

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 [Mitrās](#). These seminars were highly formative for the FWBO/Triratna 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 Triratna 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 [Triratna 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

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This transcript has not been checked by Sangharakshita, and may contain mistakes and mishearings. Checked and reprinted copies of all seminars will be available as part of the [Complete Works Project](#).

if you've seen the original, you'll realise the difference at once. So yes, certainly a hierarchy could be established in this way. But perhaps it's not only a hierarchy in the sort of vertical sense, but perhaps at each stage you have to distinguish a near and a far enemy. So that you've got, as it were, three columns of terms. One in the middle representing the different degrees or levels of compassion proper, one on the left representing the corresponding degrees of the near enemy, and one on the right representing the corresponding degrees of the far enemy. Perhaps someone could work that all out.

Padmavajra: Related to the three degrees of compassion traditionally...

S: I didn't say necessarily to them, but compassion in the real sense, yes, one could certainly do it in that particular way. Possibly in other ways too.

Vessantara: One last question left over from last time. In the second lecture you used, purely by way of illustrating your point, the descent of the Holy Ghost on the apostles as a way of helping to understand the Bodhicitta. If you had a Christian who were to equate the descent of the Holy Ghost and the Bodhicitta, what would be the most fruitful line of argument to disabuse them ?

S: Well, I don't see that one needs disabuse them because if a Christian came to think of the descent of the Holy Ghost in those terms it might be a very good thing (laughter). I don't think one need assume that the wretched Christian is always in the wrong! (laughter) I think we can venture to be a little ecumenical sometimes. I don't know. I think it would depend very much on who that person actually was and in what sense, or what spirit even, they were making that statement. I don't think there is a sort of cut and dried answer to that question, taken as a sort of cut and dried question! out of context, apart from the particular person who happened to ask it.

Vessantara: Some of these questions are now, in some way, connected with the third lecture. Perhaps we can start with a 'Christian' question.

S: Hmm.

Devamitra: In the Christian tradition the monk takes three life-long vows; of chastity, poverty, and obedience...

S: Depends which order he belongs to, but we'll leave that aside.

Devamitra: In the Buddhist tradition the bikkhu takes a precept of chastity, so there's that degree of common ground. And the lifestyle of the bikkhu is one of simplicity, and therefore really of poverty also. But as far as I'm aware there's no reference in the Vinaya to obedience. And I was wondering - well, in fact the distinction

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sometimes made between (the) Buddhist monk and the Christian monk that, well the Buddhist monk doesn't observe obedience, and this is quite a big difference between the two. But I was wondering if there's ever been any Buddhist tradition in which obedience is an accepted and important discipline. So that's the first question. Secondly, if so, are there any important differences between the Buddhist conception of the term and the Christian conception. Thirdly, do you see any sense in which obedience could be regarded as a quality of the True Individual. And fourthly (laughter) could you point to any circumstances in which obedience could be a useful discipline to observe in the FWBO ?

S: Well, first of all, with regard to the Christian monk and the Buddhist monk, certainly there is common ground in respect of the precept of celibacy or chastity. There is also common ground in respect of the rule, or the precept, of poverty, because in most Christian monastic orders poverty means that you have only very, very limited personal property, but you have a share in the common property of your order or your community. And it's exactly the same in the case of the Buddhist monk. The Buddhist monk has as his personal property only the .. (Skt.)... , strictly speaking they're only requisites, but he has a share in the common property, a share in the sense that he may freely use the common property of, usually, his monastery, or his (a~va~sa)? strictly speaking. But certainly there is some difference with regard to the third vow taken by the Christian monk in many instances. I don't

even know that there is a common Pali word for instance, for obedience. Which is perhaps rather interesting. I have given a little bit of thought to this particular matter in recent years though I must say not very much. If I just sort of mentally glance through the different schools of Buddhism and Buddhist literature I can't find that obedience, or what we would think of as obedience, is stressed, or is considered of any importance except in two schools and two traditions.

First of all, in the Vajrayana. Where it would seem, to use that term, obedience, the disciple is expected to obey the guru unconditionally. That would seem to be one of the messages of, say, the life of Milarepa, the life of Marpa, the life of Naropa. They all seem to convey that lesson among others. That the disciple is expected to obey the guru unconditionally. This may be connected with the fact that in the Vajrayana tradition the disciple is encouraged, so to speak, to think of the guru as the Buddha, even identify the guru with the Buddha and the Buddha with the guru. And of course if you

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believe that your guru is the Buddha, the Buddha incarnate so to speak, well you could hardly disobey him. And then of course the other tradition is the Zen tradition, where it would seem, perhaps in a somewhat different sort of way, that the disciple is expected to obey the roshi in the sense of implicitly accepting and following any advice or guidance that he may give.

So the question arises, why is that? What is that obedience? And is it the same thing as obedience in Christianity. Was that your second question?

Devamitra: Yes.

S: How did you phrase it?

Devamitra: Well first of all I said, has there ever been any tradition in which obedience was accepted as an important discipline? If so, are there any important differences between the Buddhist and the Christian conception of the term?

S: Well yes, this is the question which in a sense I'm asking myself. Because I'm not sure that the phenomenon which we might describe as obedience in the case of the Tantric disciple and obedience in the case of the Zen, or Chan, disciple, is, in fact, obedience in the Christian sense. So that raises the question of what one means by obedience, and I think we probably need to go into that. What does one mean by obedience? In the simplest terms, looking at it (as it were) just externally, obedience means that if somebody asks you, or tells you more especially, to do something, you do it without any question. But perhaps here too there can be different levels, even different kinds of obedience, because surely there can be different reasons why you obey. You can for instance obey, surely, out of fear. And perhaps you can also obey out of love. In the case of the Christian monk, I believe, roughly speaking, that the ideology, or the line of thinking is as follows:

Whom do you obey? You obey your abbot, your father abbot. And why do you obey him? You obey him because God has placed him over you. His is (as it were) your natural superior, and it is only right and proper that you should obey your natural superior because the powers that be, in St Paul's language, are ordained of God. So just as it is right and proper for the knight to obey his lord, right and proper for the nobleman to obey his king, to whom he has sworn allegiance, in the same way it is only right and proper that the monk should obey his abbot. So I think, especially in the middle ages, there was a certain sort of feudal element, or flavour, to monastic obedience. I did query at the beginning whether all monks took a vow of obedience,

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and that was because I believe, as far as I remember, that at the beginning of Christian monastic life, that is to say in the case of St Benedict and the Benedictines (and all that) there was not in fact a vow of obedience, that came later, possibly (I'm only hypothesising here) in connection with the development of feudalism. But again that isn't the whole of the matter as regards even Christianity and Christian obedience. One mustn't forget that Christianity saw man as sinful; with some reason,

(laughter) some justification; and for that reason Christ~lanity saw man (in as it were more psychological terms) as fundamentally, basically, egoistic; as self-willed; and as needing to deny himself (I mean after all that was an important part of Christianity) to deny oneself, to deny one's own will. Which because of one's sinfulness, because of original sin, was opposed to the will of God. So the will of God came through your father abbot. And you not only obeyed that because it was the right and proper thing to do, but you obeyed it because by obeying it you negated your own self-will, you denied yourself. And that was a very important element in monastic life or monastic practice.

So one can see, therefore, that obedience has these different senses. Obedience can mean these different things, and that there can be various motivations for obedience. I think in modern times, in the West, we tend to think of obedience almost entirely in negative terms. We think of obedience in terms of obedience out of fear; in submission, unwilling submission, to some superior power; of obeying because you have to and not because you want to. I think many people, if not the majority, have practically lost the conception of obedience out of love. In fact I think quite a lot of people, maybe even some of you, will find it difficult actually to think of obedience in this sort of way, that you obey someone, that you do what they want you to do, just out of love, or out of conviction (say) that they really and truly do know better. You are not submitting, you are actually willingly and happily accepting their will in a particular matter. And in this way, yes, you're not perhaps denying yourself in the Christian sense, but you are certainly transcending your one-sided individualism. And I think, to

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go back to something which has been discussed in the movement a bit recently, that is co-operativeness. I think there's no possibility of co-operation if you're not prepared, sometimes, to (as it were) sacrifice your own will, and give up having your own way. And this is in a way somewhat akin to obedience, though here one might say paradoxically, and even contradictory, it's an obedience as between equals and not as between (so to speak) inferior and superior.

But to come on to what was I think the fourth question, perhaps I've skipped the third question, we'll see, I think there can be a place in Buddhist spiritual life for obedience so-defined. And perhaps we miss something in not developing this particular quality. And perhaps one can say that the individual is, among other things, one who is able to obey where obedience is appropriate. Perhaps you could link it up with respect and worship - there is that verse of the Mangala Sutta " (quotes in Pali) "Reverence to those who are worthy of reverence". So you might also say 'Obedience to those who are worthy of obedience'. It's a free obedience. And if you really do reverence someone you will obey them. You'll have the sort of confidence, the trust, that they will have your best interests at heart. But I think even that doesn't exhaust the full, in a sense even the crucial, significance of obedience, which does seem to involve some, to some extent, painful sacrifice or some will, or wish, or inclination, or preference of your own. I think that's the real crux and the real crunch (as it were). And I think that's where so many people fall down. It's as though you happily accept the frustration of your own egoistic will, if that doesn't sound contradictory. Did I miss out your third question?

Devamitra: Well you glanced upon it in a way - it was the fourth one actually. I said could you point to any circumstances in which obedience would be a useful discipline to observe in the FWBO?

S: Ah. I've not really touched on circumstances. Well, perhaps it's more likely that you'll be able to think of an example than me? But yes, I can think of an example, I can think of an example from my own experience which I've related in my memoirs. Where I was dumped, one might say, in Kalimpong,

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and told to work for Buddhism there, you know, by my then teacher, Bikshu Kashyapji , which I proceeded to do. I mean I could have raised all sorts of objections, after all I was only twenty-five, I wasn't even a bikkhu then, I was only a samanera, and I didn't know the local languages, Nepalese and Tibetan. I hadn't thought of ever staying in Kalimpong, I mean I'd rather have gone on studying in Benares. I must say I didn't think in those terms, I didn't think of myself as being obedient, I was, one might say, quite happy to do as I was told. So that's an example.

Lalitavajra: (unclear) ... a differentiation in having read

Thomas Merton.

S: That's right, yes

Abhaya: So if you dumped one of us in the middle of Sheffield...

S: Well, this is what I sometimes - er (laughter) I mean one hears of Order Members and prospective Order Members thinking in such terms as 'Well maybe I'd like to start a FWBO Centre in - well - maybe California would do, I think I'd like it there, I think I'd enjoy myself there People don't very often think in terms of: 'Where is an FWBO Centre needed, and where could I be of the most help and most use'. They often think in very sort of subjective... I really suspect that in some cases if I... what to speak of ordered, but asked, suggested that some of those should go and start a Centre in such-and-such a place, they'd react perhaps with shock and horror: 'What me? In that sort of place?' (laughter) So that shows how far we are in the West from all sorts of Buddhist virtues. (Laughter)

But try to sort of think or feel your way into that mental state which you have to be in, or need to be in, in order to be able to obey; in a positive sense, not out of fear, or anything of that sort. It's something we don't think in terms of, and it goes very much against the grain, I know, for a lot of people, that the greatest misfortune, not to say the greatest insult, is to be told what to do. Ric Cooney: In the Thousand Petalled Lotus, Bhante, you actually seem to have made a conscious decision to do that. ... (unclear) .. you did that as a young Buddhist...

S: Yes, for instance, I mean, I did get that idea out of reading that book by Thomas Merton: "Seeds of Contemplation".

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Because here was my teacher Jagdish Kashyap, who was a very pleasant easy going, friendly, unpretentious person, who was always asking me, well 'what would you like to do' or 'where should we go' and it struck me well, this was really inappropriate. I mean he shouldn't be asking me, I should be doing just whatever he wanted to do. He would say 'Would you like to go for a walk' and I'd say 'Yes' or 'No' as the case might be. But then it struck me that it just wasn't suitable, wasn't appropriate, that I ought to go along with whatever he wanted to do. So I did adopt that attitude thereafter. And as the culmination of that I suppose I just stayed in Kalimpong as he'd asked me to do so. I don't think any harm came of it (laughter).

Padmavajra: Would you like to tell people, or even suggest to people, to do things more, or do you feel that the movement needs to change some more before that can happen?

S: Well, it is a very big responsibility, that you should tell somebody what to do. Not just make a suggestion that they might accept or not accept, but actually to tell them what to do. And I think - well, what to speak of telling people what to do - I don't often even advise people what to do. But I think, in the case of Order Members, it ought to be possible that where I actually see that there is a need for people to be told to do something, it should be possible for them to accept that. I think if it is not possible for them to accept that, then there is something lacking in them, there is some positive quality which they haven't yet developed. And I think they would lose, themselves, if they were asked, or even told, to do something in that sort of way, and they were not able to accept it, and act accordingly. I think it would definitely be a loss so far as they were concerned, and one that they relented on.

Ric Cooney: I remember thinking about this earlier, Bhante, It struck me we could approach it more as an apprentice, more in the (old)? sense. Maybe we could actually think more in those terms. (unclear) ...

S: Yes, yes. But of course you have to be convinced that the master is a master. I mean if another apprentice tells you to do something, or someone that you consider another apprentice, well you're not likely to respond very positively. Though perhaps even there you should, because there are, after

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all, senior apprentices and junior apprentices. But some people are prone to consider as an order even a sort of modest or diffident request, they are so sensitive, so touchy, they don't want to be told what to do, by anybody. I think this is a very unfortunate trait indeed. It creates a lot of trouble - people say, well 'Who is he to tell me what to do?', 'Who is he to order me around?' This is the sort of reaction that one sometimes gets, and this why very often it's very difficult for even groups of Order Members to function together as a team. I'm afraid this is a little bit on my mind at the moment because I've been in correspondence with Order Members of a certain Centre in particular in connection with this very issue. And it is really so unfortunate.

In some ways I'm at a loss to understand how it comes about that people have got this resistance to (as it were) being told what to do. I suppose it's all connected with pseudo-liberalism, pseudo-egalitarianism, and all those other ghastly... (laughter) Anyway, if Devamitra's four questions have been answered perhaps we can leave it there.

Prasanasiddhi: Could you say that... I mean in Christianity obedience is a bit more sort of fixed, in a way, inasmuch as maybe you need to be told to do something, and if you sort of felt actually maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea, you might be almost forced to do something.

S: Ah, yes. I must add one or two things here. First of all one thing I've noticed reading biographies of Christian monks, and nuns for that matter, is that they do make a distinction in their monastic life between something which is said, as they put it, "under obedience", and something which is not said under obedience. Supposing the father abbot, or the Mother Superior, said 'Please go and do so- and-so.' You might say 'Well no, I don't think I should'. And they might accept that. But if they thought you really should, then they would say 'I'm asking you to do it under obedience'. Then you absolutely have to do it. I mean if you don't, well you just have to leave the monastery or the nunnery. So I think it's quite interesting that the distinction is made, even in Christian monastic life, that it's not a question of obeying each and every little (almost)

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whim (as it were) of the abbot or the Mother Superior, but it's only when it comes to the crunch (as it were) that the abbot or Mother Superior has that power (so to speak) to invoke the vow of obedience. But it's not done on every occasion. So there is perhaps a little more freedom in Christian monasteries than one might have thought. What was your question?

Prasanasiddhi: I was just wondering if obedience was more fixed, inasmuch as if you actually felt that it wasn't a good idea you'd be forced to do it anyway, without...

S: Ah, yes... I read a biography of Thomas Merton by Monica Furlong, an extremely good biography, as a biography, and Merton emerges as a very interesting character. He was of course a Trappist monk who became interested in Zen and oriental thought, and he wrote a lot of books: some good and some not so good, on various aspects of Zen and comparative religion and comparative mysticism, monastic life and so on. But reading this biography, it does seem that the vow of obedience was his great burden for so many years of his life. He did have what would seem, as far as - one can make out, to have been a quite unsympathetic and un-understanding superior. And therefore Merton always found the vow of obedience coming in the way. Or rather (perhaps I shouldn't put it that way) perhaps one should say rather it would seem that the Father Superior sort of used the fact that Merton was under a vow of obedience in a way that it probably wasn't meant to be used even within the context of Christian monastic life. And that made things very difficult for Merton, because sometimes he would think, 'Well

maybe God is testing me, maybe the Father Superior is absolutely wrong, he doesn't know what he's talking about, but he is my superior under God, and I ought just to give up my own will, or crush my own will, and just obey.'

In the end what happened - he could not honestly obey. He was unable, for various reasons, to leave the order. So it's quite clear that what he did, he started evading the vow of obedience, which wasn't really a very good thing from a spiritual point of view. He never really cleanly confronted the issue. Though one got the impression that had he not met with a tragic death, as he finally did,

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accidental death, within a few years he might well have left the Trappist order. If that had happened it would have been on this issue of obedience. So I think, as I mentioned earlier on, it's not only a question of a very positive attitude of the person obeying, but also, even more so perhaps, a very positive attitude - not only - positive but almost an illumined or enlightened attitude - on the part of the person actually giving the order, so to speak. Because, you know, you're dealing with another person's life, and you can't play about with that.

Prasanasiddhi: I suppose you could perhaps say that in a sense, that in Buddhist monasteries in the past, there would have been this... where the head abbot who'd given a lot of trouble to a discipl~, maybe in an unskilful way.

S: One does get that impression, that some Zen masters (or others)? who have done that, especially with their Western disciples. One gets the impression that it wasn't always, or isn't always, the obtuseness of the Western disciple. It is sometimes the limitations and even blindness of the Eastern master. I must say that I myself, in certain instances, have got that impression quite definitely. So, I would say that perhaps this whole question of obedience is one that we need to talk about more and explore more and think about more within the movement.

Vessantara: There are some questions connected with your equating the Bodhicitta and Stream Entry as different aspects of the same experience.

S: This is still left over from...?

Vessantara: Well, it sort of follows on. It arises out of further discussion.

S: O.K.

Ric Cooney: When we look at the teachings of the bhumis not from the historical perspective but from this other perspective of Stream Entry, which implies irreversibility, which equates with the arising of the Bodhicitta. (Could there seemingly be some meaning in the teachings themselves)? The Bodhicitta not arising till the eighth stage, logically it follows...

S: No, it's irreversibility .

Ric cooney: .. .not arising till the eighth stage. It would appear then that the first seven could logically be the path of the aspirant Bodhisattva. What I was actually wondering was can we actually look at the teachings in this way when we have this sort of (phenomenon)? or apply this new perspective to it? Should we just accept that the teachings cannot really be correlated in this way and that they can only really be seen apart in the historical perspective.

S: Yes. I don't think they can be correlated point by point. I don't think that is possible, because the developments have been too diverse and over too many centuries even. But none- theless I think we need to be able to correlate them to some extent in the interests of our own spiritual life and our own spiritual development, otherwise we find ourselves in what is really the quite impossible situation

of having, say, to choose between the Mahayana and the Hinayana, the Bodhisattva Ideal and the Arahant Ideal, as though they really did represent separate and distinct paths. Whereas my main point is, of course, that they don't represent separate and distinct paths, that the spiritual path is only one for all in a sense. As the Siddharma-pundarika sutra in fact teaches. And that the path of the so-called Arahant and the path of the so-called Bodhisattva are only different aspects, different ways of looking at that one path. But that doesn't mean that one can correlate all the details of those paths, or presentations of those paths as worked out in Buddhist tradition, with one another. I don't think that can be done, and perhaps we shouldn't try to do it, perhaps we should be satisfied with just a sort of general correlation, or understanding the general principle or spirit of the thing. Otherwise, if we aim at a point by point correlation I think we fall victim to another type of literalism.

Vessantara: Does that leave us, as it were, in practical terms, aiming at Insight, with the various repercussions of that, and...

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I mean it almost seems to me as if that traditional descriptions almost as museum pieces which in a way aren't relevant to us.

S: It leaves them as museum pieces to the extent that one takes to the extent that they reflect any sort of tendency to regard the two main ideals, the Arahant and the Bodhisattva ideals, as literally distinct, as really different.

Vessantara: It seems that people actually see... if you equate these then you begin to run into anomalies when you get to...

S: Oh yes indeed. Because they developed separately, without reference to each other, eventually. So I think one has to take the gist of the matter, and take the historical material as, sort of, illustrative. Not to take it too literally. For instance when one thinks or speaks in terms of insight, well, to think and speak in terms of prajna, and to take, as it were, the Mahayana point that prajna is not really separable from compassion, or compassion from wisdom, because much of the traditional Hinayana would seem to suggest that compassion can, in fact, be separated from wisdom. Whereas I think the records of the Buddha's own teaching, and the Buddha's own life, seem to suggest that it cannot be separated in that sort of way. But if you get a path subsequently worked out by followers of the Hinayana entirely in terms of wisdom, or so-called wisdom, with no reference to compassion, well, one cannot really find that very useful or very helpful, not in its entirety. Though you might find a point that is made here, or a point that is made there, of some use. But you cannot really take seriously a working out of the spiritual path entirely in terms of insight, or entirely in terms of prajna, apparently as entirely divorced from compassion. And that must be a museum piece for you!

Vessantara: Antonio has a question on the ten great vows that you mention. S: By the way, at the beginning I say, apparently, that there are ten great vows by a slip of the tongue, where I really mean four, although somewhere else I do refer to an actual ten.

Antonio Perez: In trying to see the relevance of the ten vows to I found that the first two... actually they were quite easy to understand, but we come to the third one...

S: Which one is that?

Antonio Perez: That is "to see all the incidents of the earthly career of a Buddha". I couldn't quite understand how can one actually vow to do that?

S: Well, one mustn't forget that the traditional Mahayana presentation of the Bodhisattva Ideal and the Bodhisattva career envisages that career extending over three asamkheyyas of kalpas. And therefore as covering innumerable lifetimes. And during those lifetimes you'll be born during the lifetime of quite a number of different Buddhas: in contact with them in some way or other, even perhaps their disciple. So in the course of all those lifetimes which you (as it were) share with different Buddhas, you'll have the opportunity of seeing all the events in the life of a Buddha from the very beginning. You know: when

he is born - you may be a god on that occasion just watching from heaven; you may be perhaps the Buddha's charioteer or you may be one of the Buddha's concubines or you may be one of the five disciples who (4 words unclear) but anyway in one way or another in the course of all these lives - in the course of all these incarnations, so to speak, you make a vow that you will see the whole of the Buddha's - or the whole of a Buddha's life in all its different events, you will be a witness to the whole series of the events in the life of a Buddha. This is what that signifies. Now, how we take that, whether we take it literally or maybe in some other way, is an entirely different matter. But that is what the vow means: you make a vow to be a spectator, at some time or another, or in some way or other, to all the different events, especially the outstanding events, of a Buddha's life, because (again, according to general Buddhist teaching) the life of every Buddha follows a sort of standard pattern. (You know) his mother always dies seven days after his birth, and he always has two chief disciples, and he always gains Enlightenment seated under a certain tree, et cetera, et cetera. That is (sort of) general Buddhist teaching. But anyway that is roughly what that particular vow means.

Antonio Perez: Can that be relevant to us?

S: This of course assumes that it isn't relevant in that form. (laughter) Perhaps we ought to be clear about that first - well perhaps it is still, but perhaps it isn't. One way of looking at it is that one acquaints oneself through literature with the life story of the Buddha. You could look at it in that way. That wasn't so easy in the past as it is now, though of course got many different accounts of the life of the Buddha. You might also say, well, why is it that the Bodhisattva makes that vow anyway, taking it even quite literally. He wants to inspire himself with the Buddha's example. Not by seeing just this incident or that episode but by seeing the whole story right the way through from beginning to end, like seeing the whole film (as it were), not just a few frames here and there. But to inspire himself.

Of course it must be much more inspiring actually to see those episodes for real (so to speak) than to read about them. But even to read about them can be very inspiring too. So perhaps we can take it in that way, or make it - in our modern, very limited, unbelieving (sort of) point of view - real and inspiring. This is a quite common, one might even say popular Bodhisattva Vow. That you (as it were) accompany a Buddha throughout all the different stages of his career, you're witness to them all in one form or another. I think it may well be that some of these different ways of putting things are not very relevant to us now or a bit incomprehensible. I think we ought to make, to begin with some sort of attempt at least to grasp them imaginatively - what they mean and what they involve. Not be in too much of a hurry to make them relevant to our present (sort of) conditioned, almost an in a rationalistic sort of way. I think we must allow ourselves to linger over them a bit and at least contemplate the possibility of taking them quite literally. If you see what I mean. I think we must grasp them imaginatively first before deciding whether to take them literally or not. Anyway...?

Antonio Perez: Well it's... I've heard of instances of people

actually taking vows and subsequently breaking them...

S: I'm afraid I've heard of such instances too. (laughter)

Antonio Perez: ... and it seems to suggest that they didn't really know what they were doing, they weren't actually ready to take that step. Could you say what factors must be present before actually taking a vow?

S: One can generalise to a certain extent, though perhaps only to a limited extent. First of all you must know yourself, obviously. And in particular you must be sure that you're sufficiently integrated to be able to take the vow. And the vow, you might say, is a promise in a very extreme form, or a promise of a very extreme type - and some people can't even keep promises. They promise, you know, to meet you tomorrow at two o'clock and they don't turn up, often for no really valid reason. So if they can't even keep... or if you can't even keep a promise of that ordinary type, it's very very unlikely that you're going to be able to keep a real, serious, significant, spiritual vow. So if you're of that divided psyche, as it were, you shouldn't think, perhaps, of making a vow. Also another factor is that you should

consult your spiritual friends. And take, or make, your vow only with their agreement and concurrence and support, because they may well know you perhaps a bit better than you know yourself, and they may know better than you do whether you're going to be able to keep it, or whether you even have a chance of keeping it. So I think one needs to consult one's spiritual friends. I also think the vow shouldn't be too ambitious. Somebody came to me - this was years ago - saying that they wanted to take a vow of life-long celibacy. They were quite young. So I said, No, wait a minute, I think maybe you should try for three months (laughter). Of course I don't remember the details but they didn't in the end take that vow of life-long celibacy, because that's not an easy (unclear) obviously. So I think one needs to take or make one's vows in small doses - maybe get in training for them. Especially when they relate to major things. If it's for instance a question of a vow to give up smoking, I think probably you can, if you're reasonably developed human being take a vow to give that up for life. I think if you're an Order member and couldn't it would be really quite disgraceful. But a vow of celibacy for life, or a vow that you're going to meditate for two hours every day for life. I think that requires that you test yourself a bit more. Take it say for a month, then two months, six months, then maybe for a year. I think maybe that sort of approach is necessary... is required. I can't think of any other factors or considerations at the moment but there may well be others.

Antonio Perez: I was thinking in terms of say, you make it public...

S: Oh yes, I take it that a vow, within the context of the Movement (3 words unclear) that means that. I mention in the case of the Bodhisattva's vow, it's a public vow. And of course you do take that vow in front of, say, the assembled Order, or in front of a number of friends. Obviously that does give it a weight and a seriousness which it might not otherwise possess. The fact that you've got all these witnesses means that the thought of that helps to keep you up to scratch. Because it

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becomes then not just a question of letting yourself down, but letting them down. And you don't want to do that. So I'm afraid that some years ago people did take vows rashly and lightly, despite everything that was said. I think nowadays people tend (I'm talking about the Order mainly) to go to the other extreme and not take vows at all. I did hear of one particular chapter where they had a rather useful ... I think it was one particular session ... they sort of sat around and I think each one, after a sort of general, friendly character appraisal, gave each of the others a precept which he thought that particular person ought to observe. And they reported back in subsequent weeks on the success or otherwise in observing that precept. And it seems to have worked very well, it was all done in a very amicable sort of way, a friendly sort of way. The precepts were accepted quite happily and the people concerned really did make an effort to put them into practice, and it seems to have had beneficial results all round. So that was quite encouraging - it wasn't exactly a vow, they were given (so to speak) a precept by another Order member and ... I can't remember any actual example ... I think one example was that one particular Order member had to rest more (laughter). And he did make a sincere effort to rest more ... there were others too. Yes, so that falls short of a vow, but it does represent training (as it were) to make you ready for taking a vow. And of course there are the Ten Precepts that you already have, as Order members (sic), and those are to be taken with full seriousness. And perhaps one shouldn't be in a hurry to take vows before one is satisfied that one is already observing the Ten Precepts as well as one possibly can, because they, also, really are vows.

Vessantara: Jonathan had a question about the four vows.

S: The four Great Vows.

Jonathan Brazier: You didn't say where they came from. Do we know?

S: They do come from the Mahayana sutras. I can't quote you offhand any particular sutra, but they are found in several Mahayana sutras. And as I think I've indicated in the lecture they are quite well known throughout the Far East and often repeated - in a general way, within the context of a puja. It seems to be assumed that every practising Mahayana Buddhist would wish to take those vows, at least in that particular way. Because in a way they do reflect the essence of the Bodhisattva Ideal. If you take the Bodhisattva Ideal seriously you must be trying very hard to function in those four ways, as formulated by those four vows. And you'll certainly try to help people in difficulties; you'll certainly try to get rid of your own negative mental states; you'll certainly try to master the Dharma in all its different forms, and you'll certainly do your best to help other people along the spiritual path and

(unclear). So those vows really are implicit not just to the Mahayana path or the Bodhisattva Ideal but in Buddhism itself. These represent ways in which the 'ordinary' (inverted commas) Buddhist should be behaving all the time.

Vessantara: Susiddhi had a question about mastering all dharmas.

Susiddhi: Could I clear something (I'm sure it'll only take a

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second) from the previous answer. "Compassion which has dharmas as its object" Is that dharmas in the sense of teachings?

S: This is dharmas in the sense of those ultimate elements of existence to which, according to the Hinayana, the so-called personality is reduced. First you've got the personality, taken as something real, a being, a sattva, a jiva(?) , an atta(?), a soul - this is the common sense view. And then the Hinayana reduces this so-called personality to its constituent psycho- physical phenomena. These, considered as ultimate (unclear) are termed 'dharmas'. And then of course the Mahayana reduces those dharmas, or dharmas in that sense, to The Void. So it is dharmas in that sense which is the object of compassion in the second sense. So dharmas here in the context of these vows, means 'teachings'. In other words, it has a different sense.

Susiddhi: Thanks for explaining. I have quite a mundane early- day(?) question. This just came to me when I was reading about the Bodhisattva mastering all dharmas. Are there any specific skills or subjects which you would like to see individual Order members mastering? Either for the future strength of the Move- ment or so that you yourself could have access to those skills.

S: This isn't anything to which I've given systematic attention, but it does seem that individual Order members to function properly and effectively perhaps need all sorts of skills. For instance if one is running a centre, if the centre becomes of any size, you need people who, in addition to being spiritually committed, are good at administration, who know something about accounts, who know something about law. If you've got Order members running a community they need perhaps to know a bit about repair and decoration, and building and gardening and cooking. And one can obviously add to that list almost indefinitely. But clearly in all these cases the skills need to be subordinate to the spiritual commitment. As regards skills that would be particularly useful, I think, at the moment, just speaking, say, straight off the cuff, I think I'd like to see more Order members acquiring those skills which are directly associated with the propagation of the Dharma. Not nearly enough Order members are able to speak effectively and clearly. When I say speak I don't mean just in the sense of giving lectures - even conversing. Of course I'd like to see more Order members able to give good lectures, not just lectures in the technical sense, but lectures which really did give expression in an adequate and convincing and inspiring way to their own spiritual commitment, their own understanding of the Dharma. I'd like to see Order members do much more in the way of writing about the Dharma - writing articles, writing reviews, producing books, giving interviews on radio and TV. I'd like to see them developing those skills. I'd like to see them developing more artistic skills. I'd like to see more paintings, and more icons (if you like) of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, more frescos, more inspiring and traditional (in the best sense) Buddha images and Bodhisattva images and Padmasambhava images, and all the rest of it. I'd like to see more Order members acquiring skills such as those of editing. I think really it's a pity that I have to spend time editing my own material, transcripts of my own seminars and even lectures. It would be very, very helpful, if some Order members could acquire the skills necessary to do that editing work. Which means acquiring linguistic skills. A proper command of grammar, use of language, mastering the art or science

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of punctuation, and all the rest of it. And also an understanding of the dharma too, and of my way of thinking and expressing myself. I'd like to see more Order members acquiring skills connected with, say, book production, editing magazines and the taking of photographs for magazines and books on the dharma. There's that whole range of skills, I think, that many more Order members need to acquire. Perhaps even typesetting skills, printing skills, marketing skills. Otherwise we might... y'know, we have a very good product, so to speak: that is to say, the FWBO itself, and the dharma as understood by

us, but we're really (so to speak) marketing it properly. We need also people to acquire translating skills. I mean the English (and this includes the Scots - the British let me say) are woefully, inadequate in this field. If you go to Finland you find that practically every person you meet knows four or five languages. In Britain you're fortunate if the person that you meet knows even English at all well (laughter). What to speak of having effective command of a second language, it's comparatively rare. So I think more people must acquire skills in their own language, English if it is English, and also in French, German, Italian, Spanish - at least. Otherwise, I mean, how effective are we going to be on the continent? How are we going to be able to communicate with people on the continent? I mean are we going to expect them always to learn English or to (entertain?) English. It just isn't possible. So these are just some of the skills that occur to me just at the moment. I think they're very, very important. You can along without knowing much about bricklaying, at least I always have managed (laughter). At a pinch you can get along without knowing much about cooking or accountancy. But as an effective Order member you can't get along without, you know, some skill in communicating the dharma. Among those skills you might even include academic experience, the acquisition even of professional qualifications, academic degrees of various kinds so that you are enabled to function in certain important or influential fields - and listened to, seriously. Recently I got a letter from an Order member who happens to be particularly highly qualified in some particular field, and she's managed to tie up an academic subject with a bit of Buddhism, and to go into that under the auspices of her university. But she's able to do it not because of her interest in Buddhism, but entirely on account of her position in the university, and her university degrees. Otherwise however versed she might have been in Buddhism she just wouldn't have stood a chance, she wouldn't have been allowed to do that.

So those sort of qualifications are also helpful and sometimes even necessary, and can be regarded as skills that one needs, or some people might need, for the sake of spreading the dharma.

Vessantara: Greg has a question about...

Greg Shanks: I was wondering whether there was a tradition that's come down to us concerning the vows of Maitreya Shakyamuni beyond the four great vows ...

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S: I'm not aware special tradition with regard to the vows of Maitreya. Presumably he must have made vows otherwise he wouldn't be a Bodhisattva at all. But I don't remember any reference to them. There are, I know, various sutras connected with Maitreya, I'm not aware of any that have been translated - there might be information in those, it's quite possible. There's a lot still untranslated in Chinese and Tibetan that may well come to light later on.

Greg Shanks: And Shakyamuni? Is there any tradition there?

S: I don't recollect any vows of Shakyamuni. No. But again, Where's no reason why there should not be in some sutra here and there. Y'know, some record of such vows. Offhand I can't say that I've ever come across any reference to this particular vow. The most famous set of vows, I think, of a Buddha, probably, are those which Amitabha Buddha is believed to have taken - as a Bodhisattva or as a monk - as Dharmakara, the monk's, forty-eight vows.

Vessantara: Wade has a question.

Wade McKee: You mention that the four great vows are recited daily in all centres of Mahayana Buddhism. You also say in the lecture that they are an expression of the arising of the Bodhicitta in the individual. Can the vows operate in the same way as the different levels of Going for Refuge? In that you also say that the Bodhisattva Vow is one of the most important practical aspects ...

S: Yes. One can certainly look at it in that way. One can look at the Bodhicitta, the Bodhisattva Vow, the Bodhisattva Ideal, in the same way that I've looked at the Going for Refuge. Just because Going for Refuge does correspond to Stream Entry, in a sense, and the arising of the Bodhicitta corresponds to Stream Entry itself. You can have a sort of ethnic level, you can have a formal level, you can have an effective level, and you can have a real and an absolute level. One can work out all those sort of combinations. So one might say in the case of the ordinary Mahayana Buddhist who's been born in a Mahayana country, more or less unthinkingly recites these vows and so on. Well, that is the case of, one might say, the ethnic arising of the Bodhicitta. And then of course you've got, let's say - what do I call it? What's the next term?...

Devamitra: Provisional.

S: Provisional, huh? There's the provisional arising where, in all sincerity, one recites the formula for the arising of the Bodhicitta, and regards it as an actual spiritual practice, but where the Bodhicitta, as a Transcendental experience has not actually arisen or occurred. And then of course there comes the level of the Real arising of the Bodhicitta where, yes, it does actually arise. And then of course the Absolute arising, which is of course a non-arising, and which of course is the Absolute Bodhicitta itself as distinct from the relative Bodhicitta, which is of course the previous Bodhicitta. So, yes, one can certainly work out a set of correlations in that sort of way.

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Vessantara: Have you ever thought of having those four vows as (part of??) the FWBO?

S: Even though the arising of the Bodhicitta is, in a sense, synonymous with Stream Entry, and that is again, in a sense, synonymous with Going for Refuge. And even though: -yes, we do recite the Refuges - nonetheless the Bodhicitta, the arising of the Bodhicitta in the Mahayana has a sort of aura of associations. It has a quite (as it were) distinctive flavour, a sort of definite flavour of the Transcendental. So that I'm rather inclined to feel that it shouldn't be taken, or shouldn't be invoked, (as it were) lightly. Because the wording is (as it were) rather extreme. For instance supposing you say, well, I vow to deliver all beings. All beings means all beings. So I think one shouldn't take that lightly or repeat those words lightly. Even though, yes, they do correspond to the act of Going for Refuge, the implications of Going for Refuge are tremendous, they are no less (one might say) than the implications- of the arising of the Bodhicitta. But they're not made so explicit. You can sincerely and honestly say, well, yes, I Go for Refuge. But can you, in the same way, with equal sincerity, actually say "I vow to deliver all beings"? Is it, or can it be, for you, an equally real statement? So therefore I'm rather reluctant that we should include statements and utterances of that sort in a puja which people recite or repeat, and not be able to recite those words in the way, presumably, that they should be recited. I think this is an instance of the Mahayana 5 "way-out-ness", which has certainly got its own meaning and its own value, and certainly reveals a cosmic perspective, which (as it were) is actually there, and it makes explicit that cosmic perspective. But such sort of formulations, such revelations, of cosmic perspective do not seem to lend themselves to casual recitation - or even very serious recitation in the ordinary sense. So therefore I've not encouraged the recitation of those vows, in that sort of way. We do have, in any case, the sevenfold puja, and we do have that transference of merits at the end. And I think really that's quite enough, and that one or two people do actually recite these four vows in the course of their own private devotions, and I think I've nothing to say against that. Because if you do it by yourself, as an individual private practice, well presumably you are in fact taking it very seriously and it does really mean something to you. But just to have everybody who happens to be present reciting a vow to deliver all beings (to go no further than that) would seem to be just not taking those words seriously. Or it would seem impossible for people to take those words seriously.

Greg Shanks: I understand from Devamitra that in the early days of the Movement you gave a Bodhisattva ordination, or somebody took the vows. I've heard it described as an experiment that failed. Do you see that possibility of it being relevant. ...?

S: Yes, this is quite right. I myself described it as an experiment that failed. I sort of, at that time, added on four extra precepts which were more of a Bodhisattva character. They certainly weren't the four great vows. Because what I felt at that time was that the position of, what is now more or less, chairman needed to be given, or invested with, some sort of

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religious significance, some sort of spiritual significance. And I thought that a possible way of doing that was to give the person who took on that sort of responsibility these four extra precepts. But it

didn't actually work. And therefore, as I've said, I regarded it as an experiment that had failed. But I have thought since that there might be something to be said for sometimes including in the puja, or sometimes reciting within the context of the puja, not Bodhisattva vows, but Bodhisattva precepts. Not in fact in the sense of having any additional precepts, but of reminding oneself in a general way of the Bodhisattva Ideal. Or rather reminding oneself in a general way of that particular aspect of the spiritual life, and reminding oneself of different ways in which the spiritual life can be practised. Reminding oneself of the different aspects which it can unfold. For instance one of the Bodhisattva precepts is refraining from praising oneself and blaming others. Well, this is something quite down to earth and practical and useful. So there's no reason why that particular precept and others like it shouldn't sometimes be recited as a sort of extra reminder, without actually being (sort of) formally taken by individuals or (sort of) officially added on to the list of precepts.

Devamitra: I think you Mahaupasaka ordination as an experiment that failed, but there was also someone who took the four great vows from you, as well as the Mahaupasaka ordination. Did you....

S: I must say I can't remember that. It could have happened but I don't remember it. Because, you know, different people come to me at different times asking for, you know, different ordinations, initiations, and so on and so forth. As sometimes they do press very hard (laughter). I've even ordained samaneras since starting the FWBO, but this was no part of the FWBO - other teachers have sent disciples to me to be ordained and I've sort of done it to oblige them and sent them back to their teachers.

Devamitra: But? (unless I'm mistaken the person passed down with)? a blue kesa which I believe he was wearing? (I don't know whether)? he still does wear.

S: Oh that. I'm afraid I'd forgotten all about that. I can't remember whether it was a question of those four great vows. I can't remember.

Devamitra: Well, this is the way it was announced ten or so years ago, I believe, by yourself...

S: Well then that was another experiment that failed, wasn't it? (laughter)

Devamitra: It even fails the memory!

S: Yes, it was quite a long time ago.

Devamitra: It certainly was.

Padmavajra: Can I just ask a question on your own Bodhisattva ordination? What particular... what did that constitute in terms of precepts? And did you yourself take any individual vows?