

What Happens in a Chapter Meeting

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Brothers in the Dharma. Thank you very much Mahamati for that metaphysically very challenging introduction, the exact nature of space and time, well, at least time were called into question.

So tonight I am going to give the talk that the Chapter Convenors particularly wanted me to give after the series of talks I gave on the Chapter Convenors retreat. And I came to this event confident that I had got full notes and would be able to just unfold my notepad and start talking. So just being cautious I checked my notes and I found that I had got a page of notes for this particular talk which didn't really reproduce at all what I said. When one is giving a series of talks in a context like a Chapter Convenors retreat, well, the thing just sort of unfolds. So what I said, I said in the heat of the moment, so to speak, and I am not exactly sure whether I am going to be able to reproduce it tonight. In fact, I am sure I won't be able to, but still this is another situation and no doubt something else will emerge. And I have got seven pages of notes this time, whether that is better or worse we will see.

So I am going to talk about what happens in a Chapter meeting, or what perhaps should happen, or could happen, in a Chapter meeting. And what I am going to be talking about emerges really out of the explorations that we have been making in our own Chapter at Madhyamaloka.

Over the last years we have been exploring ways of approaching our Chapter that I think have interesting repercussions for other Chapters. What is particularly interesting about our Chapter at Madhyamaloka is that, for a start, most of us know each other very well, some of us have known each other for getting on for 30 years, and have been in Chapters and communities and so forth time and time again. But what is also very significant is that we spend a lot of time together in meetings, sometimes with other people as well, sometimes in different combinations, but most of us meet together in meetings for several months each year it almost seems, at least several weeks each year. And we used to find that we would meet together to discuss issues connected with the Order, with the Movement, we would meet together to study, and then we would have our Order meeting. And we weren't really sure what the Order meeting was, what was about it that was different from the other meetings. And so we began to ask ourselves what precisely is it that is different about this meeting. After all, all the meetings that we were in were meetings of Order members, are they then not surely Order meetings?

But we felt that was not quite a good enough answer, there must be something distinctive about the Chapter meeting that is quite separate from the other kinds of meetings that we have. And, well of course, we touched on basic Order theories stemming from Bhante, and we realised, we tried to face fully up to the fact, that an Order meeting is different from the other meetings essentially because it has absolutely no purpose at all. It is a truly pointless meeting, it is a meeting without any purpose at all. We don't meet in an Order meeting,

usually at least, certainly at Madhyamaloka, in order to sort something out or to investigate something or to come to some kind of conclusion. There is not an agenda that we have to go through, there are not issues and problems that have to be dealt with. There is no purpose to the Chapter meeting at all beyond itself. The Chapter meeting is its own purpose, you could say. That is the conclusion that we came to. It doesn't have to have any outcome, it doesn't have to go anywhere, it doesn't have to conclude anything.

Furthermore, we come into the meeting without any roles, without any functions, we are all there just as members of the Order, not as members of the College Council, as Presidents or Preceptors, Mitra Convenor, Order Convenor, whatever, all of that is left behind, we are just there as Order members. There is no sort of functions within the meeting. Yes, you might have a Chapter Convenor, but the Chapter Convenor doesn't have a sort of role inside the meeting itself. We are all there on exactly the same footing as ourselves, as members of the Order.

So that when we looked at things in this way we felt that that was quite challenging. How could we give effect to that? And how could we give effect to the fact that the meeting has no meaning beyond itself, that the meaning of the meeting is the meeting. What does that actually mean in practice? After all, if we are looking at things like that, the function of the meeting is simply to meet. I am sorry this is going to get terribly sort of Zen. It is Mahamati's fault, he did the metaphysical introduction, so I am led on in that way. The meeting consists essentially in meeting. And you do actually hear representations of this when you hear people sometimes talking about their Chapter. They will complain about this or that in the Chapter meeting, they will complain about the way it went or the way in which some people act or their relationship with some people in the Chapter, but they will often say something like, 'Nonetheless, I get something from it. And if I didn't go I would definitely miss something'. And I think this points to the fact that on one level they are looking for something and they are getting it on another level. So that we are looking for some particular sort of outcome or some particular kind of experience, but the experience that we get essentially comes just from the fact that we meet. The beginning and end of a Chapter meeting's purpose is just that Order members meet.

The Meaning of Meeting as a Chapter

So what does it mean? What does it mean for Order members to meet? What does it mean that the meaning and purpose of the Chapter meeting is simply in the meeting? Well, this is probably all fairly familiar, I did try to go into this a bit on Order Day from a slightly different angle. But let me rehearse the territory again. Everybody in that meeting is an Order member, Goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels. There is a very definite commitment that we all share, that we all know that we share. So that when we come together, when we sit together in a circle, as we usually do in an Order meeting, we are all aware of each other as individuals who Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. To some extent, even if we don't make an effort, even if we don't think about it, the fact that we all do Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels is present to us. Not just as a theory, it is not that we sort of understand theoretically that everybody here Goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels, that everybody is committed to that high ideal, it is just a plain component of our act of awareness, of us being aware of ourselves

sitting there with these people there is sort of spontaneously, you might say, a component to our awareness which is that we know that everybody there is Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Not just perhaps as a historical knowledge, there is also something intuitive about it. You could say that that act of awareness of each other as Going for Refuge is comparable to the act that takes place at ordination when the Preceptor witnesses the Going for Refuge of the person he or she is ordaining. So in the same way, when we come together in the Order meeting we are witnessing each other as Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. And the whole fundamental meaning of the meeting emerges from that witnessing of each other as Going for Refuge. So you could say that the Order meeting consists essentially in a mutual witnessing of each other as Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. And again, I stress, not merely as an idea, not just as a theory about the meeting, but as an existential awareness. We are aware of a quality to the meeting, a quality that is brought about by the presence of each individual with their individual commitment to the Three Jewels.

So if a Chapter meets on that basis that is enough. We just come into the room, we are just aware of each other as Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels in a deep way, in an existential way, in an intuitive way. That is enough. And we might even say that we could just rest with that, go no further, do nothing else, but just be there together, aware of each other as individuals who Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Everything else follows from that, whatever we do do, whether we plan it or whether we leave it to spontaneous arising, comes from that mutual awareness of Going for Refuge, to witnessing each other as Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Of course, we could say that even if we don't make an effort, even if we don't really try to make that conscious, it probably happens to some extent, and that is what I was referring to earlier when people sort of feel dissatisfied with their meeting and yet get something from it. In a sense they are aware of that mutual resonance of Going for Refuge to Going for Refuge without being fully aware that they are aware of it.

So this was our sort of idea at Madhyamaloka. Our idea was that we don't have to do anything in particular, that the mere act of being together being aware of each other, allowing that sort of existential confrontation, existential meeting, to take place, that awareness of each other as individuals who Go for Refuge, was the whole meaning and purpose of the meeting and we need do nothing else. And we decided that we would try between us to keep that very much to the fore. And we would keep it to the fore by emphasising silence. I am not suggesting that everybody else has to do it this way, I am trying to illustrate the fundamental principle by describing the way in which we carry out our Order meeting. We see silence as the context within which it is most easy for us to bring about that mutual awareness of each other as Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. So we try to keep that alive. We try to make sure that whoever we do do emerges out of silence and that when that is done silence comes back again. So that instead of rushing from topic to topic, people jumping over each other to get in the next word, we try to let silence emerge and re-emerge.

To some extent this came out of the experience that a lot of us had at Order meetings with Bhante, and indeed of our experience of daily contact with Bhante. There is quite a lot of silence if you live with Bhante. And in the Order meetings we used to have with Bhante, I remember when I was quite newly ordained going to order meetings with Bhante, there is sort of terrifying silence, a silence that was fathomless in depth and was as infinite as the sky, and

in which you felt your own fragility and the sort of delicacy of your own hold on the spiritual life. Not that Bhante was at all threatening, not that there was any imposition upon one, it was just that a silence opened up which was vaster than the sort of silences that one generally experienced. And out of that would often come some very interesting revelation, discussion, and so on.

So many of us had participated in that sort of silence with Bhante and we felt that we wanted to try to work on our Chapter from that basis so that in the silence we would become much more fully aware of ourselves and of each other as individuals who Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels, and whatever happened comes out of that silence, out of that mutual awareness, and merges back into it when it is finished, when it has served its purpose. So we try not to lose a sense of that existential meeting as individuals who Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. And by and large we are reasonably successful with that. It all depends, it depends how conscious we are, it depends what we have all been doing, but we manage generally speaking to keep some sense of that deeper meeting. And of course different people come into it or out of it in different ways, but generally we maintain that sense of the fundamental bedrock of our meeting as just individuals who Go for Refuge. And we say, we have never actually challenged this yet, that we would be prepared just to sit there in full silence throughout the evening, if nothing emerged nothing would emerge and we would just be together experiencing each other as Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

Laying the Groundwork

So how do we bring that about? Well, I suppose you say in a way you don't do anything. That is the whole point, isn't it, really? It is sort of Zen-like. As soon as you start to make an effort you kind of spoil it, as soon as you become too conscious about it it disappears. It is something that has to emerge. But really it should happen whenever Order members meet. To some extent perhaps it does happen whenever Order members meet. If we are to some extent conscious of each as Order members, that is as individuals who Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels within the context of this spiritual community, well, we do become aware of each other in a deeper way. But nonetheless we do need to work at creating it, at extending it, at deepening it, at making it more continuous.

And I think at least part of the means for this is preparation. So that you think of the Order meeting in advance, it just doesn't sort of turn up and you are surprised to find that you are in an Order meeting. Which is what seems to happen to quite a lot of people. One actually sort of contemplates the Order meeting for maybe a day or two beforehand, one considers that it is coming up. Not thinking what to say or preparing your sort of statements. Maybe things are pressing, that urge to be said in the Order meeting when it comes, but the main point is to be aware of the Order meeting as coming, as the situation in which you try to meet up with the members of your Chapter in as deep and effective existential way as you can. So you prepare yourself, you begin to contact that experience, perhaps recalling previous experience of it, and opening yourself up to it as it approaches.

If your Chapter meeting isn't very much of an experience of that kind, well, you need to begin to try to make it into that. And you make it into that not by manipulating everybody

else, not by telling everybody else how they should be, or complaining about the meeting, or anything of that kind, you bring it about by having that attitude yourself. If you are dissatisfied with the way in which the meeting goes, you can change that by going into the meeting with a consciousness that you are an Order member with other Order members, and by trying to make that consciousness more firm in your mind, more present to you, deeper in your experience. And if you go into the meeting with that attitude, regardless of what anybody else does, you will have an experience of that kind of meeting. Of course, the more others reciprocate the deeper that experience will be.

It seemed to me in discussing with various Chapters at Madhyamaloka, the progress of their Chapters, that we usually put too much stress on how other people perform in the Chapter. And when people discuss what they consider to be a dysfunctional Chapter they usually are talking about how other people are. But actually I think a Chapter is, you might say, as strong as the strongest member. We usually think of a group situation as being as strong as the weakest member, but I think that with a Chapter you can rely on the fact that if anybody approaches the meeting in the sort of way I have been indicating others will respond. This is the thing one discovers about Order meetings, although they sometimes, 'they', behave in beastly ways and really don't live up to what they ought to live up to, unlike 'us', if you consistently approach them in an honest and sincere way on the basis of the commitment that you have in common, they will respond. In some cases with particularly intractable people it takes several years, but it does happen. Excuse my cynical humour. But actually the fact is that usually with Order members, if you do approach them in the right and honest sort of way, well, a response will come, and become before too long. And especially I think in the context of an Order meeting in which everybody is conscious it is supposed to be some sort of important experience for us, I think that if you approach it in the way that I have been indicating, others will reciprocate. And even if they don't, well, you can get what you can get out of it by approaching it in this way.

So we create the Order meeting, we create this kind of atmosphere by approaching things in that way ourselves. However others respond, you can move it in that direction for yourselves. Others will pick up on your approach to it.

Awareness of One's Own Going for Refuge

So what then takes place? What happens if you approach the meeting in this sort of way? If you see the meeting as just a mutual awareness by Order members, by the members, of each other as individuals who Go for Refuge? What happens? Well, it is fairly obvious. If you are aware that you are with a group of people all of whom share the same ideal that you have, all of whom are committed to it as fully and deeply as you are, if not more, or at least who approximate to the kind of commitment that you have, well, the first thing that is likely to happen is that you are likely to become much more aware of yourself as an individual who Goes for Refuge. So you will become much more vividly aware of your own relationship to the Three Jewels, of the commitment that you have to the Three Jewels, and its place in your life. You will be conscious of your own commitment with all its strengths and weaknesses, you will be conscious of the extent to which you fulfill and do not fulfill that commitment. That will all become immediately present to you as you sit there aware of the significance of

the meeting and the purpose that lies behind it and of the presence of each other member of the meeting. You will become aware of your inspiration, you will become aware of your remorse, you will become aware of your insight and understanding, you will become aware of your confusion and darkness. Everything will become present to you, you will become aware of where you stand in relation to the ideal to which you have dedicated your life, you will be brought back to that moment of your ordination when you made that deep commitment and you will be aware of where you stand in relation to that commitment that you made. You will be aware of it because you will be aware of everybody else as aware of it in themselves. So in this way the commitment that we share is intensified, made more vivid, made more real, brought more present to us. And we will sit there with a stronger experience of it. That having taken place it will be obvious what needs to be said. What needs to be said emerges out of that awareness. What will be said will express that mutual awareness and it will bring it more effectively into being and deepen it.

What is said will be in relation to the overall atmosphere. It will be a true communication because it will arise out of one's awareness of everyone else as Going for Refuge and as confronting their spiritual commitment. But it will be a communication in the full sense. We will each of us be participating in a vital mutual responsiveness, which is what Bhante defines communication as. And whatever we do say, whatever we do do, will be spoken in accordance with the precepts, it will be open, honest, it will promote harmony, it will be uplifting in its effect, truly useful to everyone present, and said with kindness and sensitivity. And it will have the effect of promoting, of deepening, that mutual awareness of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

Three Characteristic Kinds of Communication

Now, when this meeting takes place there are three characteristic kinds of communication that will happen. There is confession, there is confiding, and there is helping. So confession and confiding are what sort of emerge from our awareness of our own Going for Refuge and the condition of the Going for Refuge. Helping is what we do in order to help others to bring their confession to completion and to let their confidences emerge fully into the light. So that will be the fundamental kind of communication that takes place. We will either be confessing or confiding or be helping others in their confessing and confiding.

So let me talk about each of those characteristic communications within the context of the Chapter meeting.

Probably confession is the most characteristic, although it is not necessarily what will happen, or if it doesn't happen an Order meeting has not taken place. But surely when we come into that atmosphere of heightened sensitivity to commitment to the Three Jewels, what we will become aware of is the extent to which we have fallen short. That surely is only natural. As our faith intensifies we become more aware of the extent to which we have not lived up to the faith that we have. And we experience that as, to a greater or lesser extent, feelings of remorse. We feel a painful consciousness of our falling short. And that painful consciousness of our falling short will lead us to want to confess. And especially as we sit in the Order meeting, if we truly bring about that sort of awareness of the mutual commitment,

that will probably be the thing that rises to the mind most readily - the extent to which we have fallen short. Not as a kind of compulsive or obsessive neurotic self doubt, but as a real awareness that we have set ourselves a very high ideal which we know we have not lived up to. And so we will want to clear the air, we will want to close the gap between ourselves and that ideal, rededicating ourselves to it by confessing what we have done that falls short of it. I think this is very important, I think confession should always take place in the context of faith. We confess because we have an ideal. If we had no ideal there would be nothing to confess, we wouldn't have any values to live by, we wouldn't feel that we had fallen short in any way. So I think that when we do confess we somehow need to give expression to that ideal which we have fallen short of, however explicitly. We need to say that, for instance, 'I aspire to brahmacharya, I aspire to freedom from sexual craving, and I have fallen short, I have allowed myself to wander into fantasy and so on, and I really deeply regret that, I value that ideal of brahmacharya so highly that I feel intensely my shortcomings'. So I think that when we do confess we should try to touch on the ideal that the confession expresses our falling short of. So, out of that mutual awareness of each other as Going for Refuge, our own sense of Going for Refuge is intensified, and once our sense of Going for Refuge is intensified we become aware of the extent to which we have not lived up to it. Of course in a way we have not lived up to it sufficiently at all, but it is not a question of sort of confessing unenlightenment or anything like that, it is a question of confessing to those actions of body, speech and mind that we have performed that do break our connection with the ideal.

Others should help us in our confession. Of course they help us most readily by lending an ear, by having an open ear, by listening to us. It doesn't have to be that they give some formulaic response, they can do, that might be helpful. I am not against the formalisation of confession, but it doesn't have to be like that. In our own Chapter it is not like that. Somebody just feels that there is something to say, something to confess, and so they say it. And others show their acceptance of that confession by the quality of their attention and by the care they take to make sure that they have understood what is being confessed and to make sure that the person confessing has fully confessed, that they have really gone into what it is that they have done, especially the state of mind that underlies it. I think a confession in a sense is never complete unless we have really looked at the state of mind that underlies it. After all, Buddhist ethics is an ethics of intentionality, so we need to, in confessing, explore and reveal what led us to perform that particular action.

And I should say that it is for this reason that we have been very strongly recommending throughout the Order, both here and in India and elsewhere, the study of Bhante's book *Know your Mind* and the study of the 51 mental events. And it is for that reason that we will be looking at the 51 mental events during the Mens Convention, and the women will be during the Dharmacharinis Convention. Because in looking at that material we will get a much better idea of what kinds of mental states underlay our skilfulness and unskilfulness. And we have got a vocabulary, a language, which helps us to understand the kind of mental states that we go through and that lead to our actions. Of course there are other ways of looking at things, there are other systems and so on, but I think it would be very good if we all shared this fairly sophisticated and fairly well articulated system of understanding the mind and that when we were communicating in the context of our Chapter meetings we were able to refer to this language. Of course, it is never completely definitive and there are ways in which it is

deficient and doesn't really quite apply within our culture and so on, but it gives us a broad framework for looking at the kinds of mental states that our skilful actions and unskilful actions emerge from. So that is why we are promoting the study of this text. And in the context of the Convention we are hoping that Chapters will have a chance to confess quite fully as the mental states are examined in a series of talks. So that there will be a lot of material for Chapter meetings thereafter.

So, yes, it is necessary to help people often to confess by helping them to reveal more fully what is going on underneath what they have done and I think a confession is not complete until that underlying basis in the mind is a little bit opened up.

Further than that, I think that the confession needs to also contain some reference to what has been done to make amends for the unskilful action. It is no good doing something wrong when you haven't actually put it right to the extent that you can. If you have been harsh to somebody, well, at least you need to say, 'Sorry'. If you have been very unmindful and broken things, well, you need to go and mend them or buy new ones or something of that kind. If you have passed gossip, well, then you need to go and tell the people who you have passed it to that it was untrue, or that it was unskilful at least, and that you regret what you have said. You need to put it right. And I think that others can help you in doing this by asking you, 'What have you done? You did this. Did you go to see so-and-so and say I am sorry? Did you go and tell so-and-so that wasn't true', and so on. This is the function of one of the ways in which can help each other in a Chapter meeting.

But even this isn't enough. Because one of the things that one does observe is that people often confess in Chapters the same things again and again. Of course, this is a bit inevitable because habits run very deep, but there should be at least some signs that what it is that is being confessed is beginning to wither away. And the best way to make sure that this happens is to make sure that the confession is completed with some kind of program of action, some resolution to be made to work against it. So it is up to others in the Chapter to sort of say, 'Yes, we hear your confession. It is very good, we understand why you did it, we see what you have done to put it right. But what are you going to do about it in the future? This seems to come out of a habitual mental state. You have reported this in a number of times, what are you going to do about it? What are you doing about it?'. And then they should help the person to arrive at a practical way forward. Because it is not always possible to get over things in a single bound, in fact it very seldom is. and it is more a question of making sure that changes are being made, subtle and small changes are being made that slowly get to grips with the underlying conditions for the unskilfulness.

So all of this should come out in the Chapter meeting, and it is probably the most characteristic activity of a Chapter really and truly. If we really and truly are participating in the Chapter meeting, that will be something that one would expect to see one doing pretty regularly. One will be aware of things that need to be confessed, one will be developing one's ethical sensitivity more and more within the context of the Chapter meeting. As I quoted on WBO Day, Bhante says that confession is crucial to spiritual life. Of course you don't have to do it in a Chapter meeting, but if you are aware of the Chapter meeting in the way that I have indicated, you won't be able to help it really - confession will leap to your lips because you

will feel what you have done to stand in the way of your full participation in the meeting. My own experience is that I often go into the meeting without having really clarified fully what I want to say, sometimes not at all, but just being there it just becomes obvious that I have got to say something about this, something that I have done that is unskilful, something that I have thought, some habit or pattern. It just has to be spoken about. Sometimes that emerges from other people confessing. You are sort of sparked off to confess by their confession. Not that you get like when there is a crime committed and 14 people ring up the police to confess to it, sort of compulsive confession. But that as a result of people so honestly and truthfully confessing, within the context of this atmosphere you are brought more fully into contact with your own Going for Refuge and what you have done that stands in the way of the Three Jewels for you. Confession is curiously an extremely inspiring act, it is probably one of the most inspiring acts there could be. I know sometimes when people have confessed in the Chapter, well, I have come out sort of high almost, just from inspiration, because, as I have said, implicit in the confession is a deep expression of faith.

So that is what one would expect most characteristically to emerge in that silence, in that silence of mutual awareness as Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels - an experience of our shortcomings, an experience of remorse for what blocks us off from the Three Jewels, and a definite attempt to heal the gap by confessing.

But that doesn't define what happens in a Chapter meeting. Something else that happens when you sit in that sort of silence, when you sit in that sort of mutual awareness, is that you become aware of things that you need to say that are not necessarily unskilful, they are not necessarily as it were negative or things that you have done wrong, they are just things that you need to say to those other people in the room. They are confidences that you need to reveal to them because they bring you into fuller and deeper communion with them, they help you to feel a deeper connection with them and they will help them to feel that they know you better and therefore that they can be aware of you as an individual who Goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels much more fully. Bhante recently has said that he thought that this in some ways was as important as confession, that we were confiding in each other, that we were opening ourselves up to each other. And he particularly stressed the importance of confiding in each other our plans. He says that he notices that still far too many Order members make decisions about their lives without really consulting each other, and certainly without bringing them up in the context of the Chapter meeting. They just do it, or they just announce to the Chapter this is what they are going to do. There is no offering of communication, there is no opening up of what is going on to others. Presumably this is out of some misplaced sense of fragility of identity. That can be the only reason that I can think of that you don't want to open it up to others, because you are afraid that they might sort of invade your personal responsibility and choice. But surely we should be stronger than that, we should be more robust than that. We should be able to open up our lives to others, listen to what they have said, and then do what we think is best.

So we should be opening ourselves up to each other so that we get the best counsel that we can have, and that others understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. Even if in the end they don't agree with us. That doesn't especially matter ultimately. It is not a question of asking permission, it is a question of opening up our lives more fully to others so that they

know what is going on. And a sphere that Bhante has always stressed is that area where we are most likely not to want to reveal - the sexo-romantic one. We are least likely to want to open up to others our plans, intentions, and so forth, in respect of that, or even our actions in respect of that. But again, it is not a question of opening it up so that other people can jump on us and tell us we are really bad and so forth, when they are really just as bad themselves, or just as good, whatever you would like to say, it is a matter of bringing out into the open an area of our lives that is probably far more important to most of us than we like to admit. And it is not something dark and unskilful *per se*, but which really occupies a lot more of the feeling, emotional, life of most of us than we generally give voice to. And of course here I must stress that others shouldn't start being censorial about it, and should be aware that often quite delicate, quite sensitive, feelings are involved. But it should be out in the open, people should know what is going on. If they don't, they don't really know you, you haven't really revealed yourself. Not that they have a sort of right to know about it, a bit like a political right to know, but that it is part of us, something that matters to us, and if we don't share it, if we don't reveal it, to our friends in the Chapter, they don't really know quite a lot about us often. And this goes for many other areas, and we will probably become aware of what we need to talk about by what we don't want to talk about. One of my little guides to what to bring out in the Chapter meeting is what just keeps on popping its head up and even though I keep pushing it away it keeps on coming back, so it is a pretty infallible sign that it needs to be said.

So, yes, we need to be revealing ourselves in as many ways as possible. We need to be revealing particularly what we are working on, what really matters to us, in our spiritual life, what is going on in our meditation practice, what is going on in our study, what is going on in our reflection, where the sort of cutting edge of our lives is, where our energies are really placed, where they are really going. We need to be sharing our insights, our experiences, insofar as we have them, which of course we all do. So that people have more and more of an understanding of what makes us tick. After all, probably more than anything it is our volitions that define us, it is what we want, where our energies are going, and that is what we need to be revealing.

Of course some of us are over adept at revealing ourselves and we need to be perhaps a little careful that we don't hog the show or just indulge all over the place. And others may have to help us by very gently hinting that perhaps that is enough of revelation for the time being and a further blow by blow account of your romantic life is not really necessary to full self revelation. But probably many of us still need to reveal ourselves more. And perhaps there even needs to be sufficient openness in the Chapter to be able to go into this, to be able to say, 'Well, I think that probably in your case it is not necessary to go into that much further', or, 'Well, I think we need more here'. But all done of course in a very friendly and open way. And if somebody says, 'Well, no, you are not getting any more from me', well, that is fair enough, that is their choice.

So confessing and confiding are probably the chief activities that characterise an effective Chapter. And both those functions do emerge naturally out of our awareness of each other as individuals who Go for Refuge. Of course, confessing and confiding, and especially confiding, can go a very long way. Confiding may lead us into quite deep explorations of the

Dharma, it may lead us into quite a detailed and deep of meditation practice, and so on.

Leaving Space, Maintaining Focus

And of course one can do many other things, one can approach a Chapter meeting in many different ways. We could study together from time to time. We could report in. That is a way of confiding and even confessing sometimes. We can discuss themes, like meditation practice, ethics, whatever. We could meditate together. We could do Puja together. We can do many things in order to sort of structure a Chapter meeting.

But I think we need to be very careful that whatever we do doesn't become a cover for a more basic existential meeting. Sometimes I felt that Chapters are too quick to sort of fill up their programme and almost have too rigid a thematic schema so that, 'Well, today is day 7 in our Chapter sequence, we must do such-and-such', and somebody has got something they are burning to confess but there is no room for it, there is no space for it, or it only fits in within a very formalised framework of confession. And one would have thought that really confession and confidence should have priority over anything else. Although, as I say, they may come out in other contexts too. But if somebody has something that they really want to confess, or really need to confide, well, there should be space for that. And we need to be very careful that we don't do things in the Chapter meeting that basically cover up our awkwardness about this raw existential meeting. I know this from personal experience that Chapter meetings can be quite daunting and I think quite often my own experience even now in such a good Chapter, such an uplifting Chapter, is a feeling of resistance before going into it. I don't quite want to go to it because it is going to demand of me a greater presence, a greater confrontation with my own essential position in relation to the Three Jewels. And instinctively some sort of self-preservation of the ego suggests not to go, and start having phantom illnesses and sudden emergencies and things like that. And one of the ways in which I think we make sure that the Chapter meeting is not so uncomfortable is by filling the programme so that there are things to do. Again, I am not saying that things to do are a bad thing, they become only a bad thing when they become a way of avoiding that sort of meeting. Any structure, any formalisation, even any no structure, can become a means of hiding, a means of not facing. Even the sort of silent non-procedure that we have can be a way of just not meeting. You can sit there in your own little box not really aware of everybody else but you are keeping the silence and you are not really allowing yourself to open up to other people.

So please don't get me wrong, I am not saying that any particular activity is prescribed or proscribed. One can do more or less anything and a genuine Chapter meeting can come about. You can go out for a cup of tea or a walk in the park, you can go to the theatre or the cinema perhaps on occasions, very occasionally, and somehow or other a real meeting of the kind that I am talking about could come about. But it is most likely to come about I think when there is space, when there is space for something to emerge, when there is space for each of us to experience our essential Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. And surely whatever we do there should be space for confessing and confiding and for us to help each other. For instance, sometimes there can be a situation in which people confess, but there is no room to discuss, there is no room to explore. There can be reporting in, but there is no

room to ask for clarification, there is no room to ask to go deeper, there is just a sort of formalised process which allows for very little spontaneous deepening.

So, yes, we should make sure that there is space within the Chapter meeting for confession and confiding to take place. Because those are the natural expressions of that mutual awareness which is the fundamental purpose, the be all and end all, of a Chapter meeting.

So I think that we need to keep the Chapter under constant review in the light of this sort of perspective. I don't mean that it should be subject to endless discussion and even argument about whether the Chapter is any good or not. Just periodically we should all step back and just ask ourselves: are we individually entering into the Chapter meeting in the right sort of spirit? Is the structure that we have erected for the Chapter meeting promoting that sort of mutual awareness and the confession and the confidence that naturally emerges from it? It is something that we should each of us aim to be true to and dedicate ourselves to bringing about in our Chapter.

If we do all remain true to that idea, that principle, that essential purpose of the Chapter meeting, something will definitely emerge from each meeting, something that is quite difficult to put into words. That we may even forget in between meetings, but that comes back to us as some sort of familiar experience that in some sense is very ordinary, very quiet, very plain, but at the same time deeply satisfying, whole and engaging. And that is really an expression of a quite different quality of consciousness, which is a quite different quality of consciousness. Not a group consciousness, though all of us share it. And not merely the consciousness of a collection of individuals, although all will be participating as individuals. It will be an expression of what Bhante calls the third order of consciousness in which each of us participates fully, shares, coincides, in the same experience but coincides in that experience from an entirely individual point of view. In other words, we are not subsumed at all by that shared consciousness. And you remember Bhante struggled to put that into words when he talked about it, and even had to borrow from Russian, he talked of the experience as *sobornost*, and he talked of that as this third order of consciousness somehow transcending the individual and certainly transcending the group, but having characteristics that were like the group insofar as everybody experienced it but that were like the individual insofar as each person so to speak had it for themselves out of themselves, out of their own personal responsibility. And that is what we experience when the Chapter meeting really works, at least a corner of that, at least a taste of that, we do participate together in a common state of mind, a common consciousness, which is this third order of consciousness, which is truly Sangha. And this is of course very deeply inspiring and vitalising and uplifting. Interestingly enough, I always find that after a good Chapter meeting, which generally for us is every week, I sleep really well. And that to me indicates that something whole has taken place. I have been satisfied on every level and my total being, so to speak, has been answered, has been met, and fed, so I sleep.

So that experience is deeply satisfying and is within the grasp of every one of us as Order members. We have all Gone for Refuge to the Three Jewels and we have Gone for Refuge quite deeply, very deeply, and we have all understood to some extent this magical thing, the Order, we have all understood to some extent the spiritual community. So if we approach

each Order meeting in the way that I have indicated, preparing ourselves for it, anticipating it, building up our expectation of it, entering into it with full individual responsibility and full personal initiative to be aware of the meeting as a meeting of individuals who Go for Refuge. If we allow ourselves to confess, if we allow ourselves to confide, and if we help everybody else in the meeting to confess and to confide very fully, and participate in whatever it is that emerges from that confession and confidence, well, then we will be bringing that third order of consciousness into being. And that in itself will have a dramatic effect upon our own spiritual lives, intensifying those lives because we will feel much more confident in what we are doing, giving us plenty of feed for reflection upon ourselves, giving us a much sharper and clearer idea of what our spiritual lives consist in. And if we as individuals have our spiritual lives intensified in this sort of way, by participating in the Chapter, well, of course the Order as a whole will benefit and the Order as a whole will be a much more live and fruitful community. And indeed the Order as a whole will approximate more and more to that third order of consciousness.

So though what I have talked about is in some ways a little bit mystical almost, it is something that we all know. We would be here if we didn't. Even if we have forgotten it, even if it is a long time since we have truly experienced it, that third order of consciousness is probably what brought most of us here on some occasions. Maybe on a retreat, maybe in a study group, maybe in communication with somebody else, we experience a transcendence of ourselves and a merging so to speak through common consciousness with others. And this is what we have dedicated our lives to bringing about amongst us. And, yes, it is not so far away, all we have to do is approach things in the right spirit and with the right degree of determination and openness.