relationships are rather more immediate than that.

However, before we go any further into our more immediate relationships I would like to stay with the broad perspective for a little longer. My talk is entitled 'Meditation and other people', and the title has been chosen partly because I know that many people do not have the impression that Buddhism is about other people at all. Surely, one tends to think, Buddhism is all about developing yourself - Buddhism is about you developing the Noble Eightfold Path to Enlightenment, Buddhism is about you becoming a monk or nun, and living a monastic lifestyle. Or at least Buddhism is about you doing something about yourself, about your states of mind. It's about you becoming a better person - and this of course is fine, it's a very good thing. Buddhism is recognised as a good thing in our society, on the whole. Generally speaking, Buddhism seems to have a good 'image' in our society, a good reputation - but nonetheless we don't, I think, usually see it as being, particularly, about other people.

In this connection we sometimes hear of Buddhism being contrasted with other religions which very much emphasise work in the world - work to help others, work to relieve the poor, to relieve the sufferings of others. In this sort of comparison, the Buddhists are sometimes seen as rather introverted individuals, who probably prefer to contemplate their inner mental workings rather than simply getting on with an honest day's work. They are perhaps seen as people, well-meaning enough, who tend to get rather obsessed with their own psychology: in short, seen as emotional hypochondriacs, seen as somewhat inadequate personalities who are concerned more than anything else with 'sorting themselves out' - and doing so in a spirit of avoidance of the more objective realities of the modern world.

Now this, of course, is a dreadful distortion of the facts, certainly with no correspondence, that I've seen at least, with the Order members, mitras and Friends here in Wellington. They all seem extremely hard-working, positive, friendly and concerned for everyone involved in the activities here at the

Centre. And just to set the record straight, Buddhists do, in fact, engage in social work. In the FWBO, just to give one example, we are engaged in a great deal of social work amongst the ex-Untouchables in India. But that having been said, when we have refuted the more extreme distortions, there seems to be a grain of truth remaining in the assertion that we Buddhists tend to be a shade narcissistic.

Someone once said that each religion has its besetting sin, its darker side. The besetting sin of Islam was said to be fanaticism, of Christianity intolerance, of Hinduism inhumanity - and in the case of Buddhism, I'm afraid, it's laziness. Now perhaps the kind of laziness that is Buddhism's *bonheur* is somehow connected with that tendency I mentioned just now, the tendency to over-identify with one's personal psychology. In a way this is a quite understandable sort of laziness. On the surface, it might seem that Buddhists have rather a daunting task on their hands in their quest for Enlightenment. Because Buddhism stresses, far more than any other religion, that the responsibility for our personal development lies with no-one else other than ourselves. As Buddhists, we can't really accept the notion of a personal god that we can pray to for our salvation. It's up to us, it's our individual effort to grow and develop that counts.

In support of this, we can describe Buddhism in a rather tight little nutshell by saying that it consists of what are known as the four Right Efforts. Firstly, there is the effort to eradicate any negative mental states which already exist in our mind; then secondly there is the effort to prevent any new negative mental states from arising. Then there is the effort to

maintain the positive mental states that already exist in our mind - three - and finally to develop any positive mental states that do not yet exist - four. So - eradicating and preventing the negative, maintaining and developing the positive: that's Buddhism. 'Cease to do evil; learn to do good; purify the heart: this is the teaching of all the Buddhas', was the answer given to the Emperor of China, when he asked a famous Buddhist teacher for the deepest, most esoteric teachings of Buddhism. He was rather surprised - he was expecting something much more erudite, at least somewhat unusual, and possibly rather bizarre. But - "why, any small child can understand something as simple as that!", he complained, with a sniff. "Yes", came the answer, "it is so simple that a small child can understand it, that's perfectly true. But though it is simple, it is also so difficult that even an experienced adult like yourself cannot put it into actual practice". Which brought the Emperor down to earth with rather a bump.

And Buddhism can have the same effect upon us. It isn't so easy, practising the Dharma on our own, even though for many people it is the emphasis upon the individual that is its main attraction. New practitioners of Buddhism will tend to lay great stress upon their own practice, their own states of mind. They haven't yet learned that they can't really practice Buddhism, can't effectively practice it that is, without reference to other people. That is the real key to Buddhism. Even though we make the effort individually, personally, nevertheless the context for that effort has to be the great universe of living beings.

This theme is stated again and again in Buddhist literature and teaching throughout all the many traditions of Buddhism. The Mahayana Sutras, for example, are always mentioning the infinite numbers of beings that exist throughout limitless space - for of course they think not only in terms of this planet, but of countless inhabited world-systems. There is that poetic reference to the Bodhisattva, the being who is said to postpone his own Enlightenment, or her own Enlightenment, so that he can lead all other beings to it first. We can't quite take that literally, because anyone who actually has that kind of motivation is going to be more than half-way to Enlightenment already - you can't really postpone your own Enlightenment - but it isn't meant to be taken literally. The point is that the Bodhisattva lives the spiritual life for the sake of the development of others - not just his personal development alone. And this sentiment is not limited to the Mahayana form of Buddhism - that is, the form of Buddhism that encourages everyone to develop the Bodhisattva way of life. It is also implicit in the Pali scriptures; and it is implicitly stated in the Buddha's own life.

In fact the life of the Buddha is a good illustration of how one can make an enormous personal effort, on one's own, yet make that effort in the context of other living beings. This is really what Buddhist practice is about. Now the Buddha left his home at the age of 29, even left his royal palace and inheritance, and practiced meditation in the wilderness for six years. He eventually gained enlightenment, and later taught the methods he had discovered for the remainder of his life - which lasted a further forty-five years.

All this was done with other people in mind. It may be that the picture we have of the Buddha is of a lone individual, a pioneer, very much on his own. But the teaching phase of the Buddha's life was in fact very much in the context of other people; for he not only taught whoever came to him, but put a great deal of energy into establishing an Order - which inevitably meant dealing with all the problems that arise when large numbers of individual men or women live together. And there were thousands of members of the original Buddhist Order, all of them trying, together, to evolve a way of life that would be most conducive to practising the Buddha's teachings. Just imagine - it's hard enough bringing up a family, or teaching in a school, or managing a department. People can sometimes be just a little difficult, let's say. So for the Buddha, to establish an Order was a very great undertaking indeed, and certainly it showed a tremendous commitment to other people. I think that one could say that the Buddha lived, he existed, for the sake of other people. But then, what about his leaving home? wasn't that a sort of 'escape' from other people? Yes, indeed it was, in a way. But the basic motivation for his escaping was for the sake of others, not just to get a kind of holiday. The Buddha just decided to place himself amongst conditions which were a little more conducive to contemplation and meditation than were his three palaces, his scores of attractive dancing girls and musicians, his attendants, his worrying parents, his amusing friends, and his sycophantic admirers. And he did this, not because he wanted to get away from people in a selfish sort of way - though no doubt it was rather a relief - but because he really wanted to find out how it is that human beings suffer in the many ways that they do, and whether there is any alternative to it. His luxurious palace life, and his over-protective parents, were preventing him from experiencing the real world. And he had formed a desire to find what would be for the happiness and well-being of the whole world. His motivation was not simply to find his own, personal, nirvana. It was to discover freedom from limitation, from self-made frustration and suffering, for all beings, for all time. That was his nirvana. So even though he had to look for that state of freedom on his own, the search was undertaken very much in the context of other people, and both the motivation and the outcome of his search was other people.

So, as we can now see, Buddhism is about other people, it's for other people. But still we may find more objections. We may say, "but look at the practices of Buddhism. Look at what these Buddhists actually do! Look at their meditations - they meditate on death, they meditate on impermanence, on emptiness, on nonselfhood - indeed, look at the practice of meditation itself - isn't all this rather life-denying, isn't it rather inturnd? So what has all this really got to do with other people?"

In answering this objection, first of all it is important to remind ourselves what meditation practice is actually for. It aims at liberation. The point of meditation isn't simply to have a pleasant experience, even though the basic form of meditation, samatha meditation, the kind of meditation we teach here at the Centre, aims to develop a state of calm collectedness and inspiration that can be very deeply enjoyable indeed. But in the long term the goal is liberation - liberation from the state of bondage which we call samsara, the cyclic, addictive round of habitual response patterns within which we are all caught in our own highly personal and complex ways. It is possible to be completely, unconditionally free from our limitations, but we don't usually think about getting this kind of freedom. Consequently we don't think very much along the sort of lines that would work against these habitual response patterns. We are all afraid of death, for example, (unless we are very, very unimaginative), but the real reason why that fear arises is because we don't understand the nature of impermanence. We don't understand the nature of life, we don't understand our own existence. In fact, we never think about death and impermanence anyway - even to mention the subject makes us feel a little gloomy. So

meditation upon these 'insight' topics that I've mentioned, such as meditation on death, meditation on impermanence, on emptiness, and on nonselfhood - they do perhaps sound rather life-denying, until we realise that the whole point of them is liberation from fear and delusion. They are not so much about death and impermanence as about liberation from the fear of death and impermanence. They point to a far richer, far more effective and inspired kind of life than the one we are living at present. So insight meditation might sound strange to us, but that's simply because we never want to think about what we are afraid of. Which is an understandable reaction, but basically an ignorant one. So from this point of view Buddhism only appears to be life-denying. Really it is more about life, more about people, than anything else we know. Hakuin, the Japanese Buddhist master, said, "without water, no ice; without living beings, no Buddhas". Just as you don't get ice without water, you don't get Enlightenment in the abstract, you don't get it outside real living human beings. Enlightened beings gain their Enlightenment through these frightful Buddhist meditation practices, and other practices too, but it doesn't change their humanity. In fact, they become much more human. I think that it's usually fairly obvious when you meet Buddhists that their humanness, their human sentiment, is their great characteristic. Buddhists - people who meditate and try to put the ethical principles of Buddhism into practice - usually have a pretty good sense of humour - and a good sense of empathy, compassion, and friendliness. Life is such a bittersweet business, we could say, that we have to have a sense of humour if we are to work with it creatively.

Anyway, this little reflection on the human qualities of friendliness, empathy, and compassion, brings me on to the main theme of my talk tonight. Just now we were looking at some of the insight meditations in the Buddhist tradition, in answer to the idea that 'Buddhism is life denying', or 'Buddhism doesn't have anything to do with other people'. The Buddha taught all these practices, 2500 years ago. And he also taught a number of meditation practices which are very specifically to do with other people. For example, there is the recollection of the Sangha, the spiritual community. This meditation practice involves reflecting, in a state of deep concentration, upon the benefits and qualities of the spiritual community, especially those who have developed to a stage where there is no possibility of regression into lower modes of being. Then, there is the recollection of the Buddha himself - after all, for his disciples, the Buddha is another person. Then, there is the recollection of generosity, and the recollection of ethical behaviour. One can hardly reflect upon any of these things without some reference to other human beings. But in this context perhaps the most important of all the meditation practices which the Buddha taught are a set of four known as the Brahmaviharas. These are the meditation upon loving kindness, the meditation upon compassion, the meditation upon sympathetic gladness, and the meditation upon equanimity.

Here we return to the theme with which we opened this talk, that original issue of our relationship with other people. For these four meditation practices help us to explore the way we respond to every person we ever meet, or even just hear about. They give us a way, first of all of discovering what our real emotions are with regard to other people, and then of transforming our negative emotions into more positive ones.

The key word here is emotion. Within the issue of our relations with other people is the key issue of emotion. Emotions are what our relations with others actually, concretely, consist of. Buddhism has this great insight into living beings that sees that we are all, primarily, emotional. We are driven by emotion. However rational and objective a person we may appear to be to others, or that we may think we are, it is always our emotions which govern our state of mind. Indeed, we essentially consist of emotion, a great complex of habitual emotional responses - that's what we basically are, no more, no less. Much of this emotional energy is unconscious and habitual, it's under the surface - it comes up, it is triggered, in particular circumstances. And it is these triggers, these responses, which govern our relationships with others - with our friends, our relations, our workmates, our partners, with all those people that we see in the street just once and never see again. All of these different people trigger different emotions, different reactions, different responses. They trigger different responses when we

are in different moods, different responses depending on what is happening to us at the time.

Well, we are starting to delve into the nature of emotion now, so let's stop and do it properly. At this point, let's ask: what is emotion? There are many different kinds of emotion, and often we experience several different kinds at once, but there are two main types. There are negative emotions like greed, craving, anger, resentment, slyness, envy, arrogance, hatred; and there are positive emotions like friendliness, patience, compassion, commitment, interest, confidence, and sympathy. We have many different words for emotions. But though we have the vocabulary, we don't usually have a very clear understanding of what these emotions really are, how they arise, or what their significance is for our personal development. So we need to ask, again - what is the nature of emotion? Well, I've talked about our emotional triggers being set off by different circumstances, and it is true that that is very often just how it feels. When we get angry, for example, we feel as though we really can't help it - the anger just comes up. And when we see something we like, again, we can't help desiring it - the desire just happens to us, automatically. But it isn't really automatic. Buddhism says that though it seems like an automatic reaction, actually our emotions are more like habits. In other words, we have developed a pattern, a habitual response pattern which tends to arise in particular situations. No doubt we have a particular set of responses to food, to sex, to certain kinds of people, perhaps to authority figures, perhaps to certain trends of opinion, particular modes of dress, particular environments. Where do we get all these from? Well, where do we get habits from? We form habits. At some point or other, we respond to something in a certain way. Perhaps it was a long time ago, when we were children or even infants. Or perhaps it was even in some previous life, we can't say. Or perhaps it was relatively recently that we started the habit. Of course it could be a positive habit, a positive emotional response - don't think that I'm only talking about negative ones. But whatever it is, there is a first time that we respond in that way, and then we respond in that way again a second time. It seems to me that if we repeat something even once, we're starting to create a habit. If you want to make a habit of something, do it twice. And from there, the tendency just gets stronger and stronger, until it is a part of our whole outlook, our whole attitude, our whole personality.

Say, for example, we have a painful experience - somebody treats us in a rather unpleasant way. We don't like it, don't like it one bit, but at the same time perhaps we don't blame them too much, we don't bear them a grudge. We see clearly that their insensitivity and unawareness is their problem, not ours, and for us to get all angry and resentful is quite unnecessary. I'd call that a positive, healthy emotional response. That's a habit that we've got ourselves into, somehow - that habit has its roots, has had its evolution over a period of time. Perhaps we used to get resentful, years ago, whenever people treated us in that unpleasant way. But perhaps we have learned, through experience, that getting resentful only leads to more and more unpleasantness, for us and for everyone we come into contact with. Of course we often get treated in an unpleasant way - people can often be insensitive, unappreciative, and rude. And, no doubt, we've realised, they always will be. There's always someone who will be. So we have learned to let go our natural reaction, to just let it go, and nowadays our habitual tendency is much more understanding of them, understanding that the way they behave really harms them much more than they could ever harm us. Nowadays our habitual tendency, this positive habitual tendency, is a part of our whole outlook, our whole attitude, our whole personality.

So that's an example of the habitual nature of our emotional responses, but it also shows something much more important than that. It demonstrates the fact that we can change our emotional responses. The fact that emotion is, at root, something that we create ourselves, means that - if we want to - we can change our responses. We have a sort of choice. We can change our tendency towards anger, or greed, or resentment. We don't have to be a slave to our conditioning.

This fact is really revolutionary. It is the most important fact in the universe. It's the apple in the Garden, it's the thunderbolt in the hand of the Bodhisattva. The fact that we can change our responses means that human beings have the power to change themselves. And that is the most important thing there is. Of course, we can't usually make a dramatic change. It isn't as though we have complete

freedom of choice, isn't as though in every situation we are presented with a sort of check-list, a sort of menu of choices of emotional responses. Transforming emotion doesn't work like that at all. When we are really angry, we aren't in a state of mind that allows much free play. In that situation, there's a very small menu indeed. But there is one. If we are aware, we can see that this state of mind is not what we want, and we can do something to calm down, perhaps we can stop short of hurting someone, perhaps we can get out of the situation and go for a walk. And perhaps next time the anger arises we will notice it happening earlier. Perhaps next time we will notice the danger that a certain situation could end up making us lose our temper.

So from all this we learn that when it comes down to it, we are our emotions - at a much deeper level, a much more fundamental level, than the level of our thoughts and ideas. We are motivated in all that we do - certainly in our thoughts - by our emotion. And we also learn that these emotions, while seeming to be automatic and beyond our control, are in fact habitual responses which we have created and therefore which we can change, over a period of time, if we wish to, and if we bring our awareness to bear upon them and make an appropriate kind of effort.

But how are we to do this? How are we to bring our awareness to our habitual responses? How are we to make that effort? There are two ways that we can do it - we can become more aware in our daily life by practising awareness, particularly awareness of the five precepts - in other words, awareness of whether our actions, and the attitudes behind our actions, are helping other people to become happier or whether they are not helping them. That's one way - trying to be more aware of what we actually do in our dealings with others, using the five precepts as a guide. The other way is through meditation.

Those four meditation practices that we have yet to explore, the four Brahmaviharas, are all about bringing more awareness to our habitual responses to other people. So let's look at these now. First of all the word, Brahmavihara. The first component, 'Brahma' usually refers to the highest of the Indian gods, or the state of consciousness of the highest gods. So we could say that it means the highest or the best, the most excellent, the most pure. Then 'vihara' means a dwelling place or an abode. In this context it really denotes a mode of spiritual life, or a religious attitude. It's an attitude that you dwell in; you're at home in it, that's the idea. So

Brahmavihara really indicates a way of life, that is the best way of life, the best attitude. The best attitude, that is, towards others - because in each of these practices, we are trying to become more aware of the way that we normally respond as regards other people. The four practices look at our emotional responses in respect of four typical situations. The first meditation, the metta-bhavana, or the development of friendliness, looks at our response with relation to other people generally. Then the karuna-bhavana or meditation on compassion looks at our response with relation to people who are suffering. The mudita-bhavana, or meditation on sympathetic gladness, looks at our response with in relation to people who have good fortune; and the upekkha-bhavana, or meditation on equanimity, looks at our response with relation to the conditioned nature of all beings. Our response to the conditioned nature of other people may perhaps not be all that clear as yet, but in the case of the first three Brahmaviharas, we are ourselves very conditioned, usually at least, let's say, as to our response. In particular, our response to people who are suffering, and our response to people who experience happiness and good fortune, is often very much a habitual one.

I have been making quite a feature of the Brahmaviharas during my stay here - the recent women's retreat, and the forthcoming men's retreat, in Auckland, have both been based around them. So I'm not going to say a great deal about the Brahmaviharas tonight, since here in Wellington we've recently had a weekend workshop on them, and also I'm told that there are soon to be four evenings here also devoted to the Brahmaviharas.

But it is worth just going over the basic ground. What, then, is our relation, our personal relation, to other people who are suffering? And how do we, personally, relate to very fortunate, happy people? And what about people generally? Well, I think that on the whole we are not as positive as we could

be, not as friendly as we could be. We don't always wish others happiness - or perhaps we do, but it's often rather superficial. We tend to be selfish, with a primary interest in ourselves and our own needs. When we meet somebody we are, perhaps, prepared to pass the time of day with them, and even smile at them. But anything more is another matter. New Zealand, like other so-called 'western' countries, is a lonely country, full of lonely people. I'm generalising, of course, so this won't apply to everyone, but it applies generally. We are good at saying 'Hi', good at welcoming people, we are good at trying to make sure people have their needs met - but that is usually as far as it goes. That's our duty done. After that, the wall goes up between us and the rest. We did our duty, we said 'hi', we made sure they were ok, and that was it. I am saying that we don't actually befriend people very often. Very often we don't make the time for that. We tend to be very, very concerned with our own lives, tend to be very, very concerned with getting away from people, with getting 'space to ourselves'. This is our relation to people generally. But of course, we don't have to be like that. We can transform ourselves, with the aid of meditation, and by practising spiritual friendship.

Then, what about our relation to people who suffer? By suffering I mean a person's experience of anything from a major disaster to a minor dissatisfaction. We all suffer, of course. We are all dissatisfied. We all appreciate that we suffer - that we suffer. We don't always appreciate that others suffer. But with a little thought, we know that they do. I think that if we used our imagination a little more in that sort of way we would start to change our appreciation and our basic friendliness towards others - all others. We would be more inclined to befriend them. Compassion is friendliness towards those who suffer. In the karuna-bhavana practice we don't try to develop compassion; we simply develop metta, friendliness. The difference is in the object of meditation - a suffering person. But before we are able to do that, we need to get over our habitual reactions to others' suffering. We need to get over the feeling that we are helpless in the face of others suffering, that despondent, useless feeling. That kind of response to suffering very often causes us to avoid the person completely, and even be cruel to them. Now, that isn't being friendly. That tendency to avoid or ignore suffering can also lead to a kind of sentimental pity, in which we even feel a little bit superior. But it simply begins with our desire to avoid actually getting involved with someone. But we don't have to avoid people, even if their suffering makes us feel uncomfortable, even if their suffering embarrasses us, even if we want things to go better for them in order to save us the embarrassment of knowing them. We can break through all that. We can befriend those who suffer, we can develop compassion.

OK, what about our relation to very happy, very fortunate people? When we see someone we know whose life is going very well indeed, who often seems quite happy. Or someone, perhaps a friend or acquaintance, who is on a good run of happiness? Perhaps we are overjoyed, delighted at their good fortune. It gives us a boost just to see them around, a buzz just to remember them from time to time. I'd say that was the ideal response. That's what we call sympathetic gladness, when we are filled with joy at the joy of others. Unfortunately, our response isn't usually quite so positive. Sometimes we even feel resentful. Their happiness and good fortune just makes us feel inadequate. What right have they to be so bright and smiling? We might even say to ourselves that their happiness is only superficial, that soon they'll be smiling on the other side of their face. I think that this is sometimes a bit of a Buddhist vice, this - or a pseudo-spiritual one - we see that someone is happy because their job is going well, or something like that - they have a new boyfriend or girlfriend, let's say - and we smile wisely to ourselves and say 'its just superficial. It won't last. So why should I be pleased?' But this is a very ungenerous attitude, and is itself rather superficial. Certainly there are higher, more worthy forms of happiness, even kinds of happiness that aren't subject to decay, that do last - such as the joy of nirvana for example - but we are ourselves some way away from nirvana at the moment and it would do us more good, and those others too, if we could be more generous, more friendly towards them in their good fortune - as well as in their bad fortune. This is the emotion that the mudita-bhavana practice develops, and it does so in the way that I've outlined - we develop friendliness and appreciation of the happiness and good fortune of others. As in the metta-bhavana, we think of our good friend, neutral person, enemy and so on, but in this meditation we particularly call to mind their good fortune. We then notice

our response to that - our actual response that is, not what we would like to feel, or what we feel we ought to feel - and within that response we look for an increased appreciation, increased kindness and friendliness. If we are honest in the practice we will find some of the negative attitudes that I've been talking about. But we have an opportunity to work with them, to transform them.

Then, finally, there's *upekkha*. That's a Pali word meaning equanimity. Equanimity is a very special emotion, a very powerful emotion indeed. It is the most positive of all the positive emotions. Equanimity is a response to the whole person, not just to their happiness, not just to their suffering, but to both - and much more besides. For it is a response to their conditioning as human beings. With the *upekkha-bhavana* we recollect that people have a history, they have a whole life-story to tell. It is their actions in this life, and perhaps previous lives too, that have brought them to the position that they are in. Their suffering, and their happiness, have causes and conditions, just as have our own suffering and happiness. When we reflect in this way, we feel as though we are addressing the whole person, as they really are. Like the meditation on impermanence that I mentioned a while ago, this is a kind of insight meditation. But unlike other kinds of insight meditation which require a strong basis of positive emotion before we can even start - otherwise we might become despondent or depressed - this meditation is a positive emotion in itself. But what kind of an insight is it? This practice gives us something of a clue to the nature of insight. It is a response to the conditioned nature of all beings, at least insofar as we understand that. It is an emotional response of friendliness to their conditioned nature. It is a response that is not moved by aversion or disgust when faced by their suffering, nor by attraction or need in the face of their happiness and good fortune. It is a response of complete equanimity - a friendly, helpful response that does not have needs, that has no strings attached, to the other person, either to their joy or suffering. It is a total response - a response to the totality of that person. We see them as they really are. This is the nature of insight - insight is, in the end, a response to reality as it is, to things as they really are.

So these, very briefly, are the four Brahmaviharas. Or something about them at least. I'm sorry that there's no time to say more about these practices. But in any case it is clear now that Buddhism, and Buddhist meditation, is very much about other people, that its ultimate goal, even, is about other people. But just to conclude, let's make one final connection with our relationships to other people.

I said a little back there about the loneliness that exists in our society. That essentially we tend to be isolated, to want to keep ourselves aloof, to maintain a space between ourselves and others. Perhaps that doesn't apply to us so much here. After all we have the ideal of Sangha - which, after all, is considered to be one of the three most precious things in life. In other words, it's one of the Three Jewels, the three most precious things in Buddhism. So we know all about friendship, spiritual friendship. We know how vital it is. The trouble is that we don't really practice it, hardly at all. I'm not trying to get at anyone here - I think that it is a general problem in western Buddhism. We just don't see, it doesn't occur to us, the extent to which we are stunted, held back, by our lack of spiritual friendships. But the question that I want to ask is, do we really understand why Sangha is so vital? Why friendship is so vital? I think it requires some reflection on your part to answer, for each answer will, partly at least, be an individual one. But one important reason that I can give for its importance is that unless we share, we don't fully experience. We need to be able to disclose ourselves. Unless we can share our experience, especially of the spiritual life, we don't fully experience it ourselves. That might sound ridiculous, logically, until we recall the difference, in experience, between meditating and sharing the experience of meditation with someone else who also meditates. Or of being in a particular mood and talking to someone, in the Sangha, about it. Doing that opens up our experience, adds new dimensions that we cannot know about subjectively. This is why the Buddha gave that famous reply to his disciple Ananda, who said that he thought that spiritual community is a good half of spiritual life. 'It's more than that, Ananda', he said - 'it's the whole of it'. Spiritual community, Sangha, is the whole of the spiritual life. Spiritual life is a life based around the spiritual community, around everything that spiritual community embodies - that is, around truthful communication, around kindly and useful

communication, around people who are trying to be direct and at the same time harmonious in one another's company. How many people do you know who value spiritual development?

So we need to create that. Don't be fooled by the centre here, by the organisation, by the Order members, by the long history of the FWBO. Even here, Sangha hardly exists yet, and it hardly exists because only a few individual Buddhists have taken the trouble to make friends with other individual Buddhists. This means you. If you are interested in Buddhism, you can't get very far without forming relationships with other Buddhists - not just relationships but friendships. And, perhaps I should make a particular point of this - not just friendships with Order members. The Sangha here in Wellington isn't going to get very far if everyone thinks in terms of 'getting the goods' from the Order members and ignoring their peers. There aren't any 'goods' outside what we create between one another. We all need to learn how to make friendships, to gain skills in making friendships. Skills like patience, like not giving up, and not having unrealistic expectations; skills such as the ability to take the initiative with our friends, working our way through the shyness, the boredom. All this without mentioning resisting the pull towards all those attractive people we know but who don't have an interest in personal growth, and so don't really have the same kind of interest in us; and working through those aspects of our friend that we don't know and don't like - their strange habits, their odd phobias. In the end attraction has little to do with friendship, because what we are attracted to is often superficial. The most important thing is giving lots of time to developing the art.

That's all I have to say. Buddhism is all about other people. The Buddha taught for the sake of liberating people. Liberation is about liberation from human suffering and limitation, which essentially means emotional suffering and limitation. The Buddha's most important discovery was that we can change our emotional responses. The four Brahmaviharas provide a training ground for transforming our emotional responses. And they are expressed in our actual dealings with others, through our friendships with brothers and sisters in the Dharma.