

A Letter to Norman Fischer

January 28th 2003

Dear Norman, I'm writing to ask your guidance: or perhaps your response. That's to say I have some questions I'd like to ask, even though I don't really expect you to answer them. But I'd still like to ask these questions and I'd like to ask you. I hope you don't mind. This letter has grown rather long by now, but it still seems very short. We met in Spring 2001, when I interviewed you for Dharma Life, if you recall, and I also ran a piece you write about Richard Baker in Dharma Life a few years ago. Well, these questions aren't about being Jewish and Buddhist; they are closer to the things you wrote in regard to Baker-roshi. I'm writing in confidence, for reasons you'll understand, and I'm sure you will respect that.

The topic is Sangharakshita and sex. You will know some of it, but probably not the whole story. It's a story because that's a way to think about it. It goes like this or, at least, this is one of the ways it goes.

A solitary young man called Dennis was growing up in London before the war. He was very intelligent and he read everything he could lay his hands on in the way of literature, philosophy and religion. In this way he discovered Buddhism. Mystical experiences followed, and with the help of these he was able to make sense of the things he read about Buddhism. He was interested in what was in the middle of all these strange texts, or perhaps somewhere above or behind them: the core of Buddhism that he had contacted in his mystical insights.

He was posted East in the War and after it finished he decided he wanted to stay on and become a monk. He had many adventures and eventually he took Theravadin ordination. Now he was called Sangharakkhita, and soon that changed, following the Indian custom, to Sangharakshita. As this was India, rather than joining a monastery he found himself on his own again in Kalimpong studying, practising, and teaching the Dharma. He was a prodigy who wrote books, edited magazines and travelled India. He helped the Dalits who were converting to Buddhism and they saw him as a kind of saviour. He spoke to tens of thousands wherever he went. And he had Tibetan teachers who thought very highly of him.

Sangharakshita was very disciplined, but there was another side to him as well. He was a poet, and in his poetry he wrote about his inner life, his feelings and his sense of beauty. He loved nature; he loved meditation; he loved the Dharma, and he wrote about all of these. He even wrote about falling in love with some of the young men he taught at his vihara. He wrote about the hopelessness of this love and how he tried to transform it. He did transform it; but the love was still there and so was the hopelessness.

Eventually Sangharakshita was invited to return to England. He hadn't thought of leaving India, but there were real problems among the English Buddhists. They thought he could help, his friends thought he should go, and in any case there were political difficulties with staying in India. So he went back, and he felt at home. He listened to music, visited

historical sights and, perhaps for the first time ever, he made real friends. One friend in particular became a soul-mate. Terry. He'd had mystical experiences of his own, and he lived on a fascinating kind of edge. And he turned to Sangharakshita for help.

Sangharakshita had to make some tough decisions about the problems among the English Buddhists, and he made enemies. He had sided against the orthodox Theravadins, and they wouldn't forget it. The breach got wider when they discovered what his approach to the Dharma really meant. For the first time, when he taught there were people who could understand his allusions and got excited by the way he presented Buddhism. He grew bolder and more experimental, as he searched for ways to connect the teachings he knew so well with the audience. It was the sixties and something exciting was bubbling up. He decided to stay.

While he and Terry were making a farewell trip to India Sangharakshita got a letter that said he was being removed from the post he had in England. It was a kind of committee-room coup, a very British sort of thing. They didn't say why, but it was clear there had been gossip according to which there was something sexual between him and Terry. Add to that the unhappiness of orthodox Theravadins at his approach to the Dharma and it was clear to them. He had to go.

Sangharakshita's friends were incensed, and they weren't going to put up with it, but in the end there was nothing they could do. So when he got back to England Sangharakshita started his own activities. He was on his own. He taught the Dharma as he understood it for himself: the essential Dharma, not just one tradition. He found his own way to put things, he experimented, he explored. He read and read and thought and thought. He asked himself, what is the Dharma at bottom? Take away all the forms, and what do you have? What is left if you are prepared to challenge everything while forgetting nothing?

The poet in him burst out again, and his lectures were full of images and inspiration. He was on fire. His activities were starting to become a movement. And then Terry, who he had helped and encouraged and chastely loved; whose suffering was beyond help; whose soul had been in the twilight his whole life, stepped into the dark. He stepped under a tube train, and Sangharakshita's heart was broken all over again.

Sangharakshita realised that he no longer wanted to be celibate. When he had loved chastely he was disbelieved, so why be chaste? He wanted human contact. He believed in it, and friendship became a kind of a creed for him. By now it was the late-sixties and he was spending his time with young people, radicals and hippies. Some of them were beautiful boys, and he took them to bed with him. It made him happy, and he felt even more inspired; it helped his Dharma teaching.

What did his robes mean now? He wasn't acting like a monk, but he was sure he wasn't a lay-person. He hadn't stepped down from anything: all his Buddhist practice had led him to this point, and he felt he was still moving forward. So he continued to wear the robe at ceremonies, but he also grew his hair. Others disapproved, he knew, but he was on his own now. He had thrown away the rule-book, and he let his instincts guide him. What

else could guide him in the strange land he now travelled in order to know the Dharma directly. Only thus could he speak directly from it and find fresh ways to express its truths. But all the same it was hard, and he sometimes felt that in his own life he was carrying the pain and difficulty of bringing together the Dharma and the West, with all their contradictions.

His classes were still popular. A centre opened, and then another. More and more people were meditating, practising together and, a little later, living and working together. They were inspired by his vision of a new society based on Buddhist practice and ideals. They glowed with the happiness of it all, and this made him happy, too. And there were more beautiful young men. Some of them fascinated him. Sometimes in the intimacy of the bedroom they would talk and talk, and he was no longer in the role of a teacher. They were just two human beings with all the veils stripped away, and then he felt he was really teaching.

The years passed. The movement grew, so that now there were centres around the world. There were communities and businesses, and there were people in his Order who were making the whole thing their own. It was very, very hard, because people were so complicated, but he kept on reminding them what it was all based on. Awareness, sharing, honesty, love, clarity. Because he wanted to nurture the movement, and because he had been hurt so much by the Buddhist world, and because he knew that others would disapprove of him, he kept out other teachers. Some people questioned that, and it certainly made a big difference.

In fact there were lots of things people didn't like, and lots of problems, but overall it worked. And that was incredible. That meant the Dharma was taking root in western soil in a way that was adapted to it; in a way that could last. A kind of miracle was happening. It wasn't the miracle of meditation, or art, or some of the other things people had anticipated. The name of the miracle was community, or sangha, or maybe just friendship. Men and women lived and worked separately, which helped a lot, though maybe it also made things a little artificial. But something grew between people that was bigger than any of them, and also bigger than Sangharakshita.

Many of his followers felt they owed him everything that gave their lives meaning. They knew they wouldn't have responded to Buddhism if it had come wrapped up in Asian clothes. They thought they were building western Buddhism, and they thought they were the only ones really doing so. They were making history, maybe creating a new world. And even though the hubris in that view meant that they were establishing the seeds of suffering, for the time being it didn't matter.

Sangharakshita had been so kind to them personally and he was so wise that they felt a deep love and deep gratitude to him. But there was always a shadow. For one thing to many outsiders Sangharakshita was a pariah for his sex life and for his unorthodoxy. For another there were times when the intensity of Sangharakshita's vision was taken up by his followers as an intolerant zeal, especially by young men with a fire of their own. Sometimes people acted badly and, without really seeing what they were doing, they used

bullying or manipulation to keep going the businesses and institutions they had started in order to realise his vision. Sometimes that got really bad, and sometimes they copied Sangharakshita's sex life, which made it worse still. He didn't want to step in. He wanted to let people sort difficulties out for themselves so that they would learn. But he eventually did step in, and that was very hard as well.

He didn't want to talk about his sex life. For one thing he was a very private person. For another he knew that people would never understand the mix of needs it had served. That was especially true in India, where homosexuality was illegal and taboo. So he kept quiet, and eventually returned to celibacy.

But others did want to talk about it. One of his former lovers filled with hatred, and he started to campaign against Sangharakshita and his movement. He caused a stir, but the man was ineffective. None of the other lovers said anything, even the ones who felt hurt. They didn't want to harm Sangharakshita or the movement they had given their lives to and which they loved.

Some years later a more serious campaign was started by people who kept anonymous. A journalist picked it up, and there it was at last: Sangharakshita's picture on a newspaper with 'bad karma' written across it. The article made all sorts of accusations, and his sex life was among them.

Sangharakshita's followers' responses varied. Some felt that what they had received from him was so important that anything else didn't matter. But others were stirred up. Even though they had really known all along what had happened, now their mixed feelings were disturbed. A few of these left, and quite a number withdrew from active involvement. Most people came to an accommodation with Sangharakshita's past that mixed the good with the bad. Why shouldn't he have sex? It was 'experimentation', it was 'exploration'. It was just a period in a long life. In any case most members of the movement didn't know him personally and judged it by their local situations and the people they did know. They stopped thinking about it. Some members of the Order found themselves having to respond to the accusations publicly, to make the movement's case. Many of the accusations were unfair, and they said so; and they stressed the way the movement was in the present. They also talked about some of the problems from the past, but they also wanted to talk about Sangharakshita's sex life and their instincts told them that they should. But they couldn't, not in public. The Indians weren't ready and, in any case, what could they say that wouldn't involve criticising their teacher? And how could they do that when they were responding in the name of his movement? What could they say when he said nothing? But at the same time, as people had matured and assumed responsibility for helping others in the Sangha, they had had to think through the ethics of sex between teachers and students for themselves. They wouldn't countenance the way their teacher acted if anyone else was doing it now, but they couldn't criticise him. They couldn't say anything at all. Wasn't that strange?

Discussion flared up in the Order's confidential magazine, and Sangharakshita found this painful. It was ingratitude, he said. At worst it felt like betrayal. The debate died down

and a new rule came in saying that the journal wasn't the place for personal criticism of anyone.

Sangharakshita was old now. He handed on the last of his responsibilities to a trusted group of disciples. He'd been gradually withdrawing for many years, so it all went smoothly, and he was looking forward to a retirement free of institutional concerns. He had an excellent successor called Subhuti, who had a very good group of people around him. But then Sangharakshita's eyesight suddenly deteriorated: macular degeneration. Now he couldn't read or write, or travel, or even go for a walk on his own.

Sangharakshita's successors were making the movement their own. In some places it was going very well; in others it seemed to be seizing up. People wondered if it could take them the whole way along the Dharma path. Some had picked up wounds when things had got difficult. Some had thrown themselves into the movement when they were young, and now, in middle age, wondered if they had made a mistake. What had they missed by not having children? What would happen to them in old age?

The new leaders wanted to clear away rules and structures that had built up over the years. They wanted to get back to first principles, including openness, honesty and transparency. They didn't want to be part of a power structure as that just created tensions. Things were changing, and a mood of revival started to go through the Order. Many, many people were being ordained and there were now over a thousand Order members. But in the back of all this openness was a subject that still couldn't be talked about.

Sangharakshita's health got worse. He changed in a few months from vigorous late middle-age being an old man. In his contracted world difficulties affected him badly. He stopped listening to the news. Then it appeared that one of his closest disciples had been taking money on expenses he wasn't entitled to. This man had once been a lover, and had had many lovers of his own. That upset him. Sangharakshita worried about his legacy, and there wasn't enough money to build the dharma shrine he had dreamed of, a library that would contain the thousands of books he had bought and read and loved over the years, as well as his personal effects. He couldn't sleep. Who knows why? Perhaps it was stress, perhaps old age, perhaps just one of those things. He entered a twilight state of his own. He just wanted peace.

But the Order was stirring. The newspaper revelations had created a crisis, but it wasn't their crisis. It came from outside, and all the reactions were affected by that. Now people wanted to talk, and one of Sangharakshita's former lovers wrote a long article about his experience. He had many friends in the Order, and everyone knew he was a good person. At one time he had felt very angry, and he hadn't written while he felt like that. But now he felt that the Order had avoided an uncomfortable truth, and that he couldn't live in such a way.

The detail made it worse, as some people had always known it would. It wasn't just a short period of experimentation, it went on for twenty years. It wasn't just a few lovers, it

was dozens of people. And was it really an aspect of friendship, as Sangharakshita had said? Some of the men were very young, even under the legal age of consent, which had been 21, and they hadn't always felt free to say no. And when he moved on some of them had felt dumped. Perhaps that was actually the worst thing, because it suggested that it hadn't been about friendship at all in the first place.

It wasn't a crisis like 1983 at Zen Centre, because Sangharakshita was no longer in charge and people had had many years to get used to the issues. But then again it did concern the founder, not his successor. And it wasn't like 1987 in Shambhala, because the protagonist was still alive. That made it really hard. Maybe it wasn't a crisis at all, but it was certainly a crux. As for the new leaders, what should they do? Should they publish the article, knowing that it might affect Sangharakshita's health? If they did, perhaps he would feel betrayed by them. Most likely he would. Perhaps, people said, it would kill him. How could they possibly do that to the man who had given them so much? Sangharakshita wanted peace. Didn't they at least owe him that much?

But if they didn't publish it, what would that say about the new openness? What would it say to the people who loved the Order but felt they couldn't wholly be themselves within it; or that they were implicated in its compromises and were wondering whether to stay? And what about the people like the author who had their stories to tell? What would it mean not to be able to write about this topic in the Order journal when it was being discussed everywhere else?

Some of these leaders, especially the ones who had had to deal with public responses, were tired of having to evade or skirt round the topic. They were honest people and they felt compromised. And though they were loyal they weren't blind: they shared the criticisms. In the end, they knew, the shadow over the Order would only disappear when nothing was off limits for public discussion and people in leading positions weren't automatically loyal. But could they do that? Could they do that while he was still alive? And did that mean that, as well as loving him, they were also waiting for him to die before they could be properly honest? And what did that mean?

And all these people the critics, the doubters, the writers, the leaders, Sangharakshita and everyone else had shared their lives for maybe two or three decades. They had wound round each other, and lived with each other, and sometimes slept with each other. If these people weren't their lives, then what were their lives?

Sangharakshita's life had always seemed to take place somewhere above or beyond their own in a misty land sign-posted 'Dharma'. But now they weren't so sure that this country existed. He had started this sangha, and yet he had never fully been a member of it. That must have been hard for him, and now it was hard for everyone. The Order had a life of its own now, that valued honesty and openness so strongly that it couldn't not act from them and remain itself.

That was wonderful and it was, in a way, tragic. They saw that, for all their idealism, their practice had to start from reality, and they saw that, in the end, 'reality' means

people. They needed to include him now in their reality, but maybe that wasn't possible; maybe it was too late.

And everyone had a different opinion about all of this, and it seemed that whatever they did would be painful. And what should we do?

With metta,

Vishvapani

4 Feb 2003

Dear Vishvapani,

Yes of course I remember you and our interview in the Dining Room at Green Gulch. Thanks for your email. I read it over several times. A sad - but beautiful - story, one that has echoes for me of stories from Zen Center and other places. You are right that the story was not entirely unknown to me. It was more or less what I had already known - what I suppose most people in the Buddhist world already knew. But the way you told it with so much understanding and compassion made it more clear to me than it had been. Of course I can't know what you should do or even have any useful point of view on the situation. I know how specific and particular these things go. There are no general rules. Still, I had many thoughts reading your story and I will be happy to share them with you for what they are worth.

To me the main message I hear in stories like this is the teaching of humility - we really don't ever know what we are doing, we are simply trying our best, we may be - probably are - overlooking something important. We must always keep that in mind and be modest and humble. Most of the great teachers who established Dharma in the West (Sangharakshita certainly among them) were not modest. The times were like that- we were all caught up in some grandiose vision of a new world, a new Buddhism, etc and thought we knew what we were doing, how it had been done wrong in the past. We were none of us humble enough. We got stuck on the brilliance of our own viewpoints and the success of our missions.

It seems as if the spiritual path presents us with some very tough alternatives when it comes to sexuality. Celibacy is possible- but very difficult. The chances of actually practicing it without becoming a narrow minded sourpuss are slim (though by no means nonexistent- some do it). Marriage or other long term relationships are good but have many disadvantages, having to do with divided commitments. The choice that Sangharakshita made seems the least tenable of all since no doubt in the end lovers will feel betrayed, make trouble etc. Seems as if what happened, with the lurid disclosures, should have been perfectly predictable. It seems as if spiritual teachers really cannot "date," having serial relationships, especially with Dharma students. Maybe we have learned this. It seems (in hindsight of course) obvious that the shit, as they say around here, would hit the fan sooner or later.

Still, various sorts of blindness or arrogance don't obviate wonderful accomplishments. The Western Buddhist Order is a tremendous achievement and will remain so. Bhante has a lot to be proud of and so do you all. How could anyone imagine that such a complicated thing - and done in such a short time!- could happen without blindness and pain. This just seems to be how things advance. We end up becoming the universe's victims, paying somehow for our good fortune. It seems to be part of the plan. All the pain just makes us deeper and wiser.

One thing seems clear to me: it does no good at all to try to keep a lid on things, to control who says what and how. That just doesn't work. It only encourages speculation and lowers the group in the eyes of the world. I think this did happen with the Order. I myself noticed how, suddenly, people in the Order I had known seemed no longer to be reaching out to me. There seemed to be a retreating and a withdrawing. A sense of secrecy that was palpable. That was a bad thing I think. But how to maintain a sense of intimacy within a sangha without that turning sour, into self protection and secrecy, exclusivity. "The outsiders will never understand." This is seductive because the intimacy really is wonderful and wholesome, and it seems that to be more open would destroy it. But the very intimacy fosters the secrecy and distortion that can eventually set in.

When there's trouble in the sangha, and you are open about it, things can get pretty chaotic. All sorts of people feel encouraged to speak out, and they tend to pile on, and many distortions and exaggerations fly out into the open. It's hard to take. But the alternative, to try to control this, or to prevent it, is really impossible. You just make it worse. So you have to endure it the best you can, trusting that in the end what's really true will settle out and the craziness and distortion will eventually be seen for what it is.

As for Bhante himself, it sounds very sad and difficult. Of course whatever flap occurs will hurt him deeply. And he may reject everyone, including those leaders who allow others to express themselves fully and openly. He may feel betrayed by everyone. But it seems to me that if there is a group of elders who sees the situation truly, as you seem to, and appreciates him for who he is and has been and what he has done, and holds him close, expressing their love and appreciation for him, but also reflecting the whole of the situation to him, including the part of it that he may be blind to - then I think in the long run he will be all right, and this will be something he will grow from, even if he never entirely comes to understand it.

These are my thoughts. I have no idea whether they are of any use or whether they strike you as having anything whatsoever to do with your situation. They may well just be my own projection; I may only be talking about our situation, what we went through, what we did. But I offer them in friendship and in the hope that they may at least make you feel as though someone cares and offers support. I feel honored that you asked my opinion. Please give Bhante my best, tell him I have fond memories of the few times we were together, and that I use his books constantly. Also thank Kulananda for the recent book about money that he sent me. I often think of him - tell him I say hello.

Yours, Norman

(Norman's reply is published with his permission)

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