

General Introduction to Sangharakshita's Seminars

Hidden Treasure

From the mid-seventies through to the mid-eighties, Urgyen Sangharakshita led many seminars on a wide range of texts for invited groups of [Order members](#) and [Mitrans](#). These seminars were highly formative for the FWBO/Tiratna as Sangharakshita opened up for the still very young community what it might mean to live a life in the Dharma.

The seminars were all recorded and later transcribed. Some of these transcriptions have been carefully checked and edited and are [now available in book form](#). However, a great deal of material has so far remained unchecked and unedited and we want to make it available to people who wish to deepen their understanding of Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma.

How should one approach reading a seminar transcription from so long ago? Maybe the first thing to do is to vividly imagine the context. What year is it? Who is present? We then step into a world in which Sangharakshita is directly communicating the Dharma. Sometimes he is explaining a text, at other times he is responding to questions and we can see how the emergence of Dharma teachings in this context was a collaborative process, the teaching being drawn out by the questions people asked. Sometimes those questions were less to do with the text and arose more from the contemporary situation of the emerging new Buddhist movement.

Reading through the transcripts can be a bit like working as a miner, sifting through silt and rubble to find the real jewels. Sometimes the discussion is just a bit dull. Sometimes we see Sangharakshita trying to engage with the confusion of ideas many of us brought to Buddhism, confusion which can be reflected in the texts themselves. With brilliant flashes of clarity and understanding, we see him giving teachings in response that have since become an integral part of the Tiratna Dharma landscape.

Not all Sangharakshita's ways of seeing things are palatable to modern tastes and outlook. At times some of the views captured in these transcripts express attitudes and ideas [Tiratna has acknowledged as unhelpful](#) and which form no part of our teaching today. In encountering all of the ideas contained in over seventeen million words of Dharma investigation and exchange, we are each challenged to test what is said in the fire of our own practice and experience; and to talk over 'knotty points' with friends and teachers to better clarify our own understanding and, where we wish to, to decide to disagree.

We hope that over the next years more seminars will be checked and edited for a wider readership. In the meantime we hope that what you find here will inspire, stimulate, encourage - and challenge you in your practice of the Dharma and in understanding more deeply the approach of Urgyen Sangharakshita.

Sangharakshita's Literary Executors and the Adhithana Dharma Team

Women's Pre-Ordination Course, September 1988

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH THE VENERABLE SANGHARAKSHITA

Sangharakshita: There is quite a pile of questions. I am not sure if I am going to be able to get through all of them this evening, but, anyway, I'll do my best. I haven't had a chance to look at all of them, actually. They range from the simple to the sublime! First of all comes a question about Ambedkar and Buddhism.

In your book, Ambedkar and Buddhism, you recount how Ambedkar traced the roots of the Untouchables back to the early Buddhists. As far as I remember, you don't indicate what your opinion is of his hypothesis. What is your opinion, Bhante?

The questioner makes use of this expression "early Buddhists" - Ambedkar traced the roots of Untouchables back to the early Buddhists.' But it wasn't the early Buddhists in the sense of the Buddhists of the Buddha's own day, or the centuries immediately following. Ambedkar believed that the Untouchables, especially, perhaps, those of Maharashtra, were descended from Buddhists of the late - no, perhaps we should say early - medieval period, that is to say third, fourth, fifth century, or even later, who refused to be reconverted to Brahminism. I think the opinion of most scholars is that this hypothesis is not established. It is certainly a possibility that some of the ex-Untouchables are descended from people who were, once upon a time, Buddhists, because we know that Buddhism was very widespread in India and many Hindus might be able to trace their descent from people who, during the Buddhist period, were Buddhists. This wouldn't be peculiar to the ex-Untouchables. So we can't rule out the possibility that some of those who have in recent years become Buddhists are in fact descended from original Indian Buddhists, but I don't think there is any evidence for the fact that this is the case to any large extent, though the possibility, in the case of certain communities or groups of people, can't be ruled out altogether.

So I think one has to say that it remains an interesting hypothesis, and Ambedkar certainly argued the case very well, but I think it is quite doubtful whether the majority of scholars would agree that the case was proven. This is a specialist field; I can't say that I have an opinion of my own, really. I find Ambedkar's hypothesis very interesting, and up to a point plausible, but I can't help also taking note of the fact that it has not won general acceptance among scholars. Some of Ambedkar's followers might say that Indian authorities in this field are prejudiced, but one couldn't say that, of course, as regards the Western authorities - or, at least they wouldn't be prejudiced in the same way. So I think the whole hypothesis requires further exploration, which I don't think anybody actually has given it.

But, nonetheless, it remains very important in terms of myth, because it greatly encourages the ex-Untouchable Buddhists to think that they are reconverting back to a religion which their ancestors originally followed. It is rather like us discovering that there was a Buddhist mission to Britain in the days of King Arthur and that actually we are descended from ancient British Buddhists! *[Laughter]* That would be quite encouraging, in a way, even though its significance would be cultural and ethnic rather than purely spiritual.

If time and money were available, is there anywhere in the world you would like to visit that you haven't been before, and why? [Laughter] Is there any one, either past or present, whom you would like to have the opportunity to meet in the flesh?

"If" - it's a very big if - "time and money were available, is there anywhere in the world you would

like to visit that you haven't been before, and why?' There are two or three places - I have mentioned them, I think, from time to time. I would very much like to visit New Mexico, I think mainly because of the descriptions of New Mexico that I have read in the writings of D.H. Lawrence; and perhaps adjoining areas, too; perhaps Mexico itself and, say, Arizona, but certainly New Mexico. In fact, I have an invitation to New Mexico from Philip Kapleau, who has retired there to Santa Fé and has invited me to go and stay with him, so I hope some day I will be able to do that, at least for a few days.

Then I would also like to visit Istanbul, because I am very interested in that part of the world, that particular culture. Istanbul is the ancient Constantinople, ancient Byzantium; it has a very long history, occupies an important place in Western culture, and I would very much like to see some of the ancient buildings there, especially Santa Sophia.

And a different kind of place I'd like to visit: I'd like to visit some part of Africa where there are lots and lots of wild animals - not buildings, or people even, but just wild animals. I'd like to visit some part of Africa - you couldn't do this in Europe, or even in India - where you can see thousands of deer or thousands of zebras, thousands of giraffes or thousands of ostriches, all together, so that you get a strong impression of animal life and can see human life in a better perspective, as it were; because the animals we see most frequently and in largest numbers are human beings - don't we? It would make rather a change to see lots and lots of animals. I think I have had this idea ever since I was a boy and was taken to see a film called 'Africa Speaks' - a black and white film; this was way back in the early '30s, if not late '20s. This film, I remember, did show huge herds and flocks of animals and birds; I was most impressed. So I would like to go to a part of Africa where I could see that sort of thing - herds of elephants, for instance. But I believe that, even in Africa, such sights are becoming less and less common.

"Is there anyone, either past or present, whom you would like to have had the opportunity to meet in the flesh?" I'll leave aside Buddhist personalities, because that is rather a special field, with the possible exception of Milarepa; I think I would like to be able to see for myself whether he did actually turn green [*Laughter*] when he was out there living on nettles! - whether all that chlorophyll does actually get into the bloodstream, and if so what it looks like. I think I would have liked to have - I'm not sure about meeting, but certainly seen and heard - Dr. Johnson. I think I would have liked to have listened to one of his conversations from a safe distance. I can't think, really, of anybody else. A lot of the poets don't seem to have been very admirable people in the flesh: Wordsworth, apparently, could be a dreadful bore; Shelley could get hysterical; Byron was rather conceited and self-dramatising; Milton was rather stern. Shakespeare might have been a good companion, over a pot of ale at the Mermaid tavern! Yes, I think Shakespeare might have been a good person to meet in the flesh! - when he wasn't busy indicting a tragedy or comedy.

Perhaps I would like to have heard a great orator of the past; I can't think of who particularly, perhaps - Burke or someone like that; someone who has a reputation of having been a really extraordinarily good public speaker. Anyway.

Here's a question about young women! We don't meet many of them around the FWBO, do we!

Do you think that, however sincere and enthusiastic a young woman is about practising the Dharma and Going for Refuge, it is wiser that she gains some worldly experience - maturity - first, before being seriously considered for ordination, i.e. holding down a job, dealing with the adult world, etc? I realised recently that this was the way I was viewing someone, and that was partly based on things I have

heard you say in the past.

What is a young woman? Could we define a young woman? 15 to 50, or? [Laughter] "A young woman"?

Sanghadevi: 18, 19, 20 - 21.

S: 18, 19, 20. Some people would say that was a girl. "...however sincere and enthusiastic a young woman is about practising the Dharma and Going for Refuge, that it is wiser that she gains some worldly experience, maturity, first...?' What does one mean by 'worldly experience'? - "holding down a job, dealing with the adult world"; but what would be the significance or value of that? I suppose the fact that one has held down a job and dealt with the adult world - whatever that might mean - shows that one does possess certain qualities of character. But perhaps it would be evident that one had those qualities anyway without having held down a job and so on. It would also depend what sort of job: different jobs bring out different qualities, I suppose. I am rather doubtful about this whole theory, though it's fathered on me in the past, whether worldly experience does prepare one - in what sense worldly experience prepares one - for embarking on a spiritual life. If you are going to be helping to run a public Centre, perhaps it is helpful to know the sort of background people come from, the sort of lives they are leading. But supposing you are going straight into a Retreat Centre: is it helpful to have had some worldly experience? Does it help, say, to have been married, and experienced divorce, or to have brought up children, or to have held down a demanding job? Does that really help one in the spiritual life? Perhaps it differs from one person to another. But I am very doubtful if it can be assumed that that sort of worldly experience, and even in a sense maturity, is a necessary preparation for spiritual life. I think there are at least some people, whether male or female, who can bypass that and go straight into the spiritual life; a lot of people seem to have been damaged by their worldly experience rather than anything else. So I think it is very difficult to generalise. I think one needs to take a good look at the person concerned. They may need to work; they may need to hold down a job, but perhaps, if they are young, they had best do it within the context, say, of a co-op, where they get spiritual support at the same time.

Vidyasri: It often seems to help people gain confidence to have done something in that way - have had a job, or a child.

S: But that still raises the question whether that is sort of confidence that one needs in the spiritual life, or is confidence a sort of common quality, a general psychological quality, that can be applied to worldly life and spiritual life alike?

_____: I don't know whether this is quite the same context, but I remember at Padmavati's and Vidyavati's ordination that you did say something about they had been successful in their fields and you seemed to think that was an advantage, that they had done - but maybe that was more that they'd done that, got

S: Yes, I think perhaps then I was thinking more in terms of, as it were, unsatisfied ambition. One might embark on the spiritual life and still have a sort of hankering after some kind of worldly success; so that, if one has had a successful career, in a sense one has got that out of the way, and one can then get on with one's spiritual life without thinking you have missed out on worldly things. But even if you had missed out on them, perhaps it wouldn't, in the long run, if you really were sincere and enthusiastic, have made very much difference? Again, I think one needs to take a look at the individual and see what is good for her or for him.

Also it could be that, in the case of the FWBO, the FWBO itself provides a sort of framework for the young person within which she or he can develop the sort of qualities that the questioner has in mind. A Mitra can be helping, say, in the Centre office, or supporting a member of the Centre team; in that way developing these sort of qualities. Because, if you go into some areas of work in the world, you may acquire a certain experience, but - as I also said - you can be damaged in the process. You may be left with something you need to sort out in the course of your spiritual life, depending on the nature of the work that you were doing. Ten or fifteen years of the rat race might leave you with some worldly experience, but would you really be any better for it from the spiritual point of view, or better prepared? It is very difficult to say. Suppose you spent ten years in advertising or computers; very often people have to undo the effects of their worldly experience. Not in all cases, perhaps.

So I think it is very difficult to generalise here. I don't think it is a simple matter of "Let the young person have four, five, ten, fifteen years of worldly experience; that will make them really mature and experienced, and then they will be ready for the spiritual life, or more ready." I don't think - at least, I am doubtful - whether it really works like that.

Vidyasri: So when, like for some of us, it has taken us some years to reach the point of being ordained, that then not because of not having enough worldly experience; it's because of, maybe, not having enough of other things?

S: Or perhaps, in some cases, psychological difficulties. I think if a really bright young woman came along who was sincere and enthusiastic about practising the Dharma, I think it would be rather a shame to send her back into the world to have all the shine rubbed off her, and then think she would be more prepared or ready for the spiritual life. I think there should be room in the Movement for at least a few young people who haven't been spoiled by the world, as it were, and who could live their whole life within the framework of the Movement. I think there is beginning to be a sufficient variety of work to provide them with all the, let's say, practical experience, as distinct from worldly experience, that they need. Or by 'worldly experience' do you mean learning to cheat, and learning to lie and manipulate people? Is all that included in it? Most people would think it was, because that's the way one usually gets by. So perhaps it would be nice to have a few people around who have never been stained in that way. Perhaps some people just don't need that sort of experience, can dispense with it. So I would say just take a good look at this sincere and enthusiastic young woman when she does come along, and just try, without assumptions or presuppositions, to see what is really good for her: whether she really does need to go and get a job and gather worldly experience in that sort of way.

Vidyasri: In the seminar on the Karaniya Metta Sutta, where there are the lines in the Metta Sutta that begin by saying "You must be able and upright". I think I remember you saying, in terms of 'able', that one needs to be capable and have a certain amount of confidence in doing things, and working with the world.

S: Well, I think I did make those remarks quite a few years ago, when we had a lot of people from the alternative movement, and who seemed to get into spiritual life - or their idea of it - because of an incapacity to function in the world; thinking the spiritual life was the easy option. I think I was concerned to combat that; because actually that is the more difficult option, as everybody knows.

So, in order to succeed in the spiritual life, one must at least have the sort of capacity that would have enabled you to succeed in the world had you chosen so to do; but that doesn't necessarily

mean that you need to succeed in the world in order to prepare yourself for leading a spiritual life. But you must certainly have that sort of capacity, and not be opting for the spiritual life as though it was a sort of soft option, as though it was an easier way, a way of avoiding difficulty and effort, and all that sort of thing. But have you been getting young women of this sort along, and have you been wondering what sort of advice to give them - anybody?

Sanghadevi: Well, I asked that question. There are three people at the moment. I don't know them well enough to actually say where they are in relation to ordination, but they are certainly young, bright, inspired, wholehearted, enthusiastic, quite - well,

S: Well, it seems a pity to send them out to be shorthand-typists or what have you.

Sanghadevi: Well, I haven't sent them out. They are embarking on getting jobs.

S: Maybe one could try to find a place for them in a co-op or something of that sort. We need more co-ops, don't we, of many different kinds? In Croydon they have been able to take quite young men, teenagers, even, into Hockneys, so there has been that possibility there; and in some cases, at least, that seems to have worked very well. Anyway, let's leave that. I don't think I can give a very definite answer, but perhaps we have just ventilated the question a bit.

In the talk entitled "The Next 20 Years," given at our WBO celebrations this year, you said you thought we could bypass the Christian tradition and go back to the Greco-Roman tradition in order to help us find parallels to Buddhist thought in our own past, and to help us feel Buddhism isn't so foreign. I am not clear whether you were suggesting that the culture and arts that have developed since the Christian era in the West are not so helpful to us as the Greco-Roman cultural tradition, and that we would be better off studying this early literature etc. Please elaborate on this part of your talk, Bhante.

Well, there is a great deal of Christian culture which is, of course, post-classical, but a lot of that culture is bound up with ideas that we find quite unacceptable or which are even quite repugnant to us. So sometimes we can't even enjoy Christian literature or art, or Christian-inspired literature and Christian-inspired art, because much of the content is unacceptable to us, and this produces almost a sort of conflict, you might say. For instance, you can read Dante and you might enjoy his poetry, but you are constantly coming up against ideas which offend your deepest spiritual instincts. So this does create a complication, and also there may be instances where Christian literature, Christian art, strengthens or tends to strengthen certain attitudes or tendencies in you which you are trying to get rid of; like, for instance, your feelings of guilt. So in that way the Christian literature, Christian art, Christian culture in general ceases to be so very useful. But, in the case of Greco-Roman cultural traditions, that isn't quite the case. In a way, we are not so close to it, we are not surrounded by it in the way that we are surrounded by Christian culture or the remains of Christian culture, so we can take a more objective look at it, and we can in a way be more selective, and we can find inspiration which is not complicated by the various factors which complicate it for us in the case of Christianity. Do you see what I am getting at?

For instance, you read the plays of the great Greek dramatists - say, Aeschylus or Euripides. Well, you can read about, say, the gods and goddesses who appear in them without being troubled by any question of personal belief; you can just take them, as it were, for what they are worth in the context of the drama, just appreciate their symbolical value. But, for instance, if in Christian literature you come up against, for instance, the figure of the Virgin Mary, it might raise all sorts of

hackles in you, bring up all sorts of associations which wouldn't be very helpful. Do you see what I'm getting at?

So I think what I am basically trying to say is that classical literature, in a way, is association-free for us; it doesn't have the associations, especially the less pleasant associations, that Christian literature or Christian culture very often does have. Or if there is anything in classical culture which we find displeasing, we can just discard it because we haven't been brought up to believe in it. A Christian apologist, who was making another point, said once: "We do not commit blasphemy against Thor." Do you see what I mean? He was making a different point, but you can see the significance of that. We can read about Thor, just as we can read about Zeus, just appreciating the general meaning of the work in which he is referred to. There are no psychological hang-ups or tie-ups for us; we wouldn't feel the need to commit blasphemy against Thor, because we weren't brought up to believe in him in the way that we are brought up to believe in God, Jesus and the saints, and so on. So classical literature is largely a sort of association-free literature; it is free from those sort of associations.

Also I think classical literature - I am thinking especially of Greek literature - shares certain values with Buddhism; for instance, its rationality (not its rationalism but its rationality), its objectivity, its concern for truth. Christianity is not concerned with truth; Jesus is the Truth! So, in the case of classical culture, Greco-Roman culture, we seem to find ourselves in a different world, a world which has more points of contact with Buddhism than I think the Christian world does. Compare, say, a Greek statue - especially one, say, of Aesculapius - with a Buddha statue; there are certain similarities. But you couldn't feel there was much of a similarity between, say, a seated Buddha and a crucifix; they belong to such different worlds of thought and feeling. So I am afraid I am all for the classics - more, perhaps, the Greek classics than the Roman ones. So then:

Does it necessarily follow that, because we were born in the West this lifetime, our roots lie in the West? Don't you think that for some people the classical West might seem even more foreign than Buddhism? Maybe some people's early roots lie in the East, even the Buddhist East.

I suppose it depends what one means by 'roots' here. Usually one uses the word 'roots' in the sense of ancestry. Americans go over to Ireland looking for their roots - meaning looking for their great-grandfather's grave, or something of that sort. So not many people in the West have their roots in the East in that sense. But there are people who feel at home, say, with Japanese culture or at home with Chinese culture; perhaps not many of them, but there are some. Sometimes, of course, it is the appeal of the exotic. But even that is not invalid, by any means. I would say that if in the West there are some people who don't appreciate the classical West there is probably something wrong with them; they have been sort of deformed or perverted by their Christian upbringing. I would tend to think that; though I am quite open to the possibility that there may be people also who have an instinctive sympathy for, say, Far Eastern culture, or African culture, or Aztec culture, and feel at home in that; but I think they would probably be rather rare, and perhaps they belonged to those cultures in previous lives. We have no means of telling. But I have met people who were fanatically devoted, say, to Japanese culture; but I think sometimes that needs looking into: what exactly it is that they admire. Sometimes it just represents a rejection of everything that they were brought up in, not always in a very intelligent way.

Anybody got any thoughts on this, or any personal experiences?

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Sometimes, of course, people are attracted by the cultures of the East, not because they are Eastern, but because they are traditional; because they are non-secular. I think that is an important point; because they are based, ultimately, on certain spiritual values in a way that modern Western culture isn't.

Sanghadevi: I was just thinking like yourself, you felt at an early age you realised you had always been a Buddhist; and yet you also had a very strong feeling for Western culture etc. But I suppose it is that sort of thing thinking, well, ...

S: I think I had a strong feeling for all cultures when I was young. I was very interested in Chinese culture, I was interested in ancient Egypt, as well as in ancient Greece. I was interested in all sorts of cultural manifestations. Sometimes I think I am not all that attracted by Indian culture, and had it not been for the fact that Buddhism was Indian I might not have bothered much with Indian culture. Do you see what I mean? Because I noticed, when I was in India - I discussed this with someone recently - Hindu and Buddhist architecture didn't appeal to me very much. It was the Islamic architecture that appealed to me aesthetically very much more strongly, though I had no real sympathy with Islam.

Sanghadevi: I think it was the bit in the lecture where you said going back to the classical Greek literature might help us feel Buddhism wasn't so foreign to us, and makes me think that actually classical literature might seem quite foreign to start with, because we don't know anything about it.

S: Yes, I think 'foreign' in the sense that we don't know anything about it is different from 'foreign' in the sense of something that is incompatible with our own mentality. I think if we do get down, say, to reading Homer or reading Plato we do feel at home in that particular world of ideas. (*Some laughter*) No?

Sanghadevi: I haven't tried it! So you don't think I mean, if someone didn't get on with it, you couldn't say that maybe their roots were in a different culture actually.

S: Well, roots psychologically, in the sense that they had a psychological affinity for some other culture. That is not impossible.

Sanghadevi: I suppose I can't quite see..... Unless one has lived in that period of time, I'd have thought that any culture in the world could be equally accessible or inaccessible.

S: I think there are degrees. For instance, I mentioned the ancient Aztec culture. Well, would we really feel at home in a society where human sacrifice was such a common feature of their culture?

Sanghadevi: ... values

S: I have often thought, reading especially the Pali scriptures, that one feels sometimes very much in the world of ancient Greece, in the world of Plato's Dialogues, you know, where questions of fundamental spiritual concern were discussed in an open and tolerant way; where there was no dogmatic imposition of views such as you find in Christianity. The whole emotional atmosphere seems much saner, much cleaner and clearer. Just to give an example, or maybe as a sort of exercise, you could say, read a Sutta from the *Majjhima Nikaya*; then read, say, one of Plato's shorter and simpler dialogues, and then read one of the epistles of St. Paul, and see what you make of them, see how they compare, as it were, and just see which two seemed closest. Be fair to St. Paul; read him in a modern translation, and not in the Authorised Version. But just see what you

made [of it]. Two or three years ago, I made the experiment of taking up the Gospel according to St. Mark, which is supposed to be the oldest of the Gospels, and reading it, hopefully, with a completely open mind as though I had never read it before. And really I was quite horrified; it seemed really quite sick. Here was this person Jesus, just going around mainly occupied with casting devils out of people - that was the overall impression; not so much of teaching, but of this strange activity, this going around in a country that seemed swarming with devils and casting them out!

So I mean that is not the atmosphere of the Pali suttas; it is not the atmosphere of Plato's dialogues; it is not the atmosphere of Euripides' plays. You are in a really different sort of world, a very strange, demon-ridden sort of world, with this strange figure going around casting out the demons, driving them into herds of swine and things like that. (I am not sure if that is in St Mark, it may be in another gospel, but that is the sort of thing.)

So I think that if in the West we want to find something which has some affinities with at least Pali Buddhist literature, we need to look to the Greeks. But if, of course, the Greeks themselves are foreign to us, we are in a pretty difficult position, aren't we? But I think the Greeks ought not to be foreign to us - for their own sake. Anybody fond of the classics? There must be a few people, at least, have read a few things of Plato or Aristotle, Euripides? Homer?

_____ : I've read

S: Oh, well, that's a good start.

[Voices offering examples] ... I can't say it was readable!

S: Preferably not read in the *Penguin* version, which doesn't reproduce the literary beauty of the original.

_____ :

[Recording becomes almost inaudible for 3 or 4 minutes due to a loud electrical hum and is enclosed in double brackets ((()))] ((..But then he's a Roman and Romans are a bit crude. But he's not as it were prescribed reading, you don't have to..... or accept him whether you're supposed to accept..... the Bible whoever battle had been done.

Also more recently I've been reading or re-reading the Neoplatonists. I, especially Plotinus

Vidyasri: Christian text that I have really enjoyed has been that one you recommended by on spiritual friendship.... I really enjoyed that.

S: Of course, he is to some extent based on classical sources.... represents a sort of traditional Christian humanism

[Realisation of fault on tape recorder by person recording the session]]

Rosy: Bhante, have you enjoyed any of the writings of the Christian mystics? Are there any of them that you have found compatible? I was thinking of Julian of....

S: Selectively compatible; you have to select certain passages and leave out others. But I have enjoyed *The Cloud of Unknowing* and... what else? Some of the writings in the *Philokalia*, the selections from the mystics of the Eastern Orthodox Church. And St John of the Cross. Someone did say of St John of the Cross that his writings were like a sponge; you could squeeze them and squeeze the water out - the water being Christianity. I don't know whether Catholics would agree with that. But some of his poetry is very very refined, as it were. There is one poem of his I read years and years ago; it seemed almost like a description of sunyata, but then, right at the end, most unfortunately, was tacked on a verse about the Holy Trinity, which really spoiled it all for me. I did admire, at one time - this is many years ago, when I was in my twenties - Brother Lawrence, who wrote a little work called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. But, yes, one has to be quite selective with the Christian mystics. Anyway, let's go on to something else.

Most people in the FWBO lead busy, outgoing lives, working and participating in Buddhist activities. Assuming that one's activity in the world is a reflection of one's Going for Refuge, and that one maintains a daily meditation practice, do you think it is necessary to spend a prolonged period devoted to meditation at some point in order to reach Stream Entry?

I suppose it depends what one means by 'prolonged'. I certainly think solitary retreats should be part of one's personal programme - at least have a short one every year - but not so much from the point of view of meditation as just to enable you to experience yourself from time to time and to be free from external pressures and influences and to get to know yourself and achieve a certain measure of inner clarity. Strictly speaking, meditation in the sense of samatha is not necessary to reach Stream Entry - that is to say, prolonged experience - because it is on vipassana, on Insight, that Stream Entry depends. But in practice you need to have got up a good head of steam as it were as regards samatha before you are really in a position to develop vipassana; and it's usually only on some kind of meditation retreat that you can develop sufficient samatha to be able to develop vipassana based on that. But the development of vipassana in ordinary workaday situations is by no means ruled out, as the Zen tradition shows. So I think that, yes, a prolonged period - say, a month or so - every now and then devoted to meditation is certainly necessary for spiritual health, but I think one ought to be at the same time making an effort to develop Insight not only in that particular situation, not only in connection with meditation, but also in connection with one's ordinary work.

Supposing you are working in *The Cherry Orchard*, and maybe you are doing the washing up; and maybe someone else is working with you, maybe they are not working properly; you get angry, or you feel anger rising within you. Well, there's an opportunity: you ask yourself: 'Who's getting angry? Why should I be angry? What's the reason for that?' Do you think: 'The other person has made me angry?' But is that the situation? Has the other person made me angry? Do I have to be angry? Does it not depend on my own volition, my own mental attitude? And who is it that is getting angry, anyway? Who is making who angry? What is this 'I' that is becoming angry? In this way you can develop Insight in that particular situation. And sometimes all the more strongly because there is a charge of emotional energy there, which can be turned and utilised.

Or if you experience a great disappointment; you might have been looking forward to something very much, maybe a visit to the theatre; maybe you have not been to the theatre for months, maybe not years, and suddenly either the friend who promised to take you doesn't turn up, or you fall ill, you can't go; you experience that keen disappointment. So you say to yourself: 'Why am I feeling disappointed? It is because of my strong desire, my craving, even, for that particular kind of experience. So if I am not going to the theatre, why should I make that an occasion of suffering for

myself?' And just see the way the mind is working, how you have looked forward to it, you've built up hopes and expectations and then they are dashed; you feel disappointed, upset, annoyed, angry with circumstances. It's all unnecessary; you could be just as happy staying at home, even just as happy lying in bed and being ill. It depends on your mental attitude.

So in that situation, too, you can develop vipassana, you can develop Insight. So it's not only in connection with meditation, it's in connection with all these other life experiences. I don't know how many of you are or have been mothers, but if you've brought up children I'm sure you will have had many such experiences, because children will give you opportunities of not just knuckling under but of actually practising patience in a very positive way. Sometimes I'm sure you feel the child's will, even the baby's will, up against yours, and there is the tendency to pit your will against the child's will, have your way. But you have to ask yourself: 'What is this will that has come up so strongly and is opposing the child's will? Am I really functioning for the benefit of the child? Am I really aware, or am I not just instinctively reacting, and pitting my will against the child's will, or some other person's will?' So all these opportunities we get for developing Insight within our ordinary everyday life; which doesn't mean that we should neglect meditation, because indirectly meditation will strengthen our concentration, and provide a stronger basis for vipassana in the long run.

But we need to operate in both these ways, and try to develop vipassana, Insight, and thereby gain Stream Entry - both in the specifically meditative situation and in the more workaday situation. Sometimes we can have a terrible flash of Insight into ourselves and the workings of our own minds, even the nature of conditioned existence, in the midst of all sorts of worldly circumstances. All right, then, the next question here from the same person says:

Given that one had developed a sound basis of samatha, could Insight arise as readily through a reflective involvement in the world as through vipassana meditation practices?

Well, yes, I've already answered that then, haven't I? Yes, I think it could. One mustn't kid oneself, of course; it must be a real, deep understanding, just as in connection with meditation. It must really make a difference to your attitude, a difference to your life; not just see, but see through, something.

On quite a different subject:

When someone is dying and appears to be suffering physically, how justified is one in administering morphine or some opiate which will ease that suffering, but also having the knowledge that it will probably hasten the death of that person? I find it is not always easy to tell how conscious that person is of what is happening, i.e. that they are really suffering, and I wonder whether the morphine is more for the carers than the dying person.

Well, certainly it is not pleasant to see someone really suffering if you can relieve that suffering. 'When someone is dying and appears to be suffering physically, how justified is one in administering morphine or some opiate which will ease that suffering, but also having the knowledge that it will probably hasten the death of that person?' Well I suppose it depends on whether one considers it better to continue living and experience pain, or better not to experience the pain and live less long. I suppose the answer would differ from one person to another. Some people would want to hang on to existence at all costs, even at the cost of suffering; others would

prefer to end it and die. But, as a general point, I think perhaps we have become in the West over-concerned with the prolongation of life for the sake of the prolongation of life, as though it was an absolute value and at all costs people were to be kept alive indefinitely, even though their life was, as far as one could see, no longer really worth living. So I don't think - this is my personal opinion - one should hesitate to ease severe suffering on account of the fact that it might well hasten the death of that person; especially if it was just a question of, say, hours or days. I'm assuming it wouldn't be a question of hastening it by a matter of months or years. I don't know who the question has come from?

Jane Evans: I was thinking of a specific incident where I gave a woman some morphine and she died within five minutes. And she was not really conscious and it was difficult to communicate, it was difficult to know how much she was really experiencing and whether her consciousness was still around. My instinct was to give it, and I did, but people criticised me afterwards.

S: Might she have lived for weeks or months longer?

Jane: No.

S: Well, I don't see that it makes very much difference. Again, it's this question of being over-attached to the prolongation of life for its own sake.

Jane: It's just that I'm often placed in those difficult situations of making decisions

S: I think, if it was me, I would rather have the morphine and pass away a few minutes earlier!
[Laughter]

_____ : What about if it severely affected your mental state, Bhante, ?

S: Well, pain severely affects your mental state. It's as though then you are not in a position to choose. Either your mental state is going to be affected by pain or it's going to be affected by the morphine. Unless you are a yogi, your mental state is going to be affected anyway; you've no real choice.

Claire/Varasri: What about the mental state of the person who is giving the morphine?

S: Well, the question does speak of: 'I wonder whether the morphine is more for the carers than the dying person.' Clearly, one has to ask oneself whether that is the case or not; whether you are not perhaps just feeling very uncomfortable at the sight of that suffering, and being unable to bear your own suffering at the sight of so much suffering, and therefore you give a dose of morphine. So obviously the person administering the drug has to ask himself or herself that question. 'I find it is not always easy to tell how conscious that person is of what is happening, i.e. that they are really suffering.'

Jane: Yes, I suppose I just wondered when consciousness leaves the body, and going on

S: You mean that there might be certain physical reactions that suggest suffering, whereas actually the consciousness may be dissociated from the body?

Jane: Yes, I just wondered whether that is possible.

S: Yes. I think it is; because one does sometimes have out-of-the-body experiences, in which one is not conscious of physical sensation. So a dying person could be in that sort of state. You wouldn't know whether they were actually experiencing anything or not, even though they might be showing as it were signs of suffering; or you might infer that they were suffering. I suppose so much depends on individual judgement in such cases; and it does seem that it is probably impossible to avoid mistakes. So I think probably it is an area where one cannot expect always to make the right decision, and one may not even know after making the decision whether it has been the right decision or not. You may never know. One therefore just has to do one's best.

It is like any other form of advice or help; you don't really know whether your advice is the best advice, or whether you are being really helpful; even the Buddha didn't always know - as when he taught the asubha bhavana to the monks who subsequently committed suicide out of depression, which wasn't the Buddha's intention at all.

So I think, where human beings are concerned, you can't be completely certain of the effects of your actions, however well intentioned. I think one has to accept that, not only in the sphere of medical treatment, but in numberless other spheres as well. You may find as an Order Member that you are giving advice to a Mitra; you hope it is the best advice, but you could have made a mistake. It is very difficult to be sure. You may give advice to children about their future careers and so on; you don't know that it's the best advice. You can only give the best advice that you possibly can, or what you think is the best advice. Someone comes to you and says: 'Should I go on retreat, or should I go and look after my sick aunt?' How can you really tell which is best? You advise according to your lights; you can do no more - if you give advice at all. Sometimes you can just content yourself with trying to clarify the situation, try to clarify the issues. But sometimes, as in the case of a doctor, you do actually have to do something, or not do something, which has consequences, and you can't always be sure that you are doing, or not doing, the right thing.

So I think one has to accept those sort of limitations. And they are perhaps highlighted in the medical profession, because you are dealing with matters of sickness and health, life and death. Presumably, when you were criticised because the old lady died five minutes after you had administered the morphine, the assumption was that her life should have been prolonged at all costs, even at the cost of suffering to herself?

Jane: I'm not sure what was behind it.

S: Or was it an instinctive reaction on the part of people?

Jane: You get people saying: 'Oh, you shouldn't have done that.' And I suppose it's like down to myself, that I thought I had done the right thing at the time. It's very difficult to tell.

S: Yes, you can't be sure. Perhaps you did, perhaps you didn't. But I think that sort of uncertainty is inherent in the practice of medicine. Perhaps some doctors are more self-questioning than others.

[End of tape one, tape two]

In the Puja, we say the words: "Our personality throughout our existences," and in the last stage of the Six Element Practice we are told to let our consciousness return to universal consciousness, having let go of our bodies. Are consciousness and personality two separate entities? And, after death, is the consciousness in one place and the personality in another?

I think the term for personality in the original text, in the *Bodhicaryavatara*, is *atmabhava*, which is usually translated as, yes, personality, the self-being. But this is not seen as having an ultimate existence; it is only being relatively real, and as being only partly conscious, because we know there is a big part of us which is unconscious. So it is not as though there is just this one unchanging self or personality going from life to life; it is more like a sort of stream - not just a stream of consciousness, but a stream of consciousness-and-unconsciousness both. And the universal consciousness which one speaks of, say, in the *Yogacara* is something quite different. Perhaps one can refer here to the Eight Consciousnesses of the *Yogacara* system. What we might call the reincarnating consciousness or personality, for want of a better term, would be identified then, presumably, with the *klisto-mano-Vijnana*, whereas the universal consciousness is the *alaya*, especially the Absolute *Alaya*. So the two would be different. Whether the one is ultimately an aspect of the other is a question that early Buddhism, at least, doesn't go into. So when we let our consciousness return to universal consciousness, it means that the consciousness is dissociated from the *klisto-mano-Vijnana*, the soiled mind-consciousness or soiled mind, which is the reincarnating mind, as it were, and inasmuch as it dissociates itself from that soiled mind, that dualistic mind, it returns, so to speak, to a state of non-dual consciousness, which is an aspect of Ultimate Reality. So consciousness and personality, in this sense - well, universal consciousness and personality - are two separate not exactly entities but different aspects of our experience, we may say.

I heard that on one of the early Tuscany retreats you had said that one could talk about God if one used the term in the mystical sense of 'the ground of being'. Is this really what you said, I think maybe misrepresented, and if you did say this, would you expound upon this?

I don't remember saying quite this, but let me express just a few ideas here. I do remember being asked, or perhaps just making the point, that if, for instance, at a beginners' class in an FWBO Centre, someone asked a question and introduced the word 'God' - if it was a beginners' class and the person was asking quite sincerely and using the word 'God' because they just didn't have any other word to use, one shouldn't jump on them straight away and start arguing about God and making it clear that Buddhism didn't believe in God. Just take the question for what it was worth and answer it, even if you yourself also had, in answering it, to use the word 'God'. Do you see what I mean? In other words, don't make an issue just of someone using that word 'God' when they may simply have used it because they didn't know any other better word. That was a point I certainly made.

But I doubt if I would recommend that sort of terminology outside that sort of situation. If we were giving an original talk of our own, or explaining something on our own account, I don't think we should bring in the word 'God' even if we did use it in the sense of 'ground of being'; I think that would be only to confuse the issue. But we need not refuse to use it if it is introduced into the discussion quite honestly by someone who is just trying to understand something. For instance, someone might ask: 'Do Buddhists believe that there is a God? Do Buddhists believe that the purpose of life is to have some experience of God?' If the person is clearly using the word 'God' just to indicate some higher spiritual, Transcendental dimension, don't quarrel with it. Say, 'Yes, Buddhism is not a form of materialism. Buddhism does look beyond matter. Buddhism does have the ideal of a spiritual goal. In that sense, Buddhism does not exactly recognise the existence of God, but it does recognise the existence of a state or an Ultimate Reality which for you seems to be indicated by the word God.' You can say something like that; not at once jump on the person and say: 'Oh no, Buddhists don't believe in God; God is just a delusion.' That would not be really to answer their question. You can go into all that later on, if you get an opportunity. I think that was

mainly the point I was concerned to make; not that, off one's own bat as it were, one should introduce into a discussion or lecture the word 'God' in the sense of 'ground of being'; no. That is as much as I can remember. I may have said something like that in some quite different context, but that I can't be sure about.

Last night, when the subject of suitable rupas for the Taraloka shrine was being discussed, Bhante said: "I haven't found the ideal rupa yet." After first making sure that Bhante actually did say that - yes, he did! - would he say more about the ideal rupa? Did he mean his own personal ideal rupa, or ideal rupa for more public use - an ideal rupa made within the FWBO?

Actually, I did mean my own personal ideal rupa, that is to say a rupa which would adequately express, as nearly as art could express, the ideal of Enlightenment in human form. I haven't found, from that point of view, a rupa that I consider ideal or perfectly satisfactory. The nearest I think I have come are some of the rupas of Borobudur; I think they come very close to what I would consider the ideal. I am not too happy with most of the Indian images; I don't like the Burmese ones at all; I don't like most of the Chinese and Japanese ones either, I am afraid. I think it is very, very difficult to find a really good Buddha rupa anywhere. Chintamani's are quite noble efforts, but I wouldn't regard them as perfect; I think we can do better than that, but it is going to take a lot of time, a lot of effort.

_____ : What about Aloka's?

S: Those that I saw some years ago I didn't particularly like, but I do believe he has changed his style; but I haven't seen some of his newer rupas.

I think Buddha rupas should be more aesthetically appealing; not just icons, as it were. If you see some of the Burmese images, they are very squat and thickset, not at all appealing, really. Some of the Gandhara images, even, are disproportionate: the heads are very big in comparison with the body and the limbs. Some of the Chinese and Japanese images seem to be fat and heavy, don't they? The jowls seem to be too big.

Vidyasri: Thai?

S: Some of them are not bad, but a bit overstylised, very often. But we are discussing the ideal Buddha rupa.

_____ : Well, that was part of the question. I wondered if you thought there was an ideal Buddha rupa for you, or for the Movement.

S: I think there are a few rupas in existence which get quite close: one or two of the ancient Sinhalese rupas. I like some Chinese images: I like the Wei dynasty images, though they are not naturalistic. Yes, some of the Cambodian images. But I think the Indonesian, the Borobudur images, come closest, I would say.

The recent 'Game of Life' retreat at Padmaloka seems to be both an extension of the previous performing arts retreats there into a more public retreat with a specifically dharmic content, and also seems to link up with an expanded interest in ritual and ceremony in the Movement since the Convention last year. Have you seen the video of this retreat, and if so what was your response to it?

I have not seen the video, though all the people participating seemed very enthusiastic about what had happened.

How useful do you think this approach of acting out the Dharma can be in helping us to experience and assimilate it more deeply?

I am not sure; I think we need to have quite a few more such retreats first, and try to assess the results over a longer period. I don't think we are at the moment in a position to say whether it helps or otherwise; or, if it does help, in what way, in what sense, psychologically, spiritually. We have only just started this sort of approach and I think we need quite a bit more experience before we can draw any conclusions.

In a broader sense, what are your views on the potential of the performing arts as a means of spreading the Dharma?

Again, I don't know; I think we'll have to see. Traditionally, of course, in India, the drama was used as a means of spreading Buddhist ideas. There are some Buddhist dramas in Sanskrit and Prakrit still surviving; but whether one could propagate Buddhist ideas in that way in the West through the performing arts, I don't know; we would just have to try and see.

I think in the West, we are used in many ways to experiencing these sort of things, going along to performances of various kinds, but not, perhaps, allowing ourselves really to be influenced or changed by them. Some of the Tibetan Tantric colleges have been sending out their lamas who specialise in a particular kind of chanting and the appropriate ritual, and these things have been put on like, almost, theatrical performances, haven't they? I wonder what effect they have had on the people going along. We just don't know. Or is it just another performance? Did they forget all about it soon afterwards, or did it have a permanent effect? I don't think any sort of research has been done. All that is known is that tickets can be sold for such performances.

So, yes, we have started expanding our interest in ritual and ceremony - well, that's a good thing - but I think it is very early days to say what the results have been, what the effects have been, and so on. But it does seem that there is interest in continuing to experiment in that direction.

I think we've come to the last question now. I doubt whether I am going to be able to answer [it] this evening, but I'll read it, anyway:

Considering Buddhist cosmology in 'the Survey', you talk of how biological development is not single but double; that the evolutionary process results from a coalescence between an upward movement of material progress and a downward movement of psychic or spiritual degeneration. I don't understand this at all. Does not our biological evolution include and lead on to the evolution of consciousness? Am I taking this too literally? Is it symbolically pointing to what we potentially can be?

I'll just make a few points here. When I speak about the evolutionary process result[ing] from a coalescence between an upward movement of material progress and a downward movement of psychic or spiritual degeneration, I am thinking of traditional Buddhist teaching, especially the Aggaña Sutta, which describes what we would call the evolution of the material universe. But then it also describes the descent of beings from the Brahmaloaka, who become involved, as it were, with

the material universe, and become, so to speak, incarnate in it as the result of a process of attraction. So here you get the upward movement of matter, as it were, on the one hand, and the downward movement of spirit, coalescing. So it's that that I had in mind.

'Does not our biological evolution include and lead on to the evolution of consciousness?' I think it is a question of whether one regards consciousness as a product of matter or not. Here one must observe that, in Buddhism - initially - no hard and fast distinction is made between consciousness or mind or spirit on the one hand and matter on the other. What we think of as mind and what we think of as matter, Buddhism would tend to regard more as being one and the same neutral stuff, as Bertrand Russell calls it, in varying degrees of density and refinement. But I doubt if Buddhism would agree that consciousness is a product of matter, in the modern materialistic sense. I doubt that very much. It is as though into the evolving grosser matter the subtler matter in the form of mind or consciousness is infused, as it were; I would put it in that sort of way. I don't know whether that is clear, or whether that makes sense to people? But if mind and matter - to use the Western term - are quite different, it is difficult to explain how consciousness does originate. It does seem difficult to reduce consciousness just to processes going on in the material brain. So what is consciousness? So it's as though consciousness exists apart from matter, but can express itself through matter only when matter reaches a certain degree of complexity and refinement.

_____ : You've made that clearer, but I still don't quite understand how at the same time you've got evolution of material form and involution of the spiritual.

S: Well, I suppose this raises questions of cosmogony, because one has then to posit, as some traditions do, a sort of primordial split: spirit on the one hand, matter on the other, each as it were pursuing its own way. And matter evolving up, and spirit involving down, and the two meeting at a certain point to produce what we would call evolution, or at least human evolution. But that leads us into realms which early Buddhism doesn't enter into. There is this Sutta I mentioned, the Aggaña Sutta, the Sutta of Origins - that is the only one that touches on these questions at all. It doesn't go right back to the very beginning; in fact, Buddhism doesn't really teach that there is an absolute first beginning, in the literal sense, anyway. But this Sutta does speak of beings descending, as it were, from the Brahmaloaka in the beginning of a world period, and coming into contact with this sticky, viscous sort of stuff, something more basic and primitive, and becoming as it were involved and entangled with it, so that their subtle, luminous forms become overlaid, as it were, with a coating of matter and they become the first human beings. It doesn't go into it in any great detail; it doesn't say anything about the evolution of animal forms. So we are left with something rather sketchy. In Theosophy they tried to work it out in much greater detail, with a whole theory of cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis. But to me it does seem that, to the extent that one does differentiate between, let's say, mind and matter, mind cannot be regarded as a mere product of matter; though mind can express itself through matter, and is associated with it in a mysterious manner that we find it difficult to understand. The Buddha himself, in the Pali Canon, raises the question whether - not consciousness, but the life principle, *jiva*, is identical with the material body or not; and he won't answer the question either way - neither identical nor not identical nor both nor neither. A sort of mysterious indefinable connection between them. Perhaps, even, the question is wrongly put: are they really two things in the strict literal sense? Or are they not perhaps the same thing looked at from different points of view? Is mind perhaps not the inner dimension of matter, and matter the outer dimension of mind, like the two sides of a penny?

Sanghadevi: You say in The Three Jewels: "Energy bodies itself forth' consciousness energy. The will

S: Right. But it's not so much that the will literally creates the physical form, but organises pre-existing matter into a form adapted to that will. It is said that if you vibrate a certain musical note over a tray of sand, the sand will arrange itself in a certain pattern; so it's a bit like that, the musical note embodies itself in that pattern, but the sand is already there. Has anyone actually tried that experiment? I've often meant to, but I've never actually got round to it. These are really questions that haven't been properly gone into in traditional Buddhist thought, though the Yogacarins have gone into it to some extent. Perhaps it is the sort of question that is likely to arise in the mind of the Western Buddhist, at least. Ratnaprabha, of course, is bringing out a book on evolution - Buddhism in terms of evolution; he has gone into the lower evolution in much greater detail than I have done in my own lectures. So I hope the book will be out before very long.

And, of course, in Platonism and neo-Platonism, they talk about what we would describe as evolution as being influenced or even controlled by a higher world of archetypes, archetypal forms, which the material world is progressively trying to embody, without ever being able really to do so. But that is perhaps all rather speculative.

Anyway, I think that's all - yes, all the questions.

[End of tape and of session]

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