

## **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





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







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 overstretched 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 a strong influence. 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









