

SANGHARAKSHITA

Questions and Answers on the talk, "Fifteen Points for Buddhist Parents" Held on 23rd April 1994 at the London Buddhist Arts Centre

Sangharakshita: So this afternoon of course it's a somewhat more select audience. I'm afraid there's quite a wad of questions. Well as I said there's quite a wad of questions, I hope I'm going to be able to get through them all but I may not be able to deal with, well I'm sure I won't be able to deal with all of them at all exhaustively. I have gone through them all just very quickly and there's a few that I think I won't be able to answer at all, not because they are intellectually difficult but because they represent expressions of situations or even dilemmas on the part of certain people which are in themselves quite difficult and to which there's really no short and easy solution or no very straightforward response or reply. But nonetheless I'll do my best.

Some of the questions, in fact I think most of the questions, are really quite straightforward though even so they're not always particularly easy to answer. Anyway there's a fairly easy one to start with, at least I think it's fairly easy we'll have to see.

What do you think the parents best approach would be to Christmas e.g. perhaps emphasise the connection with the pagan winter solstice yuletide festival?

I'm not so sure about that pagan winter solstice yuletide festival. It might confuse your child. If they were falling halfway between these two stalls - the outside world is saying it's Christmas and you're saying it's the pagan winter solstice festival. *[Laughter]* You can imagine them saying at school, 'well my mummy said ...*[Laughter]* and the teacher saying 'don't be silly dear, it's Christmas'. *[Laughter]* So I'm not so sure about that. I mean I get the spirit of this question, or rather this solution but I think if you look at it from the child's point of view what does Christmas really mean? Christmas means Christmas presents. *[Laughter]* So if a child feels that all its friends, all its little friends are getting presents but he or she isn't he or she is sure to feel - well you've guessed it - left out. So I would suggest that at least you keep up the present giving part of it *[Laughter]* but I don't think nowadays in Britain Christmas is especially observed as a religious festival except by definitely Christian people and they observe it by going to church. In fact we do hear all sorts of complaints from religious people, and others, about the commercialisation of Christmas, so I think that there won't be any harm if you give your child presents at Christmas time even if you do say 'well dear, they're not Christmas presents they're pagan winter solstice yuletide festival presents'. *[Laughter]* I think the child won't mind very much *[Laughter]* and instead of having these nativity scenes, well you can do a little yuletide bonfire or something of that sort and just maybe steer the child away from anything which is specifically Christian. I don't think one needs to make too big a thing of it, going sort of all strongly anti-Christmas, I don't think that's really called for I think you could even stretch to Christmas pudding I don't think it would be particularly un-Buddhistic. *[Laughter]* Because you may remember that the puritans at the time of Oliver Cromwell abolished Christmas pudding because they said it was definitely pagan and nothing to do with Christmas and they were dead right. And Christmas trees, after all we only had Christmas trees for the last 120, 130 years. They were introduced into Britain by Prince Albert, the prince consort, just over a century ago and are also of pagan origin.

So no harm having Christmas presents, and no harm I think with plumpudding, and no harm with even Christmas trees. You don't have to have stars of Bethlehem at the top you can have a dharmachakra if you like. So I think we just have to be a bit sensible about this and not be fanatically anti Christmas in such a way that your child starts thinking 'well Christmas must be something really good and interesting and important because parents are so much against it!' It becomes a bit like TV then.

Would you see some advantages in having a special puja written for children, for

children to take part in?

I'm not sure whether this is part of Christmas or whether it is a separate question. I'll take it as a separate question.

Would you see some advantages in having a special puja written for children? I think probably not. I think children, if I have any sort of understanding of child psychology at all, I think children prefer to take part in things that grown-ups do rather than having special children's things of their own, apart from parties and things like that. So I suggest no. If there's a question of a puja take your child through the sevenfold puja, but explain it. Explain all the difficult words and explain the idea so that if they do go along to a centre on some festival occasion and there is a sevenfold puja, they can not only join in it but they also have some understanding of what it's all about. I know there are a few slightly difficult words in the sevenfold puja. Some words which even adults may find a bit difficult these days, but if you were to take your child through the puja, explaining it, when it's old enough to understand, word by word, well that's a good opportunity to increase the child's vocabulary I would have said. Rather than having some separate little puja in basic English which is just for children.

At what age are children ready to start learning meditation?

Oh dear! This is not an easy one and several people in fact have asked this question of something equivalent thereto.

I really don't know. I don't think I can advise or suggest a specific age that you proceed then to adhere to. It depends also on the child's interest and powers of concentration and what you mean by meditation. I think it wouldn't be a bad idea to let the child know that what mummy and daddy do when they sit and meditate sometimes together, sometimes separately, is something very nice. You know you feel happy and peaceful, which I hope you do! *[Laughter]* If you don't well you need not let on till the child's a bit older! *[Laughter]* Or if you want to be really honest say 'well we're supposed to feel happy and peaceful' and just encourage the child to sit with you. Say 'well if you'd like to sit also with me you can, just for 5 minutes'. Don't impose any time limit just tell the child 'well when you've had enough just go quietly away, please don't disturb mummy or daddy and we'll just carry on a bit longer'.

Specifically, as it were, teaching a method of meditation, the mindfulness of breathing say, or metta bhavana I think one should leave roughly to about 7 or 8. That's been my own past experience. Not that I've done a lot of teaching children meditation, in fact I haven't really done any, but I've heard from people who have done this. Don't let them sit for very long, and I think with some children there may be a slight possibility of getting into a sort of trance-like state, which is not really a meditative state. But perhaps the main thing is to encourage children not so much to meditate in the strict sense but to be able to enjoy sitting still and just being, as it were, themselves. Just experiencing themselves, even for a short while, even if it's only for 4 or 5 minutes it's well worth it and lays a good foundation for later on.

To what extent is it possible to counteract the dogmatic theism that is likely to be encountered in Church of England schools. And what is the best way of dealing with it from within or outside parent-teacher organisations?

Well I suppose in a way the most drastic method is to withdraw your child from religious instruction. To the best of my knowledge parents do have the right to do that but I think it is only a measure of last resort because it does perhaps make the child stand out. I remember when I was at school when things were rather different, there was one boy who was withdrawn from religious instruction, actually it was just scripture, because he was Jewish and he was the only boy in the whole school who was withdrawn. And it did isolate him. It didn't exactly make him a pariah but it certainly made the other children think

of him as someone who was a bit, well quite different. So I think we have to look at it also from that point of view. Of course there could be many parents who object to the inculcation of dogmatic theism, you could get together with them. And if there are a number of you withdrawing your children from the religious education, the child wouldn't be so isolated. So yes, you need to look at that aspect of it too.

But I think the main thing is to talk to your child afterwards. And say 'well what did they tell you at school today?' 'What did they say about God?' But again, don't make too big a thing of it because the child probably doesn't. That's my understanding of child psychology anyway. They don't want long elaborate dispositions on the impossibility of there being such a being as God. But if you say something like 'well in this school they teach about God but in lots of other schools they don't. In Buddhist schools they talk about Buddha and so on and so forth. So the child doesn't feel that it's something that always happens everywhere in every school. And then you can say 'well mummy and daddy don't believe in God. And the child might ask what you do believe in but more likely he or she won't.

So I think handle it in a low-key sort of way unless you find that the child is being really strongly indoctrinated then you will have to go to the headmaster or to the particular teacher concerned and you will have to say 'well look, I'm sending my child to this Church of England school because I think it's a good school, and I don't object to my child attending religious instruction but I don't want my child strongly indoctrinated. If you can come to some sort of satisfactory understanding with the teacher that's best. You can always threaten to withdraw the child from religious instruction altogether if your wishes are not respected. Anyway no doubt there's a lot that could be said on that issue but perhaps I had better pass on.

Just one passing comment. I just happened to be listening to something on the radio during the lunch break and there was a reference in this programme to religious instruction in schools and to the fact that according to government directives religious instruction in schools had to be 'broadly Christian', which did rather make me laugh because what do you mean by broadly Christian? Do you teach that God does exist broadly speaking? [Laughter] Some schools will be prepared no doubt and some teachers will be prepared to stretch that broadly a bit more than others and perhaps you need to take advantage of that.

Would you like to see people in the Movement taking a particular interest in, and even a measure of responsibility for, the children of their friends in the Movement? if so could you see this ever becoming a recognised institution like godparents in the Christian religion or would it be better as an informal arrangement between the individuals concerned?

Hmm. 'A measure of responsibility'. It's a bit like this 'broadly Christian' isn't it? A measure of responsibility - it's nicely vague in a way but perhaps it can't be otherwise. No-one can take over from parents their legal responsibilities for the child so the residual responsibility is with parents. The only responsibility that friends in the Movement can feel is a sort of moral responsibility. Or a responsibility they feel out of friendship.

And I think if you yourself have no children, assuming you're an Order member or a mitra, and a friend of yours who is an Order member or a mitra has children I think you quite naturally just out of friendship will take at least some interest in that order member or mitra's children and along with that interest would go a degree, a measure, of, so to speak, self-imposed responsibility. Supposing you just happen to notice that well your friend doesn't seem to be handling his children quite right, well you'll take him or take her aside and say 'well look, I've just noticed such-and-such, don't you think you should think about that?' Or on another level, the Order member or mitra without children might feel that he or she might like to take out his friend's children for a holiday or do a bit of babysitting or take them to the zoo or something like that. I know this does happen to some extent.

So I think yes. It's a natural thing that you should feel that sort of , well interest perhaps more than responsibility, in the children of your friends. It may not always be possible. If you're very, very busy you may just not have time. You may not even have time to see people for whom you're responsible as a Kalyana Mitra in which case you will just have to give your friend's children a miss. But I think it's good if people can take, or if they feel that they would like to take, an interest in the children of their friends within the Movement. I think it's a quite natural and even a desirable thing.

And as for godparents, well you realise when you acquire godparents you acquire them when you are not in a position to agree or disagree - when you are an infant maybe just a few days old. So I think it can't be quite like that with, or among, Buddhists. But I think you may well find that if your child is exposed to quite a range of contacts among your FWBO friends you'll probably find that your child will latch onto this person, or that person. This is something I've noticed myself - that your child will take a definite liking to this Order member or that mitra and want to see them and want to spend time with them and then you should just encourage that - assuming that the Order member or mitra concerned does have the time. Whether it should ever be formalised I think I would like to leave as an open question for the time being. [Pause]

But perhaps I should just add, although it isn't in the question, that this whole matter becomes more important when the child or the children, is or are, living only with one parent because then it becomes important to have some contact, important for the child, with an adult of the other sex. With a man in the movement if there's no father living at home, or vice-versa. Although it's usually of course a case of a child with no father living at home. Oh yes this brings us on to the next question though I haven't actually arranged them in any sort of order - they're much too miscellaneous for that to be possible.

To what extent does a child need both parents to be there consistently, especially a boy and his father? And what are the potential consequences if, largely speaking, the father is absent? Also does regular contact in the early years, before seven say, greatly condition the likely contact and quality of that contact in later years, say seven upwards?

Well I'm afraid the experts do differ. When I say experts I mean sociologists and specialists in child psychology and so on. Some do seem to say, in fact quite a few of them do seem to say, that it's best for the child to have both parents there consistently. But others say that - especially feminists say - that children, including boys, can get on quite well without the father and can be brought up just by the mother just as positively as by a mother and a father. So we do see a difference of opinion here.

But I did notice, there's one thing I read about recently which though it's only a single individual case may throw some light on this. Apparently there was a case where parents - mother and father - were living together and they had two children both boys. Father lost his job and for some years he was out of work. Mother went out to work, she was able to keep her job, and everything went quite smoothly. Father looked after the boys at home and mother went out to work. Anyway after a while the situation changed - mother stayed at home with the boys, I think she lost her job, anyway father managed to get a job, a full-time job. Whereas before everything had been happy, things changed and the boys became deeply disturbed. And the author of the article who was a psychologist gave all sorts of reasons but to me it was perfectly clear what the reason was. I felt the boys became disturbed because they weren't having nearly as much contact with their father that they'd had before. One was I think twelve and one was thirteen or fourteen. But that seemed to me the obvious solution.

So I would incline to think that a growing boy needed quite regular contact with his father, though I'm aware that some child psychologists and sociologists would disagree with that, so I can't be too dogmatic about it. How that takes place, of course, is up to the parties concerned, whether the father is living with the mother or whether he is living separately in a community or otherwise, or whether he's divorced and sees his son from time-to-time, I think obviously there are all sorts of personal factors to take into consideration. But I would say that a boy does need quite regular contact with his father especially as he grows up. I'm rather doubtful, without reflecting in any way on the women, I'm rather doubtful whether a mother can provide a growing boy with everything that he needs.

To what extent contact with the father before seven has an effect on contact after the age of seven I just don't know. I've not seen any material on this or any discussion of this. I think there are one or two psychologists present. I don't know whether they would like to say something about this whole issue of the importance of contact with the father to the growing boy especially. You don't have to speak but if you do have any expertise, as distinct from just a personal impression or opinion, any professional expertise, would anyone like to say anything?

No, OK you don't have to. I just didn't want to be sticking out my neck on my own. *[Laughter]*

Oh dear here's a rather sad question and also a fairly difficult one.

If you don't know whether you are the father or not and can't get to know what should you do?

I suppose the answer to a great extent depends on the specifics of the situation. Why it is that you don't know and can't get to know. Those specifics are not given in the question. And also to what extent you yourself want to be involved with the child whom you don't know whether it is yours or not.

I suppose the best that one can say - if the person concerned has to be in contact with the child or has something to do with the child or has some responsibility for the child without knowing whether it's his child or not - I think the best thing one can do is simply adopt the attitude well 'Here's a small human being. I don't know whether it's my son or daughter or not but since I'm having to deal with him or her I'll just do the best I can.' But obviously there will be naturally a great difference between the feeling that you have for someone whom you know or believe is your child and someone about whom you just don't really know that. And there must be all sorts of other aggravating factors and you must feel very frustrated and perhaps in some circumstances even angry depending on the circumstances under which the information is withheld from you as regards your own paternity. So it's a very difficult situation and I feel quite sorry for anyone who has to ask this sort of question.

But just feel that you are a human being and the child with whom you are having to do, whether yours or not, is another human being after all, a very small defenceless one, and just do your best in that situation for that child disregarding as far as you can your own personal feelings in the matter. But I'm quite aware that in some situations of this sort it may not be as simple as that.

I don't know if this is a common problem.

It probably is! *[Laughter]*

But one of my children aged seven is strongly attracted to the TV culture, computer games etc. Having taken her to the Buddhist Centre a number of times I've now given up as she doesn't want anything to do with Buddhism and is positively antagonistic. I could

*understand this if it was a teenage rebellion against me but at this age it seems unlikely.
Do you have any suggestions about how to deal with what appears to be the pull of
samsara? [Laughter]*

I can't help wondering how it is that this tiny tot, aged seven, has already had such an exposure to the TV culture and computer games. I don't know how this could have come about, I mean perhaps I'm just out of touch with contemporary culture, developments and so on but if the little girl has become, well, addicted to TV culture and computer games by the age of seven well it's going to be a bit difficult weaning her off I would have thought.

I certainly don't think it's a good idea to go on dragging her along to the Buddhist Centre, she's clearly conceived a dislike for the Buddhist Centre, so at this stage I think perhaps you had better just let rest. But I think you'd have to exert your authority and limit the amount of TV watching and limit the number of computer games.

I didn't mention computer games myself this morning - perhaps I should have done. I must confess I'm completely computer illiterate and wouldn't recognise a computer game probably if I saw one, let alone being able to play one! [Laughter] But in what I've read about TV and computer games and so on, they always seem to be bracketed as though they come together now - if you have one you have the other. I don't quite understand the nature of the connection but they clearly belong to the same particular domain of Mara. So I think that this particular parent will just have to well, accept that the little girl doesn't want to go along to the Buddhist Centre and accept the fact that she's hooked on the TV culture and computer games but try to limit it and perhaps try to divert her interests. I don't know quite how you will do this. I don't know quite what this strong minded little lady is really like, but try to divert or deflect her interest away from the TV and the computer games. You will have to be perhaps quite inventive in order to do this. But it's sad to think that by the age of seven you are 'strongly attracted to the TV culture and computer games'.

Would Bhante extend his comments about TV to computer games [Laughter] where there is fantasy violence?

Does that mean, because bear in mind my computer games illiteracy, does this mean that while playing the computer game one fantasizes that one is oneself enacting violence?

Yes? Well this would seem to me to be not really very positive because you are not just receiving impressions of violence from the TV screen, presumably you are going through the motions of perpetrating violence and probably feeling the corresponding emotions too. So yes, I'm afraid I'll have to extend my comments in that way.

The government has made religious education in schools become more Christian in emphasis. Has Bhante any comment on how to respond to this?

I think I've really in principle dealt with this haven't I?

Has Bhante anything more to say about being up against it as a parent in a very materialistic society?

Well if I have anything it's in connection with this word 'materialist'. Society is materialist, it's consumer oriented, though there are other elements also, of a more positive nature, but materialism and consumerism occupy a very important place in contemporary society and your child is going to be influenced by that. I think you just have to devise your own measures. Try to explain to children that

there are people who have so many things, so many possessions, but who are not happy nonetheless. That happiness doesn't consist in these things. I think you just have to try to very gently inculcate those sort of lessons and - I think perhaps this is a bit of a side issue in a way but - for instance, don't buy your children very expensive toys which they proceed to break, perhaps the very next day. Try to explain and show to them that they can play very happily and simply with quite ordinary things, or perhaps make their own toys something of that sort.

I have a feeling that I ought to be saying very much more on this particular topic but I'm afraid nothing in particular comes at the moment.

*Dear Bhante, I loved your talk. I am eleven years old. Can I meet you. [Laughter]
Kieron.
PS I am from Scotland and I'm only here for the day.*

Well whoever Kieron is he can meet me in Chintamani's room straight afterwards and at least say Hello. [Laughter] Maybe someone will show him where Chintamani's room is.

Bhante. Do you have any additional points for single parents? For example, should we strive towards community living?

The consensus seems to be that being a single-parent isn't very easy. By single parent of course, I mean a parent living alone with a child or children without any partner or other friends or relations living with them. It isn't a very easy situation and I suspect that it's sometimes not a very happy one. So I think if it is possible one should strive towards community living. But then you would have to find other people who were willing to live not only with you but with your child or children, and that may not be easy because some people may have foregone having children themselves for certain definite reasons and would therefore not want to live with you and your children and therefore perhaps from a certain point of view, sharing all the disadvantages of parenthood without any of the advantages, or at least the joys. But if you could find people who didn't have children themselves, or even perhaps other single parents who wanted to live with you on a community basis I think that probably would be a preferable alternative. But you need to go into it very carefully. You need to be sure that you will get on well with the other single parent and also that the children will get on well together. They could conceivably take an instant dislike to one another, and also that there are clear guidelines as to responsibility for each other's children. That you shouldn't be overpossessive in the way I talked about this morning. That if the other single parent corrects your child, you mustn't mind. It has to be understood that to some extent you share responsibility for the children in that way.

So if those sort of reservations are borne in mind I think it probably would be good for single parents to strive towards community living.

Would you consider it realistic to attain stream-entry while being a parent?

I think actually the question means - consider it realistic to strive to attain stream-entry while being a parent.

But I suppose the question rests on an assumption that it might be more difficult to attain stream-entry as a parent than as a non-parent. Well it's certainly true that some situations, some living situations, are more supportive of any effort one might make towards stream-entry than some others. But I think one has to remind oneself that if one is really determined, stream-entry can be attained on the basis of virtually any living situation which is not positively unethical. I think one needs to remind oneself of

that fact.

Ultimately it depends upon your own personal, individual exertion.

I agree with your point about a positive atmosphere in the home. My partner is not a Buddhist and my conversion has caused considerable tension within the household. Could you give some advice on dealing with such a situation? I feel guilty when we have conflicts owing to matters ranging from diet to basic motivations.

Well first of all, maybe this is the simplest part of the question, I don't think that the person asking the question has any reason to feel guilty at all. The religion that you follow is entirely a matter of your personal choice and your personal decision.

Even if it does mean that you are, at least, so to speak, theologically, at odds with your partner, you've no reason to feel guilty about that. I think one is entitled to expect a degree of understanding and co-operation from one's partner, just as one's partner in this respect is entitled to feel a degree of understanding and co-operation from you.

The questioner mentions diet. I suppose perhaps the reference is to vegetarian and non-vegetarian, perhaps you want to be a vegetarian and your partner doesn't appreciate that. Of course if your partner does all the cooking - assuming that you're a man and the partner is a woman, and that the woman of course does the cooking which one can't assume these days - well then yes perhaps it does represent extra work for the cooking partner. So perhaps yes, you should say 'well look I do want to be a vegetarian but OK, never mind, I'll cook my own vegetarian dishes'. You can meet your partner halfway in that sort of way. It also depends of course what sort of other religion your partner belongs to. I'm afraid some other religions are more belligerent than Buddhism usually is, so I think it may be that you have to have sooner or later, a heart-to-heart talk with your partner about fundamentals and say 'well look, I've no objection to you following your path, your spiritual path, whatever it is, but please respect my wish to follow mine and let's co-operate in a sensible way as mature adult people in our family situation and with regard to our household arrangements.' If your partner of another religion can't do that it says not very much, not only for them, it doesn't say very much for their religion either.

You may have to take a rather firm stand depending on the degree of non co-operativeness and non understanding you meet with.

I'm sometimes asked by my daughters and my friends (eight to fourteen year olds) to teach them how to meditate. What would you recommend?

Well I've already touched on this. If it's eight to fourteen year olds a little just-sitting, a little mindfulness of breathing just the first couple of stages, a bit of metta bhavana.

I suggest though that if you teach meditation to your child's friends, that is to say the child's little friends, you make sure that you keep the parents informed because supposing the parents aren't Buddhist and supposing your child's friends go home and say 'oh look Mrs so-and-so taught me how to meditate and she's a Buddhist', well they might not like that and might think that you are practising black magic or something of that sort. People do get rather easily scared. So if you are teaching the friends of your own small children to meditate, make sure you do it with the knowledge and approval of their parents.

Bearing in mind that children become adults and many traditional societies have coming-of-age ceremonies, e.g. initiation, do you think that there are any appropriate modern initiations we could make more of. Or any other way we could do to encourage

this?

I'm not sure. I did think about this beforehand. The only sort of ceremony I could think of was when your child left home. When your child really went forth from the family nest. It occurred to me that it might not be a bad idea to signalise that with a ceremony or with a party. *[Laughter]* Of course there is always the 21st birthday party, I'd forgotten that, but nowadays people have their 21st birthdays long before they're 21 if you see what I mean, maybe 18, maybe 16. But I'll put it this way, this is all off the cuff, I'm thinking on my feet - so to speak. That if your child is 21 and still living at home have a 21st birthday party, but if your child leaves home before reaching the age of 21 well then have a going forth from home celebration or something of that sort. It's not exactly an initiation but perhaps it will take its place to some extent. Because also what does one mean by initiation? Initiation into what, or on account of what? That's not so easy to determine because you are legally of age in different respects according to different laws, in this country at least, so it isn't really very straightforward. But I quite agree that transitions in one's life should ideally be marked with some sort of little, or even quite big, ceremony.

In Hinduism they have the *upanayana* ceremony for boys and Judaism have the *bar mitzvah* so perhaps we need to think of something in the case of Buddhists. But though the *upanayana* and the *bar mitzvah* are religious ceremonies, the assumption would be that your child would be a Buddhist at that age which you may not be able to take for granted. So perhaps you'd better keep it secular and have, as I suggested, either the 21st birthday party or the going forth from home party or celebration - whichever comes first. I'll just have to give the matter further thought. If I come up with any further ideas I'll no doubt find some means of letting you know.

[End of side one side two]

How do you reconcile the Buddha's going forth from home and leaving his family including his young son with your 15 points and being a Buddhist parent?

Well I don't reconcile them at all! *[Laughter]* I don't feel any need to reconcile them.

Sometimes I'm asked whether I encourage fathers - the question isn't asked with regard to mothers - whether I encourage fathers (to) go forth from their family responsibilities. Well I don't encourage them but sometimes you can't stop them because sometimes it happens that someone's spiritual urge is so strong they want to sever themselves from the domestic, secular situation altogether despite their undoubted affection for their wife or partner or children or parents or whatever. And it's not a question of whether one should or should not stand in the way of that - one can't - because the other person has made up his - usually his - mind and is going to do it anyway. And that seems to have been the case with the Buddha. Of course one could plead in mitigation of the Buddha's action - that he went forth from a very big joint family and of course there were all sorts of people around to look after his wife and his infant child. You could also say that he went back home years and years later and his son became his disciple and became an arahant and his wife likewise, but I think that is rather shirking the question than facing it directly. I think you have to recognise that if a person feels sufficiently strongly about going forth from his or her family then he or she will just do that, but it's certainly not anything that I would encourage. It's not the sort of thing with regard to which encouragement is appropriate. Once the person had done it, yes I would give all due encouragement in the chosen way of life but it's not something I would encourage someone to do. If they need encouragement they shouldn't do it. So the fact that the Buddha went forth in that way doesn't mean that we must but it certainly doesn't mean that we never should.

The next question again is about teaching children or young people to meditate so I think if you don't

mind that I will just pass it over.

I think a great many Buddhist parents, not all, have either separated from their partner or their relationship goes through severe difficulties as they get more and more involved in the dharma. Do you think parents should try to keep together a relationship that would otherwise end, for the sake of the children?

I'm afraid this reminds me of a poem. I think it's by D H Lawrence, where the poem deals with a woman who's making up her mind whether to stay with her husband or not and the poem ends something like this:

She said yes. I'll do it, I'll stay with him for the sake of the children. Her heart suddenly going cold against them.

So I think one has to be very careful about this 'for the sake of the children'. If it's something really wholehearted that's another matter but if you do it with mental reservations it could - even though you are an affectionate parent - it could give you negative feelings towards your own children. So I don't think one can lay down a hard and fast rule here. It's obviously a very difficult situation with all sorts of possible variables.

If both parents are Buddhists do you think, all else being equal, that they should choose to live together or live apart?

Well the question does say 'all else being equal' well I'm afraid all else isn't always equal and that's the problem and why one can't lay down general rules. I'm afraid one will just have to leave it to the Buddhist parents concerned to sort it out with the help of their friends. I think it would be good if in such situations they do call on the help and advice of their spiritual friends.

Again, I've been reading a bit about this sort of thing and some child psychologists do say that children don't mind or can ignore quite a bit of marital discord. Again this is not a universal view of child psychologists but some at least believe that children can bear marital discord much more than they can bear having the parents living apart, but that isn't a general view, but certainly it's the view of some psychologists. So it depends on the persons concerned, what significance they attach to that.

How far do you think parents should try to hide difficulties in their relationship from their children?

Well you can't hide them. Children are much too sharp. They will usually pick up that something is wrong but they may also ignore it or very likely they'll ignore it. They just know that something is going on but - as the previous view that I've referred to suggests - they're not too much disturbed by it but it is very difficult to generalise about these matters as you will understand.

To be a full-time parent - these are all questions from the same person - demands a very great deal of one. One needs to practise patience, energy, kindly speech, constantly going beyond one's own preferences and so on.

Do you think that parenthood itself can form the major element of a spiritual path that leads to insight? In the same way as I believe that you have said that right livelihood can be a path that leads to insight.

Well there's no doubt that a parent has to practice patience, a parent has to practice energy, kindly speech and occasionally harsh speech may be called for! Constantly going beyond one's own preferences and so on - but I think there's a very important consideration to be borne in mind in connection with all this. You do it for the sake of your children, they're your children and despite what I've said about not feeling possessive you do feel possessive and you can't help it. You just have to try and keep the possessiveness within reasonable limits. So I think the fact that it is your child and you're doing all those things for your child introduces a slightly vitiating element into the whole situation which is not present when you voluntarily, as it were, go into a right-livelihood situation. Especially when the right-livelihood situation is directed, for instance, to raising funds for the Movement. So in the parental relationship *per se* there is, so to speak, there's an element of self-reference which is not present in, say, the team-based right livelihood situation.

So I think from that point of view that even though yes, one may be developing patience, energy, kindly speech and so on, it's not easy to think of parenthood itself as forming the major element of a spiritual path. Even though, as I've said in reply to an earlier question, insight can arise in any situation however difficult and unfavourable it may appear to be. It depends ultimately on your own effort.

Still more questions from that same person judging by the handwriting.

I believe that parents whose children are not yet grown up cannot become anagarikas, but I thought becoming an anagarika only consisted in taking the precept of brahmacharya, not in other changes of lifestyle which were only required of a bhikkhu e.g. fewness of possessions. Am I wrong?

Yes. I'm afraid the questioner is. There is a difference between, well in the FWBO, between an anagarika and a brahmachari. An anagarika is a brahmachari but a brahmachari is not necessarily an anagarika. Is that clear. An anagarika does take upon himself or herself not additional formal precepts but it's definitely understood that an anagarika does not have domestic or civic responsibilities and is not only celibate but is completely free from such responsibilities. So yes there is a difference. Maybe I need to go into that in connection with some other gathering which will probably be a rather smaller one than this one. *[Laughter]*

Oh yes, still more questions from the same person. This person has really thought up a lot of questions.

Do you have any thoughts on how we could work towards more extended family situations in the west, assuming this is a good idea. In other words, how could significant numbers of parents and children fit into the new society and how would its basic institutions be modified as a result?

Well this is quite a big question to which I haven't really given any systematic thought so far. But I did speak a little while ago about single parents moving into community situations and that might be a step in that direction.

In India of course quite a few of our friends both Order members and mitras live in extended family situations, not in nuclear family situations. And I do get the impression from what I hear that those Order members in particular, who live in extended family situations have a rather easier time of it than those who live in nuclear family situations. Just because they are more free to come and go as their

responsibilities in or work for the movement, require. Because if for instance it's a male Order member, as it usually is, when he goes away on retreat or on a preaching tour he doesn't leave his wife all on her own with 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, children, he leaves her in the midst of an extended family, and it may be his presence or absence is sometimes really not noticed very much [*Laughter*] because she has got her sisters, married or otherwise, she has got brothers around, she's got her father and mother perhaps, even a granny an aunt or uncle and a few cousins, they're all living under the same roof and living collectively. Some people seem to think that would be wonderful - well maybe it would be in comparism with the nuclear family situation.

Not that extended family situations don't have some drawbacks. I don't want to idealize them too much. I have been accused of idealizing the Indian extended family situation, perhaps I have, but yes there are certain problems which it doesn't have which nuclear families do have. So if we could somehow move a bit in that direction in the case of those who are living in family situations it would probably be a good thing. I don't see at the moment how it could be managed apart from the single parents moving into communities with other like-minded people.

Last question from that particular person.

Do you think that fathers and mothers have significantly different roles to play in bringing up their sons and daughters? Could you expand on any differences you see. Do you seriously think that sons should live with their fathers after the age of eight?

I can see that I'm in danger of getting into hot water here if I'm not careful, but you must remember that G K Chesterton once said:

'It's good to get into hot water. It keeps one clean!'
[*Laughter*]

I've got into, whether clean or otherwise, I've got into quite a bit of hot water in my time, but I must say this question of the different roles of fathers and mothers sometimes it puzzles me. I must confess and perhaps some people will disagree with me, I'm a little old-fashioned in my views here. I do tend to think that fathers and mothers play somewhat different roles. I hope I'm not going to get any angry letters as a result of this.

I'm not quite sure in what the difference consists. I think there is a difference. An I'm not sure whether sons should actually live with their fathers after the age of eight. I think the assumption is in the case where they're not living with them already, but I certainly think they should have regular and consistent contact with their father. Or if that's not possible, with an equivalent - what one might call a cultural father. In some societies you know the biological father is not the cultural father. The cultural father as among say the Nairs of Kerulla in South India, the cultural father is the mother's brother and the biological father does not play the part of cultural father. So if it isn't possible for any reason for the son to have regular contact with his biological father after the age of eight I think it would be a good idea if a cultural father could be found for him, if some other older man could take on that sort of responsibility.

Ideally it should happen within the FWBO quite naturally when for instance older men within the Movement just happen to know that the son of a certain woman Order member or mitra is not in contact with his biological father and can't be - perhaps it should be just a natural development that someone just starts taking that sort of interest in the boy and starts taking him on almost like a sort of apprentice as it were after the age of eight or whatever age seems appropriate, with the co-operation of the mother.

As I answer these questions one thing that does occur to me is that there's lots of problems and difficulties but it seems to me that within the FWBO at least there are very few problems of this sort related to families that can't be solved with a certain amount of understanding and sympathy or even empathy within the Movement as a whole.

You mentioned nuclear families getting smaller and smaller ...

I don't think they could get much smaller! *[Laughter]*

Do you think that the single parent situation is healthy or would you think it better for the child/children to live with both parents? My experience as single mum is that I can't meet all the demands.

I can understand the difficulties of the single parent nuclear family set-up, and probably it would be better that both parents were living together, but if that was for any reason not possible, perhaps because of the incompatibility of the parents for one reason or another, or perhaps because one of them had found another partner - well at least there should be the surrogate father. I mean it is usually of course the single mum who experiences the difficulties, but at least there should be a surrogate father, a sort of cultural father in the way that I suggested a little while ago, if contact with the biological father isn't possible.

What do you think the responsibilities are for the father of a child? Are they different from the mother's? If so what are they and what are the joint responsibilities?

I think this is quite difficult, especially in this day and age. If you had asked me fifty years ago I probably could have given a straightforward answer. I don't think I can now because society has changed so much and I think the parents, if they are on speaking terms, will have to just agree between themselves what their respective responsibilities are. And it may be that there are certain responsibilities that fathers can more easily discharge and there are other responsibilities that mothers can more easily discharge. When the child is very very small, when he or she is a baby, well clearly there are certain responsibilities that only the mother can discharge although of course even at that age there are some responsibilities that fathers are taking on nowadays that they wouldn't have been taking on a few years ago.

I think it's just a question of the parents concerned trying to come to some sensible division of responsibility if in fact both of them are still in the picture.

How are we going for time? Oh yes time is marching on, there are still quite a few questions left but anyway lets see if we can get through them all.

Do you have anything to say to parents who feel marginalised within the FWBO, who feel that they are second class Buddhists?

Well I wonder why they feel marginalised? I hope that not too many feel in this way but I rather suspect, knowing people as I do in a general sort of way, that if you feel marginalised it's because you feel marginalised. *[Laughter]* Because everybody knows that there are certain objective limitations to parenthood and that you can't go on as many retreats as you would like, and you can't be around the Centre as much as you would like but that doesn't mean that you are marginalised. But I think it's also up to you to some extent to let your presence be, I won't say exactly felt, but to let it be known that even

though you are a parent and even though you don't go on all the retreats that are open to you, it's not because of lack of interest or will it's just because you have other responsibilities. So I think it's up to you to let other people really know that, really to communicate that and to trust that it will get across.

How can you deepen your Going For Refuge and get ordained when your time as a parent is so restricted by (unclear writing) parenting? Once you have taken your children on holiday there is not much time for retreats for instance.

I know this is even more the case in America where most people, most of our Friends and mitras there get two weeks holiday a year. You're very lucky, or we're very lucky in this country we get much more than that, but in America two weeks holiday a year is the norm.

I think if you've asked for ordination I don't know quite what arrangements there are on the women's side of things, but if you've asked for ordination and you're a man you should just go and have a quiet word, or not such a quiet word if you prefer, with one of the members of the men's Going For Refuge team at Padmaloka, some of whom of course are parents which means that they have raised children themselves so they know what the difficulties are, and just explain your situation frankly. Just say "well look, I want to Go for Refuge, I want to be ordained but I'm a parent, I've got a job, I've such and such amount of time I can spare, what do you advise?" And in consultation with that Order Member work out your programme of study, retreats if possible, contact with kalyana mitras to the extent possible and so on and carry on from there.

I don't want to let anybody off the hook, that's the last thing I want to do. I'd prefer to leave them hanging on it [Laughter] - but it isn't absolutely necessary for every man who wants to be ordained to go to Guhyaloka. The winter before last six men were ordained at Padmaloka who hadn't gone to Guhyaloka on account of family and work responsibilities and commitments but they did prepare for ordination and prepared adequately and they did get ordained. I'm sure similar arrangements could be made on the women's side of things.

So once you ask for ordination contact an Order Member in the Going For Refuge team and just explain your position frankly and it should certainly be possible to work out some arrangement whereby you do make your way, or work your way, towards ordination though you may well take a bit longer than those who are able to go on more retreats.

Is it appropriate for parents to live separately? Is it indeed a desirable option for Buddhists?

Well sometimes it may be unavoidable. It depends on the wishes of the parties concerned. I can't lay down a rule that it's desirable or not desirable. I'm afraid this is something which individual Buddhists have to work out between themselves.

And do you have any thoughts on how to deal with a situation where your spouse is unsympathetic to Buddhism?

Well this I've touched on before.

Is there any particular kind of schooling you would recommend eg. Rudolph Steiner?

Oh dear! [Laughter] I'm beginning to feel like an agony column aunt! [Laughter] I've heard good things about the Rudolph Steiner schools but I know also some people have got reservations but there are

Order Members and mitras who have taught in Rudolph Steiner schools and I suggest that if you are thinking of sending your child to a Rudolph Steiner school you locate those Order Members or mitras and talk to them first.

There's not much choice, I suppose, in schooling these days. Well there is a sort of choice but it's a choice within certain very definite limits. There are also financial constraints, I mean most Buddhists are not very well off are they? Especially those who are actively involved with the Movement and they don't have vast funds to see their children through expensive public schools or even inexpensive ones sometimes. *[Laughter]* So I think you have to look around and choose the best school you can in the locality and, as I have said earlier on, join the Parent-Teacher Organisation or Association, and try to influence the school and keep tabs on what the school is doing and what the teachers are teaching. Keep tabs for instance on what sort of sex education, what sort of history teaching, and what sort of standard of English, and just play a very active role as a parent in the running of the school.

I don't know if this next question is a serious one.

A married man will do anything for money. Is Dr. Johnson right?

Well Dr. Johnson was a married man wasn't he so he's more likely to be right than me! *[Laughter]*

But no seriously - there are many constraints on a married man and of course if you are faced with the classic instance of either you steal or your children go hungry well of course you steal, well usually you steal sorry to say. So yes there at least are more constraints on the married man especially where the welfare of his family is concerned and obviously he will give that a very high priority indeed.

Anyway I will take it that the question wasn't meant too seriously.

Up till relatively recently children were regarded as little adults rather than as a sort of separate species. Is this a healthier way of looking at them?

I rather think it was. You see this reflected in art where children are dressed in exactly the same costumes as their parents but just smaller size. Size 2 instead of size 10 so to speak. I think that was healthier but on the other hand children are children, they are not adults, they're not small adults but they are probably more like small adults than like members of a completely different species. I think this also applies to teenagers - teenagers have become a sort of separate species. They've even become a separate sort of market in the commercial sense. They are being targeted, but I believe that even small children are now being regarded as a quite separate segment of the commercial market and targeted accordingly. So I would say steer a middle path and don't talk down to your children but they are not little adults even though they are little and they don't belong to a separate species, they belong to the same species as yourself even though it may be difficult to believe sometimes. *[Laughter]* Just try to see them as they are and treat them accordingly. Perhaps that's the most I can say about that.

My twin sons are being brought up in Greece as Greek Orthodox Christians. I only visit them 3 or 4 times a year. Do you have any suggestions as to how I might be able to influence them dharmically under these rather adverse conditions?

The questioner doesn't say how long he visits them, you know, 3 or 4 times a year and I think that may be relevant but if they are really being brought up as Greek Orthodox Christians I don't think there's much the father can do in the course of 3 or 4 visits a year.

I would suggest a strategy. It's only a suggestion. I would suggest that when the father is with these children, these twins being brought up as Greek Orthodox Christians, he just concentrates on improving

his communication with them and developing as positive a relationship as he can with them so that they just like and enjoy his company and have a definite feeling towards him. Then when they are rather older, then perhaps on the basis of this quite good personal relationship he can start raising, as it were dharmic issues. But I think that if he was to do it prematurely if he was to do it while the children were too young he might introduce an element of conflict into these rather short long-term contacts with them which might undermine his relationship with them or even give the mother, if she wasn't very reasonable, some excuse for interdicting those meetings altogether. So I suggest that strategy.

You don't get very far in this world without a certain amount of strategy. *[Laughter]* I've said before and I will say it again. You can't afford to be as harmless as the dove unless you are also able to be as wise as the serpent.

One of the principles of the FWBO is single-sex communities. Is it desirable to bring up children in those? If so, how does one ensure that children are getting both the masculine and feminine parental influences they need to develop as individuals?

I think I've really dealt with this already haven't I? That if a child is being brought up in a single-sex community. If it's the mother's community he needs to have, or she needs to have even, contact with the father or father equivalent and vice-versa, and I think it's just up to the relevant parent to make arrangements accordingly if at all possible.

Well here's a really difficult one, well it's not so much a difficult one its a tricky one.

Does equal parental responsibility begin with each act of sexual intercourse?

Well just off the top of my head I would say no, it can't, because of legal constraints. One of the legal constraints is that the consent of the potential father is not required for an abortion, whereas the consent obviously of the mother is. So this means that at the moment of sexual intercourse there's not a level playing field, so to speak, with regard to responsibility. So I think these legal constraints rather vitiate that.

If there was to be equal parental responsibility with each act of sexual intercourse it would have to be as a result of a very explicit understanding between the parties concerned and the woman partner would have to some extent to forgo her legal right, say for instance to have an abortion without the consent, or without consultation with, her male partner. Maybe that's as much as I can say on that at the moment. This is one of the few questions I haven't been asked before.

Oh dear here's a difficult one.

Can you comment on the clash between children's growth and parent's growth. Obviously children benefit from their parents growth but in the short-run it can have difficult effects, i.e. the spiritual life can lead to increasing awareness of negative emotion before an increase in the positive and this may be at an important stage in the child's development, so they cop it?

I think it is possible to be aware of one's negative emotion and not take it out on another person. I think the assumption too much is, not only with regard to children but other people in general, that if you experience negative emotion perhaps quite validly, I'm leaving aside that question, perhaps quite validly, you've somehow got to express it and that means taking it out on others. I don't think you need to do that. I think we shouldn't be as, perhaps, self-indulgent as we sometimes have been in the Movement in the past in this respect. I think you certainly need to acknowledge any negative emotion that you do feel but I think it is possible and desirable that you make sure it doesn't effect your child. That you don't

express it in relation to the child, nor in fact in relation to any other person, except perhaps by mutual agreement.

It would be nice to think that the parents growth and children's growth just go along hand-in-hand but that isn't really always the case. Sometimes there's tension between the two. Perhaps the parent feels a real need to meditate and I know this has happened with mothers with young children - they feel a real need to meditate but they just can't because the child is just so much around. Most mother's have told me that when the child goes off to playgroup or to school they heave a great sigh of relief. Not that they don't love the child, of course not, but they've got a couple of hours to themselves and they think oh what bliss, just 2 hours to myself' so sometimes they just sit down and meditate at least for half an hour or so. But I think one should try to avoid this sort of tension or conflict as much as one can and I think one of the ways of doing it is this - that whatever you are doing you try to put yourself in it really wholeheartedly. If you have to spend time with your children, I mean quite objectively, maybe they're not yet of playgroup going age, do it wholeheartedly and don't begrudge it. Don't think oh well I ought to be doing something else, I'd rather do something else. It may be difficult but when you do something, in this case when you are with the children, even playing with them, do it wholeheartedly without any thought of whatever else you might have done instead and so-on and so-forth. Of course when the child goes off to school you really put yourself into the meditation, or whatever else it is that you happen to be doing. I think this is just a specific application of a general principle.

Whatever you are doing try to do just that one thing and put yourself into it. So if you have to take the children on holiday - 'have' maybe in single inverted commas, don't think 'oh dear I could be on retreat'. Forget all about the retreat while you are on holiday and put yourself fully into that. You will feel then less conflict. But when the opportunity comes to go on retreat go on retreat, forget all about the family.

Do you think the positive benefits of being involved with children are sufficiently appreciated by the wider Movement?

By wider Movement presumably meaning those without children. I'm not quite sure whether the question refers to being involved with children as parents or just being involved with children. I'm not quite sure what the positive benefits are. *[Laughter]* I mean do the children keep us on our toes? Do they ask us awkward questions and make us think? Could anyone suggest positive benefits of being with children as distinct perhaps from being a parent? Because obviously the parent gets a lot of joy and pleasure out of his or her children, but what sort of positive benefits do you think the questioner has in mind? Does it help keep us young?

A VOICE: Developing patience or something perhaps,

A VOICE: Forbearance, endurance, loving kindness.

S: Well yes but that's usually working on the parent because you've no choice. *[Laughter]*

A VOICE: Teachers too. A teacher of young children has to be (unclear)

S: Yes, that's true but supposing you're not a teacher as well as not being (a parent?) because presumably if you're going to be involved for the sake of positive benefits and you are not a parent and not a teacher it would have to be something you'd enjoy - presumably, rather than doing it because it was good for you and helped you to develop patience. I mean there are plenty of situations in life to help us develop patience.

_____ : Something one enjoys (unclear) seeing your children when they develop (unclear)

S: I think small children can be very interesting and that is positive. I've noticed recently observing one or two small children that I see a little bit regularly, I've noticed the streak of independence, that they want to do what they want to do and that when they've reached a certain age they don't want to sit still, they want to move about, they want to run around the garden, they want to run up and down the stairs. And also I think to see them learning to speak, I think that's quite interesting. Not just from a point of view of child psychology but from a human being's point of view - how children do learn words, how they put them together. How they put them together in combinations which apparently they have not heard. That's quite interesting to see. So maybe for those who aren't parents and aren't teachers there's a positive benefit of being involved with children in the sense of being involved with something which is quite interesting. It's seeing the child grow and develop which I think is interesting.

It's not so easy to see an adult grow and develop because you have to watch them over a period of about ten years to see any perceptible growth [*Laughter*] - but in the case of a child you can see a perceptible period of growth, not just in the biological sense but even in the psychological sense over a period of months and even perhaps weeks and that can be very interesting. It's like speeding up the film.

But whether those positive benefits are sufficiently appreciated by the wider Movement I just don't know I haven't asked around, perhaps I should do.

To what extent should non-parents in the FWBO take responsibility for the children of FWBO parents?

Well the questioner says "should". I wouldn't like to lay down any sort of rule or law, but I take it that it's a feature of human nature that one takes an interest in the young of one's own species. I think it's a bit unnatural if one doesn't, but responsibility is another matter. One can't take the legal responsibility for another person's children - not unless one legally adopts them - but I think non-parents in the FWBO should cultivate a sort of general attitude of, even if they're not in the position to take specific responsibility, that is to say moral responsibility, dharmic responsibility for the children of FWBO parents, they have a sort of overall responsibility for their welfare and well-being and happiness to the extent that they can. Or at least that they wish them well and are happy that other non-parents take on those sort of responsibilities.

Do you consider parents in general are over-protective of their children and instil a sense of fear of the outside world?

Well I don't know to be frank, I don't know but I have heard recently on the radio a discussion about fear of the outside world as it relates to adults and especially to women. And surveys apparently have been conducted in this country and especially with regard to London and it would seem, as a result of these surveys, these inquiries or studies, that people's fear of the outside world, especially fear by women, is out of all proportion to the actual danger or harm that they are likely to encounter.

For instance someone pointed out that there were people who wouldn't travel on the underground, certainly not certain hours, through fear of violence. But it was pointed out that statistically you've a million to one chance of encountering violence when travelling on the underground but people's fear, especially the fear of women, is out of all proportion to that statistical possibility.

Whether this extends to protectiveness of children I don't know. It's possible that it does but I just don't have any information and I can't even speculate. One should certainly as a parent be aware of objective dangers in the outside world like traffic, and train one's children accordingly. You know, train them to look both ways before crossing the road and not let them cross dangerous roads on their own, take them to school yourself and bring them back if necessary or get somebody else to do that. I think that sort of

training is just common sense. But I don't think one should, despite recent quite unfortunate and unpleasant happenings, I don't think one should bring one's child up to be fearful of contact with anybody outside the immediate family circle. I think that probably would be disastrous.

Given that the laws of this country encourage living in a nuclear family

I'm not sure that they do but I won't question that.

Is it ethical for a Buddhist to lie or withhold information from the authorities in order to facilitate a more independent lifestyle.

There seems to be a question underneath the question here which I can't quite make out. Because it certainly isn't ethical for a Buddhist to lie. I think we all agree upon that, but how would the withholding of information from the authorities by lying enable one to facilitate a more independent lifestyle? Can anyone throw any light on this?

A VOICE: Perhaps the person is talking about how we can move to make, with certain women trying to get maintenance from a partner if that was exorbitant (unclear) that person may be wanting to withhold details of their income because they wanted to.....

S: Of course this raises the much more general question of whether one is justified in breaking a law because one is convinced that the law is unjust. Well this is the sort of issue that does arise. My own feeling is that only in very extreme circumstances where a very important ethical principle is involved should one go to the extreme of breaking the law. Although obviously one is entitled as a citizen in a democratic country to take whatever steps one wishes constitutionally to have that law changed, whether by oneself or in collaboration with other people.

But the question does say 'in order to facilitate a more independent lifestyle' so I can't quite envisage the sort of concrete situation that might arise.

A VOICE: The situation where the woman is having a child and there's a question about whether they're going to put the father's name on the birth certificate or not, and if they do then he will thereafter be chased up for money.

S: But does one have the option to give the father's name or not?

A VOICE: No.

S: Is one required by law to give it, can one be prosecuted for not giving it? So where does the question of a lie or withholding information come in? One might justify withholding information but one wouldn't be able to justify a lie very easily.

A VOICE: There was a suggestion that people would be prosecuted but I think perhaps I'm not absolutely clear about the legal details.

A VOICE: You might be penalised, not prosecuted. The mother is penalised by a certain amount of money per week

S: So what is she penalised for?

A VOICE: For not disclosing the father.

S: So she's penalised for withholding information. So the question of lying in that case really doesn't come in, so I suppose it means that she would have to decide herself. In a way she has the right to decide whether to withhold the information and suffer the penalty or disclose the information and not suffer the penalty. She's really caught in a cleft stick which is unfortunate and that might be a case where people felt that they should work to have that law or that requirement changed.

I know this particular 'Child Support Agency' legislation does seem to be, though well intentioned, to be quite deeply flawed in practice and it does seem that it is going to be amended.

Should we teach our children to meditate, do pujas, chant mantras and go on retreat and if so at what age? In what other ways can we provide a spiritual ideal of inspiration?

Well the biggest spiritual ideal and inspiration is you, as a Buddhist parent. Of course children don't always see it like that. Some go to school and brag 'my mummy's a Buddhist' or 'my daddy's a Buddhist' or both. Others try to conceal the fact. [Laughter]

What do you think about starting a Buddhist school?

I have often been asked about this and I've said so far as the FWBO is concerned it is a bit premature because we don't have enough children to begin with because they're not all of the same age. If you'd all sort of put your heads together and all had your children at the same time it might be different [Laughter] but it hasn't really worked out like that. Parenthood seems to be a bit unco-ordinated in the FWBO [Laughter] Perhaps there ought to be a 5 year plan for parenthood! [Laughter] But I suppose sooner or late it's inevitable that there's going to be an FWBO Buddhist school but I think in the meantime you have to place your child in the best school you can and as I mentioned choice is really a bit limited, and have as much personal input into that school as you possibly can.

Oh I think this is the last question.

Do you think that unplanned pregnancies within the FWBO are a result of unacknowledged desires for children because the FWBO generally discourages its members from having children?

Well I haven't done any survey recently [Laughter] but I suspect, and it's only a suspicion, that in one or two cases pregnancies have been the result of unacknowledged desires and of course one sympathises with that, but it's only my suspicion.

And I think whatever one's desires are in this matter or in any other matter, it's always good to be quite open about them at least with one's personal friends, with one's kalyana mitras, and discuss matters with them. Of course if it's unplanned there's no question of discussion but sometimes I suspect it might be unplanned so that there can't be any discussion, but I think it's best if there is a pregnancy it should be planned and it should also be discussed. Not only with the person immediately concerned but with spiritual friends, so that you can take the benefit of their advice as well.

So on that note we have to close. So we've had about an hour and three-quarters of questions and answers and, yes, some of the questions are ones I've been asked before but others have certainly been novel and I'm aware that I haven't always been able to answer the questions because some of them are really pretty knotty and pretty unanswerable, but I hope I've thrown at least a bit of light on at least some of them. Because as I said at the beginning of the talk this morning, Buddhist parents are Buddhist parents they're not Buddhist parents but Buddhist parents which means that first and foremost as regards principles and logically we are Buddhists, and we are also parents. So being Buddhist parents means trying to apply the Buddhist principles in which we believe and to which perhaps we've committed

ourselves, to our relations with our children and in fact to our whole family situation. And this is what I've tried to do in answering or not answering as the case may be, these particular questions which you've all thought up for me this afternoon.

We've been taped and we've been videoed as you probably have observed, so if ever you want to refresh your memory about the questions or the answers or even about the fifteen points, well no doubt you'll have plenty of opportunities of so doing and perhaps also a bit of material for discussion among yourselves.

END OF TAPE

*Transcribed by Siobhan Fitzpatrick
Checked and Contented by Silabhadra*