

A System of Spiritual Development *by Ratnaprabha*

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Back in 1976, when I was doing my final examinations down at University in Brighton, I went along to a meditation class that Vessantara taught. And that was my introduction to Buddhism. That was my introduction to the FWBO. And I think it would be fair to say that I immediately went for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha... a little bit. I did a little bit. And at first, I think for me Vessantara really was the Sangha, and the meditation practices he taught were the Dharma, though I did quickly start listening to Bhante's tapes. But despite this, it did take me a little while before I called myself a Buddhist, or at least admitted that to other people.

Now, I don't know how common this is, but here I suppose the situation is probably different, because everybody here has asked for ordination or is already ordained. So would it be very foolish of me to assume that everybody here is a Buddhist? Maybe not. I won't ask everybody individually, but maybe that is fair enough. And what I mean by that is, I've got a strong feeling that all of us here do have the Buddha as their ultimate teacher. That's one way you could put it, at least. And more than that, more than just regarding the Buddha ultimately as our teacher, there's also some great feeling, I'd say, for most of us – maybe for all of us – for the Buddha, for the awakened human being. In other words, we go for refuge to the Buddha – this is something that Padmavajra was talking about this morning.

But what about the Dharma and the Sangha? In his opening talk – last night, actually, not this morning's talk, but the talk last night – Padmavajra said 'we are all serious about the Dharma,' and again I think you can take that for granted. We are all serious about the Dharma. And you all want to join the Western Buddhist Order, which is a Sangha, so I guess you are all serious about the Sangha as well.

But what I want to do here is to ask a question, which is: Taking for granted this basic 'going for refuge' – taking for granted the Buddha refuge being present – what can we do to take our going for refuge to the Dharma and to the Sangha further?

And of course I'm going to be particularly talking about the Dharma – how we can take our going for refuge to the Dharma further by using a system of spiritual discipline, or by continuing with the system of spiritual discipline we've already embarked upon.

Already the Dharma jewel is a refuge for us. We are allowing our understanding of it and our practice of it to genuinely influence our lives, and we've also, to some extent, got the Sangha jewel as well – we've got a network of friendships and connections based on mutual respect that constitutes a genuine Sangha. But how can we take these further? How can we take the Dharma refuge further? How can we take the Sangha refuge

further?

So talking about the Dharma refuge is what I'll be doing. Saddhaloka will be talking, perhaps, about the Sangha refuge. And particularly I want to look at how you can understand developing a well-rounded, day-by-day system of practice. Some of this will be very old to you, you'll know it very well, but nevertheless I'd like to go into it a bit. And maybe even go further than that: why do you need a 'system' of practice at all? What are you looking for in a system of practice? What is special about the system of practice in the FWBO, and in the Order? And what IS the system of practice in the WBO? That's what I'll spend most of my time on: looking at what the system of practice actually is.

But I want to start a long way away from any WBO centre, any Order members, any FWBO people, because I was trying to think of, 'what is a system of spiritual discipline? What is the picture of it for me?'

And I thought, well, it's a structure, isn't it? It's a structure. And so I'll approach it by taking you on a sort of ascent, up a real, solid Buddhist structure made of stone, and this structure I'm thinking of is the great Buddhist mandala stupa of Borobudur, which is why I've got this book here. Ideally it would be nice to have slides or something to show you what Borobudur looks like, but I can't do that, and you may not be able to see this very well, but never mind – I'll put it back in the library and you can have a good look, but at least it gives you a little bit of a visual impression of some of the things I'm talking about at Borobudur.

Borobudur is in Java, in the East, and until a few years back I'd never been to the East – in fact I didn't even have any inclination to go to the East, shocking as that may seem for a Buddhist. When we had our little tea party this morning for people new to the ordination process, I noticed that most of the people present – it was very interesting – most of them had been to India, and they'd been to India before they made a commitment to Buddhism, and it obviously had – India and Nepal and other places – it had obviously had a very profound impact, that journey to the East; a broadening of horizons, a broadening of experiences.

But I never wanted to go... it wasn't that I positively DIDN'T want to go, I just sort of wasn't interested, I suppose – except for one thing, and that was this longing that I had to see Borobudur.

And I had a chance when I was giving some lectures in Singapore in 1995. They very kindly paid my fare, because Singapore is not so far from Java, and down we went to Borobudur.

I'm not going to go into great detail about it – I haven't got time – but I just remember very clearly climbing up the gentle hill towards this vast monument. The monument itself is like a hill encased in stone, it's so huge. And just seeing it like this in the early morning, silhouetted, with all the little spires and so on, tier upon tier, like a pyramid, but also like a mandala, and also like a stupa, somewhere between all of those... it was

humid, it was the rainy season there, there were little showers coming down, very hot, butterflies everywhere... I can remember the volcanoes on the horizon... a really exotic place for someone who had never been to the East at all. An amazing place.

And I started to walk around it, and I was very fortunate because in the place I was staying I could go there very early in the morning, like five in the morning before the tourists arrived, which meant I could have the place to myself, so I was able to regard it – unlike the rest of the tourists – as a sort of devotional object.

So I walked around it in the traditional way round a stupa – but with this one you can walk around it and you can also go up it, so you can do a sort of spiral. So that's what I did: I walked around the base and then I gradually moved up.

The base is a bit like cliffs, actually, most of it – quite high – but in part of it you can see there's a frieze that is revealed, that is actually hidden behind the stones of the cliff, most of it. And on the base, the friezes around there, they were exposed about a hundred years ago and were photographed and then were re-covered over.

And what they show, these friezes, is basically all human life. Illustrations of actions, their consequences, skilful and unskilful. Every impulse that you might have is depicted there in these beautiful carvings – really superb – full of life, every one of them full of human figures, every one different, beautifully executed.

Now then, from there, a walk starts, and this walk is a one and a half mile walk – it's one and a half miles to go all the way round each level until you've reached the very top. And all the way along, apart from near the top, you've got, in some cases, four rows of friezes, as if you're walking past these sort of cartoon strips in stone – but FOUR of them, for one and a half miles – so you can see what a lot of friezes there are. And each time you climb up to another level, you move through the mouth of a monster, which is the gate that takes you up a staircase to the next level – I think maybe that's... **[inaudible]**...

Just to give you some idea of going up the staircases: there are four levels of galleries, and you can't even see what they're like at the top. And then as you move up through the other galleries further up, where you're going through a corridor – they're very high, you can't see the sky – all you can see just immediately above you is the sky – so you're going through a corridor, you can't see out over the plains, and on both sides you have these detailed depictions of the lives of the Buddha, the previous lives of the Buddha, the last life of the Buddha, from the Lalitavistara, the lives of the Buddha's disciples from the Avadanas and so on – so all these lives of great Buddhist teachers, in particular the Buddha himself and his previous lives.

And also in this section further up you'll see a long series of Suddhana's quest, which you might have heard of from the Gandavyuha Sutra – the incredible quest from spiritual teacher to spiritual teacher that Suddhana took until he met, right at the end, Samantabhadra and Manjusuri and Vairacana's Tower.

So these are all depicted in these final friezes near the top. And they're about the spiritual life. They're about meditation. They show intensely positive action, these friezes. And they culminate after Suddhana's quest, in the vows of Sumantavajra.

This just shows you one of the panels of thousands of panels where a Bodhisattva is teaching. Lovely stuff – really lovely...

And then to your great surprise you emerge from these corridors onto the top, and this is also an incredible experience. You emerge onto the top, and there's an amazing view all around you, over the paddy fields in one direction, jungle, this line of volcanoes on the horizon, a village in the distance, and so on.

And it's very, very liberating, because you've been going through these corridors that have concentrated on these themes very close to you, and then suddenly there's nothing – there are no depictions at all up here. All there are are stupas. Lots of little stupas dotted about on this great rounded platform right at the top, and each of these stupas is perforated, and through the perforations in the stupas you can see a Buddha figure – figures of Vairocana. Some of them are damaged, so this one is actually exposed, but normally this would have been covered like the others with a dome and a spire.

So that's what happens when you get to the top. Now, what I didn't mention is that on each of the four faces of the great stupa, as you walk around, as well as seeing all these friezes, you look up, and there are hundreds of Buddha figures, beautifully carved. On the eastern side it's Akshobhya, on the southern side it's Ratnasambhava, on the western side it's Amitabha, and on the northern side Amoghasiddhi, and, as I say, Vairocana here in the stupas at the top.

So: the mandala of the five Buddhas, which is why I've put this up here, because I'm going to be talking about that a bit more later as well. The mandala of the five Buddhas is the overriding form of the stupa. I think I've got a picture of that... yes, you can see – Buddhas – Buddha, Buddha, Buddha, Buddha, on each face. These ones, as you can tell from the mudra, are Akshobhya, in the earth-touching mudra.

Ok... At the very summit, at the very centre at the top, there's a massive stupa, much bigger than all the others, and the strange thing about this is that there is something that you cannot see there, and it was discovered by the archeologists, which is buried right in the middle of tons and tons of stone. They found a Buddha – a stone Buddha – but it's only half finished. One half of it is emerging from the stone; the other half of it is still raw stone. So that's very mysterious: the Buddha emerging from stone.

So I've given you this introduction to do with Borobudur to give you the idea of a structure, but not just any old structure – a sort of systematic Buddhist spiritual structure which has its own meaning.

It seems to me that every human being has an urge to make sense of their lives and they need a framework. They need a structure to do this, and Buddhists also need a structure.

Buddhists, in addition to the structure to make sense of their lives, need a structure for deciding how to practice, as well – what to do.

So, from a Buddhist point of view we have the Dharma as teaching, the teachings of the Dharma, which provide a structure for understanding our lives, understanding the universe. And we can draw on the whole Buddhist tradition, that's one of the great things about the FWBO – we're not restricted to one part of it, we can draw for this structure on the whole Buddhist tradition. But it all boils down in the end to conditioned co-production, in the form of the wheel, and conditioned co-production in the form of the spiral path.

So, this is understanding the structure, understanding the framework – the meaning – but then you've got to decide how to practice, and that one can't be made so general, because it is very much specific to each person what practice to do.

So how do you decide how to practice? Well, you could try to construct the structure of your practice yourself. You could pick it out from everything that is on offer in this wonderful Buddhist cash-and-carry world that exists nowadays, on the Internet, in all these different centres, in the many books that are available, the many teachers and so on. You could go on various retreats, you could read, you could talk to teachers, and it might work, it might be successful, or it might not.

But of course the traditional way, as Padmavajra mentioned this morning, is to join a living Sangha and start to systematically follow its disciplines of how to live, its disciplines of how to meditate – and this Sangha that you join will have a system of spiritual discipline.

Discipline is a funny word, isn't it? I hope it doesn't put you off – I hope it doesn't make you think of school detentions, but what I'm talking about is setting up a process of training, and setting up a set of appropriate conditions. That's all we mean by the system of discipline. And this process of training, these conditions, eventually are designed to turn you or me from an unenlightened human being into an enlightened human being. That's what they're for.

Even a great work of art, incidentally – the kind of work of art that really changes you – can be a system of discipline. I'm not sure why I put this in here, but it just really struck me that a great poem can itself be a system of spiritual discipline that takes you through spiritual levels – at least this is according to Edmund Spenser, the great English poet, contemporary of Shakespeare. His great work, his life work, was the 'Faerie Queen', and in the preface that he wrote to this, saying what he was trying to do with it, he says (this is in 1596 he's writing) – he says:

'The general end of this book is to fashion a noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline.'

I think a Buddhist system of spiritual discipline is trying to do the same thing – it's trying

to *'fashion a noble person.'* I like that.

But the system needs to be comprehensive. It needs to cover all the sides of the unenlightened human being. It needs to cultivate all the qualities that make up an enlightened human being. And it also, as well as being comprehensive, needs to be progressive – systematic in that way. It needs to make the right methods available at the right time in your spiritual progress. And also it needs to cover all sides of you, doesn't it? It needs to have a mandala of practices, in other words. And it needs to cover all the Stages. It needs to have a path of practice. So it needs to be both a mandala and a path, covering all your sides and all the Stages of the path.

And Buddhist tradition has practices available that cover all aspects; it's got many formulations of the path as well. These are very available. And all of these different traditions in principle are the same thing, I would say.

But it seems to make quite a difference which one you adopt, though, because I know people who have tried different approaches. It makes a difference as to whether you get stuck somewhere. It makes a difference as to whether something may be missing for you. So you need to look at it; you need to actually decide what the system of spiritual discipline you're trying to follow is.

And the mandala of practices, or the path of practices, they can both be seen in their basic Buddhist forms, in Borobudur, in the great mandala-come-stupa at Borobudur.

I'm just going to mention this very broadly, but you could say that most of those carvings round the bottom of the stupa are now hidden for a reason I won't go into now. They show the results of actions; they are about the necessity for self-knowledge. They show the ethical awareness that comes from self-knowledge. That, in a way, is what Borobudur says you need right from the start. And then all these depictions of the spiritual lives of the Buddha and his disciples, and indeed Suddhana's spiritual quest, they show the necessity for self-cultivation, and the lessons on how to cultivate oneself that come from the lives of others. Generating spiritual qualities is what you need after self-knowledge. And then, breaking out into the open at the top of Borobudur, seeing the view all around, encountering all these Buddhas half hidden inside stupas – this is about opening up to reality.

Now, as for the half-completed Buddha inside the central stupa, the very culminating point of the stupa, well, I'll say something about that later – and even about what comes after that as well.

Now, in the FWBO there is a particular system of spiritual discipline. It is traditional, but it is also based on Bhante's insight and experience, plus thirty-five years of trial and error in the Friends. And this means that, although traditional, it is unique to the FWBO, although it's interesting that many other Buddhist movements are taking up methods and approaches that we use – more and more, as far as I can gather – because they do seem quite suitable to life as it is in the world today.

So, what is this system of spiritual discipline? Well, I suppose most of you are already pretty familiar with it, because you're doing it. You've probably been doing it for years. If you want to look at a detailed exposition of it, I would also recommend (like we heard this morning) Subhuti's 'Sangharakshita' – this has it all in detail, including lots of quotes from Bhante.

Another source, though, which is a much shorter thing, which shows you the Stages of the system in principle, is a short passage inside the 'Guide to the Buddhist Path' which is called 'A System of Meditation' by Bhante.... It's based on a talk he gave to the Order.

In 'A System of Meditation' Bhante says that the different methods of meditation current in the Order link up into an organic living system, and he goes into that system, and I'm going to be talking about that today. And he extends this system beyond meditation into all parts of life, particularly in the 'Precious Garland' seminar, and I'll give you some of the quotes from that on a handout sheet – also the various quotes that I'm using in this talk, I'll give you on the handout sheet.

So what it does, this system in the FWBO, is it grows out of Going for Refuge, of course, doesn't it, and it reaches higher and higher levels, and it does so through five Great Stages; the five Great Stages of the spiritual path. And this is what I'm going to spend most of this talk going into. My explanation is based mainly on this seminar on the 'Precious Garland', a work by Nagarjuna, which Bhante gave over twenty years ago.

And as a bonus, for each one of the Stages, I've got a non-Buddhist quote for you, just to give a slightly different angle. And as an even bigger bonus I've got a rhyming sequence of mnemonics for remembering the Stages. Actually, when you hear them you probably won't think that's a bonus at all and you'd rather I hadn't mentioned them... [GENERAL LAUGHTER]... but we'll see...

Anyway... so what's the first one? – and remember this is my own understanding of it from reading the seminar. I'm not going to just read out the seminar, I'm going to give you my own understanding, and also from talks given by Vessantara, who's made a bit of a speciality of studying this sequence of the five Stages.

So, the first one, what is it? It's the Stage of Recollection. The process involved in this Stage, and the effect of it, is what you might call self-gathering; integration. It's recollecting. It's attending. That's what you're doing. And the practices that you use are all the practices of awareness; the practices of mindfulness. Also the practices whereby you simplify your life – the practices of renunciation and ethics. These all fit in with this first Great Stage, and as a result of following this Stage you become mindful and aware; you become integrated.

And here's the quote (I like these quotes – you may not like them, but we'll see!). Here's the quote I've chosen from the Western tradition:

'Shall we choose to pull ourselves together, fight against slumber, and keep a balance on the dividing line between the conscious and the unconscious, still sufficiently governed by the unconscious to feel its swell raising us up, but also firmly enough sustained by the conscious not to let ourselves slip back? Then, on the crest of that wave, if we are attentive, we shall see the emergence of the nocturnal half of ourselves.'

– That's from a French writer, Suzanne Lela. So that's the first one, the Stage of Recollection.

The second Stage is the Stage of Positivity, or even the Stage of Love. And the process involved here is becoming increasingly, continuously positive and aware of others. That wasn't really mentioned in the first Stage, and this is what happens in the second Stage. What are the practices that you do? Practices involving engagement, involving effort, effort in thinking of others and cultivating the skilful, because you need to do this, and in both cases they're done in a dualistic framework; you think of others so that you're not so obsessed with yourself. You cultivate the skilful so that you can overcome the unskilful. And also longing for the goal; cultivating longing for the goal – devotion, attention to beauty, meditation in general, and the BrahmaViharas in particular – the Metta Bhavana and so on.

So this is what is involved in the Stage of Positivity, and as a result of this Stage you become positive, you become inspired, you become full of life, you get into higher states of consciousness – to the extent that you manage, of course.

Both of these Stages so far – and these are only the first two of the five – are both very, very demanding.

Here's my quote:

'Sympathetic love, while it certainly doesn't allow one to become another person, does cause one to concentrate one's attention upon them. The relationship of a sympathiser towards a sufferer is not that of an onlooker but of one disturbed to a degree where his own self becomes less and less attended to, and the needs of the other dominate the feelings he has. The focus of the mind is moved to take in something of the awareness of another; his actual knowledge of love or sympathy is not mental and verbal – a matter of belief – but a function of his whole being, his experience, and so it is a matter of faith.'

– and this is a commentator on the works of William Blake.

So that's the Stage of Positivity.

Third, the Stage of Openness. The process in the Stage of Openness is opening to reality by letting go. And the practices that you do in order to open to reality and let go are a full renunciation of the old self – your old self – and of your false refuges. Opening to reality through insight meditation practices. As a result, what do you become? You become empty. You become open. You become awake. You become realistic. And I think that

another aspect of this level of opening to reality is 'just sitting'; just sitting in actual awareness. And also aesthetic appreciation; useless appreciation, useless aesthetic appreciation, as Bhante talks about it in one of the old seminars. And Bhante says this Stage is a spiritual death; it's a death of the old, limited self.

The quote here is from Goethe:

'I praise what is truly alive; what longs to be burned to death. In the calm water of the love-nights... this is a poem by the way, that's why it sounds poetic... [GENERAL LAUGHTER]... In the calm water... [LAUGHTER CONTINUES]... I think I'd better start again, sorry.... I praise what is truly alive; what longs to be burned to death. In the calm water of the love-nights, a strange feeling comes over you when you see the silent candle burning. Distance does not make you falter. Now, arriving in magic, flying, / and finally, insane for the light, you are the butterfly, and you are gone. And so long as you haven't experienced this: to die and so to grow, you are only a troubled guest on the dark Earth.'

– that's from a poem called, 'The Holy Longing,' by Goethe.

Fourth: the Stage of Renewing. The process in this fourth Stage is gradual transformation, as the reality that you've seen is contemplated, and the contemplated reality affects every aspect of your being. And the practices that you do are practices that align you with reality by sitting in its presence. For example: visualisation, mantra-recitation type practices. And also deliberately altering every aspect of your life in line with insight, as in the Eightfold Path – or the transcendental Eightfold Path.

And it's interesting: in the Pali Canon you are at last called a 'trainee' who has entered the path of training once you're a stream entrant. You're a *shiksa* once you're a stream entrant. That's when you enter the Eightfold Path in its full transcendental aspect. That's the language the Pali Canon uses.

So, as a result of this Stage, what do you become? You become a purely spiritual being. You become a Bodhisattva. You become a Buddha. You become creative. The previous Stage of Openness might have seemed like a sudden illumination, but the truth has to sink in gradually – it has to percolate in, it has to soak into your whole being, and this is true on lower levels as well as on this complete level.

The quote, from Anais Nin, is:

'There are very few human beings who receive the truth complete and staggering by instant illumination. Most of them acquire it fragment by fragment on a small scale, by successive developments, cellularly, like a laborious mosaic.'

I like that image of the laborious mosaic. It's as if – ok, you've got the colours, you've got the overall form, you've got some sort of an insight, but you've got to laboriously place each little coloured tile in its place, and there's a long process involved.

So those are the first four Stages – and now the fifth one. What is the fifth one? I mean, you're a Buddha by the fourth one, so what is the fifth one going to be?... [GENERAL LAUGHTER]... Well, I suppose that may be obvious. The fifth one is the Stage of Spontaneous, Compassionate Action, and there's virya here, but it's virya which is spontaneous, it's creative, it's world-changing.

This Stage is what you do, in a sense, after your Enlightenment. So you can see it's a very comprehensive path. It goes right from this moment, practicing mindfulness, positive emotion, right to what you do after Enlightenment.

But, as we'll see, also all Stages are relevant to the here-and-now. It's directly relevant to us. And the relevance of this Stage of the path, this last Stage, Compassionate Activity, I've got from a quote from Theodore Zeldin, who is a historian. He says:

'The favourite instrument for dealing with danger used to be magic, which controlled the meeting of the invisible with the visible, and what it brought was fear. Today, love is the magic that most people believe in – when two strangers meet and discover they cannot live except in each others' arms – which also brings fear, the fear of losing love. The small family based itself on this magic. However, there is a third kind of magic as well as magic-magic and the magic of love. There is a third kind of magic in which an individual can make a difference to the way the world revolves, by helping another individual without asking anything in return, without offending pride, without curtailing freedom – being purely and simply generous.'

So these are the five Stages, as taught by Bhante, but – as we'll see in a minute – based on the tradition: the Stages of Recollection, of Positivity, of Openness, of Renewing, and of Spontaneous Compassionate Action. And each of them, in a way, has its own goal. You may find that you prefer one of them as your sort of model for the spiritual life.

The goal for the first one is to become fully aware and integrated, and that's quite an achievement, isn't it – fully aware and integrated? The second one, to be positive and happy – that's quite an achievement. The third one, to see reality, that's quite an achievement. The fourth one, to develop all qualities, all human qualities. And the fifth one, to benefit everybody.

I'm going to cringe a little bit here, but this is just in case it helps you to remember – this is the rhyming list of the five: 'Knowing', 'Outgoing', 'Letting Going', 'Growing', and 'Overflowing'.

Letting Going is a bit awkward, isn't it, but I couldn't think of anything else for that one. [GENERAL LAUGHTER]

Knowing, Outgoing, Letting Going, Growing, and Overflowing. I've got them down on the handout sheet I'll give you tomorrow... Passing rapidly over that... um... [LOUD LAUGHTER]... I just want to say a little bit about these Stages; looking at them, looking at the crucial points in them.

Well, the big breakthrough comes at the beginning, or in the middle, of Stage Three. This is when you know what is actually going on. This is when you start to run your life from what is really going on, because you've seen it – instead of what we usually do, which is we run our lives from what we would like to be true. And at this point you are informed, as Padmavajra said this morning, from a higher dimension. And this is all the things that Padmavajra was talking about when he discussed 'real going for refuge'.

So I imagine because 'Three' is the point of this great breakthrough, seeing the five as a path means that most of us are working primarily in 'One' and 'Two' – in the awareness and integration one, and in the positivity one. But we're also trying to push up into 'Three' as well, so we don't ignore that.

And how do you do that? How do you move from 'Two' to 'Three'? You do it by working directly on your mind so that you encounter things as they are. Working directly on your mind you need a great strength, focus, calmness, both so that you know where to look, as it were, and also to take it all in, because it can really challenge everything that we want so much. So you need a lot of strength and focus and calmness, in other words you need a lot of samatha, in order to develop vipassana. In fact, when I was talking to Padmavajra about this area, he pointed out that you really need love for insight – you need Stage Two for Stage Three. You need love to gain insight.

And if your steps are really regular – if you're following an established system of spiritual discipline – then I think you'll probably be more fortunate than someone who is just trying to cultivate mindfulness and integration at stage one, trying to cultivate love and positivity at stage two, but doing it by themselves, alone. If you're part of a system, I think you're more fortunate, because you'll be doing it as part of a Sangha.

Now, the reason I'm going into this is a little bit... I just want to say a few words about the value of ordination, about the point of ordination. You're following a system of spiritual discipline – you're doing it as part of a Sangha – and you're trying to push up into Stage Three. You're working quite well in Stage One and Two, there's much, much to do, but you're working quite well in Stage One and Two, and you're trying to push into Stage Three. And the real point where that starts to work is the point of ordination. Ordination is the preparation for Stage Three. Not that you can't gain insight or openness without ordination, I'm not saying that, but it makes things a good deal easier, I would say. It makes things easier because the practices appropriate to Stage Three, and indeed the practices appropriate to Stage Four as well – the complete transformation of yourself in the light of insight – they are for people whose going for refuge to the Three Jewels is really working, really working thoroughly, in other words is effective. If it's not effective yet, it's going to be very difficult to do these practices.

So, moving from Stage Two to Stage Three, from positivity to insight, is probably the most difficult task that any one of us could imagine. I certainly find it very difficult. And you need all the help you can get. And I think that to do it, it requires a very confirmed Dharmic approach or perspective – a complete commitment to what you're doing, and

relationship with one or more people who you could call your teacher, and also an effective Sangha around you.

So that's why we have this system of spiritual discipline – this is why we have the stage of ordination. Some people are ordained, some people aren't, and there's quite a rigorous process of deciding when it's going to be most beneficial for you to be ordained – when we can actually see that your going for refuge is effective enough for you to be really pushing on the boundary between positivity and this complete openness or insight.

And I think this is why in the FWBO we don't teach the practices appropriate to Stage Three or to Stage Four until you're coming up for ordination – or at least very rarely. You'll begin insight practices as you approach ordination, then you'll be given the sadhana practices that represent working in Stage Four when you're actually ordained. Apparently Bhante said that if someone is truly ready for vipassana, for insight practices, then surely they are ready for ordination. And if somebody is ready for ordination, they are ready for vipassana practices.

So, to be ready for vipassana, and also to be ready for ordination, you need a reasonable degree of integration – Stage One – you need knowledge of yourself, so that you know what you're taking on. You also need quite a lot of positive emotion, because you're taking on something that is very tough indeed. You need a lot of positive emotion, energy, and higher states of consciousness.

You might be wondering why on earth you're even doing Stage Four at all – even just when you're ordained, you know, I mean, shouldn't you be doing just insight practices for a long time and then maybe some higher ordination that allows you to do Saddhana? So you can ask your study group leader why that is, tomorrow. [LAUGHTER]

So, moving from Stage Two to Stage Three is this great leap, it's a great transition from the mundane to beyond the mundane, and you do this by working directly on the mind, as I've said. But a lot of the time we're actually working within Stages One or Two; we're consolidating those Stages. I certainly have a lot of work still to do in consolidating Stages One and Two.

And – ok – you can work directly on your mind in these Stages to consolidate your awareness, to improve your awareness, your integration, to increase positivity – we all know that. We all know about the practices of mindfulness and metta. But here you can also use all sorts of indirect methods – methods that sort of put you in a certain atmosphere, within which integration, awareness, positivity become naturally stronger and stronger because of the atmosphere you're putting yourself in. I mean physical disciplines – yoga, Tai Chi and so on. I mean painting or writing or playing music, or exposing yourself to arts and culture, or doing Pujas, or friendships, or being alone, or being in silence. All of these are indirect methods, and the most important indirect method of all is ethics. If you can't yet have a mind like a Buddha, at least you can act like a Buddha – that's the idea. You can use that indirect method to transform yourself.

Now, I'm not going to go into the traditional sources of Bhante's five great Stages, except

very briefly – I'll list this on the sheet that I hand out. His teaching is based on the five paths in Mahayana Buddhism which you'll often see if you read Tibetan texts – they're often mentioned in there, for example Gampopa's 'Jewel Ornament of Liberation' goes into them.

And the traditional names for the five paths – and you can work out for yourselves how they fit with Bhante's names for them – are:

1. the path for preparation or accumulation (and at this stage you practice the four foundations of mindfulness)
2. the path of application, or connection, or linking
3. the path of vision, the Dharsanamarga
4. the path of transformation, the Bhavanamarga
5. the stage of no more learning

And the path of vision and the path of transformation, as well as being part of the five paths in Indian Buddhism, are also often found in Chinese Buddhism as a particular pair – the path of vision and the path of transformation – and of course, as I'm sure you know, Bhante uses them to explain the two divisions of the Eightfold Path.

I talked about all this, if you were here, in a previous Kula gathering when I was giving a talk on Bhante as a translator, and it seems to me that this is a very good example of Bhante taking a traditional teaching, being true to that teaching, but adapting it so that it becomes really useful for us.

Well, what about Borobudur? Would it be far-fetched to see Borobudur as taking us up through these five Great Stages? Well, ok, let's have a look at it.

On the bottom, depictions of all kinds of activities in everyday life, the consequences of actions – well, I think that is to do with the process of self-knowledge and integration, and that's Stage One.

And then the depictions of all the heroic lives of the Buddha and of his disciples – Suddhana in the Gandavuha – this is arousing faith, but it's also very much connected with positive emotion in general, and the accumulation of merit is one of the main themes there, the accumulation of positive qualities, and I think this fits well with Stage Two.

And then emerging into the open when you leave those galleries, suddenly all the complexities of the rich narrative have gone, you've got a huge vista, you've got the beautiful blue sky overhead, you're surrounded by just these perfect stupas on the top and this is Stage Three.

Well, then, what about the Buddha? You've probably guessed this already, but what about the Buddha half-emerged from the stone? Well, this is the new self gradually emerging – becoming – from the stone, the raw material of one's human life – becoming a Buddha, gradually.

And Stage Five, compassionate activity, well, I'd say that that is when you leave the monument of Borobudur and you go back down into the marketplaces of Java... and you start haggling to buy these little volcanic stone Buddha rupas they sell there today... but being very nice to them!

Now, I haven't quite finished, because I've talked about the five Great Stages, but there's also the five spiritual faculties, and the five spiritual faculties are what turn the five Stages into a mandala. Borobudur is not just a great spiral path to a man-made mountain summit, it's also a mandala, and in fact when you first come to it, the dominant impression that you get is of all these beautiful Buddha figures on each side.

Some of them you can see in their little niches here... sorry, I've lost the page now, but there was a page with some of them on... So this is what you particularly... probably you notice this first because they're much bigger than any of the little friezes... um... It's a mandala, at Borobudur.

So Bhante links the five Stages with the five spiritual faculties to form this mandala. The five things that you need in your system of spiritual discipline – and you need them all the time, not one after the other – because let's face it, actually we're not going to work like that, we're not going to go through these things one at a time – we do not actually follow the Path of Regular Steps. Eventually we get onto it to some extent; we go back to what we've left behind; we discover 'I'm not really aware and integrated enough to do the Metta Bhavana effectively – I must do more mindfulness. I'm not really positive enough to contemplate Reality effectively; I must do more Metta Bhavana,' and so on. But actually it's ok to go a bit ahead of yourself, as long as you remember to consolidate behind you as well.

And the five spiritual faculties give a very good teaching that allows each stage of the five Stages to be relevant all the time.

Stage One, the Stage of Knowing, is Mindfulness – mindfulness the balancing spiritual faculty. That's fairly obvious.

Stage Two, the Stage of Outgoing, is Faith – Sradhha.

Stage Three, the Stage of Letting Going, is of course Wisdom – Prajna.

Stage Four, the Stage of Growing, is the Stage of Meditation – Samadhi – the true Samadhi that contemplates Reality and lets it fully affect you.

And the last Stage, Stage Five, compassionate activity, is Virya – energy in pursuit of the benefit of all.

So these are the five faculties that are to be worked on all the time, and to be balanced with each other. And Bhante finished his explanation of the five Great Stages in the

seminar by saying how each of them is not just a faculty to be cultivated in your practice in general, but is something to be remembered every moment.

'In a way,' he said in the Precious Garland Seminar, *'this is your spiritual life. All the other teachings on the Buddhist Path are contained in this, in principle.'*

So I'm going to use Bhante's words to explain these five moment-by-moment ways of practicing the five Stages, of practicing the five spiritual faculties.

But I want to borrow from someone else as well as Bhante, and that is Vessantara. When Vessantara gave a talk on these five precepts based on the five Stages, he imagined something which I found really helpful. He imagined that they were being taught to us by the five Jinas – by the figures on the sides, and the top, of the mandala of Borobudur. So one of each of those Buddhas sitting on the sides of Borobudur can be connected with each of the five spiritual faculties, with each of the five Great Stages. This is Vessantara's own contribution, this one.

So this is how it goes: We start, surprising as it may be, with Vairocana, at the top. Vairocana, gazing from the very top of Borobudur over the surrounding countryside, teaches mindfulness and integration. He is the gatekeeper that introduces you into the whole process. Whenever you're being mindful, you're in contact with the spiritual, or you're in contact with the transcendental.

So you begin with this process, what I said at the beginning of the talk – you begin by going for refuge to the Buddha, or to the possibility of awakening. And in the mandala, Vairocana is the central, the basic Buddha, the illuminator, total centrality. He holds the golden wheel of the Dharma in his hands.

And what is it that Vairocana says (and this is the precept from Bhante)? He says – or he demonstrates by the light of this pure aware consciousness that flows from him – he says: *'Keep up the effort to be mindful and aware, to be as together as possible at all times.'*

Very simple, but very important. That's the first one to remember – again, I've got these five precepts on the sheet that I'm handing out.

Then we go to the western side, and meet the great red Buddha, Amitabha, and we bathe in his warm red light, like the light of the sunset, feeling the great love and compassion that pours from him as he sits deep in Dyana, and he says: 'Remain in as positive an emotional state as you possibly can.'

That's the second essential precept.

Then we meet the imperturbable blue Buddha, Akshobhya, his fingers lightly touching the ground, a vajra in his lap, possessor of the wisdom which is like a mirror guarding the gateless gate of spiritual death, and he says: 'Do not lose sight of your ultimate goal at any time.'

So, remember that reality is right there – it's right HERE – it's next to us. We've just got to keep on orienting ourselves towards it, and eventually we will finally allow it in. It's not a long way off. We need to keep that orientation going, that turning to it.

Next we go to the south, where we meet the rich yellow Buddha, Ratnasambhava, the Buddha of increase, of fertility, of growth, of the sun risen to its height. He's the Buddha associated with midday, the brightest sun. And he holds the jewel of the Bodhicitta in his lap – beauty created by immense transforming forces deep in the rocks. And what he says, his teaching, is: 'Whatever you've realised or discovered or seen at the highest level of your being – whenever that was – try and apply that to your practice at every level.'

So we already have these insights, but hold them to your heart, apply them to your life, don't forget them. They're so important, they're so precious.

And finally at last we reach the green Buddha of the north, Amoghasiddhi, and he is the completely perfected man, cradling the double vajra of completeness in his lap, the Buddha of skilful action, borne through the sky on Shang Shang birds, clashing their cymbals. He's infallibly successful. So his admonition to us is: 'Do whatever you can to help other people.'

So these five little teachings are very, very simple and basic, but what Bhante says is that with those you can be sure that all the necessary aspects of your spiritual life are in place. A very useful little list for remembering, I think. And this is the way that Vessantara presented these sort of pith teachings of the five Great Stages.

I'll just read them out again in Bhante's words, from the seminar. He says:

'All the time, every day, one has got five things to practice as best you can, simultaneously. One: one keeps up the effort to be mindful and aware and to be as integrated as possible. Two: one remains in as positive a mental state as one possibly can. Three: one does not lose sight of one's ultimate goal at any time. Four: whatever you have realised on the highest level of your being at any time, you try to apply this to practice at every level. Five: you do what you can to help other people.'

So, I've been talking about the system of spiritual discipline in the FWBO. I've been just presenting it in one particular way. It's not 'THE' way to do it – I mean, if you look at Bhante's lectures, he's been presenting it in all sorts of different ways, hasn't he? I've been presenting it as a Path of Regular Steps, and that path goes through these five Stages – the Stage of Recollection, the Stage of Positivity, the Stage of Openness, the Stage of Renewing, and the Stage of Spontaneous Compassionate Action. And in this path, ideally, ordination happens when you're wholeheartedly starting to tackle the third Stage.

So this system of spiritual discipline tries to make available appropriate practices at every Stage. Indirect methods of development in the first and second Stages – mindfulness practices, direct mindful practices in Stage One; the brahmaviharas and devotional

practices for Stage Two – the insight practices in Stage Three; and the practice of Saddhana in Stage Four.

I've got another interesting question, actually, for the study groups: Where does the going for refuge and prostration practice fit into this? So you might want to ask that one... or even answer it.

I also talked about the system of spiritual discipline in the FWBO as a mandala – a mandala of the five spiritual faculties, giving you five things to be practicing all the time. And it was these last five things that I or Vessantara put in the mouths of the five Jinas.

We are listening to the Buddhas. We're listening to these things coming from the Buddhas. That's why I think I can say that we are Buddhists. We are open to them to some extent. We are indeed Going for Refuge. We're certainly going for refuge to the Buddha. We're also going for refuge to the Dharma and Sangha, but I think we can take that further. From Bhante and his teachers, and from his disciples as well, we've received a system of spiritual practice that can be the Dharma for us, that can be the Dharma refuge.

And I hope that our response to becoming aware of that system is to try it out. That is how you can begin to extend your Dharma refuge – try it out, I would suggest.

And the FWBO system culminates, if you look at the fifth Stage of it – what is the highest point of that system? – it is making a real difference in the world, affecting the welfare of others.

And I think this is also a way to extend the Dharma refuge, because we don't have to wait until the fifth Stage – we don't have to wait until we've finished the earlier Stages – we can start it now. There are lots and lots of ways to help others, but I think there's one – and this is fairly obvious – but I think there's one which is sometimes forgotten once you get well set in the FWBO; and this one is to help make the Dharma available to others. Whatever you can do to help make the Dharma available to others. That will extend your Dharma refuge, if you are able to find a way of doing that. You don't have to do this – you can be a Buddhist without doing it – but I think this is perhaps the best specific way of extending your Dharma refuge.

The Sangha refuge? Well, I could say a lot about that, but that is Saddhaloka's topic tomorrow. But I do think the Sangha refuge can also be extended. It can be extended beyond what we've already got, which is having a network of Sangha friendships and connections based on mutual respect.

Now, the suggestion I've got here is something that not everybody can manage, because circumstances do not permit it – so don't feel bad if you can't manage it, but I still want to make a suggestion for extending your Sangha refuge.

What I'm thinking of is finding a way of living or working in some sort of close-knit

Sangha team. I don't want to be any more specific than that, because there are many ways of doing this, and you may be able to found something, or join something that already exists. Is there any way that your work could involve more of a Sangha team? More – not perfect – but just more? Is there any way that your life could involve more of a Sangha team – your living situation?

And I'll leave you with that question, and maybe that will sort of ease us into the themes of Saddhaloka's talk tomorrow, which will be a talk on creating Sangha.

Thank you very much.