



# the fwbo: a community in transition

by nagabodhi

## part I

### 1/ the size and identity of the f/wbo

When I spoke in 1989 there were about three hundred and fifty members of the Western Buddhist Order worldwide. There are now more than a thousand. In the last third of its lifespan to date, the Order has tripled in size. That is pretty good news: it suggests that our approach to Dharma practice – and to sharing that practice – has remained attractive, and has offered an effective context for people who want to commit themselves to the ideals and practice of Buddhism.

Although the FWBO's spread has been mainly unplanned and uneven, there are now Order members and FWBO activities on every continent. This makes for an extremely rich and diverse community. Fourteen years ago, I anticipated this expansion cheerfully, but injected a warning note to the effect that unless we made considerable efforts to keep in good contact with each other we might find ourselves falling into a complex of regional ghettos – in poor communication with each other and occasionally suffering from bouts of misunderstanding and mistrust.

I don't think this has happened – yet. For sure, we can find it hard to understand each other's ephemeral preoccupations, and the pages of *Shabda* can occasionally host unfortunate lapses of sensitivity to the mores of cultures other than the contributor's own, but we've never yet experienced any serious rift merely on the grounds of geography or race.

Probably the greatest difficulties we've faced in this regard have been in our attempts to negotiate, especially in our public life, the gaping difference between the conventionally held moral attitudes of Indian society and those of the western world where most of the rest of the FWBO/TBMSG is located.

For example, some people in the western wing of our Movement were troubled by what they saw as a duplicitous economy with truth in the FWBO's official responses to the Guardian article and the FWBO Files. The authors of those responses were themselves uncomfortable, but sources in India had warned them that a complete and open account of some relevant aspects of the FWBO's (western) history – particularly in the area of sexual behaviour – might well expose our Indian Friends, Mitras and Order members not merely to unpopularity or ridicule, but to actual physical danger. I know the authors of the responses well, and know they acted in good faith, and had little freedom for manoeuvre. But they would be the first to admit that the choices they made have left a legacy that we are still addressing.

This is probably the biggest single predicament our global spread has created. But although the relative mores of the East and West created a problem in the West, to my knowledge it did nothing to dent the goodwill flowing between eastern and western wings of the FWBO/TBMSG.

The fact is we all seem to get on pretty well with each other, and actually manage to experience ourselves as a coherent community. Windhorse:evolution, our giftware company based in Cambridge, England, has played a key part in this sense of unity, by offering team-based right livelihood opportunities and a substantial taste of residential community life to Friends, Mitras, and Order members from all over the world. The extended ordination retreats at Guhyaloka and in Tuscany also provide a context in which people of many nationalities and social backgrounds spend long enough in

each other's company, and go through a sufficiently intense time together, to form friendships that can last a lifetime. As we currently contemplate a future in which many of our activities, systems and structures look likely to get more regionalised, even atomised, we should bear in mind the crucial bonding value of these more —central' institutions, and do what we can to support and preserve them.

Despite a few prominent exceptions, most Order members in 1989 followed a pretty standard regime of meditation and devotional practice. And although today the majority of Order members maintain an approach to meditation best epitomised in Sangharakshita's lecture, 'A System Of Meditation', certain preferences and special interests are emerging. I suspect we can look forward to a far richer mix of approaches and practices in the future, even, quite possibly, to the emergence of 'schools', as likeminded individuals cluster together for guidance and inspiration in fulfilment of more personal spiritual leanings. I don't know whether or not this kind of diversification will create tensions, but I would like to think that Sangharakshita's —system' – if interpreted flexibly as an outline of the stages in the meditation process, and of the way meditation actually works on consciousness, irrespective of the specific practices involved — is probably broad enough to embrace and unite us spiritually for a good time to come.

In 1989 it was just about possible to relate to the Order and even to large sections of the Movement as a fairly coherent social group. Most of us still knew each other by sight and by name. Many of us had visited each other's homes or at least home centres. Moods, issues, innovations, even emphases in thought and spiritual practice, could spread through the Order and movement very quickly (if not always efficiently) on the grapevine. Despite the extraordinary opportunities provided by cheap air travel and telephone connections, and of course e-mail and the Internet, no one could claim that we function in that way any more. We are definitely no longer a cosy group. And while we continue to maintain certain institutions that cater for the Order or Movement as a whole (for example Shabda, the biennial International Order convention, Dharma Life and the College of Public Preceptors) the likelihood is that our Order and Movement will become more regionalized in the coming years, with higher and higher levels of responsibility being decentralised and devolved — or even deconstructed.

For those of us who were around in the earliest days – who can remember, for example, the first Order convention, when just twenty of us spent a few days with Sangharakshita in the front room of a house in Purley – such a transformation might seem overwhelming; but it surely promises an exciting prospect of liberated creativity, greater depth, and approaches to Dharma practice more specifically geared to the individual needs of people of varying temperaments and living under differing conditions. Indeed, I suspect one of the challenges of the coming years will be finding ways of bringing to our —local' institutions – such as Order chapters, regional gatherings, meditation kulas, and public centres – a substance and intensity equivalent to that which we used to gain from our participation in the total Movement in the days when such participation was possible – or at least, seemed possible. (To the extent that such participation was really always something of an imaginative construct, the strengthening of local institutions might actually constitute a step forward.)

Over the past fourteen years, a number of Order members have initiated projects such as public centres and right livelihood businesses. But the days when most Order members found themselves

living in relatively small concentrations around an FWBO centre (to which all of them gave some, if not all, of their time) seem to be over, even in the UK. Although most Order members still live within easy reach of a centre, it is now quite common to find many who have little or nothing to do with its day-to-day life. Proportionately, too, far less Order members – again, even in the UK – work in FWBO right livelihood businesses. In other words, the idea that an Order member is someone who pretty much lives and breathes within an FWBO context (something which was never explicitly prescribed, and never even realised in most countries outside the UK) is fast losing currency. The FWBO, and even the Order, are far more heterodox communities than they were a decade or so ago.

‘Commitment is primary; Lifestyle is secondary.’ With this maxim, Sangharakshita once expressed his hope that the WBO would be neither monastic nor lay. In the UK, at least, whilst explicitly articulating this vision, I believe we’ve lived through an era when many of us perhaps paid Sangharakshita’s maxim little more than lip service, believing somewhere in our hearts that unless we were following a supposedly normative ‘centre/single-sex community/team-based right livelihood business’ lifestyle, we would not be quite the full ticket. I suspect it will always be essential to the health of our Movement that a significant number of people choose to live a —semi monastic’ (even fully monastic, even —forest renunciate’) lifestyle. But it will be equally essential that those choosing to live in other ways honour their commitment to the Three Jewels by doing everything they can to turn their life and work, whatever it is, into a form of full-on spiritual practice. Unless we accept this challenge then it will probably not be many decades before the Order evolves into a two-tier Community of full-time FWBO-style —monastics’ and half-hearted —lay people’.

The increasing diversity of lifestyles within the F/WBO therefore presents an interesting challenge. Such a community requires guidance, nourishment, and inspiration in forms that are specific to as many of its needs and concerns as possible. When Sangharakshita was most active as a teacher – giving lectures, leading seminars, giving personal interviews – most of the people he was talking to were British, relatively young, unmarried, and living the ‘classic’ FWBO lifestyle. Accordingly, much of the material we have on record from those days is geared to the needs of such people. It therefore seems important that we now start to develop a much broader body of —lifestyle teachings’ than we presently have to hand. But who will give them? Who will write the books, give the lectures and lead the seminars? The obvious candidates are those who are trying to practice the Dharma within some of those hitherto undervalued contexts. There are now a good number of people who have spent years trying to live a Dharma life whilst fulfilling family responsibilities, or working in the wider world. Surely by now they have insights to share and struggles to record. Get out your word processors, folks! It’s time to tell us what you’ve learned.

Fourteen years ago the gender balance was very lopsided, with many more men in the Order than women, and more ordinations taking place among men each year. Things are certainly changing. There are still more Dharmacharis than Dharmacharinis, but the annual ordination tallies are evening out. Teams of Dharmacharinis are playing leading roles at several of our centres, and in some regions there are considerably more women than men in the process of preparing themselves for ordination. Should this trend continue, it is quite conceivable that there will be more women in the Order than men within a few decades, and it will be fascinating to see how this shift affects us.

The FWBO is fast becoming very different to the FWBO in which many of us grew up – and on the basis of which we formed our visions for the future. It is time to take up the task of recording the stories of those early days, before the memories of that very different world fade away completely, or seem too bizarre to be credible. Those stories would communicate the spirit, the culture, the understandings and misunderstandings out of which our present Movement has grown. They will have a lot to teach us, I suspect – about ourselves if nothing else. I hope they will also remind us of some principles from which we can still learn. Doubtless they will also highlight some of the naive assumptions and expectations from which we must free ourselves, if we have not done so already.

Since I made this point in my talk last November, the Order, and to some extent the wider FWBO, has in fact witnessed quite an explosion of Order members' reminiscences of its early days. This was sparked off by a single contribution to Shabda, which posed directly and indirectly a number of questions about the FWBO's attitudes to sex, sexual relationships, to the family, to gender, and to the uses and abuses of spiritual authority. Although the questioning and reminiscing is still very much a feature of our life at the moment, and still putting some of us in touch with painful memories, my sense is that most of us are finding the process enormously productive and liberating.

## 2/ the economic climate

In 1987 many western economies were passing through a phase of radical change. Governments, whether nominally of the right or left, were loosening their grip on things, allowing market forces free rein. The oft-stated vision was of a thrusting global economy, powered by unrestrained enterprise and initiative, generating unprecedented wealth – a proportion of which would –trickle down' to benefit even the least successful members of the community. The reality actually experienced by many was one of fiercer competition for jobs, greater workloads, more stress, and an increasingly bleak set of expectations about any possibility of security in the future.

While proposing that such a climate might bring a bracing edge of commitment and realism to our team-based right livelihood enterprises, I admitted it was also likely that less people would be prepared to take the financial risk of involving themselves in these institutions, or would feel immune to the increasingly confident Siren call of material security, even prosperity (a call that had been relatively unfashionable for people within the FWBO's predominant age-range and social groupings from the sixties to the early eighties). Within the coming decade or so, I said, we would probably see a much higher proportion of Order members working out in the world's marketplaces.

Such a prospect, I argued, needn't be a threat. Out in the world people earned more money than our relatively simple lives required, leaving a surplus that could fund Dharma and social projects. Out in the world, too, we would learn new skills, develop new kinds of expertise – all of which might find their way back into team-based projects within the sangha at some future point. After all, the pendulum might swing the other way, as some people, after a taste of life out in the world, would investigate the possibility of working with fellow Dharma-farers once again. In the final analysis, I said, we would do well to remember that right livelihood was a practice that can be taken up in all kinds of situations and circumstances. It was quite possible that many people would benefit greatly – and perhaps

communicate the Dharma more effectively – as they tried to practise right livelihood in the challenging climate of the commercial world.

Today, as we have seen, there are indeed proportionately far less Order members and Mitras working in FWBO-run, team-based right livelihood businesses, even in the UK, than there were a dozen years ago. Back then, the pages of Golden Drum (the FWBO's quarterly newsletter of the time) chronicled the emergence of new businesses with reassuring frequency. These days, new business ventures are something of a rarity and it is not uncommon instead to hear of an FWBO business that is closing, or employing a proportion of non-Buddhist workers.

The major exception to this trend has been windhorse:evolution, which has grown in just about every way, year on year, until very recently. In its warehouse and administrative headquarters in Cambridge, and its chain of Evolution retail stores, windhorse:evolution employs some two hundred or more people, most of them living a classic FWBO-UK lifestyle. It should be borne in mind though that many of those people are actually visitors from overseas, spending a period of time at windhorse:evolution as a training experience. Whether or not windhorse:evolution will succeed in attracting people who want to make a long-term commitment to the kind of lifestyle it offers remains to be seen.

windhorse:evolution is by far the largest single financial donor to FWBO projects around the world. Without a detailed survey it is hard to know to how much of the wealth being accumulated by those working outside FWBO contexts is being made available to the movement through donations. Certainly, major fund-raising campaigns in recent years (the latest being in aid of Aranya, the women's ordination retreat centre) have done fairly well. But as one looks around, one can easily see a lot of projects and Dharma workers needing urgent financial help.

And as for whether or not the pendulum will swing back, bringing a rush of refugees from the outside world into new FWBO enterprises, it is too early to say. If and when such a trend occurs, I doubt we'll see a renaissance of wholefood shops and vegetarian restaurants – the staples of our early ventures into team-based right livelihood. I suspect that people with professionally trained and tested skills will form partnerships so as to be able to continue doing what they do well, and lucratively, but in a more morally and ideologically congenial context.

### 3/ ideological shifts

In 1987 I predicted that the changes in the economic climate would bring about significant shifts in the ideological —atmosphere' in the wider world. The FWBO emerged in 1960s Britain. We suffered no oppression from the state or established religious institutions. If anything, we found our feet in the context of a culture (or at least a substantial subculture) that was largely supportive of our goals and lifestyle choices. As the surrounding world became more frankly materialistic, I warned that we would find ourselves pitted for the first time against contrary forces that were coherent and confident. Would this era of triumphant materialism erode our focus and idealism? Would enough of us be immune to the gravitational pull of worldly success, or worldly anxieties? Would anyone be interested in meditation any more? Or in living a Buddhist life? We would need to redouble our Bodhisattva

aspiration, I said, if we were to keep our communities and co-operative businesses, our New Society, vigorous and viable.

Even when I spoke I was addressing what were in fact parochial, FWBO-UK, concerns. Today my words seem so archaic that I am surprised there isn't more hiss and crackle on the tape. But does this shift in emphasis away from the —FWBO lifestyle' represent a loss of idealism or focus?

I don't think there is a simple answer to this, and I do not find generalisations helpful. As a centre president I have got used to mentoring FWBO situations where residential communities or right livelihood businesses are in danger of collapse through loss of personnel. And it has become a familiar feature of my work to visit centres where only a very few of the Order members living nearby have much, if anything, to do with centre activities. Yet even if I, an old-timer, have found myself bewildered, even frustrated, by these new realities, and sometimes tempted to think of them as —crisis situations', the fact remains that the so-called —peripheral' Order members I meet almost invariably impress me with the sincerity of their practice, their contribution to chapter meetings, and the thoughtfulness with which they are making their life decisions.

'For the sake of all beings I accept this ordination.' The WBO's public ordination ceremony includes this explicit acknowledgement of the fact that our commitment to the Three Jewels has social implications, or as we sometimes put it, an intrinsic altruistic dimension. Some of those Order members who have little involvement in FWBO institutions work out the altruistic dimension of their going for Refuge through vocational work, or voluntary service, or in kalyana mitra relationships with individuals with whom they have made a connection. Others, however, seem poised between two worlds: for whatever reason, they do not feel drawn to the old ways of working within FWBO institutions, but they have not yet found alternative channels for their altruistic aspirations. In some cases the breakthrough hasn't come because they are unable to resolve some residual conflict as to whether or not they should be working in the 'old' way. In others they feel themselves to be recovering from a premature plunge into Bodhisattva activity (about which more later).

Like the FWBO itself, perhaps, I think it possible that some individuals may find themselves living for a while in a sort of —identity bardo'. Once upon a time the FWBO, at least in the UK, was almost defined by its espousal of the vision of a total Buddhist lifestyle within a Western context. We saw ourselves building a radical but viable alternative to the options provided by conventional society. To be involved with the FWBO was to be involved in building that society – and inhabiting it. Outside observers perusing the Buddhist world characterised us not as gentle folk who spent their leisure time in vibrant shrine rooms reaching for the void in deep meditation, but as a cocky young community of squatters who liked nothing better than a good building project. This caricature could frustrate us (since we did after all take shrine room activities and Dharma study seriously) and yet tickled our sometimes triumphalistic pride in the 'New Society' we were creating.

Sangharakshita's exhortations to build this world, combined with a bit of straightforward group pride and peer pressure, gave life a definite edge. Even if family or career commitments prevented you from plunging in completely, many – even most – of your friends would be trying to live a full-time FWBO life, and this could bring a valuable if sometimes uncomfortable quality of self-consciousness to any



other choices you were making. To be involved with the FWBO was to live with the koan: 'Could I be more fully involved in some way?' Irrespective of the answers one came up with, the tensions that built up around that koan were for many of us significant factors in our spiritual development.

So if we are no longer a community united by our active participation in a tangible common project, then what are we? What is our unique selling feature? Just who do we think we are? Maybe it's enough to say that we're Buddhists, that we belong to a common Order, take inspiration from a common body of Dharma teachings, respect Sangharakshita as our founder and root teacher, and so on. There is still plenty to do and plenty that unites us. But we are definitely entering a new era. There was a time when there were few people in the Order I hadn't lived with, or worked with closely in some context or other. The bonds that linked us had been forged in a series of do-or-die enterprises and adventures. That is what it meant to be an Order member, and to be involved in the FWBO....

Ah, but we were younger then! And the Movement was younger too, and so much smaller. I do not expect or even hanker after a return to those days. But I do feel a certain awe as I contemplate the mystery of what the Order and Movement will become and feel like in the coming years. And I wonder, too, whence will come the equivalents to the kind of intensity — of friendship, of vision and aspiration — that lit the fire in our bellies once upon a time.

## part II

### 1/ the biological clock

When I first made contact with the FWBO in 1970, Sangharakshita was roughly twice as old as I. Addressing the Order convention in 1989, I had to acknowledge that I was now about two thirds his age. In one respect at least I was catching him up!

On that evening most of the people I was talking to were in their mid-to-late thirties. Many of them, like me, had been involved with the FWBO since their late teens or early twenties. The core community at the heart of our movement was entering mid-life. Perhaps our years of practice would protect us from the common effects of age, but it was worth bearing in mind, I warned, that many of us were approaching a phase of life traditionally associated with questioning and reassessment, even crisis.

A common mid-life pattern could be that someone who has devoted themselves to the pursuit of mundane goals might, at mid-life, seek new meaning in more spiritual pursuits. Was it possible, I wondered, that some of us, who had been devoting our lives to spiritual pursuits, might at mid-life choose to review the possibility of fulfilment in the mundane? After all, many of us had got involved with the FWBO and joined the Order when we were young, idealistic and full of naive optimism, before our experience of the Dharma had gone very deep, and at a time when the FWBO was surrounded by a reasonably supportive youth-subculture. Surely it shouldn't be too surprising if some of us might wobble, feel impelled to question things with a new urgency, and in some cases even make a dash for more earthly delights, or more mundane security, as the ageing process began to make itself felt.



Writing in *Shabda* a few weeks later I suggested that such a dash might take place behind a smokescreen of 'objective criticism'. Few of us might be likely to admit even to ourselves that we no longer felt able to live up to our youthful ideals — ideals in which we had invested so much of our time and energy. More likely, someone considering such a step might prefer to believe that it was the FWBO that had in some way let them down, and so prepare the way for an honourable exit. We should be ready, I said, to face — in ourselves and others — an era not only of honest questioning but also of sometimes harsh criticism. There could even be a rash of resignations. I did see a silver lining to this cloud, however. Even if some of us were to step back, there would be many who would come through this phase with increased confidence and a more authentic commitment, and our community would surely be stronger when nourished by the experience of people who had passed through the fires of such a process. And what mentors, what a resource, such veterans would be.

When I gave my follow-up talk (the basis of the present article) to a men's Order weekend at Padmaloka in November 2002, I confessed some surprise that less people had visibly 'wobbled', and certainly less people had resigned from the Order, than I had expected back in 1989. But perhaps I spoke too soon.

Forgive me, gentle reader. A magazine article based on a talk that was itself a revisiting of a talk given thirteen years earlier is already complicated enough for some tastes. Who was to know, when this article was commissioned (even when I wrote the first section of it) just how much the earth was moving? The past year or so has seen an enormous amount of questioning, criticism, and reassessment, sparked off by Yashomitra's letter to *Shabda* alleging experiences of unwelcome sexual approaches and inappropriate teacher-pupil relations in the early years of his involvement with the FWBO.

It is not in my brief to engage with Yashomitra's letter or the allegations it contained. But I can report that the questioning process primed by Yashomitra's letter, which has now extended to embrace such themes as gender attitudes, hierarchy, spiritual authority, FWBO group norms, and a few more besides, has created a landscape more like the one I predicted back in 1989. So far this period of reassessment has resulted in few resignations from our Order. But it has involved a lot of wobbling, and has arguably accelerated (though by no means exclusively caused, as we saw in Part I) a retreat from the vision of a relatively monolithic FWBO characterized by the 'semi monastic', 'New Society' lifestyle that to some extent defined our movement, at least in the UK, for so many years.

As the demographics of the FWBO shift, as the ideological climate and economic conditions surrounding us change, and as so many of us reach middle age, it is reasonable, even necessary, that some people should be questioning things. Sangharakshita once wrote, 'You can only be a Buddhist if you feel free not to be one.' If some of us have not dared to check, even occasionally, whether or not we are still Buddhists in the way we once thought we were, whether the FWBO really does offer us a congenial and inspiring context, whether we are happy living in our residential communities or working in our team-based right livelihood businesses, or whether we can authentically engage with the FWBO's Bodhisattva spirit, then it is surely time we did. Perhaps one should set oneself such questions every day, or at least once a month. But it also seems crucial that as we ask such questions, and work with the answers we receive, we recognise that we are engaged in, at least to

begin with, an entirely personal process. And we need to be careful to distinguish this personal process in its raw state from notions of 'objective critique'.

This isn't always easy. Inevitably much of our questioning seems to contain an implicit element of critique: What's so special about Sangharakshita? Why is my centre being run by a team of ego-trippers? Are people not letting me have my girlfriend stay for the night in the community because they're blocked and uptight? And so on.... But the fact that such questions may deserve objective consideration and broader discussion should not distract us from our primary duty, which is to explore what is happening in ourselves as we start asking such questions. The issues that face us as the FWBO moves into a new era are too important to be addressed in a mood of reactive cynicism. I suspect that only when we all know where we're coming from will we be able to work effectively with the objective dimensions of our questions, and so work together to make the FWBO a more ideal spiritual community.

For some of my friends, mid-life questioning has focused on the issue of lifestyle. Some people who have for years been happily working in our businesses or living in our residential communities now find themselves thinking about long-term security and pension plans. Others wonder whether they couldn't after all achieve some success and well being by proving themselves in the context of an ordinary career. Some may feel their aching bones and diminishing physical vitality inadequate as supports to yet more tireless bodhisattva activity, living in 'cremation grounds', and being all things to all men.... Others might simply decide that they no longer wish to deprive themselves of the simple pleasures of intimacy afforded by a committed live-in sexual partnership. And some are realising they want to become parents before it's too late.

These are pretty run-of-the-mill human urges and ambitions, the realization of which does not in itself preclude spiritual effort, spiritual progress, or altruistic activity. But for some people who have grown up in the highly idealistic, semi-monastic culture of the British FWBO, such desires, not to speak of the taking of steps towards their fulfilment, can be accompanied by a sense of shame, even of spiritual failure. And someone feeling such shame can feel tempted to drift to the periphery of things, to distance themselves from old friends and connections, to assume themselves condemned, and thus unwittingly condemn themselves, to a life beyond the pale.

This seems terribly sad, and terribly unnecessary, for an Order member is an Order member, whatever his or her lifestyle, so long as he or she is effectively going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. I have already discussed our need to re-engage with one of Sangharakshita's most quoted maxims: 'Commitment is primary, lifestyle is secondary', so I will mention here another of his sayings. One day I told him that a few of us at Madhyamaloka had spent the morning discussing the pros and cons of introducing some sort of marriage ceremony to our cluster of liturgies. 'Ah yes,' he said, 'It's good you're thinking about such matters because the FWBO is going to become much more than a spiritual movement or organisation. It is going to be a people.'

An Order member contemplating a change of lifestyle has the responsibility of doing whatever he or she can to turn the new lifestyle into an effective context for spiritual practice and spiritual unfolding. Primary among the many things required by such an undertaking is, I suspect, the need to free

oneself from the idea that one is thereby shooting oneself in the foot. After all, if you and your friends really think you are about to do something irredeemably un-conducive to spiritual practice, don't do it! But if on reflection you genuinely believe that the step you're taking, albeit radical, albeit subject to the cautious questioning of your friends, will provide you with a new and beneficial set of spiritual challenges and opportunities (whilst not denying basic spiritual needs, such as time for meditation and Dharma study, the opportunity to meet with spiritual friends, and freedom to go on retreat occasionally) then why not go for it? Who knows what discoveries you'll make, what new riches you'll re unearth and make available to others? Who knows what breakthroughs might arise from the tensions and difficulties of your new situation? How sad it would be if we denied ourselves the freedom to explore new ways of living a Dharma life in the West out of an unimaginative allegiance to a narrow idea of how things ought to be done.

As with the individual, so with the collective. As a community, I suggest, we must become more open to the — as one of my friends put it the other day — adventure of pluralism. For sure, it is highly likely that our movement will benefit enormously from, and perhaps depends on a backbone of individuals happily living and working together in semi-monastic situations. But as we see such situations comprising a smaller proportion of our total enterprise, let's not panic. Let's cultivate instead an attitude of rejoicing in the increasing diversity and richness of our Western Buddhist world. And let's start learning how to live in it creatively.

The new spirit of freedom currently being felt by many of my friends in the UK will no doubt produce a crop of mistakes, even disasters, as some of them make choices that will lead them out of their spiritual depth in uncharted waters. But I suspect we have passed the point at which our community's safety and health can be maintained by a culture hostile to new departures, new risks. I have never felt less clear about what the future holds for the FWBO, what shape it will take, what institutions or non-institutions will emerge, what its cultural forms will be. But I do feel clear (as do many of my friends in the — now deconstructed — Preceptors College Council) that there is a lot of good sense and goodwill in our movement, that the future holds many new and exciting possibilities, and that we can afford to trust ourselves a little.

Back in 1989 I wondered aloud whether some of us might try to appease our mid-life demons by bringing mundane ambitions and attitudes into the way we operated within the institutions of the FWBO. Well, those institutions are, always have been, and always will be, prey to our lack of integration and ambivalence, but I have very rarely seen the integrity of any of our centres, businesses, or communities seriously compromised for any length of time by the worldly ambitions of the people inhabiting them. If anything I have seen an opposite tendency: the emergence of the part-time team.

Back in 1989 most of our centres and businesses were run by core teams of people living full-time FWBO lives. These days many of those teams are made up of people, or at least have a majority of people, who do not live in our residential communities, and who have substantial responsibilities outside the FWBO. In such centres activities are run and duties performed in a piecemeal way according to rota systems, with a lot of volunteer help.

Several such centres are thriving, or at least managing to stay afloat reasonably comfortably. But there can be stresses and weaknesses. In some situations where just one or two full-timers are surrounded by a core team of part-timers, I have noticed a tendency on the part of the part-timers to cherry-pick the tasks and teaching situations they find most alluring. They then leave the other classes and most of the day-to-day organisational work to the full-timers. Sometimes this works and sometimes it is fair. But sometimes it leaves the full-timers feeling overburdened, put upon, even resentful. If the full-timers are also living with a lot of complex responsibilities, say as the only Order member in a residential community, or if they are also trying to get a right livelihood business off the ground, or if they are simply trying to deepen their meditation practice in order to remain inspired, then the strain can be too much, and various forms of burn-out can ensue.

Somehow or other we are going to have to get this right, for I suspect that such heterodox teams are here to stay. This will take honesty, openness, empathy, and careful thought. Only time will tell whether teams of people for whom 'centre work' forms just one thread in their busy lives can generate the enthusiasm, mutual commitment, and friendship-in-action that makes the long-term running of an inspirational public centre possible. Perhaps the era of the FWBO public centre, at least as the defining institution of our outreach project, is coming to an end. In Buddhafield, at least, we have seen people working together very successfully to spread the Dharma in an entirely new way. Hopefully we will see a lot more developments and experiments in the coming years. The FWBO's style hitherto has been quite institutional, based largely around a communion of fairly uniform public centres, businesses, and communities. But if we can be true to what the FWBO essentially is, namely, the totality of the altruistic, Dharma-inspired activity of Order members and their friends, then the possibilities for creative innovation, whether large or small scale, are limitless.

## 2/ the changing buddhist world

In its early-years, at least in England, the FWBO was pretty much alone in offering not only an array of Buddhist practices and study opportunities but also the funkily experimental beginnings of a total Buddhist lifestyle in the Western context. Moreover, Sangharakshita's recension of the Dharma contained some highly original emphases and interpretations of fundamental Buddhist teachings. For such reasons, the British Buddhist world looked on Sangharakshita as something of a maverick, and his movement as almost a heretical sect. For our part, I think it's fair to say that we saw the British Buddhist scene as a world of armchair dilettantes governed by pompous, hostile dinosaurs. Relations were frosty and we had as little to do with each other as possible.

In 1989 I assured my audience on the Order convention that things were changing. The Western Buddhist, and even the English Buddhist world had grown up enormously and was increasingly dominated by serious practitioners studying under teachers who were trying to make their teachings relevant and accessible in the Western context. In recent years I'd been 'representing' the FWBO at a number of Buddhist conferences and conventions. And I was finding increasing numbers of people open to and interested in the FWBO's approach. More importantly, I now found myself hanging out in the breaks with people from other Buddhist movements who really did feel like Dharma brothers and sisters. It was time, I suggested, to draw a line under the past and prepare to enjoy an era of kinship

and co-operation, and to welcome the fact that we were now sharing the project of developing Western Buddhism with many others.

The last fifteen years have seen that Buddhist world grow and strengthen. Buddhism is still a minority faith in the West, but it is growing stronger all the time. A new generation of Western teachers is emerging, and new experiments are being undertaken. Recent years have also seen the emergence of a kind of A-list of Western Buddhist luminaries. They are ubiquitous, their books dominating the shelves in bookstores, their faces appearing regularly in advertisements for international Buddhist symposia and colloquia. These superstars are backed, in most cases, by years of sincere practice, and their own quantum of original thought. Yet many of them are currently non-aligned, freelance: either so loosely involved in any identifiable sangha as to make no odds, or not involved in one at all.

The mid-to-late Eighties saw a number of Buddhist movements, particularly in the United States racked by scandal and confusion. A wave of disillusionment cast literally thousands of Western Buddhists adrift. These people did not want to give up Buddhism, but they didn't any longer feel able to trust Buddhism in institutional form. Those writers, thinkers, and even traditional Buddhist teachers (notably Thich Nhat Hanh) who met such people head on by upholding the validity, even sometimes superiority, of a non-aligned Buddhism have achieved something considerable by answering the immediate needs of people who might so easily have turned away from the Dharma altogether. They have also brought a fascinating, sometimes highly charged debate to the Western Buddhist world.

Now while the FWBO's institutional life seemed radically and enticingly 'light' if contrasted to the traditional models available in the 70s and 80s, when seen in the context of an emerging mass-movement of non-aligned Buddhists in the 90s the FWBO could appear hidebound, over-hierarchical, and insular. That it also had a habit of serving as a channel for unfashionable views, views that could even seem howlingly politically incorrect at times, well, that was the giddy limit. It wasn't nearly as bad as it used to be in the distant past, but once again we were an object of caution, criticism, and even scorn.

By and large I think we have responded to this turn of events pretty well. I don't think many of us have retreated into the defensiveness that perhaps characterised our stance some years ago. And many Order members have repeatedly taken initiatives to keep in friendly dialogue with our critics. I think we have learnt to listen. And I think we have learned to bring more of our self-questioning into the open so that it informs not only our internal discussions but our public profile.

We are a nice bunch of people who mean well. We take the Dharma seriously and do our best to practise it, teach it, and live it. It can hurt to be the object of criticism, particularly when that criticism seems unfair or based on little real knowledge of us. Personally I would much prefer it if my Buddhist brothers and sisters around the world took our project seriously. I would really like it if they liked us. But whether we are an in-group or an out-group, whether we are liked or not, is much less important than the business of cultivating our garden. So long as we continue to deepen our practice, so long as we go for Refuge to the Three Jewels ever more effectively, and so long as we maintain a friendly attitude towards the Buddhist world, and above all so long as we create a movement that is an effective medium for communicating authentic spiritual experience and insight then we can't go

wrong. How we are seen by others, and what part we play in the development of Western Buddhism, will sort itself out in time. It is still very early days.

### 3/ sangharakshita's 'withdrawal'

When I gave my talk in 1989, a vigorous sixty-four year old Sangharakshita was sitting in the front row. Although for some years he had been urging us to prepare for his old age and eventual death, it didn't seem much more than a theoretical concept. He was still very much in charge, still actively participating in and guiding the life of our movement.

In the intervening years Sangharakshita has shared his responsibilities with individual preceptors, presidents, Order convenors, the Preceptors College and so on. In a number of areas and on a number of levels he has made himself dispensable. Indeed, the transition has been so complete that his recent bout of ill health, and complete withdrawal from the affairs of the FWBO, has had little or no apparent effect on the running of our institutions, or on the spiritual lives of countless people involved in the FWBO. That it has been possible for so many people to debate some of his views and opinions, even some aspects of his past actions, so actively in the past year, without withdrawing from the Order or movement, shows just how far we've come — how far, in fact, Sangharakshita has led us.

The transition has not only been complete but it has been fairly smooth, with few of the bumps and shocks that have characterised similar transitions in a number of other Buddhist movements around the world. But of course, Sangharakshita has always been there. He has not died. And while he lives, even when he is not actively participating and when people are reassessing their relationship with him, he is there in the background somehow bestowing, by the simple fact of his existence, a spirit of confidence and inspiration, and still acting as a focal point of unity. Many of our presidents are highly respected people. And I have noticed that some preceptors, particularly 'public' preceptors, occupy a place in the psyches of their students not dissimilar to that which Sangharakshita occupied for so many of us. But only time will tell how great and how significant a hole Sangharakshita will leave in our minds, our hearts, and our collective enterprise when he actually dies. In so many ways the FWBO is still very much the child of his complex genius.

What is clear is that as Sangharakshita withdraws, and as the FWBO grows, spreads, and diversifies, we need to find more people willing to take on new levels of spiritual responsibility. No matter how regionalized, atomised or innovative we become, we will remain a community, even a community of institutions. And that community will surely need to be nourished by the time, energy and guidance of people with maturity and experience. We already need more *kalyana mitras*, more presidents, more preceptors, more people willing to take active responsibility in our centres. And the FWBO needs spiritual guidance: high-level spiritual input and inspiration. It follows, then, that we will each need to dig deeper into our practice if we are to give birth to the kind of genius that will help our movement to prosper in the coming years.

Sangharakshita has confessed many times that he never felt cut out to found a spiritual movement. Given an entirely free choice, he once said, he would have preferred to spend the rest of his life writing poetry and books on Buddhist metaphysics. But having made the decision, back in 1966, to found a



new Buddhist movement in the West he gave himself to it completely, with an energy and zeal that has frequently put a number of his younger disciples to shame. Even as I was giving my follow-up talk at Padmaloka in November 2002, a seventy-seven year old Sangharakshita was touring Poland, giving talks and meeting people interested in the FWBO. From the beginning Sangharakshita has tried to infect the FWBO with something of his missionary spirit. Having worked closely with him for a number of years I know just how important he believes our movement to be. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that he believes the world's survival to depend on the effective spread of the Dharma.

I wonder, do enough of us have the same spirit? Do we have the same sense of urgency? These are not just rhetorical questions. How I answer them, how you answer them, means life or death for the FWBO. As things stand, although we are attracting some younger people into at least some of our centres, the average age of our Order, even of our general membership, is rising all the time....

Those of us involved with the FWBO at the moment are living through interesting times indeed. Perhaps as we embark on the adventure of whatever the future holds we will give birth to a range of approaches to Dharma work that will inspire and guide a new generation of friends and Order members. If we don't then our movement will become a footnote in Buddhist history. When I think of everything the FWBO has given me, if I think of the way I have seen it benefit so many others, and if I imagine how much the future could hold, for me, for my friends, and for friends still to be discovered, I think that would be a terrible, terrible shame.

Most of the time I feel confident that most of us want the FWBO to survive and thrive. Much of this current era seems to be about leaving behind the tramlines of our past. The FWBO is an evolving organism with an intriguing past and a mysterious future. But it is still very young, and still tender. It will only survive this critical stage of its life if enough of us decide we really want it to, and if enough of us are prepared to play a part — whatever that might mean, whatever creative challenge that might involve for each of us — in making its future happen.

Originally published in *Madhyamavani* 10: July 2004 (Madhyamaloka, 2004).