

From Views to the Dharma

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First of all tonight I'd like you to imagine that you've only very recently been ordained into the Western Buddhist Order. That's probably a bit difficult for some of you, but it's going to be very, very easy indeed for a number of others. Anyway, take your mind back as far as necessary, and just imagine that you've recently been ordained, and imagine that you've just come back here to the U.K., and that you are now in the process of adjusting to your new life as a member of the Order. Now, that is quite a business. You may find that there is a particularly demanding aspect to it, which is the totally new attitude that so many people now seem to have towards you. People seem to see you quite differently, seem to have very different expectations of you, seem to appreciate you in a different way. You might wonder why they never seemed to appreciate you in this way before.

And one day you hear some of this appreciation. Perhaps you hear it in a class situation, or a work situation, or perhaps you just happen to bump into some people – and they are praising you. They are rejoicing in your merits. They are saying, “*Dharmachari so-and-so is such a wonderful person. Dharmachari so-and-so doesn't go around beating people. Dharmachari so-and-so doesn't go around stealing things. Dharmachari so-and-so doesn't chase after other people's wives; Dharmachari so-and-so doesn't lie, and what's more, he doesn't get drunk. Isn't that wonderful?*”

Ok, well, perhaps you'd be fairly pleased to hear this, certainly if it were true. But now, let's imagine that you've been practising for twenty years. You're no longer newly ordained, you've been in the Dharma life for twenty years. That's probably difficult to imagine for those of you who are newly ordained, but on the other hand it's not too much of a stretch for quite a few of here tonight. It won't be long before quite a number of us are celebrating our second ten years. So – you've been in the Order for twenty years, and once again you hear yourself being praised. And they are saying almost exactly the same things as before. They are saying that this Dharmachari is ever such a good person who doesn't ever kill anyone – he isn't mean, and he doesn't rape people. He doesn't lie. Have you never see him getting seriously unaware – no. He's always kind, generous, truthful, and balanced. You never see him, or even hear of him, doing something really silly – he always seems to do the right thing. He's never embarrassing – never makes you cringe – and, d'you know, he's very ethical too. He doesn't carry a weapon – there are no guns, knives or knuckledusters in his inside pocket. And you can't bribe him, he's a thoroughly trustworthy man. And what's more, did you know, he's a vegetarian – he doesn't eat any meat. That's good, isn't it? I think that shows concern. And he speaks well, too – he doesn't talk down to you, doesn't waste your time, doesn't play games, doesn't chatter nonsense all the time, doesn't make mysterious little hints, doesn't butt in, interrupting you all the time. Not like some people that one could mention. No. This Dharmachari is a thoroughly good chap.

And they go on in this way. It's all really very positive indeed, and you certainly can't find fault with their rejoicings in your merits. That would be mean. But even so – you can't help feeling as though you've been sold just a little short. Just a little. You wonder, is that *all* they appreciate me for? Well, I don't wish to undermine basic goodness. Goodness might indeed be good enough for you and I; but we'll see shortly that it wasn't good enough for the Buddha. On a certain occasion, as they say, the Buddha was travelling along the highway with a huge company of bhikkhus – there were several hundred of them, and they were all walking – not just walking, but walking with awareness – along the road between Rajagaha and Nalanda, travelling north along the main highway. It must have been quite a sight. Just imagine the whole Western Buddhist Order doing that, all of us walking together along the main highway, all trying to be mindful and aware of every movement and every thought.

And to any innocent bystander this would have been an even more interesting sight, because it just so happened that behind the Buddha and his disciples there walked another large company of wanderering ascetics. These were the followers of a teacher called Suppiya. This was one of those glorious coincidences that sometimes happen – Suppiya hadn't known that the Buddha would be travelling on this particular road at this particular same time. If he had known, he might have thought twice about travelling to Nalanda that day. But anyway, to any innocent bystander the Buddha's company was a magnificent sight. The traditional commentary likens it to '*the shimmering crest of a golden mountain enveloped in a crimson mantle.*' I'll read you some more of it:

'At that time, it is told, the six-coloured rays of the Bearer of the Ten Powers issued forth from his body, filling and pervading an area eighty feet on all sides. The forest clearing through which they were walking appeared then as though it were bestrewn with garlands and wreaths made of gems, or with the dust of pulverised gems, as though it were a beautiful golden cloth embroidered with gems, as though it were sprinkled over with the essence of ruddish gold, or filled with a hundred meteors, or bestrewn with clustered Kanikara flowers,.. or as though it were irradiated and illuninated throughout by the splendour of rainbows, streaks of lightning, and the multitudinous host of stars.

The exalted One's body, adorned with the eighty minor marks of physical beauty, was like a lake filled with blooming lotus-flowers and water lilies, like a Paricchattaka tree in full blossom, like the canopy of the sky sparkling with the light of the stars, smiling down with glory from above.. Surrounding the Exalted One stood bhikkhus, all of few wishes, content, fond of solitude, aloof, exhorters, censors of evil, teachers, tolerant of correction, endowed with virtue, concentration, wisdom, emancipation, and the knowledge and vision of emancipation.. The sight filled the eyes even of the birds and beasts with joy, much more then the eyes of gods and men. On that day most of the eighty great disciples accompanied the Exalted One, [with] their cloud coloured rag-robes arranged over one shoulder.. All [were] free from corruptions, their corruptions ejected, their defilements shattered, their tangles disentangled, their bonds cut. The Exalted One, himself free from lust, hatred, and delusion, stood surrounded by those free from lust, hatred and delusion.'

The commentary carries on in this vein for a while. Then Suppiya, the other leader, surveys the scene – his own disciples, the disciples of the Buddha – and he can't help comparing... The wanderer Suppiya then surveyed his own assembly. He saw his followers leaning on their carrying poles, [which were] heaped up with a big load of requisites – dilapidated stools, tridents, peacock fans, earthen bowls, sacks, water pots, etc. They were loose-tongued, noisy, vociferous, unsightly, and uninspiring.

Unfortunately, Suppiya became extremely jealous of the Buddha, and as he walked along at the head of his own company of wandering ascetics, he gave way to this feeling and began to disparage the Buddha, his teaching, and his disciples as they all walked in front of him. He accused the Buddha of claiming falsely to be Enlightened, and even of lacking common manners. He said that the Buddha's Dharma was basically all wrong, and that the Sangha practised wrongly and perversely. The bhikkhus at the rear of the Buddha's company of course had to bear the brunt of all this. But, surprisingly, Suppiya doesn't get away with it from his own disciples. His own chief disciple, Brahmadata, counters each unjust criticism with a praise of the Buddha. Brahmadata realises that speaking in this way is highly unskilful on his teacher's part. He reflects that:

'[Even] if the teacher were to tread upon dung, fire, thorns, or a black viper, or to mount a stake, eat deadly poison, step into a violent stream, or throw himself down from a cliff, there is no reason for [this] disciple to follow suit. Beings are owners of their own kamma, and they each go their own way according to their own kamma.'

This little episode introduces the '*Brahmajala Sutta*', which is the very first of all the suttas in the Pali Buddhist scriptures. The Buddha uses it the very next day to illustrate a very important teaching. He begins by giving some advice as to how to handle that sort of situation, when others either praise or dispraise the Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. Indeed, both praise and blame are very testing – they are two of eight 'worldly winds' by which we are very easily blown about. the Buddha says that if we hear dispraise of the Buddha, his Teaching, or the Order, we must make sure we don't react. That is very important, for if we inwardly react to what has been said, perhaps giving way to resentment or anger, then this will cloud our understanding.

All this may seem a very roundabout way of talking about the nature of views. But in fact this point is the vital point of the whole sutta. It is that negative emotions cloud the understanding. If we indulge craving, it affects our understanding; if we indulge hatred, it affects our ability to see what is going on. It's a terribly simple point. If we allow our understanding to be clouded by a negative reaction, we will not even see whether they are mouthing dispraise or giving some useful criticism. Whether their words are true or false. The Buddha says that if we hear someone maligning the Dharma, then we should respond by unraveling what is wrong with their statement and expressing what is wrong clearly, with reasons. And we won't be able to do that if we've allowed our minds to be possessed by negativity. He then goes on to give some similar advice concerning praise of the Dharma. We shouldn't give way to jubilation and exultation; in other words we shouldn't allow ourselves to become intoxicated and unaware of what has actually been said. We should then happily acknowledge whatever is true in their statement.

Having said this, the Buddha starts to go a bit deeper into things. Apparently, according to the commentary, he had decided just that morning that it was the time to give a really cracking discourse on the Dharma. He's said it's going to be like *'pounding the sky with a golden mallet'*. He's planning to roar his irreversible lion's roar and cause the ten thousand-fold world to quake. This teaching, he knows, is going to liberate beings for five thousand years – though you wouldn't think it, so mildly does he start up the proceedings. He starts by analysing the kind of praise that he, the Buddha, tends to receive. We've just seen the kind of praise that a Dharmachari might receive, whether newly ordained or twenty years into the Dharma. Here's the praise that he, an Enlightened being, gets:

'Having abandoned the destruction of life, the recluse Gotama abstains from the destruction of life. The recluse Gotama – has abandoned taking the not given. The recluse Gotama – abstains from the vulgar practice of sexual intercourse. The recluse Gotama – abstains from false speech, slander, harsh speech, idle chatter. The recluse Gotama – abstains from damaging seed and plant life. The recluse Gotama – abstains from eating at improper times, and also from dancing, singing, from witnessing unsuitable shows, wearing garlands, scents and unguents, luxurious beds, accepting gold and silver, meat, animals, women, girls and slaves, owning land, and from running errands. etc. etc.'

The sutta has three succeeding, and increasingly long sections on the details of all these different kinds of things that people appreciate about the Buddha most of all. There are many interesting details of the kinds of shows, the kinds of board games and guessing games, kinds of furniture, cosmetics, clothing, fashion accessories, kinds of talk, kinds of errands, kinds of wrangling argumentation, and kinds of means of livelihood, that the Buddha doesn't get involved with. He's very much appreciated, by the worldly folk, for this. But the Buddha is not impressed, and certainly not flattered. He calls these – trifling and insignificant matters, minor details of mere moral virtue – [typical things] that a worldling would refer to when speaking in praise of the Buddha. Ordinary people will inevitably see one's going forth in terms that they can understand – they will only see its grosser aspects. Vital though these are, the Buddha wants to draw attention to the aspects of his going forth that specifically make him a Buddha. He says:

'There are, bhikkhus, other dhammas, deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful and sublime, beyond the sphere of reasoning, subtle, comprehensible only to the wise, which the Tathagata, having realised for himself with direct knowledge, propounds to others; and it is concerning these that those who would rightly praise the Tathagata, in accordance with reality, would speak.'

The Buddha is about to demonstrate his understanding of the subtle views that one needs to transcend in order to gain Enlightenment. This is going to be his lions roar, this is going to be his pounding of the sky with a golden mallet.

I noticed a little uneasiness in myself when I first learned the title of my talk tonight. I don't know about you, but I find the very notion of views disquieting. I suppose it must be because somewhere in the back of my mind I suspect that I have many wrong views. But there is another factor as well, which is that even though I know that my views are unclear – that I'm often unsure of what they are, unsure of their motivation, unsure of their skilfulness or unskilfulness – I also care a lot about them. They are precious to me – and you can read that positively and negatively. I realise, too, how they condition my life, and therefore the lives of others, in a very direct and powerful way. And I also know that in the world generally, views are such powerful things. They are so capable of arousing strong emotion, often negative emotion, that I find that I often have to be extremely cautious about the words I use. It isn't that I want to avoid expressing opinions that others might find fault with – but unless I am careful, I may speak rashly. And if I do that, the other person certainly isn't likely to abandon their viewpoint and start agreeing with mine. In Blake's famous words, or at least I hope something like them, “*a man convinced against his will retains the same opinion still*”. You can't make someone change their views simply by the force of your personality! If you try, what is much more likely to happen is that they hold on to their views even more tightly than before. This shows that views can be a source of security, and therefore a source of attachment, a false refuge.

And this means that they are very, very important to people. Views are so primary, so basic to our functioning, that the Buddha chose Perfect View, *samyak drsti*, as the starting point of his Eightfold Path, just as he is now in the Brahmajala Sutta. So this would seem a good point at which to define our terms.

What is a view? The word *drsti* means a sight, a view, or a vision. It refers literally to the physical sense of sight, but just as a view can both be what you see out of your bedroom window and a set of definite ideas, so *drsti* can imply inner vision, mental vision, as well as simple eyesight. So it is correct to translate it both as 'view', and as 'vision'. 'Vision' is perhaps better when we're talking about the Enlightened view of a Buddha; just 'view' is most appropriate when we're talking about the view of unenlightened people like ourselves. So *drsti* refers to both these two levels. And when it refers to the ordinary level of unenlightened views, there are two kinds of *drsti* – *samyak drsti* and *mithyadrsti*, right view and wrong view. The criterion for rightness and wrongness of view is very simple. What the view is – its verbal expression – does not matter. Even its objective truth is not the point at issue, though clearly it's not irrelevant either. What really matters is what the view does. Does to you, the holder of the view. If a view is conducive to happiness and spiritual development, it's right view, *samyak drsti*; if it has the effect of making you miserable, and losing progress in your practice, it's wrong. It's *mithyadrsti* or in Pali *micchaditthi*. An example of right view is the idea that you can gain Enlightenment. This is a right view, a correct view – though not, as yet, a perfect view. It isn't an insight – we don't fully see, we don't yet fully experience, that Enlightenment is a possibility, but we have that view.

So what is going to be the result of holding this view? The result is going to be some spiritual progress. Therefore it's a right view. Right view leads to right practice, which

will eventually lead to some actual experience or vision of the true nature of things. Wrong views, of course, lead to wrong practices which don't do that. It's interesting, isn't it, that the actual content of a view is not the point. This is because from the Enlightened point of view, from the point of view of Perfect Vision, both right views and wrong views are, in a sense, wrong views. Right views, such as the idea that you can gain Enlightenment, are right in the sense that they are skilful, but their content can only go so far – our unenlightened ideas can only go so far – they are still more or less theoretical to us. For example, we don't actually understand, from experience, that Enlightenment is a possibility. But still we hold the view that it is a possibility. And that view is right! These, then, are the two different kinds of right view.

The '*Brahmajala Sutta*' is about wrong views. In particular, it is about what are known in Pali as *ditthigata*, or speculative views – metaphysical, religious, or philosophical theories about the nature of existence. According to the Buddha, all such metaphysical theories are really rationalisations for craving and attachment. There are four varieties of attachment. We get attached to sense pleasures. We get attached to merely formal ethical or social observances. We get attached to the view of a soul or self, and we also get attached to speculative views. The process of attachment is pretty much the same in the case of these views as with any other kind of attachment – we get attached to some kind of pleasant feeling, or sense of security, that we get from the view. But this pleasure is as fragile as any other pleasure, and so attachment to a particular view also involves anxiety. We know, somewhere, that our view is only an idea, that we don't really understand. Thus all views spring from ignorance and craving, and so if we cling to them too tightly we are led into unskilful, unprofitable actions.

It is like a group of blind men, each of whom is poking at a different part of an elephant's body and insisting to the rest that he knows exactly what an elephant is like – after all he can feel it right then and there with his own hand – and it's perfectly obvious that an elephant is rather like a fan. But another says no, rubbish, it is like a basket, and another says how ridiculous – it is like this – exactly like a tree, how can you say basket. All of them completely disagree, and eventually all of them get very angry and start fighting. Thus holding fast to a particular view results in dogmatism, which results in pointless disputes. And like any other attachment, views are the cause of our becoming like this or like that – becoming fixed in this or that mode of being, and revolving for ever on the Wheel of Becoming, the Wheel of Living Death. But I'll say more about that later.

It's time now that we looked at the sixty-two wrong views that make up the 'great net' of the '*Brahmajala Sutta*'. This Brahma-net, this very fine-meshed fisherman's net, is the critique with which the Buddha intends to catch every possible variety of wrong view. So let's go back to our story. The last thing we saw was the Buddha explaining about his ability to perceive what views there are, what they are based upon, and where they lead. Now he begins to analyse all the different kinds specifically. There are sixty-two of them. I'll be brief! But as I go through them I'd like you to consider whether or not you tend towards each.

First of all come eighteen speculative views about the past – about how human life came about and its nature. These start off with four different ways of looking at the nature of change in relation to the so-called self and the so-called world. Two of them say that things really do change; the other two say that what seems to change is actually just an illusion. At the same time, two of these four views say that the self and the world are really one absolute reality, and the other two say that the self and the world are completely separate things, like spirit and matter. Well, haven't you ever thought that when subject and object are experienced as one, that's reality with a capital R ? Or isn't that quite the Buddhist view? I'll leave you to think about it. These four, by the way, are the eternalists.

The next four views are eternalist too, but only partially so, because three of them conceive on the one hand either one omnipotent eternal god, or several of them, who create the universe, and on the other hand, ordinary time-bound beings like ourselves. This is, basically, the God Idea. The fourth view is more rational, '*hammered out by reason*', as the Buddha says, that thinks of the mind as eternal, and the body as impermanent. What is most interesting to me about the God view is that the Buddha ascribes it to misconstrued spiritual experience, gained in meditation. This is the most common reason that the Buddha gives for wrong views arising. When I first came to this sutta I assumed that metaphysical views like these come about when people overvalue their ability to think and reason. But the majority of these 62 wrong views don't happen like that at all, they arise out of doing a lot of practice and devotion. In other words they arise out of some kind of higher experience. But that higher experience is rationalised in terms of personality view. It seems that if one practices within a framework of self-view, then every attainment in meditation will simply confirm that view. So that's another important reason for getting one's views straight early on. It seems that you can't just trust your experience – experiences have to be tested in the light of wisdom.

As a further example of this, the next four views all arise from misconstrued experiences of the higher *dhyanas*, the *arupadhyanas*. Actually in the first example it's a failed experience of them – a meditator finds that he can't reach the *arupadhyana* – and so decides that he knows, and what's more, knows through direct perception, that the universe is definitely not infinite. In the second example, a meditator succeeds in reaching the *arupadhyana* – presumably it's the sphere of infinite space – and so decides that he knows, and knows through direct perception, that the universe definitely is infinite! In the third example he experiences the infinity of space in one direction but not in another, and decides, from his experience, that it is both finite and infinite! The person in the fourth example is not a meditator – he's a rationalist who hears all these accounts. They are all contradictory, so they can't all be right, so he comes to the conclusion that none of them are right, and that the universe is neither finite nor infinite.

Another kind of view is the view of refusing to take up a view. You might try to find out what someone thinks about life, but they say that they can't say – certainly not for definite, anyway. They don't like to make a false statement; or they don't like to be put in a position in which they might get over-emotional. Or they would rather not say what they think, in case their view might get challenged; or else they equivocate out of sheer

perversity and stupidity. They say, 'No, no, I don't think it's like this or that. And don't get me wrong – I don't say that it isn't like this or that either'. They make all kinds of evasive answers. These are called endless equivocators. The Pali word, *amaravikkhepa*, means the 'eternal mind-tossers', or, alternatively, the 'eel-wrigglers'. You just can't get a grip on them.

Then finally, there are two views that existence happens spontaneously, without any particular reason. First of all an ordinary person doesn't see that he has had a previous existence – he sees no evidence for one – so he concludes that it has all happened spontaneously. You can probably think of some people with that kind of view. And perhaps, somewhere, that's what you think too. After all, where's the evidence? Then secondly, a meditator has just spent some time, of course he doesn't know how long, in the realm of non-perception. Do you recognise this one? He has been experiencing what is known in the trade as one-*skandha* existence. That is, just the *rupaskandha* – just form, no mind. Apparently this is a meditative attainment. Anyway, it seems that after being in that state, it's rather a surprise to come back into five *skandha* existence, so that it appears that existence arises spontaneously, just like that, without a cause.

All right, that concludes the first set of speculative views regarding the past. Now we come to the speculations regarding the future, in particular regarding future lives, and we can dispense with these more quickly, because most of them are just different possible ways of seeing future existences – possibilities that can be combined in various ways. Basically, there are an awful lot of people out there who think that some kind of self, or soul, is going to survive death. The Buddha says that there are no less, and no more, than thirty two different ways that they do this, depending on whether one imagines that one will be able to perceive anything or not after death – (or that one will neither be able to perceive anything or not be able to perceive anything). And also depending on whether, in any of those situations, that perception – if it's there at all – is uniform, diverse, limited or unlimited; and whether the whole experience, (if there is an experience, that is), is pleasant or painful, or both, or neither. And also whether the self that is experiencing (or not experiencing) after death is material, immaterial, both material and immaterial, or neither material nor immaterial. And whether it is finite, infinite, both finite and infinite – presumably in different directions – or neither finite nor infinite. You can take your pick of all the different combinations of these factors, which add up to thirty two.

Now just two groups of views remain – these are the annihilationists, and those who think that nibbana is right here and now. Basically, annihilationists all think that death is the end – that at the moment of death the self, whatever kind of self it may be, comes to a complete and final end. The first of these is the common materialist cum scientific viewpoint: the self is the physical body and finishes at death. After all, where's the proof that it doesn't? But the another six annihilationist views are products of spiritual ideologies – they're probably of the 'annihilation of the soul in God', or the 'dewdrop slipping into the shining sea' variety. Each of these views thinks of the self in terms of a higher state of consciousness, such as the *rupaloka*, but thinks of it as definitely ending at death. The views that '*nibbana*' is right here & now all seem fairly familiar. The thing that is wrong with them is that there is a self that gains this *nibbana*. The idea is that this

self gains '*nibbana*' through sheer hedonistic enjoyment, or through enjoying the bliss of the 1st jhana, the 2nd jhana, the 3rd jhana or the 4th jhana. That's five different views.

So there we have it – the Buddha's net of 62 views. The Buddha claims that this is an exhaustive list – all the basic kinds of speculative views are there, all are in the net. It might be rather hard for us to see this. Where are modern philosophies like existentialism. What about the New Age? I don't propose to try to fit it all in. It might be interesting to reflect upon the deeper sources of these ideas – perhaps they do fit despite appearances – but if they don't, it doesn't matter too much. What is important is that the Buddha points out the effect of speculative views and shows how to transcend them. To do this, he points to their emotional basis. He says that each one of these views *'is only the feeling of those who do not know and do not see; they are only the agitation and vacillation of those who are immersed in craving'*. In other words, we fabricate these views about the past or the future in order to rationalise deeply felt desires for certain feelings – feelings of pleasure, or at least absence of pain. Taking the view that death is annihilation can mean to us that it doesn't matter so very much what we do in this life. Taking the view that an omnipotent God will look after everything provided we have faith in him may be a deeply felt source of security. But the Buddha goes on to say that if we hold such a view we are ignoring the real nature of feeling. Feeling is just pleasure or pain. Feeling is just a phenomenon that arises in dependence upon certain conditions, and certain other conditions are likely to arise in dependence upon it. That's its nature. Because they don't see the natural tendency for feeling to condition craving, people tend to cherish the feelings that their views arouse. But cherishing feelings just leads to more craving, and the cycle of re-becoming is established more and more firmly. This is why feeling is known as 'the bait of the round' [*vattamisa*], the baited hook which we would naturally avoid if we noticed it, but which generally we swallow quite happily. The Buddha says that if we are to end the cycle, we must go back to the sense contact that conditions the feeling. If we want to free ourselves from becoming this or that, we need to be much more aware of our sense contacts, much more aware of what we take in through our bodies and our minds. We need to guard the gates of the senses, to keep our senses clear and calm, we need to keep a cool head and an open heart. If we can keep a cool head and an open heart, we will be able to reflect upon the nature of things – reflect on the arising and the passing away of conditioned things. If we reflect like this, then we will realise the real truth, that is the perfect view, the perfect vision of the Buddha. ...

But what's that? Can that view be formulated, can we formulate the Buddha's vision? Before we go into that question, we need to assess our own position. The Buddha's net of views provides a good framework for looking at our own views. We can try to see whether our own ideas and opinions are rooted in a particular metaphysical view, perhaps an eternalistic one, or we can simply ask ourselves "what do I really believe?" For example, do we really believe in rebirth, even in the Buddhist sense, and in what way? Do we really know what we think? Asking ourselves questions like this – and also asking one another – can be very stimulating, can help to clarify our ideas. Perhaps we find that we're a bit of an eel-wiggler – we don't like to say what we think, because – well, we might be wrong! And perhaps we do this, not only in communication with other people, but in the privacy of our own minds. To clarify our views and opinions, we

should use the Buddha's critique of views and examine the emotional base of our views – not just the metaphysical speculations, but also our ordinary day-to-day opinions about things. We may discover that our everyday opinions about things are linked to a deeper view, a more universal, eternalist or nihilist view, perhaps. We may also see its root in craving and attachment, its root in some view of self. We may also see the extent to which our views really are our views, the extent to which we have really thought and considered them: and see the extent that our views are conditioned by the world we find ourselves in at present.

This is very important because many of the views we hold are likely simply to be popular views, which have somehow been implanted into us. I think that people are very, very impressionable: we need to be aware of the extent of this impressionability if we want to clarify our thinking, and if we want to become more of an individual person. Most of our ideas are products of a whole history of ideas, a whole evolutionary – and devolutionary – process of ideas. For example, the reasons why certain ideas gain influence in society are often simply through historical accidents, hard political facts that affect whole societies like wars and conquests. Then there are the outstanding individuals – the poets, artists and thinkers of any culture are often said to be a hundred years or so ahead, in terms of views, of the ordinary people. I believe that the whole of western industrial society is still being sparked off by ideas that were really new in the nineteenth century. We are still being affected by ideas that conditioned the French Revolution. We are still being affected by the ideas that conditioned the dissolution of the monasteries.

What about the ideas that condition an historical phenomenon like the Western Buddhist Order? I would that the Western Buddhist Order is in some respects somewhere in the vanguard of the evolution of ideas, but my general impression is that individually we are much more strongly influenced by current fashionable views. Or is that just on the surface? Is it simply skilful means? There are also other historical influences on our views – our views are shaped by the images, myths and archetypes of our age and former ages, by the ideals of our age and the remnants of ideals of former ages. Views are shaped by evolving and devolving political dreams – perhaps by the desire for one caring, sharing, classless, sexless, raceless, co-operative world; or perhaps by the desire to be the chosen people, in the promised land, ruled by the divine liege lord; or perhaps just the vague general desire for 'freedom'. Generally our views are very much influenced by the views that have grown up around us throughout history, and we will be able to formulate and clarify our own views the more we understand about history, and the more we see that we are part of history. I said that because the natural tendency is to think that we are at the end of history, and that we are the most important thing in history. That's natural, because in a sense all that history has built up to the present moment. But we are not at the end of history. Time just keeps going, and even though the age we are living in is interesting, I wonder if there is really anything special about it. The people are certainly no nearer Enlightenment, certainly no happier, and not inherently any more interesting or significant than people in former times – probably less so. We naturally consider ourselves to be the most interesting beings in the history of the universe – but all the great ferment of modern views that seem so exciting to us, in the build-up to the millennium,

are just a few sparks in the greater perspective of history. They will all, without exception, come to an end. It is good to try to see this, because it helps to isolate us from the superficial excitement of new ideas, and helps us to distinguish what is real and useful from what is false and perhaps even harmful.

Even though we live in what is called a free society, we are nevertheless constrained in the expression of our thinking, and even in our thinking itself, by public opinion. Public opinion is the opinion of the group; it is formed by a great chaos of influences. It is really a chaos, a hell even, of compromises and misunderstandings. Because people rarely think ideas through, they share their views on the basis of mutual compromises on truth. And it's hell because there is no truth. There is no easy way to mutually agree on the truth. People compromise and stick with the views that feel best, that provide security. Since we in the Western Buddhist Order are in the business of communication of truth, of reality, of right views that lead to happiness and freedom, we must acknowledge this. We cannot allow ourselves to compromise in our thinking. We must go forth from views – limiting views – to right view. And we must go forth from right view to perfect view. We must go forth from views to the Dharma. Now, just a couple of questions we need to ask ourselves. First of all, in terms of wrong view – what kind of views do we in the Order need to go forth from? And in terms of right views, what are right views for us in the Order? I'll briefly suggest some answers to these questions before concluding.

So – views that we need to go forth from. There are so many of these, but I think that the distinctive feature of all of them is that they are essentially mundane. At the heart of these views is a fear that limits our viewpoint to the ideas and aspirations of ordinary people. We can't bear to be different in our thinking, we can't bear the insecurity of standing outside public opinion. This clinging to group security is at the heart of so many of our rationalisations in the W.B.O.. For example, we take the idea that the Bodhisattva works in the world. We are budding Bodhisattvas, so we too need to work in the world. There is some truth in this – there are people there in the world who need the Dharma, just like we once were ourselves, and we don't want to ignore them. But this idea of working in the world so often comes to mean working in the world, not as a Bodhisattva in training, but as a very ordinary, mundane individual indeed. We actually take on the values of the world, for example one such value is that of being what I have heard called 'full-blooded'. We want to be someone really dynamic and impressive. On the surface, perhaps, there is little wrong with this, but the notion I am talking about is not just the antithesis of being weak and anaemic; it is also the antithesis of mindfulness and awareness. It takes the form of involvement in every kind of worldly activity, and stimulation of the senses, apparently because one doesn't want to be seen as abnormal or sexually unattractive. One is motivated on the one hand by a desire to conform, and on the other by fear of group rejection – which amounts to the same thing. We have succumbed completely to the pull of the world, yet we think of ourselves as budding Bodhisattvas. We really admire the Bodhisattva Vimalakirti going into those gambling houses and brothels, and we want to be like that too – we want to be what we probably think of as being 'really alive', while in fact, spiritually, we are really, really dead to our own growth and development.

The main problem with this kind of view is that it is the opposite of the spiritual life. The Bodhisattva way, the Mahayana, of course doesn't ignore the world, but it starts with Hinayana. There is no Mahayana without Hinayana. There is no Bodhisattva – not even a budding Bodhisattva – without renunciation, without Going Forth from all these essentially mundane, essentially boring and essentially useless worldly activities. There is no Bodhisattva – there is just a thoroughly ordinary, mundane person. And perhaps that's what we always wanted to be. We just wanted to be normal and acceptable in society. This is why we hold so many of the common views of our time, this is why we get so hot under the collar when some of our precious issues are raised – not because we care about the truth, but because we must conform, we cannot be seen not to be right on, we cannot be seen to disagree with the view of the group that we have unconsciously identified ourselves with.

And the other kind of wrong view I'll mention is the way we can twist this idea round, and this time we view our own movement as that very group. We view the FWBO as some kind of group-like cult that is trying to brainwash us with its ideas, but we aren't going along with it – no, we're going to be an Individual [with a capital I]. Now of course there is the possibility, even the likelihood, that some people involved in our movement may not fully grasp the implications of certain aspects of the Dharma, or may imbibe them and even teach them unreflectingly. Unfortunately, where there are unenlightened beings, there will always be misunderstandings. But with this wrong view of the situation we take the idea that the FWBO is a group in an absolute way, just so that we have an excuse for reverting to a mundane way of thinking. It isn't actually that our view of things is more insightful, but that we want to find a rationalisation for not accepting some Dharma. Really, we want to follow the worldly way, and be acceptable.

After all, what do we say if our parents or our old friends – particularly our old friends – start asking awkward questions? Well, I think we should be truthful. We must avoid destroying the very thing that can help us. The FWBO and the W.B.O. is really a medium, you could say, for collective reflection on what is right and what is wrong view. It always strikes me as particularly foolish when I hear complaints like 'I don't like the way that the FWBO is going'. About the Guhyaloka vihara for example. As though the whole movement were sort of sliding down a particular direction. It doesn't take very much reflection to realise that it is very unlikely that the whole movement is going to 'go monastic'. How many of us here are going to join the vihara? But do we really think that it won't enrich the movement? Surely it is an honourable thing, a worthwhile thing, for some people to do this? Shouldn't we be providing this aspect of the spiritual life?

The other night Dhammadinna, in her talk on the Refuge Tree, showed us the richness of the FWBO lineage, all the different streams of influence that our movement inherits through the work and thought of our teacher Bhante. Everything that we inherit through the purity of his views. It's silly to think of the movement going in a particular direction. We are simply trying to establish Buddhism in the West, and that is a very broad and multifaceted thing with many forms and practices involved. The new monastic community, as I'm sure Dharmaghosa will be telling us on Saturday, is going to be another jewel – and no doubt a very prominent one – in our mandala. But it isn't the only

jewel. We can't afford to nourish these half-baked views. All these views – the ones about the world, the ones about the Sangha, not to mention all the speculative views mentioned by the Buddha – are bandages, they're band-aids which we use to cover up the wounds of our own existential conflicts, the challenging realities of life, love and death that we cannot bear to come to a decision about. And we are so sensitive about these wounds, that we don't like to change the bandages. And after a while the bandages get rather smelly. Primarily, these bandages are covering up that great nexus of unthought out assumptions and feelings, our own sense of self. They are all based upon the *maha-micchaditthi* of self-view. Getting to see through this huge mess of assumptions is one of the main aims of insight meditation, the sort of practice that we are gradually trying to develop at Vajraloka. It's also one of the main aims of study and reflection on the Dharma.

This brings up my final topic, and also harks back to the earlier question of how do we formulate Perfect View? This is a huge question, so I'm only going to introduce it and then conclude. We have looked this week at the FWBO lineage in terms of individuals, but we could also, and in my opinion should also, look at our lineage in terms of views. If we say that we inherit the philosophical tradition represented by Tsongkhapa, by Asanga, by Nagarajuna, etc., what does that mean? What is the FWBO formulation of the Dharma in those terms? What is the FWBO view? Are we primarily Madhamikas? Are we followers of the Yogachara? What about the Tathagatagarbha Sutras? If we aren't eternalists or nihilists – or eelwrigglers – then what, more exactly, are we? Are we any of these, a particular development of these, or can we be several of these? Or does the FWBO represent a kind of living dialogue of views, a kind of medium for formulating views, based upon a growing experience of meditation and reflection? I think that it is more like that. Indeed, my impression is that Buddhism is like that – that the Sangha is like that.

I think that my main point, my final point, is that we must go forth in our views more than in any other area. Because it is basically our view that results in actions. It is our mental attitude that creates our world. But views are subtle. Views are subtle obscurations, subtle hindrances that we often can't see for ourselves. Our friends in the Sangha must point them out. That's one way that we can go forth from them. But this subtlety of views also reminds me of the Vajrayana, the meditation practices of the Vajrayana. One of the special functions of the imagery of the Vajrayana is said to be the transformation of subtle hindrances, and views are subtle things. What is transformed in the meditations of the Vajrayana is our views – those complexes of negative emotion and rationalisation as described in the Brahmajala Sutta. They are transformed via reflection; they are transformed by the imagination. We saw earlier that false views like eternalism can easily arise out of meditative experiences, but in Vajrayana practice we always recollect the dimension of *sunyata*. The dimension of *sunyata*, wherein all is open like the infinite blue sky, with no obstruction anywhere. Ultimately this is how we go forth from views to the Dharma. We must study, reflect and meditate upon the ultimate nature of things – study it, and reflect upon it, in terms of ideas – in terms of transforming unclear views in the light of right views; and finally we must meditate in terms of the imagination, and thus transform our right views, our reflections on right views, into the perfect view of the Buddha.

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