Theris' Question & Answer Session with Bhante Sangharakshita at Tiratanaloka
14th April 2002

Sangharakshita: I know these multipart questions!

Dhammadinna: I've always noticed when you get multi-part questions, that you go 'Hmm', 'Hmm' - you sort of clock each part.

S: Multi-part questions make me feel rather like a dictionary!

Dhammadinna: I've divided them into sections. The sections are: There's a couple of more personal ones, about personal practice, and then there are three questions on the Bodhisattva Ideal because that's one of the topics we've been discussing, there are two on meditation, three on questions about the FWBO and the WBO practice and three on the FWBO, WBO and its relationship to the world and other cultures.

S: Quite a wide variety.

Dhammadinna: We may not get through them all, though.

S: Let's try.

Dhammadinna: So the first question has two parts, I'll give you one part at a time. This is the more personal one. This is from - it didn't say, but I think it's Vidyasri.

> *In recent years and months, do you find yourself drawn to any particular Buddha or Bodhisattva figure?*

S: In recent years or months, I don't think I can say that I have found that. Because there are various figures with whom I keep in particular touch depending on the initiations I received from my Tibetan teachers. So among them there's obviously Green Tara, there's Manjughosa, there's Vajrasattva, these are the principal ones. So anyway, they all have their turn, you know. Sometimes I give more attention to one, more attention to another, but I can't say that during the last months or years there's any one figure to whom I've given more attention than I have to any of the others.

Dhammadinna: So the second part of the question.

> *Likewise, as you get older, do you find yourself feeling closest to any particular one of your teachers?*

S: No, I can't say that I do. *[Laughter]* There seem to be all sorts of expectations! No, but I can also say that in the case of my Tibetan teachers I always associate them very closely with the particular practices which they gave me, so that if for instance I'm doing the sadhana of Manjughosa, I think at the same time of Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche. I see him as Manjughosa, or I see Manjughosa as him. In the same way if I do the White Tara practice, I think of Dhardo Rimpoche, because it's from him that I received that practice. And similarly with other teachers and other practices. If I meditate on Amitabha I think of Dilgo Khyentse, if it's Green Tara, well, it's Chetul Sangye Dorje, if it's Vajrasattva it's Dudjom Rimpoche. So for me the yidam and the teacher from whom I received the practice are very closely connected. So when I think of the one I think of the other. In a sense they're inseparable. Perhaps I could say - this is a little extra thought - that if I think particularly on Shakyamuni, *the* Buddha as we say, that's you could say more associated with Kashyapji, because it's with him that I studied the Theravada Abhidhamma in particular. So in that way these practices are very definitely associated with the teachers from whom I received them. I think of both at the same time of practice, so to speak. I find it quite impossible to think of the practice apart from the teacher who gave me the practice.

Dhammadinna: So those two questions do actually go together, more than we thought.

This is a question from Kalyanaprabha, which is:

In your interview for the recent Newsreel you spoke about faith in the Dharma - 'It's worked for me'. Have you any further thoughts on the topic of faith, what best promotes it, and why there might be a lack of it in some Order Members' lives or, at least, gaps in their experience?

S: It's very difficult to generalise about Order Members. It's very difficult to generalise about the Order. I know that some people do this rather freely, sometimes with rather unfortunate results, in the sense that they come to sometimes quite unfortunate and unjustified conclusions. I think we mustn't forget that the Order is made up of individuals, all of whom are practising in their own way; they have of course various degrees of sraddha and sometimes sraddha does lapse or weaken for a while. And different people are inspired by different things. I know some people, some Order Members, feel more sraddha towards the Buddha personally, or towards their yidam, some towards the Dharma, some towards the Sangha. But I think, coming back to the question, that if one does have any lapse or weakening of sraddha, one of the most general reasons or most common reasons for that is that one loses contact with other Order Members. Because other people's sraddha does rub off on you. So I think if you're conscious of any fading away of sraddha on your part or if you're conscious of any weakening of your devotion to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, then I think it's best to look at whether you are in sufficiently close and regular contact with the rest of the Order. I don't know if that fully or sufficiently answers the question. People can ask supplementaries if they want to, of course. Who's that?

Kalyanaprabha: I'm Kalyanaprabha.

S: Right, sorry. Couldn't see you. There's also the reading of devotional texts. But of course if your sraddha is weak, very often the last thing you want to do is to read devotional texts because they might sound sort of hollow and unreal. Perhaps one needs to get back into touch as they say with one's emotions generally, perhaps one could read inspiring poetry, perhaps that could help. But I think the thing that helps most is to be in contact with other Order Members who have faith, who have devotion, and who *show* that. It rubs off.

Dhammadinna: I've got three questions on the Bodhisattva Ideal. The first one is from Anoma.

> *I was very impressed by something you wrote a couple of years ago to a fellow member of the ordination team. (And I quote):* 'I very much hope that all of you are enjoying stillness, simplicity and contentment in full measure, even though you are leading such busy lives. Not that inner calm and outward activity are necessarily incompatible. If we allow ourselves to be inspired by the Bodhisattva Ideal the dichotomy will be transcended.' And this is Anoma: *It's easy to think that in order to experience more stillness, simplicity and contentment one needs to be less busy rather than allowing oneself to be inspired by the Bodhisattva Ideal. Is it that in allowing ourselves to be so inspired we become more selfless and therefore experience less conflict and more wholeheartedness? Could you say more on this subject?*

S: Well, yes, that's what happens! It's really quite simple. I'll just say something which has some bearing on this. Recently someone has been reading to me a little book of Dudjom Rimpoche's teachings. I don't know if any of you have seen it, it's called *Counsels From the Heart*. It's quite a small book and it's translated - I think it's translated, well originally from the Tibetan but maybe even via the French - but there was one particular teaching he gave which did strike me particularly. I'm not sure if I can remember the exact wording but I'll try. He was talking about the as it were conflict between what he called sunyata and practice, and he said that there were two extremes. One was to lose the practice in sunyata and the other was to lose sunyata in the practice. Now, he didn't explain too much of what he meant but I'm going to have a go. You lose the practice in sunyata when you think that ultimately there's no distinction between skilful and unskilful, they're both void, they're both sunyata. So this is the attitude of some Zen practitioners, that in a sense practice doesn't matter, ethics don't matter, because in a sense ethics is dualistic and sunyata transcends dualism. So if you allow sunyata to swallow up your ethics, as some Zen practitioners in Japan appear to do, then that is one extreme. You mustn't allow sunyata to swallow up your ethics.

On the other hand, you mustn't allow your practice, your ethics, to swallow up sunyata. You must have the experience of sunyata at the back of your practice of the spiritual life, of ethics. You mustn't allow the one to be swallowed up by the other. So the Bodhisattva Ideal exemplifies that, in a way. The Bodhisattva doesn't allow his experience of sunyata to swallow up, say, his practice of the paramitas. He continues to practise - sorry, *she* continues to practise - the paramitas as it were on a dualistic basis, even though the inner realisation is one of sunyata. And on the other, even though the inner realisation is one of sunyata, as an *expression* of that on the relative or mundane level, the Bodhisattva practises the six paramitas and engages in all kinds of external activities. So you have - I won't say a balance, between the two, it's not that here's the sunyata and here's the mundane practice, or ethics - the two are sort of interfused, though of course at first it's as though one sort of hops from one to the other, you have retreat, you have activity, you have retreat, you have activity, but finally the two must really interfuse so that there's no difference between them.

And I must say speaking personally that I had a particularly intense experience of this years and years ago when I was travelling among the ex-Untouchables in central and western India and giving talks, giving lectures, seeing people all the time uninterruptedly for months on end, and I never experienced any conflict between my inner experience and my outward activity. So this is what it means to practise , at least to a limited extent, the Bodhisattva Ideal. It's not easy to achieve. I suppose you begin by achieving a sort of balance. But eventually there's no question even of balance, the two have become, one could say, one. You might find it difficult to say whether you were practising or whether you were so to speak withdrawing, whether you were experiencing sunyata, so to speak, or whether you were practising the paramitas.

So at the highest level this is what is called the non-abiding nirvana, at the highest level, that is to say it's called the apratistha nirvana. The Bodhisattva doesn't abide in samsara, he doesn't abide in nirvana, conceived of as different. He's gone beyond that difference, or she's gone beyond that difference.

Dhammadinna: Could you say the Pali term again?

S: It's the Sanskrit term. You don't get it in the Theravada Pali Buddhism. Apratistha. The non-established. So you're not established either in samsara or in nirvana, you've transcended that duality. But that's of course a very, very long way ahead, but it's as well to bear it in mind, at least as an ideal.

Dhammadinna: Could you say a bit more about how you keep sunyata at the back of your practice of ethics?

S: Well, from Dudjom Rimpoche's point of view it means that in addition to practising the paramitas, practising ethics, you also have, as it were separately, a regular practice of what he terms sunyata but which you could understand to mean the whole sort of meditative side of spiritual life. You have that practice going on all the time, initially of course in separate sessions, periods of meditation, but eventually the influence of that, the effect of that, percolates through into your outward activities, so that gradually the two are brought together. But to begin with you have to, as it were, practise the two separately.

If you don't practise sunyata, in Dudjom Rimpoche's terms, separately, then you just have the external practice, which means that the sunyata is lost in the outward practice. For it to be possible for the sunyata experience, so to speak, to permeate the outward activities, you have to start off with a separate practice or experience of sunyata. Gradually the two come together. Is that reasonably clear? As I say, I don't remember the exact terms in which Dudjom Rimpoche made this point, but I thought it quite significant. He certainly did use the term sunyata and I'm not quite sure what term he used for the other half, or the other extreme.

Dhammadinna: Some of these questions may overlap on the Bodhisattva Ideal. This is from Ratnadharini, from the study group she was in.

> *During this retreat we've been exploring the tensions inherent in the spiritual life, as between one's own personal practice and responding to the needs of others. In the context of two of our ordination vows, 'For the attainment of enlightenment I*

accept this ordination' and 'For the benefit of all beings I accept this ordination', with the suggestion that this tension could be a positive catalyst for Insight and transformation. Our group wondered whether this tension is the same as that expressed in the myth of Avalokitesvara which seems more to do with the tension arising out of the impossibility of solving duhkha on its own terms.

S: Yes, I'd agree. I personally find this myth of Avalokitesvara contemplating the sufferings of the world, or rather of the beings in the world, and his head splitting into a hundred - some say a thousand - pieces, very evocative. Maybe one experiences something just a wee bit like that when one considers all the conflicts that are going on in the world today, 'well, what can I do?' It's as though your head splits. You can't come up with a solution. You can only come back to your own practice and the effect that that has within the circle of people with whom you are in personal contact.

So yes you realise, duhkha is duhkha. The conditioned is the conditioned. The conditioned is *not* the Unconditioned, not on our level of experience, and then that can give rise to, yes, a degree of insight.

Dhammadinna: Ratnadharini wants to just add something.

Ratnadharini: I wondered, Bhante, if there may be connections between two different descriptions or tensions. The first was a tension between one's own personal practice and responding to others, whereas I was beginning to think, is that the same thing as the tension experienced by Avalokitesvara? Are they the same thing, but on different levels? I wondered in a way whether there was a hierarchy in terms of the paramitas.

S: Yes, the higher the level of experience the greater the tension in a way. Yes, because presumably Avalokitesvara would want to respond to the suffering of the entire world and in a way does respond, and if one looks at the sort of myth dualistically, in popular terms, that is to say of Avalokitesvara being willing to give up his personal nirvana - that is to say not to just settle down or be established in that - it does represent on that much higher level the same kind of tension. But the ultimate solution is to see that there is no ultimate distinction or difference between the two. If you help yourself, you're helping others. If you help others, you help yourself. So even on an ordinary and everyday level of experience and practice, we should try to think in those terms.

Well, recently in connection with the illness of your mother, you got a lot of help from other people. So were they helping you? Were they helping your mother? Or were they helping themselves? You can't distinguish, it was all the same. Through helping you and helping your mother, they were helping themselves. So even in one's relatively mundane practice of the Dharma one can see that sort of distinction between helping others and helping oneself disappearing. I sometimes say that all the ethical precepts, all the ten precepts, have an altruistic dimension. I think it's important to see this. In fact it's quite impossible to separate them from their altruistic dimension, because, I mean, take the first precept, not to harm other living beings. How can you practise it without an orientation towards other living beings? If there were no other living beings you wouldn't be able to practise that first precept. So it's as much others, you don't just practise it to purify yourself of unskilful thoughts, unskilful attitudes - you do it for the sake of other people, and the two cannot really be separated. So that first precept has that altruistic dimension. The same with the second precept. Not to take what is not given. Not given by whom? Others. Don't take what belongs to them. So there's again an altruistic dimension, and similarly with *all* the precepts.

So I think we should be very careful not to set up a false antithesis between what we do for our own benefit spiritually and what we do for the benefit of others. Because we have to be sort of commonsensical because we have to recognise that we have personal limitations of time and energy and knowledge. We can't always do, whether for ourselves or for others, all the things that we would like to do, so if you really overstrain yourself in as it were helping others, you're not really helping others necessarily, you're not at your best then and you may not be helping yourself. On the other hand you mustn't be too precious.

Does that throw some light on the matter?

So you can't help being Bodhisattvas whether you like it or not! *[Laughter]* The fact that you're involved with the Dharma, well, you know, you're Bodhisattvas. You may be very small ones, even budding Bodhisattvas as someone puts it, but Bodhisattvas none the less. The minute you put your foot on the spiritual path, well hey presto, you're a Bodhisattva! There's no alternative. To be an Arahant is not a *real* spiritual objective. Of course I'm speaking of the Arahant in so-to-speak Mahayanistic terms. The Arahant of the Pali scriptures - Sariputra, Moggallana, and Ananda - well, yes, they are also Bodhisattvas. One remembers what the Buddha said to the first arahants, 'Go forth, and communicate the Dharma out of compassion for the benefit and happiness of the world.' So there's the Bodhisattva Ideal, right at the very *beginning* of the Buddha's teaching career.

I was recently reflecting on this and thinking it was very significant, the Buddha had these sixty first disciples and he sent them out, and he did say quite specifically - and these words are in the Pali, 'Go forth and teach the Dharma for the happiness and welfare of the world *out of compassion*, anukampaya, and I think those words are often overlooked because there's a lot in the Pali Canon in what appear to be the Buddha's original teachings which contain the *seeds* of the Mahayana but sometimes the seeds are so small that people who study only the Pali scriptures are not able to recognise them *as seeds*. But when the Buddha says to his first disciples, 'Go forth and teach the Dharma out of compassion', there's the seed of what was later to develop into the fully fledged Bodhisattva Ideal.

Dhammadinna: Vidyasri?

Vidyasri: Yes, this is going to sound very stupid, this question, but you're stressing helping self and helping others as having an equal value, but the Bodhisattva Ideal seems to just stress helping others. Iit seems a bit different..

S: Yes, it *seems* as though the Bodhisattva is only helping others, but what has really happened is that the Bodhisattva has transcended the idea or the experience of self, or separate self. So other people perceive him as helping others. They don't know, they're not in contact with the Bodhisattva's direct inner experience. To them the Bodhisattva appears as a kind, helpful person, helping others. But the Bodhisattva doesn't really experience it like that. The Bodhisattva doesn't see others in the sense that we see them. So from the Bodhisattva's point of view he's not helping others. *[Laughter]*

Dhammadinna: I wonder if Vidyasri's … we have been discussing in some of our groups the fact that on a lower level than that, the Bodhisattva who's transcended self can be very inspired by the Bodhisattva Ideal and perhaps because of certain conditionings we have, perhaps Christian conditionings, perhaps our conditioning as women, we take that Ideal, we help others and leave ourselves - we have a self - and we leave it out of the picture, and that results in overstretch and the strain you've just talked about. I don't know if you can explore that aspect.

S: Yes, there you're losing, in Dudjom Rimpoche's terms, you're losing sunyata in the practice. So you have to rectify the balance because we are at present experiencing the two things, helping self and helping others, as different, at least to an extent. The ultimate aim is to experience them as the same thing.

Dhammadinna: So to begin with one might have to as it were re-balance although in the end you said it wasn't a question of balance.

S: Yes, but again one mustn't be precious about it, I think sometimes there is an element of preciousness. One mustn't do too much, I must be careful not to strain myself, you know, that sort of attitude. And of course one has to recognise objective limitations, as one does as one gets older. You can't do what you used to do in all sorts of ways. I mean, just recently, in connection with my memoirs I'm getting someone to read my old diaries to me to refresh my memory and I'm really quite astonished, I'm really quite shocked in a way, because there were times when I would be talking to people - people who came to see me, *half the night*, and then getting up early, and the next day busy leading a retreat, giving talks, leading meditation. I can't do it now. And there was one particular day, or rather night, when I had only one hour's sleep, and then I was leading a retreat - I think it was at Keffolds - with a full programme of meditations and talks and discussion, and in the evening dashing up to London to take the evening class there, dashing back

in time for the last puja. Well, I couldn't do that now! I couldn't even *think* of doing it. *[Laughter]* So it's not that I've lost faith in the Bodhisattva Ideal! It's just that then I was a comparatively young man and now I'm a comparatively old man. So we have to recognise our objective limitations. But that's a quite separate matter. We have to be sensible.

Dhammadinna: You weren't *that* young, even then, were you?

S: No, I was in my early, middle forties. But looking back that seems really quite young!

Dhammadinna: Spring chicken!

S: Yes!

Dhammadinna: Any more comments on that one? One more on the Bodhisattva Ideal. This is from Parami.

> *On different occasions you have said that the Bodhichitta is more likely to arise in the collective. Can you recommend any scriptural references to this?*

That's part one of the question, there's a second part.

S: I can't think of any precise scriptural references, but one certainly does get that sort of impression reading some of the great Mahayana Sutras, especially the Avatamsaka which of course includes the Gandavyuha. Maybe if one hasn't got time to read all the Avatamsaka, which is pretty weighty, there is the Gandavyuha, which is just a very lengthy chapter of that. I certainly get that sort of feeling reading it because there's so much about what I call the glorious company of Bodhisattvas and while one is reading one is very much within that company, that community, and something of their inspiration, the fact that the Bodhichitta has arisen in them, rubs off on oneself.

Dhammadinna: Parami?

Parami: Yes, that seems a bit to be looking at it from ahead back, if you see what I mean. So there are the glorious company of Bodhisattvas united in their glorious experience of the arising of the glorious Bodhichitta, but as less glorious beings I suppose… you see what I mean it's a bit like coming from the other angle. Is there anything in the scriptures that explains how the practice, a collective practice, could foment the conditions for the arising of the Bodhichitta?

S: I've not come across it. There may be - the scriptures are vast, the commentaries are vast - there may well be an explanation. It is as though on a more ordinary level, say in a community, you rub off on one another, don't you? Your angles are sort of softened, and so you become in a way less self-centred through living in a spiritual community. And to the extent that you become less self-centred, you become a little more altruistic. And to the extent that you become more altruistic, to that extent at least a mundane Bodhichitta has arisen, some feeling for living as it were a bit beyond yourself, beyond your self-centred interests and concerns.

Dhammadinna: You had your experience of reading the Mahayana sutras which you did quite extensively in Kalimpong, so that you were in touch with that spirit, and also you had your personal experiences which you have told us about of teaching amongst the ex-Untouchables where there was no separation between self and other, as it were. So did you have a personal experience of being in an ordinary collective as it were, ordinary human beings, where you felt that spirit, and it's on that basis that you're, that you've created your…?

S: Well, they would not be ordinary beings, as it were, they would be Order Members, because the Bodhichitta doesn't arise so to speak in the way that we've been talking of, just in a group or in a crowd. The crowd is not especially conducive to the arising of the Bodhichitta, though I'm not saying that it's impossible to happen for an individual within a crowd, but I think it's more *likely* to arise if you are within a community of people, a gathering of people, who are definitely committed to the spiritual path and some of whom perhaps do have a considerable degree of altruism. And you're not just sitting there, so to speak, you're interacting, you're helping one another, you're rubbing off one another's angles and rough surfaces, so in that sense there is what

I have called a sort of mutual self-transcendence of ego, and it's that which amounts on a higher level to the arising of the Bodhichitta.

Dhammadinna: I suppose what I was asking was more historical, whether you'd had that experience prior to your founding of the Order which you then brought into the way you created the Order and its principles.

S: No, I don't think so. I think I've mentioned somewhere, it may be in *The History of My Going For Refuge*, that in my early days in Kalimpong I was very deeply impressed by Shantideva's *Siksasamuccaya*, which is a sort of anthology of passages from Mahayana sutras, which has survived in the original Sanskrit. So I came across a translation of this and I think it was this which really did cause me to be very inspired by the Bodhisattva Ideal, more than perhaps any other scripture.

Dhammadinna: So the second part of the question you may have answered, but we'll have it anyway.

> *Given that in your talk on the 1999 Convention you emphasised the need for the real arising of the Bodhichitta in the Order, do you have any advice on the way to encourage and ensure this happening?*

S: Well, that Order members individually get on with their spiritual practice, with their sadhana practice, their practice of ethics and spiritual friendship, and all the rest of it, and continue to meet in large and small numbers, whether meeting as chapters or regions, and of course national order days and so on.

Dhammadinna: Are there any other points from your …?

_____: I wanted to talk about the third order of consciousness arising …How does that connect..?

S: Well, this is my term in a sort of general way for the type of mental state, if one can call it that, which is represented by the Bodhichitta. You can have as it were the group consciousness and then the individual consciousness which is as it were opposed to the group consciousness. So the group consciousness is the first order, the individual consciousness is the second order. The Bodhichitta represents the third order of consciousness which transcends the difference between self as represented by the second order of consciousness, and the others as represented by the first order of consciousness. So broadly speaking third order of consciousness corresponds to Bodhichitta, or perhaps I should say the Bodhichitta represents the higher development of that third order of consciousness which is neither collective nor individual, but which transcends that dichotomy.

Dhammadinna: I've got two questions on meditation and the first one's from Kulaprabha and refers to the six element practice.

> *I've been looking for sources which give descriptions of the six element practice. The ones I've found so far are in the Pali Canon. In these descriptions the sixth stage seems to rely on reflective thinking, for example on vedana and its impermanence. This seems to be very different from how we do the sixth stage, in terms of expanding consciousness or letting go into universal consciousness. Why have you preferred this latter approach and is there a text or a source for this?*

S: Yes, the six element practice as we do it in the Order I received from Yogi Chen. I can't say why I so to speak preferred it to the account which we find in the Pali Canon, though of course there is a passage in the Pali Canon where the Buddha speaks of giving up the earth element in one's own personality, and giving up the water element and so on, but as far as I remember he speaks only in terms of giving up *four* elements, but I won't be sure of that because I've not looked up the references recently. But yes, in the Order we follow the tradition which of, one may say, Mahayana, specifically Yogacara, tradition as I received it from Yogi Chen.

Dhammadinna: Kulaprabha?

Kulaprabha: When I looked up one of the sources, there is quite a long description of the first five elements, so that's form and space, then it does say something like, thus is one's mind made clear and bright, and then using that it seems to be a description of being aware, really it seems like mindfulness of feeling, whether pleasant or unpleasant, and reflecting on their impermanence, but it did say one's mind becomes clear and bright and then you apply that clear, bright mind to it. It felt like what we call (glowing in the dark/dwelling in the gap(?)). Could we do it that way?

S: I'm just thinking. One gives up the earth element in one's own personality, gives up the water element, fire element, air element, so one gives up the material, physical body - this is the way we practise. And that material, physical body occupied a certain space. It demarcated a certain space, so when you give up that physical body, or you let that go, the space which that body occupied is no longer demarcated from the rest of space, so you experience so to speak the infinity of space. But you experience it. So what experiences it? Consciousness. And inasmuch as your consciousness is no longer tied to the physical body, no longer tied so to speak to the space occupied by that body, your consciousness is freed from limitations. So you experience, one could say, yes, in the language of the text you quoted, a clear, bright consciousness. From the Yogacara point of view that clear, bright consciousness is non-dual and that is what you, so to speak, experience. Without looking up that text I'm not quite sure what would be meant by using that to examine vedana. That looks to me rather like coming down to another level of experience. So I'm not quite sure what the meaning or the function of that is.

Kulaprabha: It could be that having gone some way to gain that pure, clearer consciousness, you just take that further by looking at what is in one's immediate experience, because that seems to be what's described?

S: Yes, but then the question arises, why should one need to do that at that level? If you have genuinely reached that level, and it's not just a mental reviewing or reflection on that level, then why should you need as it were to go down to the level of vedana?

Kulaprabha: Well, if you've just got an initial glimpse of that clearer but not fully non-dual consciousness, if you've just got an initial glimpse, perhaps then the mindfulness of vedana could help take that further?

S: Could be. One would just have to try it and see. Yes.

Dhammadinna: Do you remember the textual reference, which text it is?

Kulaprabha: It's a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya called the Exposition of Elements.

S: I must get someone to read it to me. But while we're on the subject of the six element practice, I do regard... [break in tape/end of side] … as we move towards ordination and then keep up afterwards, it's one of our major - I won't say vipassana [Pali] but vipasyana [Sanskrit] practices, one of our major insight practices, and it has a very definite cutting edge. It is very effective. And one can have a very definite experience as a result of doing this practice, so we should keep it up as much as we can.

Perhaps I'll add a sort of footnote here. In some traditions, in the Buddhist movement in the West as well as in the East, there's quite a lot of talk about vipassana, meaning by vipassana a certain *kind* of vipassana. Sometimes the suggestion seems to be to me that that is the one and only way of practising vipassana. But this is certainly not correct. There are a number of different ways of practising, and the six element practice is one of them. So I prefer to use the term vipasyana [Sanskrit], the Sanskrit term for insight or clear vision, just to make it clear that what some people call vipassana is not confined to what they call vipassana. There are so many ways of practising vipasyana in that broader sense.

Dhammadinna: So then you would see that the term vipassana as a particular method?

S: Yes.

Ratnadharini: In the system of meditation the six element practice usually comes before the sadhana practice.

S: Yes.

Ratnadharini: I think we often see it in that context. So would you think it needs to be used in that way with another practice *(unclear).* Or can it stand on its own?

S: You can practise the six element practice on its own, so to speak, but you can also practise it as a sort of introduction to sadhana in the sense of a visualisation practice because the six element practice one could see as clearing the way to the experience of sunyata as symbolised by the blue sky with which most sadhana practices begin. So yes, one can certainly connect the two in that way.

Dhammadinna: The next question is from Dayanandi. I think it relates to what we have just been talking about.

> *Do you think it is important that all Order members receive a sadhana at ordination in terms at least of being introduced to a Bodhisattva or Buddha through the repetition of a mantra, and continue to maintain some sort of connection with that figure or other yidams through their Order lives?*

And there's a second part to the question.

S: Hmm, yes, I'll answer that. I'd say yes but. I know a lot of people have difficulty with visualisation and this has been addressed. I've talked quite a bit with Subhuti about that and I believe that some of the things I've said or explained to him have been communicated to others within the Order. What I've said broadly is that when one is ordained, when one commits oneself to the Three Jewels, one is committing oneself ultimately to the achievement of Enlightenment and well, Enlightenment, sambodhi, was realised by the Buddha. And apart from the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, there are other Buddhas, there are Bodhisattvas representing or symbolising different aspects of that Enlightenment experience. So when we are ordained we try to think or we try to see what aspect of enlightenment it is that I'm particularly drawn to. Because Enlightenment just as a word is a bit abstract. You need that word to be embodied in a person in a way, a Buddha, a Bodhisattva, with whom you can establish a sort of connection and so that you can think, this is what I want to be like in the long run. I want to be like Shakyamuni, or like Manjughosa, or like Tara. So this is what the selection or choosing of the yidam at the time of the private ordination represents. And of course the mantra, the connected mantra, is the sort of sound syllable embodiment of that particular yidam and you repeat it to keep in contact.

But some people, as I've said, have difficulty visualising. So for them we've more recently decided there's the possibility of taking up some other practice, or being given even some other practice at the time of their private ordination which will enable them to bridge the gap between their aspiration to be Enlightened and the actual achievement of that. But they will still have as it were a yidam, representing a particular aspect of what is their ultimate goal. And they will have also a mantra which they can repeat on occasion or incorporate in their practice as they wish. So there has more recently been this development in order to help those Order members, whether new or old, who do find visualisation difficult.

So it's as though, yes, in a sense one continues to have a sadhana practice of a simplified kind but within that there is another practice. It can be a practice, say, of formless meditation which enables one to, as I said, bridge that gap between one's aspiration to Enlightenment and the actual realisation of that.

Vidyasri: Could you give an example of what sort of practice that might be?

S: Well, some people are drawn to a sort of simplified form of dzogchen. I say simplified because I don't mean the full-blown Tibetan tradition, but - what shall I say, it's not very easy to put into words - well, something similar, say, in the Pali tradition, the reflection on the three laksanas and their corresponding samadhis, that would be another way of practising. Or doing the fully-fledged Satipatthana practice, in the four or the sixteen stages.

Dhammadinna: Can I just read the second part of the question, which also relates.

> *I'm wondering this in the context of what seems to be a growing interest in other forms of insight meditation, e.g. Viveka's description of the use of mindfulness of breathing as a route to insight, the six element practice, reflections on impermanence, etc. Is it a matter of temperament which type of insight meditation we choose to apply ourselves to or are some types more indispensable to the maturing and developing of our insight into reality? Is one route to reality enough, or do we need to approach it through a variety of different meditative routes?*

S: I think in principle one route is enough. I think people can get a bit distracted if they chop and change, and try this route and then that route. I mean, every route gets you there in the end. I'm just recollecting a story I read somewhere just recently, I think it was from a Chinese Mahayana source. I think there were two friends who were both monks, and - let me just think. Yes, one of them went off, he was practising for 30 years, practising various forms of meditation, and he practised under thirty different teachers, different kinds of meditation. But his friend just stayed in the monastery and he practised one method of meditation under one teacher. So at the end of the thirty years the first monk, the one who had been studying under all these different teachers, came back and he was talking with the one who'd stayed in the monastery just practising one method under one teacher. So he said rather proudly to his friend, 'Aha, you see I've been and I've practised meditation under thirty different teachers, thirty different methods. You've only practised *one!*' So the first monk said 'Yes, I've been practising one meditation for thirty years, but I've practised meditation for thirty years. You in effect have only practised it for one year!' *[Laughter]* Because in the course of one year you can't go all that deep. So it's better to stick to one method, one route, one road and get deeper and deeper into that. Of course, that's not to say that in the course of your sadhana practice, using the word sadhana in the broader sense, you may not incorporate different elements, as it were, into one method or stream of practice, but you stick with that over the years, or at least you stick with certain basic elements of that over the years. It's very easy to think that, as they say, the grass is greener on the other side of the street, or in the other field or whatever, and people can be very easily distracted. I was quite struck by a comment that appeared in a fairly recent Shabda. People were talking about exploring different methods of meditation, but have they explored Bhante's system of meditation yet? Well, if they haven't, what's the point in trying to explore other ways of practising? You've got enough to get on with already. Even if you just practise metta - I say *just* practise, but it's an enormous thing - just practise mindfulness of breathing and metta bhavana, they'll carry you a long, long, long way.

Dhammadinna: I think you are sometimes used as an example, Bhante, because you had many teachers, and practices…

S: So I did, so I did, but I did lots of *other* things. I was a monk, for so many years. If you're going to take seriously this following in Bhante's footsteps, yes, be a monk or a nun, go the whole hog. Don't just pick out those aspects of Bhante's life which happen to suit you! I don't think this is a very good thing to do. Bhante lived in the Himalayas for fourteen years. Do you want to do that? Bhante was going on lecture tours among the ex-Untouchables for many, many years. Do you want to do that? Why just select that Bhante had so many teachers, so that's a justification for us, you know, going here and going there. Bhante hadn't started the FWBO then. Bhante wasn't very lucky. You've *got* the FWBO. You've got a path to follow. Bhante didn't have that! *[Laughter]* So - don't try to rationalise things you want to do by referring to what Bhante might have done or not have done. For many years Bhante didn't eat after twelve o'clock. *[Laughter]* Do you want to follow that one?

Dhammadinna: We were having this discussion the other day and it's interesting to hear you say it yourself… So any other questions on meditation and insight practice, because we're going to move on or have a little break even? Mallika?

Mallika:

> *Just one about the practice of the mula yogas. In the booklet which was produced I believe I'm right in saying that Bhante recommends that Order members should at least do some practice of these in their lives.*

S: In the course of their Order life, yes. Of course I leave it up to the individual Order members as regards at stage you incorporate them, and when you incorporate them, depending on the time you have, but they're all good to do, especially I would say the Vajrasattva practice, which is a practice of purification. I notice in this little book of teachings by Dudjom Rimpoche, he says that, speaking within a specifically Vajrayana context, if you can't do anything else, just do the Vajrasattva practice. It includes the practice of all the other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and it's a practice of purification, and clearly purification is needed. It's also very interesting that in the course of this little book, he twice quotes a verse with which we're familiar from the Pali scriptures - from the Dhammapada, *sabbapapassa akaranam*, that is to say, the ceasing to do all evil, the doing of all good, and the purification of one's mind, that is the teaching of all the Buddhas. So Dudjom Rimpoche connects the Vajrasattva practice with that third line, the purification of the mind, that this is the essential point of the whole Vajrayana. So this is a quite effective and as it were concrete and imaginative way of purifying the mind and getting that, as it were, experience of purification, of washing away all your faults, all your and your weaknesses, your sins of omission and commission, your failure to keep precepts and so on. So if you aren't able to incorporate all the mula yogas, at least do that one. At least, Dudjom Rimpoche says, at least recite the Vajrasattva mantra twenty times a day. That's not much, is it! Maybe at the end of whatever other practice that one does. And it's a mantra which does have a very great significance. Unlike many other mantras, it does have so to speak a conceptual meaning, something that you can reflect upon. And of course there's the Going For Refuge practice and the Bodhichitta practice, but those are represented by other elements in one's spiritual life anyway - one is going for Refuge as an Order member all the time and inasmuch as you recognise that altruistic dimension to the spiritual life, you are doing the Bodhichitta practice. And of course there's the Offering of the Mandala - one practises dana, one practises worship to the extent that one can, so that element presumably is always in one's spiritual life as a Buddhist anyway. And of course there's the Guru Yoga. Dilgo Khyentse says that if you just do the Guru Yoga that's enough, you don't need any other practice! So you think of your teachers, you think of your spiritual friends, your kalyana mitras, you're grateful to them. That's a permanent element in one's spiritual life too.

Dhammadinna: Bhante, going back a little bit about people finding visualisation practice difficult, and this is something you have obviously understood from your contact with people and letters from people, what the difficulties are, and why people might find visualisation difficult, is there a common thread or - ?

S: I suppose lack of imagination, some people don't seem to have much imagination, not able to build up mental pictures very easily. It seems connected with that. Perhaps they don't have much of a poetic streak. Maybe they're really rather prosaic souls. Not to say that they're less spiritually developed, of course, but they prefer something almost a bit drier, almost a bit more scientific as it were. They don't like all this flowery imagery, these lotus thrones and moon mats and mandaravas and so on. Some people love that sort of thing! I personally rather like it!

Dhammadinna: So temperamentally, for some people it's a reflective element, although there is a reflective element in visualisation, they find it easier to just as you say contemplate the laksanas without the symbolic imagery?

S: Yes, yes. Some people seem to respond more strongly to symbols.

Dhammadinna: We've been just over an hour. Do we need a little break or shall we carry on? A break? So, say ten minutes?

[Break]

Dhammadinna: Parami's causing trouble at the back! Everything all right?

S: She's usually causing trouble in the front!

Dhammadinna: Usually causing trouble in the front!

We have six questions left, moving on to a different topic, kind of. These questions refer to the FWBO and the WBO. The first one is from Khemasiri and says,

> *Compared to the 60s when you founded our Movement and Order, these days there are many more Buddhist traditions and movements available to people in the West. If you were to found our Movement and Order now, (1) would you do it?* [Laughter] *And (2) would you found it along the same lines?*

S: If I was to found it now, I'd be a very old man, wouldn't I? But yes, I certainly would found it because it's true that there are a number of other Buddhist groups and traditions in the West, but there's nothing like the FWBO. So there would still be a need for the FWBO. So, if I had the health and energy and strength, yes, I'd do it all over again. So, second part of the question?

Dhammadinna: Perhaps you could mention the six distinctive emphases.

S: Yes, I did hear that Vajraketu gave a talk on these and that he had discovered that not all Order members were acquainted with these six, or could even reel them off in some cases. So I must say I was rather surprised, but anyway let's hope *I* can remember them. So first of all, we're an ecumenical tradition. We draw inspiration and way guidance from all the existing Buddhist traditions, teachings, scriptures and so on. And then secondly we emphasise the central importance of the Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Then of course we are what I called a unified Order, that is to say we are an Order which accepts on equal terms men and women, people regardless of social or cultural background and so on, which is not the case of course with all Buddhist groups or even orders. What's the next one? Yes, the emphasis on team-based right livelihood. I think this is one of our more distinctive developments, not just emphases, because in the Zen tradition, yes, they do have this phrase, 'a day of no work is a day of no eating', and we don't take that too literally but we've tried to extend the Buddha's teachings about right livelihood right out into the world, with the emphasis on community at the same time. Then, of course, we've got the emphasis on spiritual friendship, that hardly needs mentioning, and the emphasis on the importance of the arts, and perhaps I should say sciences because I've been rather reproached by some people for leaving out the sciences, so, yes I think the sciences also are of importance, I mean taking the sciences in the broadest sense. So yes, these are our six distinctive emphases within of course the much broader context of all the different teachings and practices and doctrines which we have in common with the rest of the Buddhist world.

Dhammadinna: So would you do it? And you would!

S: Yes, indeed.

Dhammadinna: Would you found it along the same lines?

S: Well, when I founded it, I didn't found it on particular lines except that I was very clear that it had to be an order, not a society. It had to be an order in the sense that it had to comprise people who were committed to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and who did Go for Refuge, and everything eventually grew out of that. I didn't start off consciously formulating those six distinctive emphases. They emerged gradually and perhaps not very evenly. The significance of some became more evident perhaps rather later on. I imagine that if one started off with that principle of the centrality of Going for Refuge, it would so to speak give birth to all the other emphases and aspects that we know today after 34 or 35 years of our existence.

Dhammadinna: Next come four questions from Vidyasri along similar lines.

> *Dear Bhante, Are you surprised in any way at the way the Movement or Order has developed so far?*

S: Surprised? Not really. I did mention a little while ago that someone had been reading to me from my old diaries. I have diaries - well, I have the diary of the year from the founding of the FWBO, with the opening of the Tri Ratana Shrine and Meditation Room in the basement of

Sakura in Monmouth Street, up to the giving of the first ordinations exactly a year later. And hearing those diary entries, which are fairly detailed, I was quite surprised, because I hadn't really remembered in this way, to see how quickly the FWBO got off the ground. We had well attended meditation classes, well attended lectures in public halls, and right from the beginning I had as many activities as I'd ever had when I was at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, whereas when it became obvious that I couldn't return there, and I've told that whole story in these memoirs, there were people who were saying that I just wouldn't be able to function because the Sangha Trust didn't want me, the Buddhist Society didn't want me, what could I do in England all by myself? No, it didn't happen like that *at all*. Meditation classes were as full, and lectures were as well attended, and then we started having retreats. It all took off rather quickly, more quickly than perhaps one might have expected, given the circumstances at the time. There were lectures at the Kingsway Hall, and one diary entry records that one lecture was attended by more than a hundred people, which is more than I *could* have had at the Hampstead Vihara because you could squeeze in only 90 chairs, even after I'd *expanded* the lecture room. So yes, we got off to a quite quick start. Because a lot of people who had been coming to my classes and lectures at the Hampstead Vihara just followed me on to the new ground, and others who perhaps would never have gone along to the Hampstead Vihara just started coming along to this new movement. So, yes, we did get off to a quite good start. Though I must say also that things began to bite only with the starting of the Order. And not everybody who was ordained then - and there were twelve people in the first batch - really had much idea or a very deep idea of really what it meant to Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. That got gradually worked out and clarified as the years went by. Out of that original batch there's only one left, and that's Ananda, with whom of course I'm still very much in touch.

Dhammadinna: I think I was in the second, the second reasonably large batch…

S: There was a wave...

Dhammadinna: Malini**...**

S: Buddhadasa, and Vajrabodhi and Vajradaka. But yes, in a way starting the Order was much more difficult, for obvious reasons, than starting the FWBO. It's not so difficult to dip one's toe into the water, but to plunge in is a different matter. So to change the metaphor, or perhaps to extend the metaphor, it's perhaps better to plunge into one pool, than to go on dipping your toe into quite a number of pools!

Dhammadinna: The second part.

> *Is there anything in particular, or any particular emphasis, you would like to see coming more into being in the future for the Movement or Order, or in general?*

S: Well, we've got enough emphases to be getting on with, haven't we? Perhaps I would. I think I'd like to see us being rather more outward-going. I don't know whether it's my Indian background, one might even say my Indian conditioning, but I do think very much in terms of *spreading* the Dharma, making the Dharma available to other people, and it does seem that the world really does need the Dharma at this present juncture, but I get the impression that not so many Order members feel the - I won't say need, but feel that spreading the Dharma would be a natural expression of their own commitment to the Dharma, because some people have limitations and even responsibilities which mean that they can't go very far from their home base, so to speak, or from their local centre, but I'm sure there are others who could do more to carry the Dharma to places where it isn't as yet known. So, yes, I think I would like to see more emphasis on this altruistic aspect, especially as expressed in spreading the Dharma more and more widely and supporting those who are doing that if one's not able to do it oneself. But of course this also means that one's spreading of the Dharma must proceed from a certain depth of personal practice. One can't really separate the two. So that's all I can think of at the moment.

Vidyasri: Can I just go back to that first question? Just now, in the present, when you look at the Movement, are you surprised by anything that has developed? Or not?

S: Well, at my age - I'm nearly 77 - I am very difficult to surprise! *[Laughter]* I'm not surprised or astonished at what people do or don't do! *[Laughter]* There are some developments that I had

not expected, but which I greatly welcome, like for instance the development of the choirs around the movement. Now this is something that I was not responsible for and which I did not even *think* of. It just started happening and as soon as I saw it was happening, yes, I *encouraged* it, but the initiative didn't come from me. So I won't say I was surprised because in a way it did seem to be a natural development - after all I'd always encouraged enjoyment of the visual arts, encouraged people to write, and knew that lots of people wrote poetry - but anyway suddenly choirs arose. I was very pleased with this development. I won't say it surprised me because, yes, it seemed a natural extension of our involvement with the arts from the spiritual point of view, but it was very welcome.

Dhammadinna: So the third and fourth questions of the four are more to do with the women's Order.

S: No, I'll just add something! I think it was in connection with the Buddhafields retreats. I heard about these naked hot tubs. I must say that did surprise me a bit, a wee bit. But then I soon got over the surprise and I gathered that the hot tubs have not become too widespread or too popular, or may even have died out to some extent, so I don't bother about it any more. But, yes, it did surprise me a little at first, because I couldn't help wondering what part it occupied in our spiritual practice; but some people seemed to think it did occupy a place in their spiritual practice, all right, so fair enough. So one does get these *little* surprises from time to time!

Dhammadinna: If Varabhadri wants to comment on the role of hot tubs in the spiritual life?

Varabhadri: You could say a therapeutic value, then...

S: Therapeutic, uh uh, right, sure ...

Varabhadri: And relaxing

S: And relaxing, yes, yes,

Varabhadri: ...cold baths...

S: Maybe it brings back memories, recollections of childhood, or even infancy, when mother was putting you into your hot tub and you felt so warm and cosy and comfortable and loved and cherished and cared for and all the rest of it.

Dhammadinna: Right, moving swiftly on! *[Laughter]*

S: But I was very interested to see various people's reactions when they heard about these hot tubs. Some really denouncing hot tubs as literally the work of Mara and others singing their praises, but eventually it all died down and no-one was taking an extreme view either for or against which seemed more sensible. But yes, it did add some interest to the pages of Shabda for a while!

Dhammadinna:

> *Do you have any observations or comments to make about the past and present of the women's wing of the Order?*

S: The past and present? Well, as regards the past, it got off to a slow start! But as regards the present, well, it's accelerated considerably, and as regards the future, I hope it'll go zooming ahead! But I'd especially like to see more Dharmacharinis in India. I'm very aware from my personal experience that Indian women don't have an easy time, and perhaps especially among the Buddhists. They're often illiterate and they have all sorts of household responsibilities which limit them considerably very often, so we don't have very many Indian Dharmacharinis. And I would really like to see more Dharmacharinis, those who are free, moving from the West to India and working there. And I'm very pleased that a few Dharmacharinis have already done that, and are doing a very good job there. But I would like to see more Dharmacharinis moving to India, or at least paying extended visits and doing what they can to help women mitras who have asked for ordination to prepare themselves for joining the Order. Because there's a vast disproportion at

present. I think we've got roughly 250 Order members in India of Indian origin and how many Dharmacharinis? A dozen or fifteen?

Dhammadinna: Fifteen.

S: So that's not very many, is it? So there's a lot of leeway to be made up.

Dhammadinna: So see Srimala afterwards, if you can go, or know anyone who can go.

S: Obviously it's not all that easy living there, though I'm very pleased and surprised to see how well Vajrasuri has adapted, and after all, she's not a young woman. But she's very happy there and doing a very good job, and she also - which is a bonus - finds that the dry heat of Pune really suits her health, which is very good news.

Dhammadinna: I think with Vajrasuri she came to that decision partly because she looked after my mother for a while. And I think Vajrasuri's now seventy - is she seventy? And she just realised that she had a lot of life left, and my mother was eighty-seven, so the contrast - she had thought, not of retiring, but of living more quietly...

S: But one is not old at seventy, is one? No, of course not!

Dhammadinna: But it seemed to come out of that experience, she thought she wanted to, she really wanted to…

S: Well I never think of Vajrasuri as seventy, I think of her as a woman in her mid-fifties, that's the impression I have of her. Maybe she feels no older than that. I'm sure she's too sensible to overdo things physically, but she's making a very positive contribution there and in the process very much enjoying herself and is very happy. She feels that she's found her niche. So it's something to have found one's niche at seventy, isn't it? But yes, we need a lot more input into the women's wing in India.

Dhammadinna: So the last part of the question.

> *Is there anything in particular, or any particular emphasis, you would like to see coming more into being in the women's wing of the Order in the future?*

S: Well, just everything, the same as for the men's wing. Just everything - more meditation, more study, more outward-going-ness, more spiritual friendship, more pioneering - everything. But, yes, with particular concern, as I've said, for the women's situation in India. There's a lot of women, I gather, who have asked for ordination in India. Anyone know exactly how many?

Dhammadinna: Two hundred? No idea.

S: Well, there's scores and scores anyway. Which means that since they've asked they need to be helped. They need to be provided with facilities, with the context within which they can come to the point where they can be ordained. At present those facilities are very limited. Just a few Western Dharmacharinis, with the help of the Indian Dharmacharinis, are doing their best, but we need a lot more help there.

Dhammadinna: So more of everything?

S: Yes. And perhaps I should add, to avoid any possible misunderstanding, more and more concentration on what is really essential - from the point of view of the spiritual life. Not too many little interests and minor hobbies and things of that sort.

Dhammadinna: The next question's from Khemanandi.

> *Do you think as an order we're involved in an on-going and effective critique of ourselves and the FWBO? Do you see anything we could do to make such a critique more effective?*

S: Critique? Could you read that again please?

Dhammadinna: Do you think as an order we're involved in an on-going and effective critique of ourselves and the FWBO? Do you see anything we could do to make such a critique more effective?

S: Well, we should always scrutinise our own practice, especially our individual practice, very carefully, very closely: are we effectively Going for Refuge, are we practising the ten precepts, are we developing spiritual friendships? We should always critique ourselves in this way. And of course I don't think we can really critique the order without critiquing - to use that term - ourselves, that's where it starts, because the order is made up of individuals. I think we should be very careful about generalising about the Order, or trying to critique the Order as a whole when actually we are personally in contact only with a very small segment of it.

Dhammadinna: Did you have anything particular in mind, Khemanandi?

Khemanandi: Just an area we talked about in our group, whether we have created enough of a culture which welcomes a bit more of a collective aspect, sort of dialogue with each other...

Dhammadinna: A questioning?

Khemanandi: Yes a questioning...

Dhammadinna: Of each other and...

Khemanandi: And how effective we are at it. The sort of thing you've been talking about this morning. Just interested to see if you had any reflections, any specific questions *(unclear)* any important issues, *(unclear)* that we can create a culture where...

S: Well, the chapters are of course the context in particular where one engages in that sort of activity. It's part of the aspect of the chapter as a spiritual workshop. And, of course, confession is an essential element of the functioning of a chapter, as you know. And confession, one could say, is a self-critique which you make clear to other people, and ask for their advice or help or support or clarification.

Dhammadinna: Do you mean on a more collective level, that you find involved in something collective, or doing something at the Centre; you re-appraise it and see if it's actually working, whatever it might be?

S: Well, that is, for instance, what a Council of an FWBO Centre is supposed to do. You have a publicity campaign because you want to get more people coming along to classes, so you critique that particular campaign afterwards. You have a sort of post-mortem, did it really work? Could we have done it better? Is there a better sort of approach to doing that sort of thing? That sort of self-examination and self-critiquing should be going on all the time. Are our methods...

Khemanandi: Welcoming the voices of question or other perspectives and creating an atmosphere within which other perspectives are welcome and appreciated, and the juxtaposition of that with a sense of faith or confidence, that we have enough faith and confidence in yourself to welcome other views and be able to make objective comments.

S: Well, it's individuals must do that and Councils must do that and chapters must do that, yes.

Dhammadinna: Is that those perspectives from both within and without …

[break in recording /end of tape]

Khemanandi: ... of our faith in fundamental principles of that position then we can create that kind of critique as and when necessary and welcome other points of view.

S: One wants to be sure that one is doing as well and as perfectly as one can what one is purporting and trying to do.

Parami: I'm just wondering whether that to some extent is part of the new regional kind of forums - fora in its plural - whether I suppose as much as critique, it's dialogue, isn't it? There are structures currently being more and more put into being that can create dialogue between individual Order members and in some sense *(unclear)* both for the Order and the Movement.

S: Hmm, hmm.

Dhammadinna: Anything else in that area? Another section of questions, the last one, three more questions. I've put these under the heading of The FWBO and Culture, as it were. The first two I think connect. The first one is from Kalyanaprabha and she says,

> *In her talk on FWBO Day, Dayanandi referred to your very sobering comment that the world may be heading for times of barbarism, and higher culture may not survive. Do you have any thoughts about what the priorities might be in a movement such as ours to contribute to trying to preserve higher culture?*

S: It's very difficult to say. I've been a bit struck by what seems to me to be a general tendency - and I'm talking about the UK mainly - to a sort of dumbing down. I know that's a popular expression, but I think it is a bit expressive. There seems to be almost a movement of levelling down and this finds expression in maintaining that you can't say that, say, one work of art is better than another work of art - that's a sort of hierarchical arrangement of values that some people don't find acceptable. For instance, some time ago Chris Smith, who at that time was Minister for Culture if there can be such a thing - anyway he was Minister for Culture, I don't know if you still have one - perhaps he's still Minister for Culture for all I know. But according to him a song by, er, who was that man who was popular in the sixties? You should all know!

_____: Bob Dylan?

S: Pardon?

_____: Bob Dylan.

S: Bob Dylan, yes. That a song by him was as great as poetry as an ode by Keats. That's a rough example of the sort of thing I mean. It's as though what we call the higher culture is becoming less and less valued in many quarters, or sometimes studied from a purely sociological perspective, which doesn't recognise its aesthetic and even its spiritual value. So I think that it can be one of the aspects of the FWBO's emphasis on the spiritual value of culture to try to preserve and cultivate what is often called the higher culture; the fine arts, literature, poetry, music, and so on, in a world where they seem to be in some ways less and less appreciated, or to be swamped by something of much lesser value. Several people coming newly into the Movement and coming to see me, mitras and perhaps new Order members, have said that one of the things that they very much appreciated about the FWBO was that it had introduced them to culture and that before they'd been oblivious to the fact that there was such a thing as higher culture, that there was such a thing as classical music or great poetry, this was all *new* to them, it was a revelation, it had not formed any part of their education. And they were grateful to the FWBO for having introduced them to it and in that way enriched their lives, even their spiritual life. So I think this is one of the contributions we can make. I hope the world isn't really heading in the direction of a sort of cultural barbarism but sometimes it does seem like that. But whether that is the case or not, we can certainly enrich our own lives, our spiritual lives even, and the lives of others by our distinctive emphasis on the fact that culture, the arts, poetry, music and so on do have a definite place in our spiritual lives. I'm not saying that you *have* to involve yourself in these things. Not everybody wants to, but most do. But if you do involve yourself with them they can certainly enhance the spiritual quality of your life.

Vidyasri: Bhante, even less high culture, like for instance folk music or other kinds of traditional music, I suppose I find that that can enrich my life as much, well, it can enrich it as much as classical music can.

S: I suppose a subjective element does enter into it, I suppose it is where one is at at a particular moment. Some people do say that rap music enriches their life - I'd be a bit doubtful about that actually, because I think you can organise or arrange music or any of the arts in a sort of

hierarchy. I don't think Andy Warhol is as good as Turner, for instance, I really don't. And no one's going to convince me otherwise. It's just like saying a mental state dominated by greed, hatred and delusion is no worse than one that is not so dominated. Well, I just can't accept that. I accept a hierarchy of values. So I think one has to try to work one's way up the hierarchy, as it were, whether with regard to literature, or music, or anything else. Very often you start off by not being able to appreciate the very best in any of these departments, but gradually you learn, you develop a taste in these things. But the starting point will be different for different people according to their particular needs. But I don't agree with the attitude of putting it all on the same level.

Dhammadinna: A question from Vimala.

> *September 11th demonstrated extremes of the clash between two cultures, Western secular devoted to consumption, and Islam. In the past you have said that one of the greatest dangers in the world would be fanatical fundamentalism, and mentioned in particular the Islamic varieties. You have also stated on another occasion that the Buddha's teaching had its effect on Islam. Could you enlarge on this, or would one find the answer to this question in the seminar on Al Ghazali's* Duties of Brotherhood in Islam*? Are there any books you could recommend on how Buddhism affected Islam?*

S: I don't think I spoke in terms of Islam, exactly, more in terms of Sufism. There does seem to be a *bit* of an overlap, and one doesn't want to exaggerate that, in what is now eastern Persia, between Buddhism and some forms of Sufism, but I certainly wouldn't think that there was any broader influence of Buddhism on Islam, I wouldn't say that, or on any of the monotheisms, in fact. Perhaps it would have be a good thing if there had been more influence. But central Asia and that eastern part of Persia for centuries were a great melting pot of all sorts of religious beliefs and traditions - Nestorian, Christianity, Manicheism, Mahayana Buddhism, Sufism, Zoroastrianism and so on, and they influenced one another to an extent. And it does seem that some of the Sufi traditions have some connection with the Buddhism of that part of the world. But I wouldn't like to go beyond that.

Dhammadinna: Perhaps we could rephrase and say, 'Are there any books you could recommend which say how Buddhism affected Sufism?'

S: I can't think of anything in particular - you'd have to look at general works on Sufism and especially at references to the Sufism of that eastern part of what is now Persia, or Iran. In the Order Library there are quite a few books on Sufism which I've collected over the years.

Dhammadinna: One last question which is from Vidyasri.

> *Many years ago you said that you thought there would have to be a pagan revival in the West before Buddhism could really take root here. Would you still agree with this?*

S: I think I'd agree with what I *meant* by what I said then, *[Laughter]* but I think I wouldn't say it now, because it's been the subject of so much misunderstanding or confusion of thinking. I think I'd say now it helps if you start by being a happy, healthy, human being, but we very rarely start unfortunately with being happy, healthy human beings. We come into the Dharma with all sorts of dreadful personal histories, or many of us do, or some of us at least. I remember one of the things that really struck me - you could even say surprised me - when we had our first ordination retreats, that is, ordination retreats for men at Il Convento - I think the idea originated with me. I thought it would be a good idea if people introduced themselves and just spoke a bit about themselves and their lives before they came in contact with the Movement and before they came on this retreat. I think my idea was that each person should speak for about five or ten minutes, but what happened was that people were telling their life stories and taking several hours to do it, and in some cases extending over more than one evening. And I was really quite surprised by some of the stories that some people had to tell, what they had been through, and though I'd known these people I hadn't known their past histories, I'd known them only since their coming into contact with and joining the FWBO. Some of them had horrific stories to tell, and it was amazing that they'd come through. In some cases it was amazing that they were still

sane, or alive. Some people had been suicidal. Even now, people have been writing to me in the last month or two saying if they hadn't come into contact with the FWBO they would be dead by this time, they would have committed suicide. So this is one of the reasons I feel it's so important that we spread the Dharma. It could save quite a few people from committing suicide.

So, to come back to my starting point, yes, not everybody does come into the Movement as a happy, healthy, human being, but that is a very good foundation if we're so fortunate as to have it. And part of our spiritual life, along with the more specifically spiritual part, is just becoming a happier, healthier, more sane, balanced, human being. A good Buddhist, one who Goes for Refuge, is sort of a human being *par excellence*, you could say. They don't become less human, they become more human in the best sense of the term. So, yes, I'd speak in those sort of terms now, I think. Just that one little remark of mine, you know! I remember when I made it. It was in the very early days of the Movement and it was in the course of a talk that I gave at Southampton University. Just those few words have been really seized upon and made the subject of elaborate commentaries and justifications for all *sorts* of things, so I'd put things a bit differently now!

Dhammadinna: Do you think it was the use of the word 'pagan' that brought about those?

S: Yes, it was the use of the word pagan which seems to cover all sorts of ideas and practices, some of them all right but others a bit weird and far out and even mistaken.

Vidyasri: Would you still say that - I don't know if it was at that time or later, there you talked quite a lot and generally in the Movement there was quite a lot of talk about the influence of Christianity and some of the unhelpful influences of Christianity on us in society generally, would you still think that that is a factor, that as the Dharma encounters us in the West it has to meet quite a thick wall of Christian conditioning?

Dhammadinna: So really by the use of the word pagan Bhante's referring to really pre-Christian or non-Christian.

Vidyasri: Pre-Christian. That's what I associated it with.

S: My impression is, though it's only an impression, that there's much less discussion or talk about Christianity in the Movement now than there was at the beginning, because I remember that in my Hampstead days and in the early days of the FWBO, newcomers especially used to be quite keen to know whether there was a God in Buddhism or not, and got often a little upset when they learned that, well, no, there was no personal creator God in Buddhism. I don't know whether you come across that sort of question or that sort of a problem in newcomers' classes. I don't know. But there doesn't seem to be much discussion around that sort of issue these days. On the other hand, quite a few people, both Order members of fairly long standing and very new people who have maybe just become Friends or Mitras, do speak in terms of having been quite negatively conditioned in certain respects by their - particularly Catholic - upbringing. One does still come across this from time to time. But also one must say that the FWBO started 30-odd years ago and during that period there have been quite big changes within the Christian churches. There's been Vatican II. The Catholic church seems to have a somewhat more relaxed attitude now towards non-Christian religions and they seem more keen on having a bit of dialogue, and in Birmingham I myself have been involved in that. I've taken part in discussions with members of the Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham's interfaith commission. They make a point of inviting me to all sorts of functions. Last week I was invited to attend a big reception that was being given on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the first Catholic Bishops' Conference, so there were thirty-odd bishops there, some of whom I met, some of whom I *know*, and a couple of archbishops and the cardinal archbishop, with whom I also had a chat. In fact I've met the archbishop of Birmingham several times now, and we've had some discussions. So they are much more outward going in this respect than they used to be. They've realised that they need to know something about these other religions. They're aware that they're losing some of their flock and that some people are becoming Buddhists, or Hindus, or sometimes Muslims. In fact one of the people that I was talking to at this reception who is on one of their inter-faith committees told me that according to his information the Catholic church was losing more of its members to Buddhism than to any other religion. Yes. I didn't say anything! *[Laughter]* But he just stated it as a matter of fact, he certainly didn't give the impression of being terribly upset or anything of that sort. I've met this gentleman several times and we've had several talks, but at least we can be

thankful that they don't any longer think in terms of burning us at the stake! So we have to be thankful for small mercies, and it's nice to have a bit of a dialogue instead!

Ashokashri: What would you say was the flavour of your dialogue? Are they interested in, do you think they'd be influenced by your arguments?

S: I don't know, because obviously in most cases they have their own very strong convictions, especially if they become bishops and archbishops - you don't become a bishop by being a bit way out in your views, so I couldn't say. But they are sometimes interested in discussing matters of general principle. For instance, I remember another reception - I think it was last year - I was talking with the archbishop of Birmingham and another member of the Catholic Interfaith Commission, and the subject of orthodoxy was raised, so this other person, not the archbishop, turned to me and said jokingly, 'Of course in Buddhism you're lucky, you don't have any such thing as orthodoxy!' So I said, 'Oh yes we do!' We were talking about that with him and with the archbishop, about our conception of orthodoxy and subsequently I sent them copies of my essay, *The Meaning of Orthodoxy in Buddhism*, which they said they had found quite interesting. So sometimes we discuss things like that. But several Catholics I've met have been interested in discussing meditation and have bewailed the fact that the Catholic church seems to have lost the tradition of meditation. They know that they had it once upon a time in the old monasteries, but they recognise that meditation is no longer widely practised in the Catholic church and they see that as a lack. Some of them even say that 'This is something we can learn from the Buddhists.' But of course one mustn't forget that sometimes they may just be being polite and nice to me, and after all it's interfaith dialogue! But the Pope does seem to be still quite right-wing. But I also noticed that the Catholics I'm in contact with in Birmingham are all not very keen on the Pope at all! And on one occasion the archbishop actually told an anti-Pope joke, *[Laughter]* which I found rather interesting! So they do have a certain sort of freedom of thought, it seems, within certain limits.

Dhammadinna: Perhaps we could draw to a close. Anyone got any last points or questions?

S: But one thing I did tell my Catholic friends. I said, Look, you don't have to worry about the Buddhists, we're peaceful people. It's the Muslims that you should worry about. And they know that. And they often complain that they invite Muslims along to interfaith gatherings, but they don't come, or come in very small numbers. And there's hundreds of thousands of Muslims in Birmingham, they're a very big faith community. Buddhists are a very small community, but whenever I go to an interfaith gathering, there's usually four, five, six Buddhists, not from the FWBO - well, not all from the FWBO and I know the others - even though there's only at the most a few hundred Buddhists in Birmingham, but we're there, well represented, but you may get the odd Muslim, at the most the largest number I've ever seen at a reception is three and they weren't at the last reception, and my Catholic friends tell me that it's very difficult to get them along. They're always invited but they hardly ever turn up.

Dhammadinna: Is that true do you think post September 11th?

S: Apparently it's always been the case, because this interfaith commission has been in existence for several years now. I would have thought that post 11th September they'd be all the more keen to come, but apparently that is not the case. But I did have an interesting discussion with one Muslim cleric, a Shi'a cleric, whom I met at one of these receptions - well there were three of them there - and one of them wanted to know how many levels of being we had in Buddhist thought. They were all three quite highly educated in their respective theologies and scriptures. In fact there's a flourishing Shi'a study centre in Birmingham not very far from us and one of these Muslim clerics wants to come and see me and take me there to have a look at their library. So there's a little bit of contact, but not much. And next week, I think it's next week, or the week after, I've been invited to a reception at the Sikh Gurdwara. So the invitation card said I was to come 'bringing my family and my friends'! That sounded very Indian, so I'm taking a few people with me, my family and friends - well, I'll take my friends anyway. My friends are my family. And we have to go wearing headgear out of respect for the Gurdwara, they ask that, they always cover their heads in the Gurdwara.

Dhammadinna: So what are you wearing?

S: I haven't decided yet. Something. But they do say that if anyone is isn't able to come in headgear they will provide little caps. But I will not be wearing a baseball cap! *[Laughter]* I have been presented with baseball caps in the past by well-meaning transatlantic friends, but I have never worn them, even though one of them had printed on the front 'Bhante'! I lost that several years ago!

Dhammadinna: Sounds like it might have been intentional!

S: Yes I refused to be dumbed down!

Dhammadinna: Are you happy to draw to a close?

S: Yes, I'm sure you can draw us all to a close in your usual elegant fashion!

Dhammadinna: Thank you very much, Bhante, for coming to visit us over the last two days.

S: Thank you for having me!

Dhammadinna: And answering all our questions so fully. Thank you for the questions also. We're very, very pleased you've come to be amongst us, those of us you've ordained. Thank you.

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