

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/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

Tuscany Preordination Course 1981

Question and Answer Sessions, Part Two

Held at 'Il Convento', Batignano, near Grosseto, Tuscany, Italy from 3 September to 3 December 1981

Present: Sangharakshita, Ratnaguna, Sthiramati, Subhuti, Vessantara; Alan Angel (Devapriya), Johnny Baker (Yashomitra), Mark Bowden (Prajnananda), Dave Brennan (Vajracitta), Gerald Burns (Khemaloka), Brian Duff (Dharmavira), Peter Fletcher (Sthirananda), Andy Friends (Subhadra), Steve Francis (Sumitra), Peter Hill (Jinapriya), Rudiger Jansen (Dhammaloka), David Luce (Saddhaloka), Bob Jones (Vajraketu), Simon MacIntyre (Yashomitra), Clive Pomfret (Kevala), Dave Rice, Jonathan Rice (Yashopala), Cieran Saunders (Ruciraketu), Michael Scherk (Dharmapriya), Peter Shan (Vajrananda), Malcolm Webb (Sudhana), Murray Wright.

Sessions on the Mitrata Omnibus and various topics: 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 23, 29, 30, 31, 32, and Concluding Remarks.

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Appendix - Some Notes on the Communication Exercises: 22.9.81

Notes on Bhante's instructions and comments while leading communication exercises. See also Session Eleven for subsequent questions and answers. Notes by Prajnananda.

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Some Notes on the Communication Exercises

Subsequent to Bhante leading communication exercises at Il Convento in 1981, and to discussion with others on the course, I made some notes on the instructions and comments he gave. It has been suggested that these might prove of interest and use. At the risk of restating what may seem obvious to some, I have included everything that I noted, even small details.

Before Starting

When people have sat down in facing pairs, check to see that the pairs are spread out, not

bunched or too close together. Check also that lighting is adequate and that no one is distracted by light shining in their eyes.

Then explain what you're going to do, the general purpose of the exercises; this is not always done. Explain that many of us are quite blocked in communication because we're not really aware of the other person, and so we don't get as much out of communication as we might, and therefore we may find these simple exercises useful in helping us to develop greater awareness both of other people and ourselves.

Then give general preliminary instructions: eyes should be about level; sit on a cushion if necessary. Try to do without spectacles if possible; they are sometimes a defence. Sit in a straightforward, upright but relaxed posture, neither rigid nor slumped; hands resting on knees or in the lap, not clasped tightly.

Exercise One: "Just Looking"

In this exercise the two participants just look at each other. There is no need to stare fixedly or try to have an effect, such as causing laughter or suspicion. 'If you look, you will see.'

Start the exercise and, while it goes on, remind them to sit upright; to keep the head straight, not twisted or tilted; not to lean forward aggressively or shrink back defensively; not to cross the legs or arms - these can all be barriers. Also tell them that there is nothing wrong in laughing, or even crying, if it comes up.

Exercise Two: "Acknowledging" or "Responding"

Explain the exercise and perhaps have it demonstrated by a more experienced pair. During the exercise, explain that people should direct their communication to the other person, not let it 'fall short' or 'overshoot'. And acknowledgement should not 'cut in' to the initiating phrase - allow time to receive before responding. Nor should it be timid or apologetic. Perhaps have these faults demonstrated before repeating the exercise with partners swapping initiating and responding.

By now, you should have observed how each pair is getting on and you may want to change people around. Either both partners may be too blocked to help each other - very blocked persons should be put with someone quite experienced - or games may be going on - sexual games in a mixed pair or power games in a male pair. It is sometimes good to swap around anyway if there is time.

Exercise Three: "Exchanging"

Don't cram this one into the session; perhaps just do exercise two twice and finish with "Just Looking".

General Remarks

It is hard to generate the necessary 'opening up' atmosphere with too few people. Perhaps twelve, i.e. six pairs, is a minimum, and between twenty and thirty seems quite a good number.

A session should not last more than one and a half hours. In all; perhaps 2 hours with a tea-break. For each exercise should be allowed 3-4 minutes for beginners, up to 6-7 minutes for the more experienced. Any longer will be a strain unless communication has become completely spontaneous. Do not be tempted to increase these times if 'results' are not apparent enough: e.g. shouting, crying, loud laughter, etc. Bhante stressed that the atmosphere should be calm, natural and positive, not inhibitive or over-anticipatory - i.e. no whipping-up excitement. Allow the exercises to have their effect; there is no need to put pressure on! Don't let people indulge. Energy will come up and should be expressed, but do not force it. Do not try to 'treat' people - just communicate!

Try to be fresh every time you take the exercises, not mechanical. What is learned in these exercises should be put into practice at all times. (Bhante also said that between Order Members the exercises should be unnecessary.)

Prajnananda

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