

Creating Sangha and Changing the World by Saddhaloka

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This weekend we are looking at what is so special about the Western Buddhist Order – what are its distinctive features and characteristics. We're trying to see what – in the approach of the Order, the movement – what in its emphases might make it a particularly appropriate vehicle for the transmission of the Dharma, the practice of the Dharma, in our increasingly Westernised world of today; in this remarkable world we find ourselves in at the start of the twenty-first century.

With Padmavajra we have looked at how Bhante – Ugyen Sangharakshita – has sought to get back to the fundamentals of Buddhism, to the heart of the matter, and at the significance he has given to the act of 'going for refuge' in his teaching. And with Ratnaprabha we looked at the system of practice we follow, and took an overview of the method of spiritual development; we heard about the five great Stages of the Path and their connection with the five Spiritual Faculties, the five Jinas, and so on.

I am going to continue today by speaking on creating spiritual community and transforming the world. I am going to be talking about Sangha, spiritual friendship, kalyana mitrata... familiar words, familiar territory, but it's a matter with which we really can't be too familiar, because to really know them – to have penetrated behind the words, to have really entered deeply into the teachings these words indicate – would be to be a Bodhisattva; would be to live in the Bodhicitta.

So, Bhante's teachings on spiritual friendship and spiritual community – as unfolded by him over the years and now being further explored by Subhuti and other of his most experienced disciples – these teachings are easily... well... not so much 'misunderstood', though that is possible and does happen... not so much misunderstood as *superficially* understood, understood in a limited way... which is fair enough.

The teachings – if you remember what we heard read out this morning by Gunapala before we chanted the Triratna Gandhara – the teachings are progressive, to be understood individually by the wise.

We have probably all had the experience of thinking we have understood something, you know, like the Five Precepts – we've understood what ethics is all about – but then a year or two later, having studied and practiced a bit more fully, a bit more deeply, it's now as if we've *really* understood. Before, we didn't understand at all, but now, now we do understand what ethics is really all about; another dimension of understanding opens up...

...But then, another year or two later, it's as if now, *now* we really DO understand!... and so it can go on.

I am reminded here of Bhante's aphorism: 'there are no higher teachings, just deeper understandings'.

So, inevitably our understanding of the Dharma is initially superficial, but that superficial understanding suffices for a while. It is enough to get us moving, practicing, changing, up to the point where we come up against the limits of our present understanding – and then we need to go deeper if we are going to continue to progress on the path.

The important thing is perhaps not to think we know, to think we've understood; just to realise that our present understandings, however useful, are provisional.

Bearing that in mind... initially we might see Sangha as being all about being 'friendly'; about our Centres being welcoming, inviting places where people can contact the Dharma in spite of the nervousness and fear that might have held them back. We can see Sangha as being about creating a positive context for our spiritual practice; about mixing with a bunch of people who are very friendly, warm, encouraging, supportive – of course, sometimes challenging – but often stimulating and inspiring. ...Well, that's fine, as far as it goes.

Others might see Sangha as a sort of spiritual support group, so there's always a friendly ear to bend when you're in difficulties; a sort of safety net. There is always a spiritual friend there to pick you up and dust you down, put you back on your feet when you take a tumble. Well – again – fair enough, as far as it goes.

And it might even be that even at this level there is something fairly distinctive in the FWBO... I wouldn't like to say – I haven't enough experience of other Buddhist organisations and movements – but there is certainly more emphasis than most placed on friendship, on creating community within our Order and movement, even at this level, you could say, of a 'positive group'.

But we need to go a lot further, a lot deeper, to really begin to understand what we are trying to do – however inadequate our efforts might often be in creating the Sangha of the Western Buddhist Order – and what you, therefore, are engaging with in moving towards the Order.

In a number of talks that we study here on Going For Refuge retreats, Subhuti goes into the idea of the Order as a spiritual practice, the idea of the creation of Sangha as a spiritual practice. So we are now not just talking about Sangha as a *context* for practice; not just about establishing a very positive and supportive environment in which to deepen our Buddhist practice, to study, meditate and so on. It's much more than that. We are talking about creating Sangha as a practice *in its own right*.

So creating Sangha, creating the Order, is an integral part of our practice. It is part of the process of self-transformation, of bringing about that fundamental shift in our being that sees us living more in accord with the way things really are.

To join the Western Buddhist Order means entering into – helping to create – an ever-expanding network of trust and friendship built around shared ideals, a shared vision of what we can be as human beings, and transforming ourselves as part of that very process of creating Sangha.

You won't find other Buddhists speaking in this way. Here we are, now, in the distinctive approach of the Western Buddhist Order of Sangharakshita... and it is worth remembering this. If you start chatting and speaking with other Buddhists, they may not understand what you are talking about if you start straight away speaking in this way; you may actually need to take a few steps back and establish a more obvious common ground, and start from there.

So: the Order as a practice... Put simply, the spiritual life in Buddhism is about overcoming the illusion of a self – of a 'me'. A big 'ME', standing at the centre of the universe, surrounded by a myriad of 'OTHER'!

If we are working to overcome 'self', it stands to reason the spiritual life can't be lived out selfishly. That would be only to reinforce, however subtly, that sense of self. To practice the spiritual life just for yourself is a contradiction in terms.

So when we join with others in creating Sangha we actually try quite deliberately to put aside self-interest and enter into a process of mutual self-transcendence. There are many levels and dimensions to this work of mutual self-transcendence, and I am going to note and comment just very briefly on a few.

Creating Sangha, creating the Order, means learning to be a friend. It means cultivating the art of friendship. Again, this has a number of sides.

It means learning to value vertical friendship, in the sense of learning to be able to appreciate the qualities of those who have a deeper understanding and experience of the path than ourselves.

It means being able to put aside pride, arrogance, and so on; to develop receptivity, appreciation, gratitude, a readiness to learn – not thinking we know it all already, but quite the opposite – an open-heartedness towards others and their qualities.

On the level of horizontal friendship it means learning to value and engage with all sorts of different people, not just those who look like or dress like the sort of people we naturally, instinctively like, but actually learning to be able to appreciate and value people who at first sight would be the last sort of people we would want to have anything to do with. Really learning, again, to be open to the deeper qualities, the truer qualities, in all sorts of people.

And then vertical friendship, again: in the sense of learning to befriend and offer encouragement and help to others who are coming into the Dharma, who have less

experience than us. Again, really learning to be able to put our own interests aside and go out to others.

And all of this involves much more than just walk and talk and earnest chats over cups of coffee... despite appearances at times to the contrary... [LAUGHTER]

...There is a lot to learn. Initially, I remember having very much the sense of, 'everybody else has got something and I haven't!' – you know, all these people giving each other hugs and going off for walks, and... 'not me! What's wrong with me? How come I'm missing out?'

But I realised as time went on that it's not quite like that. It is not something you can just sort of grab and have – you know – that others have got it and you can have your share immediately. It is something we have to work at. It takes patience, perseverance, care, a readiness to learn from our mistakes and clumsinesses and so on.

And it happens. You work at friendship: it grows, it deepens. I've got friendships in the Order and movement now that go back over twenty years, and they are going to be there for the rest of my life, but they haven't just happened. It has taken time, it has taken patience, it has taken effort at working at those friendships – the vertical, those I look up to; my friends and peers; those I have befriended and shared my experience with.

So then creating Sangha, creating the Order, means learning to live with an awareness of others: learning to be kind, unselfish, ethical.

Again, this is a very practical matter. It is not an abstract quality that you sort of polish up and carry around in your briefcase. It is actually something very practical: it's down to things like doing your share of the washing up and shopping in the community flat where you live, and just responding to what's going on around you and what needs to be done. Or on a weekend like this – you know – just noticing the cups and rubbish that get left around the retreat centre and not having the attitude, 'it's somebody else's problem'. If there's something that needs to be done, well, one can do it. It is that very practical sense of other people and their needs, and a readiness to respond in a very down-to-earth way.

It means learning to give what we can give of ourselves: it might be money, possessions, time, energy. Again, here we can just ask ourselves a simple question: how much easier do we find it to bring out a five pound note and buy ourselves and a friend coffee and cakes, than to put five pounds in the Dana bowl? Just a simple question like that... I think it is worth sort of mirroring back and just looking at, 'how are we getting on in developing that open-handed ability to give?'

It means going beyond a protective, precious, self-centred way of being. It means putting ourselves out when it is not most convenient – you know, when we get a phone call from a friend who is ill, and we've got a busy day planned, and we just really don't want to have to go and look after them and do some shopping for them or whatever, and it would be very easy to sort of say, 'oh well, hope you get better soon...' and not make that offer to

put ourselves out. It means actually putting ourselves out when it's not what we feel like, not what we really want to do, but it's clear it needs to be done.

It means learning to confess – not hiding our shortcomings and trying to keep up a convincing spiritual front. Really acknowledging our faults quite honestly and openly, making amends and moving on. This is something we need to learn – the art of confession, the spiritual practice of confession – and it is something to practice. Initially we might be quite clumsy, quite reticent, but it is something we can learn by just doing it, and in that way discover, again, the difference it makes both to us and to our connection with others.

Creating Sangha means learning open, honest communication; becoming more and more transparent to our brothers. It means no longer having a secret life. Again, we can ask ourselves: 'Are there secret areas in our life? Are there things going on in our life we just don't talk to others about; that we don't talk about in our Going For Refuge group, to our friends?' Again – a question to hold up as a mirror.

It means learning appropriateness: when to speak; when to keep our counsel. It means learning how to deal with difficulties and conflicts; learning how to contain our reactions and anger so they are not destructive, but to be able to say what needs to be said at the right time, when it is going to be really useful and helpful.

It means letting go of hurt and resentment; learning how to forgive – remembering that forgiveness isn't conditional on other people admitting their fault; it's actually to do with something that comes from us. Again, it's something to learn. I remember some years back having a difficulty with another Order member, and someone in my chapter saying, 'you've just got to forgive them and let it go,' and actually I remember thinking, 'it's not as simple as that.' Yes, one makes a decision to forgive, and to try and change things, but it's not as if you flick a switch and that's it – you know – there are all sorts of situations where we've had difficulties with somebody, where our buttons are pressed – the old hurts, the old feelings come up again – and we have to learn how to work with them creatively again and again when they come up, so that they don't take us over; so that we don't feed them.

So, again, forgiveness is something we have to learn. We have to learn how to forgive, how to keep on forgiving. It's not something where we can just say, 'ok, I'll do it.' There is something in so many of these things that we have to discover the real art of.

And together with all these there is an ongoing working on our mental states: eradicating the unskilful, preventing the arising of unskilful states that haven't already arisen, developing the skilful states of mind that haven't yet arisen, and maintaining those that have arisen – in and out of meditation. Having a regular meditation practice with a strong element of Metta Bhavana in it; strengthening both our own clarity of mind and the quality of our connection with others; and learning how to engage our heart in Puja and devotional practice, so that opening of the heart can flow over into our connections with others. Clarifying our thinking, clarifying our views, through study and open-hearted

discussion of Dharma. All these things feed into our practice of creating the Order, creating the Sangha.

Looked at this way we can begin to see how the work of self-transcendence and the work of creating the Order go hand in hand. We can perhaps then begin also to see the place of the institutions of the Order and the movement. It becomes clear that chapter meetings – or, for you, at the moment, 'Going For Refuge' groups – are not optional extras; they are not just a pleasant way to spend a Sunday evening with like-minded people. Rather, these gatherings are a crucial working ground in our spiritual life where we can focus and intensify so many aspects of our practice.

So, to living with others in communities... even short term, if you've got a family, you can still share in community on retreat, on Kula gatherings and, in time, on Order weekends, and just realising the importance of having that sort of experience of community regularly, even if it's only short term because you have family or other commitments.

Working with others in a Right Livelihood business – again, to be clear, this is not just about a pleasant working environment and making money to fund the Dharma; there is a vision there in the Order and in the movement that goes far beyond that. Again, it is a very important and significant working ground for the creation of Sangha in all these different dimensions I have been speaking about.

It is worth noting, as well, the fact that our communities, our businesses, our activities, for those more committed as single sex... you know, just being very clear that this definitely isn't just a quirk of the English. It is not just to do with the 'public school influence' of certain senior Order members... [LAUGHTER] ...it is actually to do with the intensification of our spiritual practice that is possible in an environment free of the sexual and psychological polarisation that takes place, usually, when men and women are together. Again, it is all to do with taking every opportunity to deepen our practice; our connectedness with others.

The best of our communities, in particular, do continue to provide one of the main spiritual cutting edges of the movement. So, even if you are not able to live in a community, work in a Team-Based Right-Livelihood business. You know, you should be grateful for them and those who put their lives into them. We wouldn't have anything like the Order and the movement we have, without them, and it is really important to appreciate the part they play in making our Order and movement what it is.

In all this there is something else very important to remember. The Order isn't just a fixed, worked-out thing that you join. The Order is an unfolding organism that you take on to help create and be a part of. Moving towards the Order, towards ordination, means becoming increasingly a part of it, increasingly a part of this living network of trust and friendship. And it means taking full responsibility for your part in it: giving of your best; working to unfold the best in yourself so that the Order itself is an increasingly effective force for good in the world.

I am starting to touch here on something of great importance, but before following it through I want to just backtrack a little bit and take a bit further this theme of 'responsibility'...

As I said, in moving towards the Order you make it your own; you take a share in responsibility for it. Initially, your share of the responsibility might seem very small compared to that carried by Subhuti, Padmavajra, others of the Public Preceptors and those at Madhymaloka, and so on. But it is a very real responsibility from the very beginning. Even as you move into the Order, even as you train towards ordination, you are taking up a real responsibility, and one that isn't to be abdicated to any 'them' at Madhymaloka or anywhere else.

And it is a responsibility that will grow as you grow into the Order; and it is one that you really need to accept squarely with ordination (well, you really need to accept it squarely before ordination) – you know, that this is something you are taking on to help create, help build, help make. We speak of the 'path of responsibility' in the Order and the movement, in the way that taking on responsibility – within the institutions, Centres, businesses, and taking on responsibility for the spiritual welfare of others – how this can itself be a path of spiritual practice.

So, again, this is very much to do with putting aside smaller self-interest; going beyond self-concern. But it is definitely *not* a matter of burdening oneself with this great wheelbarrow-load of responsibilities, this great rucksack full of responsibility that you then stagger spiritually around under the weight of...

I think there is quite an analogy, for many people, with parenthood – you know, where people become parents, they are confronted with a child that isn't going to go away! You can't sort of have days off when you've got children. You have got to keep responding even when you don't feel like it.

And, for many people at least, this can be very maturing: they get away from the danger of 'eternal adolescence' when you can always do what you want when you want.

So, it's taking on responsibility for others in the institutions of the movement, responsibility for their welfare, in this sort of way – you know – when there's no walking away. You take on responsibility in that sort of way, that you are not going to put it down if you've got a bad day or a bad week; you are going to keep doing what you said you'd do; keep responding to others in the way you said you would.

And I think in this way we do discover resources, qualities, strengths in ourselves that weren't previously apparent; so we do at least develop a bigger human basis from which spiritual qualities can then unfold.

So... that's responsibility and the path of responsibility.

I want to go back now to that point I was just starting to touch on earlier – how, working in the context of the Order to unfold the best in us, we make the Order itself an increasingly effective force for good in the world.

Giving ourselves to the work of the Order, we collectively become the Bodhisattva (Padmavajra spoke a bit about this on Friday evening). We have this bizarre, strangely beautiful image of the Eleven-Headed, Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara – and we can become, each one of us, one of his arms, one of his hands. And in each of the hands there is that eye; the wisdom that informs compassion.

Bhante has said it is probably more useful for us to think of ourselves as *collectively* becoming the Bodhisattva rather than each of us individually becoming Bodhisattvas – me becoming a Bodhisattva, you becoming a Bodhisattva. When we think of it as 'me' becoming a Bodhisattva we can easily fall into the idea of becoming a sort of 'cosmic social-worker' and taking on this hopeless task of putting the universe to rights – but this isn't what it's about. Altruism in Buddhism, the altruism that lies behind the Bodhisattva ideal, is to do with recognising the limitedness of our self-view; it's to do with opening our heart in understanding, and learning to live more and more from a profound sense of interconnectedness.

And it is for this reason that we find, for example, Bhante suggesting that we ought to only recite the Bodhisattva precepts collectively. In a way, it doesn't make sense just to go off and recite them by ourselves. It is when we recite them together that they are more likely to unfold their true meaning.

And the emphasis that is placed on the Sevenfold Puja as a collective practice, a practice that can help bring about the arising of the Bodhicitta when we speak together with the voice of the Bodhisattva – we evoke, then, through that, the Bodhisattva in our midst.

So it is in entering into and seeking to realise the myth of the Bodhisattva through the work of creating the Order, in all its nitty-gritty practical detail that I have touched on, that we collectively might become the Bodhisattva.

I have said quite a lot about the teaching of the 'practice' approach to Sangha in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, the Western Buddhist Order – about our particular, distinctive approach to Sangha – but I still don't feel I have done justice to the subject...

There is the matter of love... In creating Sangha, in creating the Order, we learn to love one another. We hopefully become kinder and wiser, and as that love grows in its fullness it overflows, reaches out, touches the lives of others.

And beauty...

...An afternoon in early summer at Padmaloka, on a Mythic Context retreat... We are well into the retreat, and in silence. I go out into the garden, near the lounge... there is gentle,

golden, early summer light... people are sitting around... it is like entering into an atmosphere of liquid metta; like swimming through an atmosphere of liquid metta; an atmosphere of friendliness, brotherhood, and a beauty that opens into a sense that one needs look no further.

...An Order convention at a Victorian, gothic, Roman Catholic school and seminary... it is the end of the Order convention... in the gym, Order members, men and women, go up to make offerings. Year by year, those ordained first going first, year by year these people who were ordained going up in waves as we chant the Padmasambhava mantra. A mysterious beauty touches many hearts... and there is a wordless knowing that this is the right way to live: we should live simply, unselfishly; give ourselves to friendship and the building of Sangha and our Dharma practice, in all its many aspects, and let that overflow into the world.

So... it is simple... vast... beautiful... mysterious.