

## **Walking Into the Forest**

*by Vessantara*

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It is the 21st of August 1974, and I am on retreat at a Sufi farm in Surrey, south-west of London. I am not a Sufi; this place has been rented by the FWBO for our two-week summer retreat. As I am doing a social work course, I have only been able to attend the second week.

Today, myself and five others are to receive our private ordination into the Western Buddhist Order, and I am pretty nervous about it. Nor am I the only one suffering butterflies in the stomach. The Sufi farm is a community with children, and has an outdoor playground. At one point, I and Ray – another of the six to be ordained – can be found in the playground, rocking each other up and down on the seesaw, its rhythmic motion calming our nerves.

The private ordinations take place in the evening, in the context of a Metta Bhavana meditation, during which everyone directs loving kindness to the world, and especially to those being ordained. Before we begin, Bhante Sangharakshita, in robes but with quite long black hair, warns us that as he has six private ordinations to perform, the meditation will be a protracted one. He says that some people may need to move, get up and go out to stretch their legs. But, he adds, some may not. ‘Order members sit like rocks.’ I’m not sure if this is said with a touch of humour or not. Nobody laughs, so as someone about to join the Order, I resolve not to let the side down, but to turn my knees to granite for the evening.

The Metta Bhavana starts, and after about ten minutes Bhante gets up from the leader’s place, and mindfully navigates his way through the seated figures facing the shrine. (We don’t sit in rows; that practice will not be introduced until the early ’80s.) He leaves the room, making for a small wooden hut in the grounds where the ceremonies are to take place. A few minutes later, the person designated to be ordained first walks out to join him.

At this point I realise that, even if my knees are granite, the rest of me is jelly. There are three reasons why I am in a state of high nervous tension.

The first is that I am about to take a momentous spiritual step. However, unlike the rest of those being ordained, I am not about to go for Refuge to the Three Jewels formally for the first time. Some while previously, feeling myself to be a Buddhist and wanting to make that fact as real for myself as possible, I have gone for Refuge formally, witnessed by Akong Rinpoche, at Samye Ling Tibetan Centre in Scotland. But I made it clear to the Rinpoche that I was not necessarily taking him as my teacher. Strong as my feeling for Tibetan Buddhism was, I even then suspected that I would prosper spiritually more easily and quickly with the guidance of a teacher from my own culture. So I subsequently

asked for ordination into the Western Buddhist Order. Thus the momentous step I am taking is intended not just to acknowledge once again that I am a Buddhist, but also to have that commitment to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha witnessed by Bhante, the teacher under whose guidance I have decided to follow the Path, and thereby to take half a step into the Order that he has founded.

I say ‘half a step’ because the ordination consists of two parts. First comes the private ordination, which, as its name suggests, happens between just you and your Preceptor. During it you recite the Refuges and Precepts, receive the mantra of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, and are told the new name that you will use as an Order member. Then, usually within a few days, follows the public ordination, in which you are formally acknowledged by the Order as a whole as someone who is ‘effectively going for Refuge’. At that public ordination, you actually become an Order member at the point at which you receive a kesa – the strip of cloth that Order members wear. In future, the kesa will bear the symbol of three flaming jewels set on a red lotus and a white moon mat, but now, in 1974, it displays Dharmachakras – wheels of the Dharma – embroidered in gold.

The second reason why I am all nerves is that I have read everything I can lay my hands on about Buddhism, and some of it has rather overheated my ever-vivid imagination. In 1974, Buddhist books tend, with a few honourable exceptions, to divide into two categories: the dry as dust, and the exotic and starry-eyed. Much preferring the latter, I have absorbed all kinds of tales of strange, miraculous and terrible happenings at the time of initiation. One story that has stuck in my mind concerns a Tibetan disciple who, on the way to the place of initiation, finds the path to his guru’s door blocked by a massive wrathful deity.

Earlier in the day, the six of us have been given a short briefing about the ordination ceremony, and what happens in it. Nobody mentioned anything about encountering wrathful deities. But then they wouldn’t, would they? So I am sitting with copious adrenaline coursing even through the granite of my knees. I am prepared to do or die, if need be, in order to receive the ordination. Who knows what might await me in the darkness on the short walk to that hut?

The third reason why I am largely gelatinous is that I do not know when my time will come. Usually, if there are several people to be ordained privately, they are told beforehand who will be first, second, and so on. Often the order is decided by what is rather grandly called ‘natural seniority’, i.e. age. But on this occasion, for some reason, Bhante has decided to follow another procedure. We only know who will be ordained first. Bhante will tell that person who to tap on the shoulder as the signal that he or she is next. I have great respect for Bhante’s acumen, and doubtless he has his reasons for doing things in this way, but I don’t think that this is one of his better ideas (and it is not a procedure that he will ever use again, to the best of my knowledge.) For the effect, on me at least, is terrible. I have never been present when private ordinations have taken place before (I have only been around the FWBO for twenty months), but I have heard that private ordinations tend to last about twenty to twenty-five minutes. So I sneak

surreptitious glances at my watch. After about twenty minutes have passed, I become worked up to fever pitch, in case I am second.

The door opens; the first person has returned. Out of the corner of my eye I see someone else receive the shoulder tap. I relax somewhat, and try to direct metta to the person going out to be ordained. Twenty minutes later I am at fever pitch again.

As things turn out, I am not third; nor am I fourth. I watch people returning from the hut closely for signs that they have been wrestling apparitions, but they all look quite calm. Kay Turpie, who has just become Mallika, is always very presentable. When she returns there is still not a hair out of place. She simply looks radiant. But although she obviously hasn't been doing any wraith-wrestling, that doesn't mean that I may not have to.... Finally, after over two hours of meditation, with my granite knees somehow afire, and having sat through three nervous crescendos and letdowns, there are just myself and a young girl called Debbie Lobstein left. I am bound to be before her! Fifteen minutes pass, twenty, twenty-five. The door opens. Right, here goes. Think of the Buddha. Think of Bhante. Remember what it says in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*: whatever appears between here and that hut, know it to be your own thought-forms. Here they come...

And then the fourth person veers off course and gives Debbie the call. She goes off into the night to become Khema. After that I am emotionally spent. Twenty minutes later, when Debbie gives me the inevitable summons, I disentwine my legs, which take a little time to become usable again. Then I stroll quietly out of the shrine room, stop to use the toilet (after more than two hours, I need to), and then walk calmly into the night. There is the hut, not very far away. I can see the welcoming glow of the candles on the shrine, by which Bhante is waiting. There is nothing blocking my path.

I go into the hut to find Bhante seated holding a flower. He passes it to me and I offer it to the shrine, followed by a candle and a stick of incense. In this way I make the three offerings to the Buddha in the same way that countless people have done, for over two thousand years. I feel as if symbolically there is only one flower, one candle and one incense stick, each of which has been handed down through the centuries, from teacher to disciple. Then I sit down, and Bhante leads me through the ceremony. When it is over, I emerge from the hut deeply happy, chanting the Padmasambhava mantra to myself, alternating it with trying out the word 'Vessantara'. When Bhante told me that all six names had come out in Pali, I was initially disappointed, as I had rather set my heart on being called something like 'Vajravajravajra'. But when he explained that my name meant 'universe within', and that there was a Vessantara Jataka, in which Prince Vessantara makes a great vow to give anything that anyone asks him for, I felt more than happy. Indeed Bhante had turned my name into a personal precept. 'You don't need to look outside yourself for anything', he had said. 'Everything that is really important, even Enlightenment itself, is all within you.' It is a precept that I have explored, and tried to live by, ever since.

So I return to the shrine room, emotionally spent but deeply fulfilled. A few minutes later Bhante takes his place once more, and we perform a sevenfold puja. So undeveloped are

things at this stage of the Order's growth that after the puja we do not even have silence overnight. When the six of us emerge from the shrine room we are all congratulated by the other retreatants, who also demand to be told our new names. Only Ray, my playmate from earlier in the day, refuses to say. We have to wait until the following day to discover that he has become Sona.

That night, asleep in another, larger wooden hut in the grounds, I have a dream. In it I am playing whist, a card game for four players. At a certain point, I win a trick – a set of cards – and start to pick it up. As I do so, I realise that I have done something against the rules of the game: I have played a trump when I could have followed suit. I am just about to explain my mistake to the other players, and return the cards to them, when something extraordinary happens. Among the cards is the ace of clubs. As I watch, it becomes three-dimensional, and transforms into a gilded chalice, with a lid. It is decorated in an ornate, rather gothic style. I pick it up and lift the lid. Inside is a complex pattern of interlocking pieces of wood, a 'Chinese puzzle'. Marked on the wooden pieces of the puzzle are keys and crowns.

I am overwhelmed by the beauty of this apparition from the cards, and carefully examine every aspect of it. But then I remember that I have won it under false pretences. I put it down, explain what has happened, apologise, and make to give it back. But the others brush aside my attempt to return the chalice. 'Oh no,' they chorus, 'we want you to have it. You keep it!'

On waking, I understand certain facets of the dream at once. I had been trying to 'play my cards right' in order to become ordained. But in the ceremony I had been put in touch with something far more beautiful and valuable than I could ever have imagined. Indeed, the chalice reminds me of the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend. The act of looking inside the chalice perhaps relates to the 'universe within' of my name. Inside, there is the Chinese puzzle: even coming to terms with my own psychological complexity, let alone achieving Enlightenment, will be a difficult problem to solve. But there is much to be gained from solving it, for keys and crowns are traditional symbols of spiritual and worldly power.

Winning the chalice under false pretences doubtless relates to feelings of unworthiness – that I do not deserve to come upon something so beautiful. But Bhante and those around me have given it to me freely, and even though aware of my failings are delighted that I should receive the gift of ordination.

The next morning, the 22nd of August, the public ordination takes place. (The date is significant for me, for it becomes my 'Order birthday', the anniversary of my entering the Order.) This ordination is a much more relaxed occasion than the private one. At one point I come forward in my turn to receive a few drops of purifying water on the crown of my head.

I still strongly identify with some aspects of hippie culture, and I am wearing a pale blue

Indian shirt, on which Judi, my girlfriend, has embroidered patterns. My hair is a great red aura. There is much laughter as Bhante wades through this Afro jungle in an attempt to locate the crown of my head, in order to pour a few drops on it from the vase of initiation. The previous night's tensions have all disappeared. Even though my anxieties were completely unnecessary, with hindsight laughable, still I was prepared to go it alone, to do whatever it might take in order to go for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Symbolically my short walk to that candlelit wooden hut had been a going-forth from the mundane. I was in the same position as someone at the time of the Buddha who left his town or village and walked alone into the forest in search of Enlightenment.

At the public ordination I symbolically discover that I am not alone. In a forest clearing, as it were, I come upon a gathering of people, all committed to the Buddhist Path, and am invited to join them. There are lots of us. These six ordinations bring the Order's total strength up to forty-four. Soon we shall have fifty Order members!

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It is the 20th of October 2001. I am sitting in the whitewashed shrine room of Guhyaloka, our men's ordination centre in the Spanish mountains. I am dressed in the blue robe that people on these ordination courses wear. It is another evening of private ordinations, and Surata, our leader, has just started the Metta Bhavana. This time I have no anxiety, just a quiet happiness in the face of the unknown.

After a few minutes' meditation, I look along the row towards Kovida. We get up, offer incense to the shrine, and go out together. We put on our sandals. He, as someone who has done this before, smiles at me and says, 'Good luck'. We head off in different directions, our paths marked by fir cones of different colours, some on the ground and others hung from trees and bushes. I follow my golden path until I come to the ordination stupa. The bar across the gateway has been put to one side. I circumambulate the stupa, visualising it as made of light. The vajra has been removed from the door. I look in, and see... well, I don't think I should tell you in detail. Let's just say that there is a Buddhist shrine, and two sitting places.

I sit down, my mind full of the trivial and the profound. Part of me slightly nervously checks that everything is in order. I count the flowers, candles and sticks of incense to ensure that there are five of each. I am ordaining Justin, Simon, and Jim, and after that Arthapriya will ordain Dean and Robert. I am worrying unnecessarily. Everything has been meticulously prepared. Beneath this surface activity, my mind is focusing on the Buddha and the whole line of teachers down to Bhante, a golden chain stretching over two thousand, five hundred years.

I pick up the flower that the first man will offer, and sit waiting. Outwardly I am a middle-aged man, hair no longer red, sitting in a concrete structure, dressed in a blue kimono-like outfit, holding a flower. Deep within myself I am a Dharma practitioner, a

follower of the Enlightened One, sitting in a shrine made of light, dressed in the apparel of one who has gone forth in search of truth and freedom, and I hold in my hand the One Flower that has been faithfully handed down from teacher to disciple since ancient times, and was entrusted to me by my teacher twenty seven years earlier.

It begins to rain. As the minutes pass, part of my attention turns outwards, searching for the sound of footsteps among the raindrops. The everyday part of me hopes that Justin won't get too wet. The deeper part of me is wishing him well, that he will have the courage to find his way alone through the forest, and not be faced by any wild animals, or wrathful deities...

At last I hear footsteps, and very shortly I am handing Justin a flower, and watching him embark upon a new stage in his spiritual life.

As I sit in the candlelight leading each of my three friends one by one through the ceremony, I have various paradoxical feelings. The ceremony is very short and simple, and in its essence it is simply a repetition of what these three men have done hundreds of times before: chanting the Salutation to the Buddha, and the threefold repetition of the Refuges.

Yet in this simple repetition of a familiar formula I experience extraordinary beauty. The ceremony has a purity about it. It is the quintessential spiritual act, undiluted by anything extraneous. I am privileged to be present at a unique moment in these three human beings' lives. Symbolically at least, in that simple repetition they are turning their lives in a new direction, like some winged creature, wandering lost, that at last senses the direction of the Sun, and can steer for home. From a Buddhist perspective, I am witnessing a commitment that, if followed through in the way that each one is pledging himself to do, will have effects over many lifetimes.

There is also something paradoxical in the sense of sameness and uniqueness that I experience in the three ceremonies. Each one follows the same form, centring on the Refuges and the Ten Precepts, virtually identical with my own ordination and that of over a thousand others who have joined the Western Buddhist Order / Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha. And yet each person is unique, and the 'spiritual mood' of each ceremony is very different. Even the conditions of their short walks to the stupa reflect this: one in rain; another during a sunset of visionary intensity – an unfolding pageant featuring purple clouds drifting up the valley; and the third in darkness. I do not read any omens into this, but rather I see it as a small demonstration of the fact that each person commits himself to the Buddhist Path under unique conditions, both internal and external. Because of this uniqueness, I feel I could repeat this ceremony indefinitely, witnessing more and more people taking this step, and never grow tired of it.

After the ordinations are over, and the third set of footsteps has receded into the distance, I sit and guard the shrine until the friendly, bearded face of Arthapriya appears. For him too it is the first time of acting as a Private Preceptor. Having just become a seasoned veteran of three ceremonies, I wish him good luck. Not that he will need it, and not that it

is a question of luck – one feels deep karmic forces at work in such a situation – but, like Kovida, I want to say something.

I return to the shrine room, where the meditation has already been in progress for over two hours (and it was preceded by a talk from Surata, and a long puja with offerings). I stop to bow in front of Dean, as his signal to follow the fir cones to the waiting Arthapriya, and then make my way back to my place. Some refreshments have been served. I sit sipping green tea, and trying to munch a piece of flapjack quietly, so as not to disturb those meditating around me. I gaze at the painting of the Refuge Tree that dominates the shrine, with the Buddha at its heart, surrounded by Buddhist teachers from down the centuries. My mind is still, and I am deeply contented.

After twenty-seven years I have come full circle. I have passed on the Flower to three fine people who, if all goes well, in years to come may pass it on to others in their turn. I have been privileged to witness something wonderful. Yet it was nothing that I saw or heard. The expressions of the faces, the chanted words, were only outward manifestations of something that goes far beyond them. I cannot put it into words. I could not do so in 1974, and I cannot do so now. Nobody can. I would like to be able to explain, to share it with you. But to discover what I am talking about, you have to decide to turn away from mundane concerns, to devote your life to truth, love and freedom, and to walk off alone into the forest.

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