

## A System of Training

by *Dhammarati*

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### **Dhammarati's nightmare; celebrating birthdays; the Order at 40 - taking stock**

Vishvapani was saying yesterday that we make a fuss about birthdays; we remember birthdays; and I also remember the sixteenth birthday of the order. I believe – Parami confirms – that was the occasion of Bhante giving the paper on the ten pillars; and all of us sitting (I think it was in York Hall) listening to a reading, basically, of the text of the ten pillars... but a real seminal moment.

We also made quite an occasion of the twenty-first birthday. And what I remember of that one is sitting in the basement of the LBC, designing the graphics for the twenty-first anniversary. What I particularly remember was the logo— which was a *Baskerville* “2” and a *Japanese Calligraphy* “1” — anyway, probably not a lot of people noticed that... [LAUGHTER] ...

Fortieth birthdays are more problematic (beast, isn't it?) The only occasion I can think of is a mid-life crisis... [LAUGHTER] ... so – assuming that we are not about to all go and buy a red sports-car at the end of this weekend – I was thinking, well what happens when you're forty? And there's definitely (if I can remember back that far) a kind of *taking of stock*; there's your youthful idealism, and even – may I say – *naïveté* meeting the complexities of real experience, and *you* having to figure out what's of real central value to you.

I was talking to Subhuti recently. He was talking about his time as Order Convener. I think that maybe some people missed that Subhuti was the *overall* Order Convener. Subhuti had so many responsibilities, they all blurred into a sort of single portfolio, pretty much. Subhuti was ubiquitous, I think, for a lot of our time growing up. He was saying that he became Order Convener just before the *Guardian* article came out, and he stopped being Order Convener just after Yashomitra's letter. And I think the point he was making to me was just wanting a bit of empathy for the responsibility he had through what's probably been the most turbulent period of self-questioning that we had ever been through as a movement – as a community.

So, I think this whole motif about the age of forty— taking stock, and just thinking: well actually, where have we got to; what is of central importance to us?— is kind of apposite, actually.

**The 'Chetokhila Sutta' - confidence in your basis of practice; influence from other sources; lineage and handing on through generations**

I volunteered to do the talk on the *System of Practice*. I wanted to do a talk, and this was the one I was interested in. And there's two reasons for that actually, and in a way they follow from that from that point of being through such a turbulent period. In Subhuti's recent letters, one of the things that really struck me was a point he made about the *Cetokhila Sutta*, and the Buddha (in the *Cetokhila Sutta*) says: "If you want to make spiritual progress, you have to have confidence in the system of practice that you're using; that *that* confidence is an absolute functional necessity; it's not a sort of sectarian thing. So I wanted to address this whole thing of a system of training because I think that this issue of confidence in our own system – for some of us I think that happens to have been an issue for us over the last few years, and I want to really try and make the case for the grounds for confidence in our system of training.

The second one is that I think that over the last few years, we've had more inputs, more inflows from other sources, from other traditions, than ever before in our experience as a community. I have to say, on the whole, I'm with Vishvapani on this one. I've personally found that a very stimulating thing, and I think that one of the ways that you become clearer about who you are, is to be in dialog with others; and I think that the dialog that we've been involved in over the last few years, I think has been a healthy thing. But I think it's also true that it's raised questions, and questions that need clarification, so the second point is, I want to come onto this whole issue of lineage. I think we're already at a point, as a community, where *we've* been handed something by our teacher, where it's *our* responsibility in an order of the age of forty to be handing it on to the generation coming behind us. And I think as well as our own individual practice, we have to be clear as a community, as a practice community, well what is our tradition, what is it that we are handing on.

So, I want to try to address both of these issues: confidence in our own practice as a condition for successful practice; and clarity about what our system of practice is, so we can hand it on faithfully.

### **Systems; Ravenna mosaics and modern mosaics - building in irregularity**

The title of the talk is: **What Do We Mean by *Our* System of Training?**

The first thing that I want to say is that talking about *a system* at all, immediately brings up my own personal unease. On the whole, I like a little bit of freedom; as soon as I see a fence, I want to climb it. I was visiting Vassika recently in Paris. She was telling me about the mosaics in Ravenna (Ravenna, if you don't know, is this place in the North of Italy with some astonishing first century mosaics covering a lot of the churches; they're really, really beautiful). And she was showing me a piece of a mosaic done in the style of Ravenna mosaics and a piece of modern mosaic— the thing about modern mosaic... is that it's all (if I understood Vassika's point) regularly cut tiles put flat in the grouting. And, by comparison, the mosaic that they used to do in Ravenna, and the main element of the method (or at least a couple of the elements) is that the tiles are all of irregular size (basically they've been broken), and they're put into the cement at irregular angles. And the effect of that is, as you walk past the surface, the whole thing is scintillating; the way

light catches it is completely unpredictable... much, much more interesting than the rather uniform, regular, mosaic done in a more modern method. And that image struck me: I just realised that I like a little bit of irregularity; actually, I like something that's not too tight a system.

One of the things that the piece that Vassica was showing me, was that all of that irregularity made up this glorious, luminous, halo of a saint. So there was a pattern there, the whole thing held together; it was alive, and it was moving. So I want to just sort of reassure myself first of all, by allowing for a little bit of irregularity in the pattern. I've got an unease with a system that's too tight. Luckily, however (it seems) so has Bhante.

### **Sangharakshita on the FWBO system of meditation**

I was listening, as part of the preparation for this talk, to a set of question and answer sessions that Bhante did recently at Madhyamaloka on a seminar organised by Subhuti on *Sangharakshita as Teacher*. But a few things that Bhante said in those Question and answer sessions really struck me: one of them about the *System of Meditation*.

So Bhante said that the system is not meant to be a rigid system with carefully defined boundaries; each stage is meant to cover a vast range of experience and practices. And then he goes on to say— for example, in the second stage – if you're talking about the stage of positive emotion (I'm assuming that most people [here] are familiar with the main categories of the System of Meditation at least), and in the stage of positive emotion there can be joy, ecstasy, bliss, compassion, everything that's of an emotionally positive nature, from ordinary positivity to sublime spiritual experience – one shouldn't think of these stages in too narrow a sense.

So, that was the first point I wanted to make. So when Bhante talks about a system of practice, he's talking about a stage that encompasses a vast range of experience and practice.

What, in that case is the value of a system at all? And, in the first lecture that Bhante gave on the *System of Meditation*, he laid out his reasons for why he wanted to articulate a system. And what he said was, "I want to take up different methods of meditation current in the order." If I can do a little aside there: at our recent Guhyaloka, Dharmapriya counted up the number of meditations current in the order and I think he came to seventeen meditation practices being done regularly (counting sadhana practices as a single practice). So there's seventeen – pretty much on a regular basis – being done. Anyway, Bhante said that he wanted to take up the different methods of meditation current in the order and see in what way they link into "What I have called,..." and at this point he puts in the qualifier "...a trifle ambitiously, a *system*."

So, the first thing he wanted to do was to link the different practices. And then he goes on to make clear why. He said that it needs to be clear how the practices are related. What we need is an arrangement of practice that takes us forward step by step, and stage by stage, and then he went on to say that what he wanted was something that made clear the

progressive, cumulative nature of spiritual practice. And for me they're the central points that I want to just underline in this talk: that what Bhante was trying to do was – from the point of view of our own practice being effective – articulate how what looked like a kind of random set of practices... how they hung together and supported each other; and secondly, how they became a progressive, cumulative sequence of practice that moved from the first steps into awareness, into a full transformative spiritual experience.

### **The system of practice seen pragmatically; the centrality of 'Going for Refuge' - shared experience of spiritual life**

And I want to come at it absolutely pragmatically. I'm interested in how we use our system of practice as something that's deeply transformative; and I think that that's the main point I want to make this morning.

I've been using the *System of Meditation* as an analogy because I think it's the most systematic part of our teaching. Our system of training, our system of practice is not just limited to meditation practice. So I want to try and broaden out a little bit, and I want to start with this idea of the centrality of Going for Refuge. I have to say, the centrality of Going for Refuge is one of these ideas I come back to again and again and I think— have I really understood this? Have I understood why it gets quite the emphasis that it does on Bhante's teaching? And I'm not sure I've completely exhausted the implications of the centrality of Going for Refuge.

When I became a preceptor, I went back and read a lot of Bhante writing about Going for Refuge... very, very struck by a particular passage. I don't have *The History of My Going For Refuge* with me, so I'm doing this more or less from memory. But it's a paraphrase of a point that Bhante made at the time of the first ordinations, and he said *at the time of the first ordinations, now eleven other people – at least to some extent – shared my understanding of Going for Refuge*. So the whole way he described the ordination was *eleven people understanding his experience*. He had just described the last twenty-five, thirty years of his own thinking. It's almost, you get this “Kaundinya knows!” moment; you get the idea that eleven other people have understood what *he* understood as the nature of spiritual practice.

And then he went on to say, *not that that understanding of going for refuge was something fixed, [but] that it was now unfolding in eleven other lives as well as in my own*. And actually, that idea of a shared understanding— a shared understanding that wasn't fixed, but was developing in eleven other lives, and those people in dialog with each other, and that developing understanding being supported by their communication with each other. Personally, I found that a very moving description of what happened at the point of the first ordinations. And what I think the nature of our spiritual community is: it's that their own personal experience; their own personal understanding, deepening and coming into relationship with a network of other people who's experience is deepening; and out of that communication is something of significance happens that's deeper than any of us would do on our own.

The point I was trying to make was that – for Bhante obviously – this whole area of Going for Refuge, and a shared understanding of Going for Refuge, is definitive in the nature of the order.

### **Asanga on essential elements of practice; 'purified intention' and 'making correction after failure' - mind and the nature of commitment**

I was doing some study recently on an Asanga text, and Asanga threw some more light for me on the meaning of Going for Refuge. I got a letter recently, from a mitra who has asked for ordination, for whom their meditation practice is very central, and he's got to a point where he's saying: *look, I'm getting on with my meditation practice; I'm having significant experience. Why do you keep on going on about going for refuge? Why can't I just pursue my meditation practice, as it were, on it's own terms? How does it relate to going for refuge? How does it relate for ordination? And that had me thinking: well, how does it relate?"*

The Asanga text threw some light on this for me. Asanga is describing the essence of practice; and there's two elements, he says, that are essential to any practice (he's talking about the Bodhisattva's practice, but I think what he says is true of any practice with life in it), and what he says is the first thing that you need is ...[MOBILE PHONE AND LAUGHTER]... [Dhammarati:] "If it's Bhante, ask him if I'm on the right lines!" ...[LAUGHTER]... [Dhammarati:] "Ma nightmare's comin' true... aw ma god! ...[LAUGHTER]... Asanga was saying, central to any practice is what he called *purified intention* and then secondly, *making correction after failure*. And what he says with purified intention is that what you're trying to do is that more and more of your energy, more and more of the stream of your being, is trying to move towards *arising of the bodhicitta*.

But this thing about making correction after failure I have to say I loved, because what he's saying is *a lot of the time we're not going to make it*, and that what's crucial is that every time you move away from this volition – towards deepening our awareness – you recognise that you have moved away from it and you intentionally come back— and that that clarifying, deepening intensification of the stream of our being towards awakening is what's crucial in practice— and that every other practice basically supports that move of our own minds; supports that move of our own being.

The thing that unifies, in a sense, meditation with ethical practice/ritual is that all of it supports this mind that starts off all over the place, within which there's a strand that's a move towards awakening – a move towards awakening for self and other – and that that gradually becomes the shaping, defining current of our being, of our lives. That's what Going for Refuge is, and according to Asanga, that intensification of that intention – the sustained intention to make correction after failure – is of the essence of spiritual practice.

For me, it linked why Going for Refuge underlies every other practice, how every practice is basically a supporting of that... arising of the *bodhicitta* if you like— but that

clarification of our deepest nature, of our deepest purpose.

I just loved though the idea that losing touch with your Going for Refuge is just part of the nature of it. It's not that you've done something dreadfully wrong; it's just a given and all that you have to do – Subhuti put it as – basically, what you're doing when you're making a commitment, is that you're making a commitment to recommitting. So it's every time you lose it, you come back; there's no big drama in it.

### **The FWBO as four lineages; meditation not all there is to our practice; a lesson from Lhundrup about experience meeting a tradition**

The second point that Asanga makes is that the essence of the practice is to correctly receive it from somebody else. What you are getting in a spiritual community, what you are getting in a tradition, is our own deepening experience meets a more mature experience than our own. So the essence of practice according to Asanga is that we correctly receive the practice from somebody else. And that brings me onto this whole question of lineage.

Vajrasara yesterday reminded me that Bhante actually has spoken about the FWBO as a lineage. And actually, he has spoken about it as being four lineages:

- he says that there is a lineage of *practice*
- there is a lineage of *teaching*
- there's a lineage of *inspiration*
- and then (I think as a wee consolation for those of us who have spent most of our lives working for the movement) he says well you could say there's a fourth lineage, which is the lineage of *responsibility*.

So I want to say something about each of those briefly; but I mainly want to concentrate on the lineage of practice; and I mainly want to concentrate on meditation practice. Because of that, I want to make the qualifier: our system of training is bigger than meditation. For most of us, our meditation is something we do for forty minutes to an hour each day, and if that was the sum total of our practice, you can forget *transformative*. Basically, you've got twenty-three hours where the other shaping influences are not necessarily towards awareness. So basically, you have to be thinking of each moment of experience within a framework of practice.

But for all that — Joseph Goldstein I think it was who said that well you could take your life as your practice, but sometimes you've also got to think about your practice being your practice — so I want to speak a little bit about meditation specifically.

Partly, I want to speak about it because it's been a controversial area; at least, a confusing area over the last few weeks. So I want to talk a little bit about this whole business of what we're receiving, and how it meets our own practice. Part of my job is to talk to other traditions, and recently I visited a Kagyu retreat centre in France, and a couple of things really struck me on how they taught at this place. One of the sessions (actually, this was

something that happened at Madhyamaloka, but...), a lama (a guy called Lhundrup, who I'd got to know quite well) was talking about the teaching: Gampopa, teaching *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, and he was going through the passage on the hells *but*, he said, *it wasn't his business to edit Gampopa*. He was at liberty to say, 'I don't find that useful; it's not something I'd use in my own practice.' But he also felt he had a responsibility to pass Gampopa on *full*. And there was something about those two elements. It's not that we got the bits of Gampopa that Lhundrup was at ease with: you got the whole text; you also got his comment— *this is where I find it useful; this is where I don't find it useful*.

...Something very similar in how they teach meditation. When they're teaching a sadhana practice, there's a couple of different stages that you go through, and one stage is to read you the text of a sadhana. You're being read this text that's probably hundreds of years old and you're getting every clause and every comma of how a particular sadhana is done. But then there's a second part to the practice, and it's the guy telling you what he actually *does* in his practice — and I was thinking again, you've got the same dialog going on: you've got somebody saying, *well actually, this is what works for me*; but *his* experience is put in a context; what you're getting is an absolutely – as far as possible – an undistorted communication of what a tradition is saying, the practices involved.

Now, I have to say, it made me think that there's lessons that we can learn from that in terms of how our experience meets a tradition, even how it meets a body of teachings, some of which we're at ease with and some of which perhaps not so at ease with.

### **The context of meditation in the FWBO and the five spiritual faculties; describing not prescribing – the system in relationship to the mind**

And it brings in the whole question for me of how we bring in practices that don't immediately sit at ease with what we've learned. So I want to talk a little bit about particularly Pure Awareness practice and some of the issues that that's thrown up. But before I do, I want first just to sort of lay out the context of meditation that we've been given.

So, Bhante, if I can remind you, I'm sure this is familiar ground, lays out four main stages, what he calls *four great stages* of: *integration*, *emotional positivity*, *spiritual death*, and *spiritual rebirth*. He slightly expands that in another system that he calls the *five great stages*, what he calls: *mindfulness*, *vision*, *transformation*, and *spontaneous compassionate activity*. And one of the things that he makes explicit is that there is a direct connection between that system of meditation and the five spiritual faculties: so, the integration links up with mindfulness as a spiritual faculty; emotional positivity links up with *sraddha* as a spiritual faculty; spiritual death links up with wisdom as a spiritual faculty; and spiritual rebirth links up with meditation – in the sense of that glimpse of what we've seen becoming deeply transformative of our whole being.

And then the other stage he links with *virya* to what he calls *spontaneous compassionate activity*. Now, I think it's significant that system of meditation is linked with the five spiritual faculties. And the reason it's significant is that it means that our system of

training... it's not an arbitrary system.

I was reading somewhere, listening to Bhante talking about he picked up the four stages mindfulness of breathing technique, which apparently he learned from a Theravadin bhikkhu who he met in Singapore. And what you're looking at in the *System of Meditation* is not just the practices that haphazardly have come in to the movement. What you are looking at is an attempt to describe the fundamental elements of the mind in the process of waking up. So the whole tradition is saying that the characteristics of that are going to be a tendency towards awareness; a tendency towards increasing positivity; a tendency towards seeing more and more clearly into the nature of things, and that clear seeing into the nature of things gradually becoming transformative; and out of that, out of the overflow of that, we start to work in a way that's a bit less self-referential and a bit more inclined to help others.

And the reason I think that's significant, is that it shifts the *System of Meditation* from being one system among many to saying that well, actually, it's rooted in the nature of developing spiritual experience. To the extent that it is true that developing spiritual experience has a quality of growing awareness in it, then mindfulness has to be part of that. You're just describing – you're not prescribing – to the extent that it is a move away from aversion into love. All you're doing is describing one of the fundamentals of what happens as you start to spiritually mature.

So, what it seems to me the system is saying: it's not that you've got this arbitrary set of practices that you can argue with. It's saying: there's a certain character to our own maturing spiritual experience; it's possible to be aware of the main components of that; and it's possible to intentionally support their development. And if you are aware of what the main components are, and aware of the practices that support that development, you're going to end up with a well-rounded, mature spiritual experience.

So, the *System of Meditation* (I'm almost a little bit shocked to come to this conclusion, I think)— the *System of Meditation*, I think grows out of the nature of the mind, it grows out of the nature of the mind in a process of awakening, and it's *that* fundamental; it's descriptive rather than prescriptive. It's certainly not arbitrary.

### **The need for intelligent dialogue between what we like and prefer, and a more rounded tradition**

Each stage has a characteristic practice: so, with mindfulness, the Mindfulness of Breathing, in a sense, is the obvious practice. Positive emotion, the *Metta Bhavana* is the obvious practice. But one of the things that's important I think is that it's not limited to that particular practice. But again, in the positive emotion stage, Bhante points out that it would include *Metta Bhavana*; it would include the *Brahma Viharas*; it would include *puja*; it would include the *bodhicitta* practice; it could even include poetry; it could include the arts. There is a key practice, but the stage isn't limited to that practice.

Again, coming back to trying to chunk the system down to specific practices, I think what



I would want to argue is that one of the things that you're trying to do with spiritual training is that you're moving yourself out of your own self-reference; you're moving yourself out of your whole framework of what you like and what you don't like. And I would say, for quite a long period, there's an argument for actually doing the specific practices. So first of all, I want to open the space up, then I want to try and close it down a little bit.

I've got an *enormous* bias towards mindfulness practice. Left to my own devices, I'll just do the mindfulness of breathing, and I'm much more reluctant to do the other practices—you see, I can feel the inertia in my own mind. And one of the things since I've started to teach in the ordination process: I've had to get more direct experience of the other practices. And it's been *enormously* beneficial for me and for my mindfulness practice. The fact that I'm more conscientiously doing the *Metta Bhavana* practice, the fact that I'm starting to do the Six-Element practice, I'm even starting to engage a little bit with *Sadhana* practice, really has had an impact. And one of the reflections for me is that I've gone for the best part of thirty years in the Order defending my preferences, and actually I'm glad at this late stage that I've finally had a structure that's made me have to take on board what the tradition has been trying to tell me for the last thirty years.

So first of all, I would say, there's a real benefit in just doing what it says—do the five practices. Certainly, don't prematurely drop them. However, I think it's also true that after a while you get experience, you find out what works and what doesn't work. And for good reasons, you have to start to be intelligently in dialog with the tradition. Like, I was thinking, for me the Mindfulness of Breathing can cover the whole spectrum of practice: it covers mindfulness; it covers positive emotion; it moves into the whole kind of *laksanas* area; so it starts to move into the area that the Six-Element practice does. But a good friend of mine... for her Mindfulness of Breathing doesn't even support the experience of mindfulness ...[LAUGHTER] ... and a number of people for whom Formless practice has been a much more effective support for mindfulness than the Mindfulness of Breathing has.

So, I think you've got to be in sort of intelligent dialog with it – but not too fast. Right, you really don't want *what you like* being the arbiter of what bits of the tradition you're willing to lay yourself open to.

### **Specific practices shading into insight; two takes on 'Pure Awareness' practice in the Fwbo**

I want to come back to this whole idea of practice as progressive and cumulative. An interesting conversation with Bhante recently, where he said that what he had been trying to do in the text of *Living with Awareness*, was to show how the practice of mindfulness went beyond the four stage Mindfulness of Breathing and moved into the area of insight. What he had been trying to do with the *Living with Kindness* book was to show how the practice of *metta* went beyond the five stage *Metta Bhavana* practice and gradually shaded into the experience of insight. Then he said something very interesting actually... so interesting that I checked it with him. He said that he thought that what some order

members were starting to do with formless practice was analogous to that. He said that what he had taught as Just Sitting, he hadn't really unpacked the implications of. That he thought that some order members were starting to take Just Sitting, and starting to show how it shaded into the area of insight.

First of all I thought it was a very interesting take on some of the stuff that's been going on around this whole *Pure Awareness* discussion: to have it addressed in that context. But the more fundamental point, one that I do want to spend a minute on, is this idea of each of those practices shading into insight.

I want to talk about Pure Awareness first of all. At a meditation colloquium last August, we tried to re-brand Pure Awareness. We're really suggesting that it doesn't get called Pure Awareness – it just carries such a connotation. We're suggesting a blanket term, or an umbrella term, of *Formless Practice*. If you want to know more, there is a session this afternoon reporting back from that colloquium.

But, it has been a controversial thing: some of the stuff around Pure Awareness practice in the last few years. And I was thinking, there are two completely different stories that you can tell: one is that it has been an organizational disaster starting with David Smith (his criticism of the spiritual plateau); the opposition between Pure Awareness practice and *Bhavana* practice. And we've created such a muddle around how the whole thing hangs together. So there is a whole story you could tell about *how did we get there?*

There's another story I think. I was thinking that in my experience, actually, Pure Awareness has caused some problems. It's mainly caused problems with me talking to other people about their practice. But on the whole, in my direct experience, I would say its impact has been more helpful than harmful and actually, I don't do Pure Awareness practice; I don't do Formless Practice. I spent one ten-day retreat with Tejananda and Viveka, completely didn't get it, and just went back to Mindfulness Practice. ...[LAUGHTER]... In fact, to tell the truth, I couldn't tell the difference between what they were teaching in the mindfulness practice.

One of the things that I notice is, I've never seen so much interest and excitement about, passion about, and ambition about meditation practice, that I have in the last few years. It seems to me, meditation's got a life in it that I don't think I've seen for a long time. And you're getting people seriously talking about the experience of insight in a way that it hasn't got the apologies and the qualifications. They're just saying, you know, you give that particular kind of attention to your experience; it supports pretty much at least the first glimmers of the experience of insight. And what I realise is that on the whole, I've found the whole discussion around Pure Awareness to be an enormously stimulating element – even David Smith accusing us of being on a spiritual plateau – and made you all think, *that'll be right (!)* and it's made me engage with my practice with an intensity that I think I didn't have before.

So, I want to tell the story a little bit about what a constructive, stimulating shaking up of the pattern it has been. And Bhante, again in these question and answers, says that

Formless Practice is important, helpful, useful, as long as it's in a context. And I want to come back again to the Five Spiritual Faculties. The only thing that he says is that *if you think it's the whole path, then it's not*. That goes against the whole Buddhist tradition. If you put Formless Practice in a context of recognising what you're trying to do is set up the conditions that support deepening awareness, deepening positive emotion, and deepening clarity, transformation, then there's no problem, I think. So you're back to this whole question of how a practice gets contextualized, how it gets fitted into a broader system of practice.

### **Anapanasati and metta practices as examples; corollary between the work of the Six Element Practice and the Bodhichitta Practice**

I want to say one more point actually. One of the things that Bhante has really been emphasising in the last few years has been this potential for insight in each of the practices. I have to say, I think I've got some direct glimpse of that through doing the Anapanasati Sutta where it just takes you really simply from awareness of the breath through the *dhyana* factors and then it just gets you to notice that everything that you've been aware of is impermanent. And it's not a polemical, conceptual point. It's just saying look at it, just look at the breath, just look at every mental state you've just been so carefully developing. So it just gives you this context of space, and just brings your attention to the impermanent nature of the whole thing. So, I think this is obvious, how Mindfulness of Breathing has this dimension of insight to it.

One of the things I've been really excited by recently is Bhante making the same point about *metta*. He's saying *metta* done in the right way is an insight practice. I'm going to just read you a short quote— Bhante says “a misapprehension is to think of insight in metaphysical terms rather than as concretely lived attitudes. If you don't have a realization of the egolessness, the solution is to act a little selfishly, the understanding comes after the experience; and not before.”

And just for me, that idea that you can understand something almost emotionally, and that your conceptual or your more cognitive understanding catches up. I find that a really sort of exciting one— but that idea that *Metta Bhavana* has within it, this possibility of moving the whole self-centred frame of reference that we split experience into.

And just briefly – I mentioned this in a talk before but – a thrilling experience at Guhyaloka: the relationship between the Six-Element practice and the *Bodhicitta* practice. Bhante recently was giving a lot of emphasis to this Six-Elements practice. He was saying that if what we are really trying to do is to overcome the illusion of self, you could say that the Six-Element practice is *the* most important practice in our whole spiritual discipline. I was really struck by just the level of emphasis that he was giving it.

But, my experience at Guhyaloka was doing the Six-Element practice regularly, like doing it daily pretty much, and doing it intensely for a couple of weeks. And the experience of just the whole habit of clinging onto your own experience loosening up. And then going from that into doing the *Bodhicitta* practice, and just this— almost

surprised that a corollary of that loosening up was how much easier it was to feel empathic connection for others.

So again, it sort of seems to me that what you're working with is *a system* of practice. It's not that you're trying to think *well what's the real practice?* The loosening of the self-identification that you get in the Six-Element practice makes it possible for this experience of real kind of interest in connection with others, and that that — that the *Bodhicitta* practice supports — the *Bodhicitta* practice warms up — gives you this sort of empathy in the experience of the Six-Element practice. Just this real experience of how the two practices supported and nourished what each of them was trying to kind of nudge us towards. And again, back to this thing about the *System of Practice*, this trying to bring our attention to the main strands of the experience of the mind starting to wake up.

### **Context and structure in relationship to formless practice- unpacking the four lineages of the FWBO**

The last point that I wanted to make was that each individual practice happens within a *System of Meditation* practice, and that the meditation practice happens within a broader system of practice. There's four lineages that Bhante talked about.

He says there's **the lineage of practice** — practice includes things like ethics. We were recently studying a Milarepa text, where Milarepa had just done this whole *Mahamudra* thing about trying to get you to realise the spontaneous, luminous nature of the mind, and then he follows that up immediately by saying “Your life is full of potential! Guard your ethics as you guard your eyes!” And it just seems to me completely traditional that Formless Practice gets put in a context of highly-structured, careful, formed practice and, in a sense, that's the argument that I'm making.

Meditation's in a framework of ethics; it's in a framework of views. The fundamental view I think is *pratitya-samutpada*. Just, again, bringing your attention to the fact that you're looking at this flow of experience.

I think, something else that for me has come from the whole Pure Awareness discussion, is realising that that's not just conceptual. What this whole view's trying to do is just get you to notice that (again, sort of Milarepa) it's about looking at your whole experience as *bubbles in a stream*. It's like it's not that it's not real, but it's not as fixed or as heavy or as tight as you think it is. And what you're trying to do, this whole idea of *pratitya-samutpada*, is just become sensitised to this fluid nature of our experience.

And then Bhante's saying that within this fluid nature there are two possibilities: there's what more traditionally gets called the *samsaric* option, where you get caught in confusion — and Gampopa says “samsara is the mind caught in bewilderment and pain.” So you get one option within that, and you get the other option, which is the *nirvanic* tendency — it's the mind choosing *moment by moment* to move into clarity rather than bewilderment — and the whole point of that view is, *being pushed into sensitivity to the possibility — within each moment of experience — of paying attention*.

There's **the lineage of inspiration**, Bhante says, and that's basically just saying that we learn from each other; we don't spend all our time meditating; but, we've got our own maturing experience. My experience comes into dialog with your experience and I learn; you give me feedback about where I'm getting caught, and I am made more open. So, our practice happens within a whole context of communication.

And then finally again, for us *apparatchiks*, **the lineage of responsibility**, which I think basically boils down to *do what you can to help other people*. That your practice happens in that context of us taking the responsibility for passing on what we've understood that the tradition is trying to tell us.

### **Practice as aligning the nature of reality and the nature of our mind**

I wanted to finish off with one last point. What it seems to me is, if you look at our own System of Practice, what's being said is *the key idea is pratitya-samutpada*. Our System of Practice is based on *the nature of reality*. It is just that it's the fundamental Buddhist description of the way things are. The *main stages* is basically based on the fundamental description of the nature of the awakening mind. If you want to look at the foundation of our practice: it's the nature of reality, and the nature of the mind; and what you have to do *intentionally* to support the mind starting to wake up.

Bhante finishes off by saying:

“If you want to know what your practice is, each day there's five things that you have to practise as best you can:

- you keep up the effort to be mindful and aware
- you remain in as positive a mental state as you can
- you stay in touch *all of the time* with what's most deeply important to you
- you try to apply that *deepest* understanding to your practice at every level, and
- you do your best to help people

He goes on to say “Enlightenment's not that hard; *this* is your spiritual life. You can forget about where exactly you are on the path; what you have to do is intensify your effort in those five directions and then,” he says, “you simply can't go wrong.”

...[APPLAUSE]...