

Bad Press and its Net Effect by Vishvapani

'Bad karma' read the headline on the front of The Guardian's tabloid supplement in late October 1997. It was emblazoned across a picture of Sangharakshita, founder of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, who the paper described as: 'the man at the centre of the sex and suicide scandal that is haunting Britain's Buddhists'. Inside was a substantial article by the paper's religious correspondent, Madelaine Bunting, based on a few case studies presenting bad experiences within the fwbo which, it suggested, were cause for concern about this Buddhist movement.

Bunting first contacted the fwbo about six weeks before the article appeared, with an apparently innocent request to interview Sangharakshita which he declined, because he is now in semi-retirement. In 1996 Bunting had written an article on the New Kadampa Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which many observers considered partisan and sensationalised. It soon became clear that Bunting's interest in the fwbo came from her contacts with its critics in the British Buddhist community, and that the article she had in mind would itself be critical of Sangharakshita, his teachings and the fwbo. Nevertheless the fwbo communications office worked closely with Bunting as she researched her piece and maintained friendly relations with her.

Bunting's first case study was a former member of the wbo who described a sexual involvement with Sangharakshita in the 1970s and alleged that it had included an element of coercion. The second case was 'Tim', a pseudonym for a man who had been practising within the fwbo for 10 years. He was first involved at the Croydon Buddhist Centre (for a full account of these difficulties see *'Learning the Harsh Way at the Croydon Buddhist Centre'*) and he described having been induced into homosexual activity with the Centre's chairman. Finally there was Matthew, who had also worked at the cbc in the 1980s and who killed himself three years after leaving. There were extensive quotations from Matthew's diaries, which complained of the oppressive atmosphere at the Centre, the implication being that this had contributed to his suicide.

Individuals from the fwbo were quoted as arguing that the cbc's difficulties had arisen for specific reasons and that safeguards had been instituted against a recurrence. Bunting suggested, however, that certain teachings by Sangharakshita could be used to legitimise abuse and coercion. She gave a brief account of his teachings on the family (which she thinks the fwbo considers 'addictive and neurotic'); the respective spiritual aptitude of men and women (characterised, according to her, by 'a misogynistic biological determinism'); and sex, implying that homosexuality was considered somehow superior to heterosexuality.

Finally three individuals, whom Bunting described as 'senior British Buddhists' were quoted criticising the fwbo. Buddhist commentator Stephen Batchelor suggested that the fwbo is a 'potentially closed system'; Ken Jones, a long-term activist in the engaged Buddhist movement, went further, and called it 'deviant'. While the third figure, who wished to remain anonymous, described it as a 'westernised semi-intellectual pot-pourri

of Buddhism’.

Bunting comments that these stories are hard to match up with virtues she also sees in the fwbo: the ‘sincere idealism’ of its members; its charitable work; its innovative approach to business; its influence as a voice for Buddhism in British society at large, and its ‘respectability’. Publication of the article has caused much interest and some consternation, both inside and outside the fwbo. The Guardian received many letters both defending and criticising the fwbo – though only one was printed on either side of the debate. The bbc World Service Religious Department, which has worked closely with the fwbo in the past, broadcast a debate around the article between Madelaine Bunting, Subhuti (a senior Order member) and academic commentator, Elizabeth Harris.

Shortly after publication, the fwbo communications office submitted a complaint to The Guardian’s editor arguing that the article contained many inaccuracies. It suggested that Bunting had presented a distorted view of the fwbo’s teachings, ignoring the alternative interpretations of those teachings that had been given to her by people from the fwbo in interviews and in writing, which contradicted hers. It also said that the article contained a highly selective presentation of the views of other Buddhists – many of whom it suggested have sympathy with the fwbo’s work. It argued that Bunting had used the figures she had quoted to question the legitimacy of the fwbo as a Buddhist tradition, but that she had not substantiated these points, nor given the fwbo an opportunity to respond. In addition, the editorial presentation tended to sensationalise the material. For instance a headline referred to the fwbo as a ‘cult’ while Bunting herself had told the communications office that she did not regard it as such.

Bunting acknowledged there was a case for putting another side of the story, and agreed to let someone from the fwbo write a response. This was a virtually unprecedented concession – so much so that when The Guardian’s Readers’ Editor heard of it, he was at pains to emphasise that the paper was not formally admitting fault and that this should not establish a precedent for future complaints. The paper’s syndication service continued to carry the story, and this led to its appearance in several other countries.

Taking up the paper’s offer, Vishvapani wrote a column attempting to place the fwbo in a historical context. It was an evolving tradition, he suggested, that was learning through experience how to practice Buddhism in the West. While admitting that the fwbo had experienced difficulties, he suggested it was a sincere, careful and largely successful attempt to create a western Buddhist tradition. The following week Elizabeth Harris wrote another column. She expressed appreciation of the fwbo’s work and agreed that difficulties were inevitable in any religious community. The fwbo functions independently of Asian traditions, and Harris expressed concern that it should not ‘stand alone’ in isolation from other Buddhists.

Meanwhile a debate about issues raised by the article sprang up on Internet discussion groups devoted to Buddhist subjects. A wide-ranging and sometimes acrimonious debate ensued that included people from the fwbo as well as critics. Vishvapani, one of the protagonists in this debate from the fwbo commented: ‘These days if a controversy blows

up it always gets taken up on the Internet and that is true of Buddhist controversies. On the positive side it means that there is a public forum where issues can be aired – you can put your side of the story. But, being entirely unedited and uncensored, such debates can also contain things that are untrue or unethical and, in any case, they are inevitably inconclusive.’

Finally INFORM, a government-funded academic department within the London School of Economics organised a forum including Madelaine Bunting and Guhyapati of the fwbo communications office as part of a seminar on relations between New Religious Movements and the media. Bunting described the difficulties in her position as a religious correspondent – the intense pressure to meet deadlines and write a good story; and the problem of evaluating conflicting information about very different religious traditions. She reiterated her concerns about certain aspects of the fwbo, and said she stood by what she had written, but also expressed her respect for those Order members she had met.

Guhyapati outlined the fwbo’s experience of working with Bunting on the story, emphasising that it had tried to avoid being defensive in the face of hostile media attention, and to maintain good relations with Bunting herself. He described the range of responses within the Order – from offence, to indifference, to acknowledgment that the article contained some valid criticisms. Academics from inform commented that they were impressed by the reasonable tone of the debate and expressed a hope that other religious movements could learn from the fwbo’s avoidance of a ‘siege mentality’.

Within the fwbo itself the article sparked considerable reflection and debate particularly within Shabda, the Order’s confidential journal, and a wide-ranging consideration of what could be learnt from this media criticism. One lesson is that the legacy of difficulties between British Buddhist groups cannot be ignored, and that it has generated an atmosphere of some misunderstanding and mistrust. Similarly there has also been discussion between the fwbo and other British Buddhists about the accusations. Stephen Batchelor stressed that while he stood by his comments, he had also said much that was favourable but that was not quoted. Likewise he said his criticism of the fwbo as a ‘potentially totalitarian system’ could apply to Buddhist organisations in general.

What effect will this episode have on the fwbo’s long-term development? Subhuti, a leading member of the Order, was quoted in the article as saying he had been waiting for a journalist to stumble on the story of the cbc. He has since commented: ‘Naturally it is unpleasant to experience such publicity, which was unjust in so many ways. However, we must make something of it. It is an opportunity to examine our movement and to clarify misunderstandings and disagreements with those other Buddhists who are critical of us. Above all, it is a spiritual test. Are we able to respond positively, with clarity and friendliness? If we are, what has happened can only strengthen us individually and as a movement.’