



how the fwbo presents itself
by vishvapani

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I. introduction

The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) is one of the largest Buddhist movements in Britain. To be more precise it is one of the three largest movements catering principally to Westerners, the other two being Soka Gakkai and the New Kadampa Tradition each of which gives its membership as 'several thousand'. Taking the numbers affiliated and the number of FWBO centres in the UK, the FWBO may fairly be said to account for between ten and fifteen percent of Britain's non-Asian Buddhist community. There is no doubt then that the FWBO is a significant aspect of Buddhism in Britain. However it is a disproportionately significant force in the dissemination of Buddhism, and in shaping perceptions of Buddhism in British society. The FWBO has always placed a strong emphasis on teaching and communicating its message and around 20,000 people a year learn meditation at an FWBO Centre or outreach activity in the UK. Many thousands more have contact with one of the FWBO's ancillary activities, such as hatha yoga classes or arts events, not to mention going into a shop run as one of the FWBO's 'right livelihood' businesses, or supporting its social work projects in India, through the Karuna Trust fundraising charity.

In addition, the FWBO's emphasis on external communications is evident in the three magazines it publishes, in Windhorse Publications the FWBO has its own publishing house, and there are two video production companies creating FWBO-related material. The work of the FWBO Communications Office, which is the UK's only dedicated Buddhist press office, has ensured that it has a fairly high profile in the media, and that members of the Western Buddhist Order are to be heard broadcasting on UK radio. I must confess my own role in this communicative zeal as I myself edit Dharma Life, the leading FWBO magazine, and am the Director of the FWBO Communications Office.

How the FWBO presents itself is therefore an important aspect of how Buddhism is presented, re-presented and perceived in Britain. But before it is possible to discuss FWBO this, it is necessary to ask what the FWBO is.

II. the fwbo's stance

The FWBO conceives itself as a middle way within the transmission of Buddhism to the West between the approaches of transplantation and westernisation. By 'transplantation' I mean the approach of the many representatives of traditional Asian schools in the West, whose concern tends to be the transmission of 'authentic' traditions of Buddhism. The FWBO's approach is based on a belief that it is impossible to transplant developed Buddhist traditions from an Asian society into the West without creating many problems and anomalies. One will inevitably be importing a large amount of Asian culture which has no spiritual significance for westerners. Therefore, as Stephen Batchelor argues, 'adaptation is not so much an option as a matter of degree' for all Buddhists in the West. The question posed by Sangharakshita's writings is, on what basis does this adaptation take place, so that it makes Buddhism relevant to the new context, but does not compromise the integrity of the tradition?

At the same time the FWBO sees itself as distinct from the secularised and ‘westernised’ approach which understands Buddhism in the light of particular traditions of western thought, such as psychotherapy or socialism, drawing on it as a source of techniques and instruction. Those Buddhist movements that might be characterised in this way tend to be lay-oriented and to place a relatively low emphasis on affiliation. They also tend to emphasise meditation rather than engagement with the full range of the Buddhist teachings and practice. Sometimes it has been assumed that the FWBO’s ‘Western Buddhism’ is an adaptation of this sort. However the FWBO is a very different body than, say, the Insight Meditation Society. It emphasises affiliation and tends to require a relatively high level of commitment; it teaches a systematic path that draws on a range of Buddhist practices; and it presents these in the context of the ultimate aims of Buddhism. It also stresses the roots of its teachings in the Buddhist tradition, and indeed its non-sectarian engagement with all aspects of that tradition. From the FWBO’s perspective the danger of the secularising approach is that it may reduce the Buddhadharmā to a set of ideas and techniques that ignore its soteriological dimension and assimilate it to a materialist worldview that is fundamentally at odds with that of Buddhism.

The premise underlying FWBO’s approach is that the central insights and teachings of the Buddhadharmā are extra-historical and universal, while the forms Buddhism has taken are historically specific and contingent. Sangharakshita expresses this point in his key teaching of the centrality of going for Refuge to the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha). ‘Going for Refuge is the essential Buddhist act,’ he says. For Sangharakshita this traditional formula, which is common to all Buddhist schools, encapsulates the spirit and fundamental orientation of Buddhism and the individual’s relation to it. Being a Buddhist therefore means reorienting one’s body speech and mind towards the values, qualities and understanding that are represented in the Three Jewels and to following the Buddha’s path to Enlightenment. Because individuals do this to differing degrees it follows that there are different levels of going for Refuge. Practising the Dharma means learning to go for Refuge more fully. This same spirit is expressed in the core teachings that are common to all schools which emphasise that Buddhism is a path to Enlightenment, rather than a set of customs or injunctions regarding lifestyle.

The FWBO seeks to adhere to these central teachings and this timeless core, but to apply them pragmatically within the cultural context of its practitioners. This makes the FWBO’s praxis varied and flexible in some respects and remarkably coherent in others. At the heart of the FWBO is the Western Buddhist Order, a community of nearly 800 men and women whose commitment is described as ‘effective going for Refuge to the Three Jewels’. Their ordination is described as being ‘neither lay nor monastic’, and is based on the principle that ‘going for Refuge is primary, and lifestyle is secondary’. Some Order members lead a fully monastic life, and practice chastity; others have families. But the commitment each has made to Dharma practice is the same, and it is for each individual to find their own way to live that out in practice. The FWBO is in one sense no more than the product of the joint efforts of those 800 people, and the flexible, adaptive forms they have developed in the FWBO are expressions of their responses to the circumstances in which they found themselves. This is the great virtue of the contingency of lifestyle in the FWBO, its middle way between monk and lay. As Andrew

Rawlinson says, 'Sangharakshita is equally critical of orthodox "cultural" monasticism and innovative "rational" non-monasticism. The FWBO is apart from – one might almost say, above – these extremes.'

From the point of view of its practitioners the FWBO is an expression of their own relation to the core of the Buddhadharma itself. 'How the FWBO presents itself' is therefore a secondary concern. Primarily its adherents are concerned with the practice and communication of Buddhism as they understand it, and with their personal Dharma practice. As Sangharakshita puts it, the work of the FWBO to spread its version of the Dharma represents 'the altruistic dimension of going for Refuge'.

It would be wrong to suggest that the FWBO has an overarching presentational policy, as particular expression of what it stands for reflect the individual approaches of particular Order members. Moreover the FWBO's distinction between the underlying principles of the Dharma and their cultural expression implies that these expressions should vary according to local cultures. The FWBO is now active in twenty countries, including such diverse cultural contexts as the Indian Ambedkarite movement and the South American bourgeoisie, and how it presents itself varies accordingly. Having said that FWBO centres broadly follow a common syllabus; they are based on the same core set of teachings; they attempt to co-ordinate their teaching work; and they fund collective bodies such as the FWBO Communications Office. In this paper I hope to suggest something of the variety of presentations of the FWBO, and yet also to suggest some of the principles and common concerns which structure these presentations.

As its dialectical relationship to other Buddhist movements suggests, the FWBO is built upon an awareness of the cultural and historical forces that mediate the expression of individuals' going for Refuge. Indeed it may be said that the over-arching project of the FWBO is the creation of a tradition of Buddhism that is genuinely at home in the modern world and Western culture. While Buddhists in the West may hope that an intrinsically Western Buddhism will arise naturally in the course of centuries, the FWBO sees it as something to be systematically cultivated. Sangharakshita has sought to outline the basis on which a Buddhist tradition may arise that is as much Western as Zen is Japanese, or the Nyingmapas are Tibetan.

The FWBO's role as an organisation is to make these principles manifest in institutions, ideas, lived experience and forms of practice, and these manifestations of Dharma practice are also presentations of the FWBO. Given its relationship with other forms of Buddhism, both Eastern and Western, it is natural that the FWBO seeks to avoid portraying Buddhism as an Asian tradition that is, however venerable and profound, culturally alien to the West. And it does not wish to present Buddhism as a system of philosophy, ethics, psychology or relaxation which may be easily assimilated to otherwise unchanged western lifestyles. It wishes Buddhism to be seen as a universal spiritual tradition, that applies equally to all ages, and transcends culture. It wishes to suggest that Buddhism has great relevance to the modern world and that its wisdom, and radicalism can be re-expressed within that world and make a profound contribution to it.



III. the fwbo's representations

The movement that has grown up over the last 30 years as a result of this project is complex and multi-faceted, and the question of 'how the FWBO presents itself' is accordingly complex. I want to consider a few examples of FWBO activity to suggest this complexity a mediation class at the London Buddhist Centre; pieces of work by three visual artists; and Dharma Life magazine.

1. the london buddhist centre

The principal way people encounter the FWBO and learn about its approach to Buddhism is through the activities of its urban public centres. Of these the London Buddhist Centre (LBC) is the largest and most fully developed. Several thousand people pass through its doors every year, and it has become a well-know landmark in East London.

The main teaching work of the LBC consists of meditation classes. Each week it holds one main introductory class on Wednesday evening, plus one or more six week courses, and a class every lunchtime. These teach two samatha meditation practices, anapanasati, or the mindfulness of breathing, and mettabhavana, or the development of loving-kindness which are typically taught in a single session. There are also follow-up sessions or courses that address topics such as how to work with the difficulties encountered in meditation, and the relationship between ethics and meditation. On average about fifty or sixty people attend the evening class, and those who decide to pursue what is taught there continue to attend for a maximum of nine months before moving on to a 'Friends Class', on Tuesday evenings.

The first point to note is the emphasis on meditation as the medium through which Buddhism and the FWBO are introduced. The implication is that the FWBO's teaching is related to personal experience, and especially to the experience of personal change. Thus Buddhism is not presented initially as an intellectual discipline, a movement for social change, or a devotional discipline in these introductory activities, although the FWBO contains all of these dimensions. Devotional practices are not taught at introductory level, and chanting and mantras come later too. When concepts from the Buddhist tradition are introduced in talks their practical import, and experiential significance is usually stressed, as opposed to their philosophical interest.

Secondly neither the anapanasati nor the mettabhavana requires any prior knowledge of, or assent to specifically Buddhist teachings. In this sense they differ from Theravadin Vipassana practices or Tibetan tantric practices, and this makes the FWBO's meditation teaching less overtly 'Buddhist'. However, there is no attempt to disguise the Buddhist origin and orientation of the meditation practices that are taught at the LBC. Classes are led by Order members who wear a kesa (a brocade indicating their membership of the Order), use their Pali or Sanskrit names, and take place in a shrine-room that is dominated by a large Amitabha rupa, albeit one with a Western face.

Similarly no expectations are placed on individuals that they will affiliate to the FWBO, or even that they have an interest in Buddhism. Peggy Morgan has contrasted the FWBO's approach in this respect to that of other groups in being both out-going and non-coercive. 'I have found something of a middle way in the styles referred to above in the activities of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, who do actively initiate contacts and discussion, and seek to inform people, but who have never been accused of putting any undue pressure on people.' However activities are carefully structured to allow a clear path of progressive involvement in the LBC, which also involves engagement in more specifically Buddhist practices such as puja (worship).

It might be said that at the LBC's introductory classes meditation is explicit while Buddhism is implicit. However the environment in which the class takes place gives an additional message. Around 25 people live in the building above the Centre in residential communities. Next door, and open before classes, is a co-operatively run vegetarian restaurant, and in the surrounding streets are several Buddhist-run shops, a café, the London Buddhist Arts Centre, and Bodywise Natural Health Centre. Indeed the LBC is the focus for a community of several hundred Buddhists. The shops, communities and so on are outward manifestations of the decisions of the people involved to live in an overtly Buddhist environment. These activities have been described as the seeds of a 'New Society', which offers an alternative to conventional social forms and is informed by and supportive of Buddhist practice. Their proximity suggests to the people attending meditation classes that the practice they are learning has social and economic implications over and above the purely personal benefits that meditation brings.

Many people attending the LBC's meditation classes have no interest in the FWBO, and perhaps none in Buddhism – they just want to explore some of the benefits of meditation. The Centre's teaching meets this interest on its own level, yet introduces other aspects of its teaching and practice which people are free to pursue if they want to. Buddhism is communicated as something that is not culturally alien, has a universal relevance, is accessible to people's lives and experience, and yet which implies a radical alternative. This tried and tested approach underlies all of the FWBO's teaching work.

2. the dynamics of cultural encounter – envisaging a western buddha

The second aspect of the FWBO's representations I want to explore is the visual arts, and this in turn suggests a further aspect of the FWBO project: it aspires to create a Western Buddhist culture, making links between the western artistic heritage and Buddhist practice. I will look at work by three Order members, Chintamani, Aloka and Dhammarati, and for the sake of simplicity I have chosen three treatments of Buddha or Bodhisattva images in three different media: sculpture, painting and graphic design. Each of these men is a senior member of the Western Buddhist Order, Chintamani was ordained in 1973 while Aloka and Dhammarati were ordained in 1976). Each of them produces distinctive work that attempts to articulate a visual language for Western Buddhism.