

The Order's Relation to Sangharakshita

by Vishvapani

This article is a transcript of a talk to members of the Western Buddhist Order. For that reason I refer to Sangharakshita as 'Bhante', the term by which he is affectionately known is known within the FWBO.

Introduction

On WBO Day 1990 Bhante delivered a paper entitled 'My Relation to the Order'. In this paper he remarks:

'The first thing that occurred to me when I started preparing this paper is that besides the question of my relation to the Order there was the question of the Order's relation to me... My relation to the Order and the Order's relation to me are two sides of a single coin... In sharing with you some of my current thinking concerning our mutual relation I shall, however, be speaking mainly in terms of my relation to the Order, leaving it to you to work out for yourselves what this implies in terms of your relation to me.' (p.16)

I wasn't ordained in 1990, but 10 years on, in August 2000, I find myself speaking to a Men's National Order weekend on the subject of 'Our Relation to Bhante'. So, rather belatedly, I shall be trying to work out some of these implications. I shall also be adding some thoughts of my own, as it seems to me that Bhante cannot fully be expected to see himself from our perspective any more than we can see ourselves from his. That could be a motto for this talk. In an important sense our relation with Bhante is something we have to create, each of us for him or herself, even if we never exchange two words with Bhante personally.

The points I want to make about our relationship with Bhante grow from reflections on his comments in My Relation to the Order, but do not follow the structure of that book. First, to put things in context, I want to discuss how our relation to him is changing. Then I want to consider from our side the first point that Bhante makes about his relation with us – that it is important. Then I want to discuss some of the ways in which this relationship is inherently difficult at least in some respects and for some people. I want to talk about actual difficulties that have arisen in the light of the experience of western Buddhists in traditions other than the FWBO. And then I will discuss our own difficulties under the headings, Authority and Influence. Then I will conclude by suggesting how we can develop this relationship positively.

1. A Changing Relationship

Bhante does not say why he chose to deliver his paper at this time, but he does make a number of comments about the state of the Order at that time. In April 1990 there were 384 Order members, and the Order was 22 years old. It had therefore recently passed its 'majority', when it turned 21. A mark of this coming of age, of which Bhante makes a great deal, was his 'handing on' of the responsibility of conferring ordinations to Subhuti

and Suvajra, the first two Order members to become fully-fledged Public Preceptors, who made decisions regarding readiness for ordination and conducted ordinations themselves. Bhante was clearly delighted by this development, and also by the way in which Subhuti had undertaken his role in running the ordination process for men. At the time of Bhante's paper, Subhuti was in the throes of revising, not to say rejuvenating this ordination process. I was then involved in the ordination process as a mitra, and I remember the excitement of the time, when Subhuti applied the rhetoric of glasnost and perestroika to the Order as a whole. Through his work on the ordination process Subhuti waged a campaign to revitalise the Order as a whole by re-emphasising Bhante's basic teachings, especially the centrality of going for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

Ten years on the Order is 32 years old and it has changed considerably – I am sure the developments are familiar to us all. There are 870 Order members, and by the end of the year there will be around 900. The Order has changed in others ways too. The process of 'handing on' resulted in the appointment of more Public Preceptors (of whom there are currently eight in addition to Bhante) who have come to comprise the College of Public Preceptors. 1993 saw the establishment of the Preceptors College Council, initially including seven, and now ten other senior Order members. The acquisition of Madhyamaloka in late 1994 created a base for the College and the PCC. This process will reach a culmination and, it seems, a conclusion in just three weeks time when Bhante hands on the Headship of the Order on his 75th birthday.

So the first point that can be made about our relation to Bhante is that is evolving. In retrospect is clear that the appointment of Public Preceptors in the late 1980s marked not only the start of Bhante's handing on of his major responsibilities, but also the start of a major change in the Order's relation to him. The effectiveness with which Subhuti took on the ordination process meant that he was, in effect, taking responsibility for the spiritual needs of the Order as a whole, and in that sense picking up a responsibility that only Bhante had hitherto been able to exercise.

The consequences have been far reaching. Almost all of the 500 Order members who have joined been ordained since 1990 have been ordained by people other than Bhante. For these people, who are now the majority of the Order and include myself, Bhante is not our preceptor, but our preceptor's preceptor. So although this talk is entitled The Order's Relation to Bhante, even the formal aspects of this relationship differ between us. So far as personal connections are concerned, we have moved from a time in the early days when Bhante was the movement, for many people, to a time many Order members have no direct connection with him. He seems a distant figure for many people, seen only occasionally and usually at a distance. It is unusual that members of my generation of Order members have the chance to spend a great deal of time with Bhante, and to make a personal connection with him. My own experience since moving to Madhyamaloka in March last year shows that this is still possible, but it is rare, and I am very grateful for it.

With the emergence of this third generation of Order members, new kinds of relationships have emerged, and the Order has therefore become more complex. We are still in the process of working out how the relation of the Preceptors College and Council

to the Order as a whole – and probably it will never be possible to define it. They cannot replace Bhante's relation to the Order, but for those whom they have ordained, the College has, quite naturally, taken on one very important aspect of his role. To accommodate this new configuration we have had to re-emphasise ways of thinking of the Order's hierarchies other than simply relating to a teacher. That is one reason why there has been more and more emphasis on the cascade of kalyana mitrata, in which we look to Order members who are more experienced than ourselves for friendship, guidance and inspiration.

Thinking about how this new configuration affects my own relation to Bhante, I have been starting to wonder if, precisely because Bhante isn't my preceptor, my connection with him can be somehow freer and more relaxed than that of Order members whose connection goes back further. He is a kind of spiritual grandfather to me and to others in my generation of Order members. In considering the benefits of this relationship, I am not just thinking of the saying, 'grandparents and children have a common enemy: parents.' My generation in the Order are not exactly Bhante's charges, but he takes a benign, yet distant interest in our development. And perhaps because our personal engagement with him is less intense, we can appreciate him more simply.

So Bhante's role as a preceptor is changing, and his role as Head of the Order is changing, but there still remains his role as our teacher. But we may not have paused to reflect that this relationship, too, is changing. Although Bhante's teaching continues to be central to the FWBO, often we encounter it in mediated form through the talks and books of Bhante's disciples. The mitra study course still revolves around Bhante's lectures expounding aspects of the Dharma. But the ordination retreats mostly focus on study of talks by Subhuti and others. These talks relate Bhante's teachings to the issues that arise for people asking for ordination, and they fill in gaps in Bhante's written output, covering areas about which Bhante has spoken, but never written. Is it not extraordinary that the importance of kalyana mitrata is one of Bhante's principal teachings, and yet he has hardly written on the subject at all? Instead we have Subhuti's excellent lectures on the subject.

Subhuti, indeed, has emerged as Bhante's principal expositor. Sometimes, as in *Women, Men and Angels*, he has been an apologist for Bhante, seeking to explain his views to critics (though not everyone seems to understand that this is what he is doing). At other times, particularly in his most important book, *Sangharakshita: a New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Subhuti has presented Bhante's disparate teachings as a coherent and systematic account of the spiritual life, the Buddhist path, and the practice of the FWBO. This book, rather than anything Bhante has himself written, forms the core of the Order study course.

In a way it is curious that this has been necessary. Bhante's role was itself to apply the Dharma to the West, making it comprehensible and relevant. In *'My Relation to the Order'* he describes his role as that of an 'elucidator', one who 'throws light upon' the Dharma 'in certain fundamental respects' (p.22). He also describes himself as a translator, and invokes the figure of St Jerome as an image of the archetypal translator.

He quotes his essay Saint Jerome Revisited in which he described his response to St Jerome in the 1960s when he was founding the FWBO:

‘I was living in the desert. I had left the “Rome” of collective, official, even establishment Buddhism, and was seeking to return to the origins of Buddhism in the actual life and experience of the Buddha and his immediate disciples. Not only that, I was trying to teach Buddhism in the West, which meant I was trying to communicate the Dharma in terms of western rather than eastern culture. I was thus a translator with all that implies in terms of trying to fathom the uttermost depths of what one is trying to translate, so that one may translate it faithfully, i.e. bring its meaning to the surface, or from darkness into the light.’

Bhante translates the Dharma into the language of the West, yet as time passes it is becoming clearer that Bhante’s teaching itself needs translation. That is to say firstly that the Dharma needs further elucidation in terms of Bhante’s teaching, secondly that his teaching needs elucidating itself, if its relevance is to be clear to us. And thirdly that Bhante’s teaching will sometimes need to be corrected where it seems that it has failed to elucidate the Dharma adequately.

But none of this means that the elucidations of a Subhuti are themselves definitive. It is open, in principal at least, to any of Bhante’s students (or, indeed, to anyone else who cares to do so) to trawl through his writing as Subhuti has done, and present their own synopsis of his thought. This is not to say that all such expositions will be equally accurate, interesting, or helpful – and some may be downright pernicious. But none of them can be final. The point is that to be a disciple is not just to learn, but also to apply, expound, explain and interpret. In due course Subhuti’s elucidations will require elucidation themselves, and so it will continue. As Bhante comments in My Relation to the Order, ‘This is the way a tradition – a lineage – develops’. (p. 22)

It is right that our relationship with Bhante should change – this is a sign that the Order is alive, but the changes we have seen and are continuing to see are also a preparation for Bhante’s death, which, as Wallace Stevens says, ‘is the final form of change.’ We should feel grateful that Bhante has himself given so much thought to the impact of his death on the Order, and prepared the way for it by handing on his responsibilities. But we won’t know the effect of Bhante’s death until he has died, and we probably won’t fully understand his influence as a living presence until then either. Buddhism corrects Stevens sense of death’s finality, and should instruct us that there can be no definitive understanding of our teachers role in life or death. We shall continue to review and remake it in our own lives, in our own deaths.

2. An Important Relationship

Even starting to think of the Order without Bhante brings one to the next point, which is the first point that Bhante makes in My Relation to the Order. He says that the Order is important to him, and who among us will not agree with the corollary from our side, that Bhante is important to Order members. However there is a difference. When Bhante says

that the Order is important to him he is not doing much more than stating a simple fact. He describes how he takes an interest in the lives of Order members, reads all their letters, goes through Shabda from cover to cover each month as soon as it is published, and so on. In short, he cares. We probably do not put an equal amount of interest, care, attention and energy into our relation to Bhante, though some of us might.

Nevertheless Bhante is important to all Order members, whether we think about that importance or not. Even if Bhante is not our preceptor, even if we have never spoken to him, or perhaps never seen him, and even if the relationship is changing, Bhante is still our teacher. Tibetans speak of one teacher being one's root guru. This person may not be the first to teach us meditation, but they have a special place in our hearts, because they have enabled us to see the Dharma. In some sense similar to this, Bhante is a teacher to us all. His elucidation has made the Dharma accessible to us, so everything we have gained from practising the Dharma is traceable back to – or perhaps I should say through – him. That is why, as Bhante explained in his talk on Wesak last year, Buddhist tradition stresses that we should feel gratitude towards our teachers. Gratitude is a natural and healthy response if we value what we have received.

Furthermore, in our ordination ceremonies each of us recites a set of 'ordination vows', the first line of which is 'with loyalty to my teachers ... I accept this ordination.' I must confess that I have no recollection whatsoever of taking doing this at my own ordination, but I am confident enough in Subhuti to assume that he did not forget, and that these lines were lost in a haze of euphoria. Be that as it may, now that I know this is what I vowed I am happy to restate this affirmation. Not only have I vowed loyalty to my teachers, but I feel it, simply because they are my teachers, and because of everything I have gained from them.

In other words we need teachers, mentors, guides on the path. The Buddha is our ultimate teacher, and our kalyana mitras are our immediate mentors. But Bhante has a crucial place between these distant and proximate objects I won't dwell now on why we need people to fulfil these roles – let me take that as read. More pertinent is that we consider our own responsibilities in this regard – consider, that is, what it is to be a disciple. We don't have a word for this in the FWBO. We don't even have a word for the junior party in a kalyana mitra relationship. But in Sanskrit there is the word '*shaiksha*', one who offers him or herself for training – specifically the three trainings of sila, samadhi, and prajna. Then there is the word '*shishya*', a contemplator, one who observes or 'takes in' his teacher's character and qualities. And finally there is the word '*bhajana*', meaning a receptacle or pot into which the Dharma may be poured. According to a Tibetan analogy some pots are upturned, unreceptive to the Dharma. Some are holed and whatever is poured in drains away, just as the Dharma pours from our unretentive minds when we forget what we have been taught. And some pots are filled with poisonous herbs which contaminate the water just as our own negative states of mind may taint what we have been taught. So to the extent that we wish to commit ourselves to the Dharma our responsibility is to become a pure vessel, a true disciple.

Not only is Bhante our teacher, he is the founder of our Order, and the chief elucidator of

what Buddhism means for us. In my dealings with other Buddhists, I am often struck that aspects of Bhante's role which Order members usually take for granted, can seem extraordinary or even outrageous to outsiders. It is no commonplace thing to found a Buddhist Order, as opposed to establishing an existing one in a new context. Buddhist history does not readily offer precedents for consciously establishing a new Order outside the categories of monks and lay people. For our critics this is a knock-down argument that demonstrates that the Western Buddhist order lacks legitimacy, and on its own terms this argument cannot be countered. I won't rehearse the arguments concerning legitimacy of our Order and movement now – I feel I have spent quite enough time doing so over the last three years. Today I want to rejoice in the benefits of Bhante's approach.

The great creative endeavour that is the FWBO was only possible because of Bhante's fresh start. Following his example we, too, are neither monks nor lay people. We can live lives wholeheartedly devoted to the Dharma without either the encumbrance of the vinaya, or the subordinate status of lay-people. We have a clear sense of what is central to the Buddhist path – going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. And this affords the freedom to question and explore the Buddhist tradition confident that in questioning peripheral aspects of the Dharma we will not be undermining its basis in our lives. We can dispense with the medieval nonsense and feudal hierarchies of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, and still derive inspiration from its spiritual teachings. Perhaps we tend to take this for granted, but Bhante consciously made a decisive break with the past, at the risk of incurring the accusation that he was making it all up. We may be sure that Bhante had at least some sense how much poison he might have to swallow as a result.

All this is due to the thought and practice of Bhante, without which I very much doubt I would be a Buddhist at all. In addition in my time living with Bhante for a little more than a year I have personally benefited from Bhante's example, and I have had a glimpse of some of what my own preceptor and his peers have themselves gained from Bhante over so many more years. Who can quantify all of this? Who can say how much we have all gained in so many ways?

3. Issues and Difficulties

This brings me to a second observation that arises from comparing the position in 1990 with that in 2000. Not only is our relation to Bhante changing, it also contains difficulties. I shall have a fair bit to say on this topic, though I am well aware that the things I shall be discussing are not issues for everyone. Some people are complex, and some are simple. Some people are faith followers, happy to walk the path Bhante has cleared; others are doctrine followers, for whom asking questions is a quality of their being. Not everyone experiences difficulties in having a teacher, but from what I have seen over the years I suspect that at some point in their Order lives, most people do.

As Bhante says in *My Relation to the Order*, the two years before the paper was delivered was a period of some turbulence in the Order, if not exactly turmoil. In 1988 Stephen Barnham, the ex-Padmaraja, resigned as Chairman of the Croydon Buddhist Centre, which was then probably the second largest public FWBO centre, and left the Order amid

acrimony and soul-searching. And also in 1988 Mark Dunlop, the ex-Vajrakumara, was dropped from the Order register after he had commenced a campaign against Bhante and the FWBO. He had then gone on to contact the press and to publish potentially damaging material from Shabda.

As in 1990, in 2000 we are emerging (at least I hope we are emerging) from a period of turbulence. In India the movement has experienced not only turbulence but turmoil provoked, in part, by the bad publicity that appeared in the West, and this brought to a head various personal, cultural and ideological tensions within TBMSG. So far as the West is concerned I think it is hard to say how we have been affected by recent difficulties. In part this is because it is too soon to say, but I think it is also significant that whereas the problems of the late 1980s, like our recent problems in India, were internal, the attacks in the West came from without, and our responses to them were secondary phenomena.

None the less the recent spate of criticisms has had an effect on some of us individually. Some people have had many questions and doubts about Bhante, some of which were prompted by the public criticisms, while others were reinforced. These doubts have created a wedge which has eventually led to their drifting further and further from close engagement with the Order, and sometimes from practising the Dharma. Each case needs to be understood separately, and in some cases issues around Bhante provided a hook or justification, or even a rationalisation for other forces. But what is most sad to me is where issues in relation to Bhante have come to comprise a barrier between those people and the Dharma, and undermining their spiritual lives.

I have thought a good deal about these issues because I have found myself in the position of having to respond to the criticisms of Bhante. For one thing I needed to understand the criticisms in order to know how to respond, but as a matter of integrity, I also needed to be confident in my own mind that I was not acting merely as an apologist, or even a 'spin doctor'. I always saw my role in the FWBO Communications Office as spreading the Dharma through the mass media, not as being Buddhism's answer to Alistair Campbell.

Leaving aside for now what others think of us, I have come to think that there will always be some degree of difficulty in our relation to Bhante. Beneath the particular criticisms I think there lie deeper tensions which can only be worked with, never resolved to the satisfaction of all. The first area in which these issues are found is that of authority. The second is the area of ethics; and the third issue relates to what one could call 'the psychology of discipleship, the issue of 'influence'.

The Teacher Student Relationship in Western Buddhism

Before looking at these issues I want to put them in a wider context. They arise from the fact that Bhante is our teacher, and this is a problem-prone role. A relationship with a spiritual teacher is not a one for which much else in our culture has helped us prepare. It is not like that between a parishioner and a priest or a synagogue member and a rabbi. It is not – at one end of the spectrum of relationships with which we might compare it – like

a Catholic's relationship to the Pope; and it is not, at the other end, like a client's relationship with a therapist.

Furthermore, many of the models of what has been termed 'the teacher-student relationship' that obtain in the East are problematic when applied to the West. Accounts of the history of Buddhism in the West, and particularly in America over the last 30 years routinely focus on the scandals concerning teachers' 'abuse' of sex, money or power. The wave of 'revelations' concerning these and other Buddhist teachers in the 1980s led to widespread questioning of the deferential attitude with which roshis, lamas and so on had previously been regarded. Some argued that the forms of deference that had applied in Asia were inherently authoritarian or even 'patriarchal', and were of no value even in Asia. Others argued that they had become dangerous only in the West in the absence of a cultural context for the teacher's role. So a crisis of confidence ensued. In response some people have advocated non-hierarchical, democratised structures for Dharma organisation. There have been many casualties, people who have become disillusioned not only with teachers, but with Dharma organisations, and even with Buddhism.

Recently more thoughtful responses to the teacher-student issue have started to appear among western Buddhists, which have grown from experience of these difficulties, and seek to safeguard the autonomy of the student, while remaining open to the wisdom of the teacher. My own thoughts have been influenced by these responses. I would particularly mention Pema Chodron, and Rita Gross (it is interesting that these women are both students of Trungpa Rimpoche, whom they both consider to have been brilliant, yet flawed). I also recommend a new book entitled '*Relating to a Spiritual Teacher: Building a Healthy Relationship*', by Alex Berzin, who comments:

'Resolution of the problems and healing of the wounds are desperately needed so that sincere seekers may get on with their work of spiritual development. The teacher-student relationship as understood in the West needs re-examination and perhaps revision.'

Returning to our relation to Bhante and the criticisms that have been levelled at him, there are some similarities with these American experiences, and some differences. Bhante too has been accused of having abused his position in the area of sex, and of being unaccountable to any outside body. His name is, I am afraid, likely to be added to the list of controversial teachers, and Order members and others are likely to continue to find this difficult or disillusioning.

However, the principal difference between our relation with Bhante and others experiences with traditional style teachers is that the way in which he has seen his role is itself a revision of traditional understandings. In particular Bhante does not invoke what Dayamati, in '*Land of No Buddha*' calls 'the mythology of enlightenment' – the notion that a person occupying the role of a Zen roshi or a Tibetan lama is necessarily a realised spiritual being whose words carry the authority of that attainment. Bhante has been called many things over the years, including being called 'the Enlightened Englishman' by a television documentary. But he has never himself made any claims to a particular attainment himself, and he has certainly not claimed an authority deriving from this.

What, then, is Bhante's authority?

Bhante's Authority

This question can be put another way. If Bhante isn't a traditional-style guru, what is his role? *'My Relation to the Order'* was, perhaps, written as an attempt to answer that question, but I am not sure that it fully succeeds. The closest Bhante comes is saying that, in addition to being the founder and teacher of the Order, he sees himself simply as a friend. This definition is helpful in that it removes the relationship from a formal context and sees it as a matter of personal connections. But while this may answer some questions it raises others.

One problem with thinking of Bhante as a friend is that most Order members do not spend time with him personally. Even in the 1970s and 1980s when many Order members did spend time with Bhante and were ordained by him, they did not necessarily form a personal friendship. One reason is Bhante's personality. Although Bhante is very eloquent about many aspects of his life – such as his thinking, his reading, his observations, and his perceptions – he is quite reserved in talking about his feelings, his emotions and areas such as his sexuality. This seems odd to the generations who comprise the majority of Order members, reared as we are on the virtues of self-disclosure.

So if Bhante is our friend, it is quite an impersonal kind of friendship. In Mahayana traditions Kalyana Mitra refers to a teacher or even a Bodhisattva, who is a friend to us in the sense that he gives us the Dharma, not in the sense that we have an intimate personal relationship with him. Such a friend is defined as one who feels love, or maitri for us, and in relation to whom we feel apatraya or fear of blame if we act unethically, but not necessarily a personal intimacy. Berzin comments that in most Asian contexts it would be considered inappropriate, or even impertinent to expect tell teacher about one's personal life and its difficulties. So if we are to feel a connection with Bhante we need to learn this way of relating. As time passes and Bhante grows more distant this impersonality becomes increasingly predominant. At some point Bhante will die, and the impersonal relationship will be all that is left.

So Bhante's friendship is not of the usual sort. Perhaps what is useful about this way of designating the relationship is not what it tells us, but what it repudiates. Bhante's description of himself as a friend of the Order is a repudiation of an 'ecclesiastical' kind of authority. He does not expect us to defer to him because of his position, only that we should be respectful because of our relationship with him. Similarly he doesn't expect us to agree with everything he says. And yet, reading the discussion of *'Women, Men and Angels'* in *Shabda*, it seems that some Order members feel oppressed and pressurised (or perhaps they feel embarrassed) by the fact that Bhante holds particular views on the subject of gender. They treat him as an authority and consequently feel trapped.

In an interview with Bhante that will appear in the forthcoming issue of *'Dharma Life'*, which will be published to coincide with Bhante's birthday, Jamie Cresswell, an

interviewer from outside the FWBO, asked Bhante directly about the question of his authority in the Order. Bhante replied:

'I don't think of myself as possessing authority. As a result of my own studies and practices I have a certain understanding of the Dharma, and a certain ability to communicate that, and that's what I've been doing. If people find what I say to be reasonable and if, when they put it into practice, they find that it works, they may choose to accept it. That was the Buddha's approach, and on my own level I do the same.'

'My appeal is to people's reason and experience; ultimately that is the authority. If there are conflicting authorities, you can only decide between them in the light of your own reason and experience, especially spiritual experience.'

This last point is pertinent to followers of Tibetan Buddhism who have made commitments to lamas on opposite sides of a dispute concerning the authenticity of a Dharma protector or support rival candidates as the rebirths of a particular tulku. Who should they both believe if the words of each side are spiritually authoritative? Bhante explicitly disavows such authority, and in the *'Dharma Life'* interview he adds that he does not consider his words to be sacrosanct, quoting the Buddha's own approach as a model: 'Even the Buddha did not consider his word sacrosanct. He said 'Test my words as gold is tested in the fire.' How can one say more than that?'

This approach throws the responsibility back on the individual, each with his or her own reason and experience. How we do this – how we ascertain the truth – is another, much larger question, which touches on the perennial issues of the claims of reason as against those of faith, and the nature of knowledge in a religious context.

I won't attempt to engage with these issues here beyond pointing out the relevance and importance of two Buddhist teachings that offer a 'guide for the perplexed'. The first, the *'Kalama Sutta'*, is very well known. But it is easy to forget just how subversive is the Buddha's insistence that we should not accept a teaching on the basis of hearsay, lineage, scripture, expertise, or respect for one's teacher to most of the authority claims made by figures in the Buddhist traditions. However, as Bhante himself has frequently observed, we are also wrong to read the Sutta as a charter for sceptical rationalism, because it balances the authority of personal experience with that of the testimony of the wise. It indicates a middle path between unthinking acquiescence, and a scepticism that can never be satisfied. To place this in terms familiar from Bhante's own teaching, it indicates a middle path between conformity and individualism.

The *'Kalama Sutta'* is important and intriguing, but it is brief. More guidance on issues of authority is supplied by a second teaching: the four patisaranas, the matters relating to refuge, or else the 'Four Reliances'. These spell out what we can rely on and what we can't, stating that we should rely on the meaning of a teaching, not the letter, on sutras if clear meaning, not of interpretable meaning, and on jnana or wisdom, not on vijnana or intellectual discrimination. There is clearly much to reflect on in these distinctions, and a chapter of Bhante's *'The Inconceivable Emancipation'* discusses them.

Most relevant here is the first of these ‘Four Reliances’: that we should rely on the Dharma, and not on the pudgala, that is, not on any particular person. This is a Mahayana teaching, found for instance in the *‘Vimalakirti Nirdeśa’*, and given the Mahayana’s stress on the importance of having a teacher it would be wrong to understand this teaching as implying that we do not need teachers, or that we can understand the Dharma other than in the context of human beings. The point seems to be that the teacher is there to help the disciple get to the truth, and to develop qualities that will enable them to see the truth. The ideal relationship with a teacher, then, is one in which both parties join together in a mutual exploration of truth, in which the teacher’s greater experience naturally places them in the role of the one who has most to say.

I am reminded of some comments that Bhante made in a question and answer session at a colloquium for scholars in the Order which I organised at Madhyamaloka earlier this year. Saramati asked Bhante whether we are better regarding him as a ‘repository of answers’ or alternatively a ‘model for behaviour’. Bhante responded by saying that he thought there might be another alternative. He suggested that he might be seen as ‘a repository of perceptions’ and that we could learn from him as one learns from a novelist or a poet. I found this intriguing, and it reminded me of Bhante’s suggestion in *‘My Relation to the Order’* that if we want to get to know him we should read his poetry. More broadly it returns one to the question, how can we gain from another’s wisdom? Bhante’s suggestion implied that we must learn from his way of looking, by contemplating what he has seen. Perhaps this is one reason why he writes memoirs. It is as if he is interested in communicating a sensibility as much as expounding a philosophy. A perception isn’t definitive, as an argument may claim to be – you can’t gainsay someone else’s experience, and you can’t really argue with it. It may be that it differs from your own experience, but then that should be a starting point for communication, rather than the occasion of a rift.

Nowadays I have little trouble disagreeing with Bhante. As discussion roams freely across the Madhyamaloka dinner table from religion to literature to history and politics I find myself consistently engaged, challenged and stimulated, the spur of Bhante’s mind means that I have frequent glimpses of the shallowness of my understanding, the limits of my knowledge, and the casualness of my thinking. But sometimes Bhante’s views seem based on a partial knowledge, on premises I don’t accept, or opinions I don’t share. I try to bring humility to these disagreements, but I see no reason to shy away from them when they arise. When such discussion flows freely and creatively the issue is not who is right, but what is the truth.

A couple more points about disagreeing with Bhante. First, if Bhante’s place as our teacher is to mean anything then we cannot regard his views in the same way that we regard other people’s. Especially in relation to views such as Bhante’s on gender, which raise such strong feelings, we need to be prepared to set aside our reactions, trust that the motivation behind them is one of kindness and wisdom, and consider the possibility that we may be wrong. We need to accord due weight to the fact that these particular views have been expressed by someone to whom we look for guidance.

Secondly, we need to be clear whether the disagreement concerns an area that is so fundamental that our discipleship is undermined. I think this means asking whether it prevents us from going for Refuge to the Three Jewels in the context of the WBO, and in the light of Sangharakshita's exposition of the Dharma. So, for example, Bhante's views on gender seem to me peripheral to his teachings as a whole, and I can't see why disagreement with these should undermine more fundamental agreement.

Thirdly, the manner of our disagreement with our teacher is important. If we are to disagree we should do so politely, without making a rousing declaration of our intellectual autonomy, or an oedipal triumph. And I think that our disagreements should be regretful, and made with humility. And they must take place within the context of a broader assent, and spiritual harmony.

And finally, as Bhante stressed at the colloquium, when people disagree with him they need to take the risk of that disagreement. That is, they risk possibly falling into 'wrong views'. The responsibility is ours.

Bhante's Influence

So far as it goes this account of Bhante's authority seems fair and accurate. Yet there is something lacking from it. This way of putting things expresses our relation to Bhante from his perspective, suggesting the claims he does and does not make on us through his role as our teacher. But what does it feel like for us to be in this relationship? I want to move on now from considering the dynamics of our relationship with Bhante, which I have discussed in relation to the question of authority, to a more subjective dimension, and reflect a little on the psychology of discipleship. If Bhante is not an authority he is none the less an influence, and I want to ponder what it is to be influenced by another, or even to be 'under their influence'. I want to reflect a little on the phenomenon of 'the anxiety of influence', which is the title of a book by Harold Bloom who, some of you may have noticed, is a considerable influence on me.

Bloom is an English Professor at Yale, but he is rather more than a critic: he is a brooding meditator on poetry who tracks the spiritual life of the post-Renaissance West through his readings of its literature. '*The Anxiety of Influence*' is his key work, written in 1973, a 'poetic myth of the origins of poetry', that turns on the paradoxical relationship between a poet and his or her precursors. A poet in the romantic and post romantic traditions of modern poetry seeks fresh or direct utterance. Yet the imagination of every poet is wakened into song by the poetry others have written before him. A poet learns to write, think, imagine through his encounter with the imagination of an earlier writer. As Bloom says:

'the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of other selves. The poem is within him, yet he experiences the shame and splendour of being found by poems – great poems – outside him.' (p. 26)

In this view the precursor initiates the student into his own experience, but this is a problematic phenomenon for someone who wants to find their own voice. I have pondered Bloom's theories for a number of years, and wondered how much they can tell us about our own relations with our teachers. I think the parallel can easily be over-stretched because the 'strong poets' Bloom is discussing are exceptional individuals, each of them a great mind straining after originality. Such a mind needs to struggle against influences in order to find the creative space for fresh utterance, and Bloom charts the twisting path along which poets travel, rereading and misreading their predecessors in the interests of this search.

We aren't like that, or at least I am not like that. But on my own level I have often felt the need to 'think for myself.' Yet this approach has dangers. As Bhante commented at the colloquium 'very few people think for themselves', and he warned against 'a pseudo thinking for oneself, which is really just raising objections.' Indeed we may ask, what is it to think for oneself? On that colloquium I reflected that my concern to protect myself from influences had in the past taken the form of a scrupulous scepticism, a concern to rest only on what I knew to be true. Others there had a similar approach, indeed, academics guard closely their intellectual autonomy, and incline towards asking questions rather than settling on answers. Bhante responded to our questions by commenting that 'there is no limit to scepticism, and where one stops is a subjective matter.' As an alternative he invoked Keats' negative capability, the capacity to dwell in a state of 'not knowing', without any 'irritable searching after fact or reason'.

Erecting a barrier of doubt and questioning to ward off influence is, according to Bloom's categories, a 'weak misreading' of our precursor, that fails in its aim of protecting a creative space that is safe from the precursor's influence. But 'nothing is got for nothing' in the psychic economy, and we shall find that the space we have made – in this case the fortress of reason – is a lonely citadel, whose walls isolate it from the very creativity we originally craved. This is just one variety of defence against influence, and there are as many others as there are temperaments. But if our defence is simply a warding off it will make us weak because it is defensive and unconscious. Bloom insists that the history of individuality show that it is never achieved without the active presence of strong influences. To do so is to remain trapped within our limitations – that is why in his later book *The Western Canon* Bloom so bewails the deconstruction of the values of the western literary tradition on political rather than aesthetic grounds. In turning away from the giants of the past we avoid confronting their strength, but also lose the opportunity to find ourselves in relation to it.

We, too, can live in ways that minimise our contact with strong presences such as those of senior Order members, let alone Bhante. Are we afraid of Bhante? Afraid that our budding individualities will be overwhelmed by the force of his mind? The individualist's fear is above all that he will fall into conformity, but the paradox is that his own aversion to influence is itself a testament to its strength. It is exceptionally difficult to find a third way, between individualism and conformity, a strong response which is both a full engagement with our teachers, and yet is our own. Before I moved to Madhyamaloka this concerned me too. Would I subtly lose the initiative in my own mental life, or even

in my life as a whole. My anxiety concerned not just Bhante, but Subhuti, and in fact the weighty beings of Madhyamaloka as a whole, by whom I would be surrounded. Would there be space for me to flourish?

Having lived there for over a year I still think that the anxiety of influence is real and challenging. Among guests to the community dinner table a frequent problem is the influence of anxiety, which is rather different. The problems of influence concern the nature of one's life as a whole and the forces that shape it, and this is perhaps particularly an issue for those who have spent a long time around Bhante. But it is also clear that this very phenomenon of influence has helped produce the strong personalities, developed minds that I see around me.

Engaging with an influence is not easy and not without its cost. Three years I interviewed Robert Thurman on the subject of future of Tibetan Buddhism, and asked him about the role of teachers. Perhaps responding to the over-emphasis on teachers among American students of Tibetan Buddhism Thurman recounted a Tibetan saying that *'the best teacher is the one that lives three valleys away.'* And he added, *'You have to remember that in Tibet three valleys means, like, from here to Switzerland.'* Sometimes a space is needed so that we may find the strength in ourselves with which we can confront the strength of our precursor.

Bloom's great point is that we have to make our own sense of the precursor's perspective if we are to achieve a vision of our own. This is the way to strength. Throughout this article I have stressed the ways in which we need to make Bhante's teachings our own, and more broadly still, to make the Dharma our own. A true teacher does not want mere followers, so much as successors, and those who will surpass him. As Bloom says, *'Be me but not me'* is the paradox of the precursor's implicit charge.'(p.70)

A Buddhist teacher differs from a poetic mentor in that he wants to induct the disciple into a third thing, the Dharma, which he, too, aspires to realise. Etymologically 'influence' means 'in-flux' or inflow and perhaps the closest word that Buddhism has for influence is *adistana* or blessings, which also refers to the light that emanates from the yidam or the guru in a sadhana practice. Most simply, we shall find our own space most truly in relation to Bhante by making our own connections with the Dharma, and coming ultimately to our own realisations of its truths. If we do so in the light of Bhante's teaching, perhaps we shall feel more fully that we have chosen our teacher, out of what Goethe calls 'elective affinity', rather than merely waiting to be chosen.

So let us not turn away from the strength of others, and let us not avoid Bhante's influence. Now that he is not a personal presence in many of our lives, we can still relate to him through reading his books, and reflecting on his many teachings. His output is formidable, in its extent, range and depth, but we can regard that as an intellectual and spiritual challenge, and we shall have to become greater if we are to encompass it. We should read them, and read the books by Subhuti and others as spurs to practice and gateways to the open secrets of that Dharma, so that its own vast influence may also enter our lives.

These reflections on the anxiety of influence point to a broader issue in relating to Bhante. Very simply, we each need to consider how our psychology conditions how we approach him. If we have problems with authority in general, we will certainly experience these in the sangha, and some people at least will experience them strongly in relation to our teacher.

Many of the same issues come up, of course, in relation to kalyana mitras other than Bhante, and if we can work through issues of anxiety, idealisation, transference, and projection with them, then we will have gone a long way to developing our relationship with Bhante. But, I have one final thought. Perhaps the best way to understand Bhante is to become a kalyana mitra oneself, and experience the pleasures and perils of influencing others.

Conclusion: Relating to Bhante as a Practice

If my talk has a single message it is that we should consciously take responsibility for developing our relationship with Bhante – and by extension with other senior Order members. We should regard it as a practice, seeking to understand the forces at work and addressing difficulties as an aspect of our commitment to Dharma practice.

In Berzin's *'Relating to a Spiritual Teacher'*, having considered the many difficulties and misunderstandings that arise in such a relationship, he concludes that students must take responsibility for it. Even if our teacher has both faults and virtues, it is open to us to choose where we focus our attention. After all our closest friends also have a mixture of qualities, but friendship is impossible if we dwell on their faults. Tibetan tradition sees the relationship with the guru as a practice, and says that it can develop as we progress along the path. This 'sutra level guru meditation' which is derived from Tsongkhapa is different from the tantric practice of regarding the guru as a Buddha. It means cultivating a skilful response to a teacher as a way of seeking to discern the Dharma, the truth they have been teaching us, and which we aspire to become.

First of all we imagine our teacher by looking at a photo or visualising their image, and we direct a puja towards them. The difference between the form of this puja and our own is simply that it does not include going for Refuge. The teacher is an object of devotion, but is not a refuge, and does not, as they would in a tantric practice, stand in for the Three Jewels. We entreat the teacher not to die, and ask them for teaching – as in the 'Entreaty and Supplication' section of our puja.

Next we remind ourselves of the benefits of dwelling on our teacher's good qualities and the disadvantages of dwelling on their faults. In brief we engage with our teacher as a source of inspiration because, however complex our relationship with him may be, he is the conduit through which the Dharma has come to us. It is a process of seeing the Dharma through our teacher by seeing the Dharma in our teacher.

Next we may bring to mind what we believe to be the teacher's faults and consider that

these are impermanent, and illusory when set against his virtues. We then bring those virtues to mind, dwell on them and rejoice in them. We may consider the extraordinary achievements of Bhante's life: his deep connection with the Dharma; his intuitive grasp of the essentials at an extraordinarily early age; his immense learning; the breadth of his outlook, which enables him to be a kalyana mitra to so many people from so many backgrounds. We may think of his mindfulness – which seems to be unfailing – his devotion to friendship, his perceptiveness, and his mystery.

We move on to reflect on how these virtues came into being. For sixty years Bhante has worked on himself with unfailing persistence, energy and resolve. His life is evidence of his deep faith in the Dharma, and his willingness to do whatever is necessary to serve and to practice it – whether that meant leaving his culture to devote himself to the life of a monk; risking unpopularity through refusing to confine himself to the teachings of a single school; or leaving behind his life of writing and reflection to respond to the aspirations of Dr Ambedkar and his followers. Then Bhante came to the West to engage in the vast task not only bringing Buddhism to the West, but translating it for the West. He survived rejection by his critics in Britain, and had the courage and vision to found a new movement. And then he patiently worked to develop the Order and movement, unperturbed by the many, many difficulties along the way.

Bhante may not regale us with stories of his experiences in meditation but these biographical details themselves tell us much about Bhante's practice. He became what he is through these efforts. So, in the next stage we consider that we, too, can develop such qualities if we commit ourselves to practice. This is Bhante's message to us. Through his hundreds of lectures, dozens of books, his lifetime of teaching, and his personal example he is showing us what we can become if we apply ourselves with love, respect and faith to Dharma practice.

This brings us to a reflection on our teacher's kindness, and a sense of what we have gained from him. What would our lives be like if the Dharma had not been taught in a way we can understand? What would our minds be like if it were not for meditation? What worlds would we inhabit? We feel our hearts appreciation and respect for everything he has done for us.

And finally we request inspiration – the adistana or blessing – which enters our hearts as white or golden light, emanating from our teacher's heart. An image of our teacher comes to the crown of our head and they sit there for the remainder of the day as a witness to our behaviour and thoughts, and a continuing source of inspiration. Before going to sleep at night, Berzin suggests, we may imagine that this image dissolves into our hearts, or that we fall asleep with our head in our teacher's lap.

I don't know if I am capable of such unselfconscious devotion to Bhante. But I am moved by the reminder in this meditation and our own Kalyana Mitra Yoga, of everything I owe to him, and the depth of our connection.

The culmination of '*My Relation to the Order*' is the following passage, which is one of

Bhante's most striking testimonies and finest pieces of writing. Having described what he sees as his own limitations he expresses his amazement at what has resulted:

'Now hundreds of lotuses are blooming, some of the bigger and more resplendent flowers being surrounded by clusters of half opened buds. During the last 22 years a whole lotus lake has come into existence, or rather a whole series of lotus lakes. Alternatively, during the last 22 years the original lotus plant has grown into an enormous lotus tree not unlike the great four-branched Refuge Tree – has in fact grown into a whole forest of lotus trees. Contemplating the series of lotus lakes, contemplating the forest of lotus trees, and rejoicing in the strength and beauty of the lotus flowers, I find it difficult to believe that they really did all originate from that small and inadequate pot, which some people wanted to smash to bits, or put in the dustbin, or bury as deep as possible in the ground.

In brief, dropping the metaphor and speaking quite plainly, when I see what a great and glorious achievement the Order represents, despite its manifest imperfections, I find it difficult to believe that I could have been its founder. Not long ago, in connection with the dropping of names from the Order register, I spoke of my having taken on the onerous responsibility of founding the Western Buddhist order. I indeed took that responsibility on myself, and it was indeed an onerous one. None the less there are times when, far from feeling that it was I that took on the responsibility, I feel it was the responsibility that took on me. There are times when I am dimly aware of a vast, overshadowing Consciousness that has, through me, founded the Order and set in motion our whole movement.'

What then do we relate to when we relate to Bhante. A 75 year old Englishman of regular habits and literary tastes, or something much greater? The man, or this mysterious force, which we too may dimly perceive as we contemplate his life and its effects? Bhante has made himself a powerful conduit for this force. Our little lives are rounded by a sleep, yet we have each felt its impression, and it has disturbed our dreams, even if our slumbers continue.

In *'The Words of My Perfect Teacher'*, Patrul Rinpoche uses the analogy of lighting a fire. The Dharma is like the sun, which shines on all equally, but its rays are defused. A kalyana mitra, in the fullest sense is like a lens which focuses the sun's rays, so that we may feel their intensity applied to our little selves, and like a bundle of twigs, we may be set afire.

May we be burned up by the Dharma, consumed in the flames kindled by our kind, flawed complex, brilliant teacher, Urgyen Sangharakshita, and may the conflagration spread. Berzin finishes his meditation with a prayer, and with that I conclude:

'May the legacy of my mentor's good qualities and kindness integrate with my own qualities so that I may pass on this legacy to others and help them feel happiness, well being, liberation and eventually enlightenment for the benefit of all.' (p.255)

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