

# Conversations with Bhante, August 2009

## Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Order,

In August this year Subhuti and I met with Bhante over three successive days and asked him some questions about his understanding of his own character and aspects of his personal history. Bhante had on an earlier occasion talked to us, together with Dhammarati, about some of these matters and we thought these conversations were of wider interest and significance. They fill in gaps in what is generally known and therefore help us to understand our Movement better, through understanding the circumstances in which it was created. Bhante agreed that our conversations be recorded and spoke to us for three or four hours each day, freely and generously answering whatever we asked him. The recordings were transcribed and then edited by Bhante for readability and clarity of meaning.

For me personally it was a privilege to participate in such an intimate exchange with Bhante. It was much more like a series of conversations than an interview, and was always characterised by Bhante's warmth, humour and frankness.

Bhante is happy for you to share these Conversations with Mitras and Friends if you think they will benefit from reading them - in order to make the text more easily available, Bhante has agreed to place it on his website: [www.sangharakshita.org/interviews](http://www.sangharakshita.org/interviews). The text will also be printed in December Shabda.

Finally, I'd like to mention that Bhante does not consider this a starting point for further discussion with him. He is simply happy that Order members know a little more of him than they did before.

Yours in the Sangha,

Mahamati

Madhyamaloka, Birmingham, U.K.  
November 15th 2009

## DAY ONE: Bhante's Character

*Mahamati: Bhante, many of your disciples would like to know more about you. We know your teachings and we know quite a lot of the facts of your life, however many of us don't know so much about what makes you tick or how you tick – although, of course, there is a lot of speculation. Our sense of not knowing seems to come partly from the fact that you are a rather unusual man, but also because maybe you are by nature rather reserved, even reticent, for whatever reason. Could you say something about your own character, as you understand it?*

Sangharakshita: I think perhaps you are right, I am rather reticent in certain respects and that is for quite definite reasons, which I might go into a bit later. But I'll begin with some more general characteristics that I have noticed.

For instance, I have noticed over the years that if I become interested in any particular topic I want to explore it very thoroughly. This began very early in my life. At the age of eight I was confined to bed for some two years. That period got me into the habit of reading. Of course I was already reading by the time I was eight, but it was during my confinement to bed that I became an habitual reader and began to develop certain very strong interests.

I remember I was especially interested in the visual arts, my principal reading matter being the *Children's Encyclopaedia*, which was very well illustrated. As soon as I was free from invalidism and able to borrow books from public libraries, I started developing some of the interests I had formed in a more specialised way. One example of that is the Pre-Raphaelites: I've been interested in them from that time right up to the present and I have enjoyed reading about them, visiting galleries where their paintings could be seen, and so on. In other areas too, I've tended to read quite a lot about the figures in whom I have been especially interested. I wasn't content with reading just one or two books: I wanted to study a whole lot – and that's how I have come to collect quite a few books about, for instance, Milton, Blake, D. H. Lawrence, John Middleton Murry, and the ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Plotinus. Of course, eventually that extended to the Dharma: once I had encountered the Dharma I wanted to read as much as I could about it and I read more or less whatever was available. *A Survey of Buddhism* demonstrates that, by the age of 29 when I wrote it, I had explored the Dharma very considerably. I don't think anyone could have done very much better at that time, considering what material was and was not available.

That then is one part of my general character: if I became interested in something or someone, usually a writer or a poet, I wanted to know a lot about him or her and wanted to explore their life very thoroughly, and that eventually carried over to my study of the Dharma.

*Subhuti: You talk about 'becoming interested' in a particular person or topic. I am wondering how that interest manifests itself – what form it takes?*

Sangharakshita: I think you could talk about it, first, as a strong empathy for the work I am engaging with. This seems another aspect of my general character. I've always had considerable powers of absorption and, when I'm absorbed, I suspend my critical faculties. I've noticed this many times: when I am reading a work of imagination, whether a poem, a novel, or a short story, I identify with the author and with the characters and I become thoroughly absorbed in them. I quite consciously and deliberately suspend my critical faculties at the time and only afterwards do I allow them to come into play. It seems that I have a great capacity for empathy and this extends not just to works of literature, but even to works of philosophy and religion. If I read Schopenhauer, I become a Schopenhauerian; if I read Plotinus, I become a Neoplatonist. It applies even to religion: I don't find it difficult to identify with some of the Christian positions. I've made it clear in *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra* that I can enjoy the Christian myths because I don't have to take them literally, as the orthodox Christian does. I can appreciate them just as myths and in the same way I can enjoy Hindu or Greek mythology. It's only afterwards that I apply my critical faculties. I think one has to have this imaginative empathy first, before the critical faculties come into play, if one is really to appreciate a work of art and to evaluate it deeply. I think some of our greatest critics, such especially as Coleridge, have had that power of initial empathy.

I can identify imaginatively but, when I'm not doing that, my critical faculties are very much at work. This may account for certain contradictions in some of the things I've said at different times: it depends whether I've made those statements at the time of empathic engagement or at the time of later critical appraisal.

Of course this tendency to delve very thoroughly into whatever I am interested in is not just about literature and art: it extends to people, it extends to meditation even. One can even see it at work in my period of sexual activity. The fact that I had quite a number of partners during that time is more understandable in the light of my tendency to want to explore very thoroughly when I come to something new that I'm really interested in – and of course I was really interested, in this case.

*Subhuti: Some people have suggested that you are more interested in ideas than in people, but I think that is a complete misunderstanding. I get the impression that your engagement with books is more about people than ideas. I get the impression that you engage with a book almost as a communication with the author: you are in contact with the author, not just with their words or their ideas.*

Sangharakshita: That is true. For instance, not so long ago, I listened right through to a recording of *Paradise Lost*. At the end of it, I got the strange impression that I was living inside Milton's head – yes, inside this vast intelligence. I had that feeling very strongly, which I had not really had quite like that before, even though Milton and *Paradise Lost* have always been great favourites of mine. By listening to *Paradise Lost*, I was inside Milton's mind in a very real sort of way. I was not just hearing something he had written,

but experiencing Milton himself, which had in a way nothing to do with the subject of *Paradise Lost*. It was a very expansive experience.

*Mahamati: Are there other distinctive aspects of your character you haven't mentioned yet?*

Sangharakshita: I have on other occasions spoken of one of the most important of my personal characteristics in terms of phrenology – the supposed science of reading character from the shape of the head: looking for 'bumps' that were thought to represent particular traits. I have said that I have a particularly large 'bump of veneration'. I find it very easy to venerate, to look up: I enjoy looking up to those who are better or more advanced than me in this or that respect. I found it easy to look up to my own Buddhist teachers and I find it easy to look up to the great religious figures, philosophers, poets, and artists of the past. I am very glad that there are people who have been much greater than me: I would hate to think I was the summit of human evolution – that would be a terrible thought. Of course, I have no problem looking up to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

This then is a very important part of my overall character and always has been, certainly from the time I became acquainted with the *Children's Encyclopaedia* – and it is totally opposed to certain current attitudes and thinking, even within some sections of the Order. I am not happy with cynicism and debunking or anything like that and I strongly dislike the tendency to that sort of thing in the Movement and the Order.

This capacity for veneration means that my thinking is naturally hierarchical: there is a hierarchy of values and achievements. I can be critical, as you know – but that sits quite comfortably with my overall preference for looking up, admiring, and if you like worshipping, rather than looking down and trampling on someone or something.

*Subhuti: One could say that the capacity for veneration is closely connected with the capacity for empathy. It seems in your case that the critical faculty does not interfere with veneration and empathy, nor do they impede your critical faculty. I was wondering about that faculty: have you always had it, or did you have to work to develop it? How does it function?*

Sangharakshita: The fact that I find it very easy to admire also gives me certain standards, so I can see when something does not live up to those standards. I also have the capacity to analyse, to see fine distinctions, where they exist, which are not necessarily obvious to other people. I can see the subtle distinction between certain words that seem to mean the same thing. I have the ability to see where those words differ and am able to express that difference. That has helped in my exposition of the Dharma.

I have probably always had it, but my capacity to analyse was first pointed out to me by a Hindu Newari friend in Kalimpong. He was not one of my students, but a bit older, and he was the eldest son of Parasmani Pradhan, a prominent literary figure who was also a

printer. We were talking one day and he commented on this ability of mine by way of the analogy of several sheets of fine paper pressed together so that they looked like just one sheet. I had the ability to separate out the sheets that others would see as one, that's how he put it. That of course is part of my interest in words, the meaning of words, dictionaries and so forth.

But I think I can also say I have the faculty not only to analyse but also to synthesise. Most people have either one or the other – unless they have neither! I am able also to synthesise, to bring things together, and I've done that, I think, in my exposition of the Dharma.

Going back to my capacity for veneration, it occurs to me that there is a corollary to that. I never experience myself as relating to others from a height, for instance even within the Order of which I was the Head. You were talking, Subhuti, in your lecture on the Men's Convention, about the impression you had of me, when you first met me, as rather extraordinary – well, that's not the impression I have of myself. To myself I always appear quite ordinary. I am with myself all the time so there is nothing special about it. I feel that quite genuinely. For that reason I see myself as relating to others as one ordinary person to another.

That connects with the criticism that some people have made – and you have also touched upon it in the past – that, in my sexual relationships with those much younger than me, I did not take into account that I was so much older, more experienced, the teacher, etc. The fact is I did not because in a sense I *was* not: it did not seem so to me. Thinking this over more recently, the phrase that came to mind was, 'Like love, sex is a great leveller.' Take the old cliché: the millionaire and the chorus girl – when it comes to sex, they are on the same level. Her beauty weighs as strongly as his money. It's not that he holds all the trump cards, very often she does. I didn't see myself in those sorts of situations as a 'flaming Jupiter' descending on the hapless Semele, as Marlowe has it. And I think quite a few people saw me as I saw myself.

I think that is an important aspect of my attitude and my life, this tendency to look upwards and to compare myself, if I compare at all, with those above me, not those who are below me. Take my poetry: it is important to me, and I value it – and some of it is quite good. But I always compared myself as a poet, when I did make comparisons, with those quite a bit better than me – not the greatest: that would have been laughable!

*Mahamati: At the beginning you agreed that you are rather reticent, by character. Could you say a bit more about that?*

Sangharakshita: I have always been very reticent and reserved. There are reasons for that in my early experience. First of all, from an early age I realised that my serious interests were not shared by anyone else I knew, so I just did not talk about them. As time went on, that included my interest in the Dharma: there was no one in my immediate circle I could talk to about that – although after a while I did contact the Buddhist Society and make a few friends there with whom I could discuss the Dharma. However, I think my general tendency has been not to disclose my deeper feelings or real thoughts. That has of course spilled over and reinforced my reluctance to talk about my sexuality. It's not that it's the one issue I don't talk about, it's one of several more intimate or profound interests that I haven't talked about.

*Mahamati: For instance?*

Sangharakshita: I don't feel the need to disburden myself ever. I feel quite able to keep a secret: I think that's part of my nature. I very often keep my feelings and thoughts about other people to myself, for the obvious reason that within a community and organisation you can't be sure that what you say won't be repeated and then create various kinds of confusion. Some of my thoughts relating to the Dharma I keep to myself, if I feel they are of a more speculative nature, or may not be understood, or might cause unnecessary controversy. And of course I keep reasonably quiet about some of my views, although I might have a quiet joke with some of my friends from time to time!

*Subhuti: Your reticence about the topic of your sexuality is not because you are ashamed or anything of that kind, or guilty?*

Sangharakshita: No, not at all.

*Mahamati: Although you may not have talked much about your sexuality, you never tried or wished to keep secret your activities?*

Sangharakshita: On the few occasions I have been asked, I have freely acknowledged it. For instance, quite a few years ago, during the reign of the Tories, two Ministers' wives became a bit interested in Buddhism. That was newsworthy apparently, so a reporter from the *Daily Mail* came to see me and asked me about Buddhism and the FWBO. It was a good interview: we spoke for about an hour and he asked me quite a bit about the FWBO and myself. Among other things, he said that he'd heard I had had sexual relationships with other men and asked if that was true. I said, 'Yes, that was true'. He made a note of it and carried on with the interview. After a while a two page spread was published on the story, with photos of the Tory wives and quite a bit about them. At the bottom there was a little box with a little about me and the FWBO. The fact of my homosexuality was not omitted – it was just mentioned as a fact; it wasn't made into anything more. And there are quite a number of other instances of a similar kind, where that fact was mentioned in

a quite uncomplicated sort of way in a public medium. I definitely did not try to keep it secret – I just did not talk about it unless specifically asked to do so.

*Mahamati: Within the Order and Movement, in your so-called 'promiscuous phase', people could speak quite freely if they wanted to? You never asked anyone to keep silent or anything of that kind?*

Sangharakshita: Of course, they could speak quite freely about it. Why not? I never saw any reason to try to keep it quiet, although I never felt any need or desire to discuss it, unless I was asked.

*Subhuti: Perhaps this takes us back to your reticence. You mentioned that the reasons for that reticence were not primarily to do with the nature of your sexuality, but I can imagine that realising your were sexually attracted to men in the 1930s would justifiably have been reticence-inducing!*

Sangharakshita: It is interesting that in all the recent discussions about me in this respect, to the best of my knowledge, no one seems to have considered what it must have been like for me, growing up at a time when all forms of homosexual activity were regarded as criminal. It could have had a much more unfortunate effect upon my character than it did. That it didn't was because I was naturally self-confident, perhaps partly due to the way I had been brought up by my parents. I know that somebody has suggested that I still need to come to terms with my homosexuality, but so far as I am concerned there has been nothing with which I have had to come to terms.

Let me fill in a bit of background. I have already said that I gradually became aware that I was different to most other people in my interests in art, literature, and history, which were not shared by those around me. But as I made clear in *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra*, I also gradually became aware in early adolescence that my sexual inclinations were also not shared by anyone around me. However I accepted that fact and it didn't trouble me. I knew quite well, when I was an adolescent, that society disapproved. I knew what had happened to Oscar Wilde, for instance, just 30 years before my birth, and to others like him. Nonetheless, although I was aware of society's disapproval, I did not disapprove of myself for having those inclinations. I never have done, not for an instant, and I have never wished I was different in that respect. I accept it as a quite definite aspect of my character and I feel very sorry for those men who have to struggle with this issue, sometimes denying their own deeper feelings. I felt very sympathetic to a friend in the Order, for instance, who was struggling to come to terms late in life with the real nature of his own sexuality – I really empathised with him.

To give you an example of the kind of tensions those with homosexual feelings were under then, I'll tell you an incident I've only recently re-remembered that happened when I was about 17 and that made quite an impression on me at the time. I was then working for the London County Council at County Hall and I would often cross the river to frequent the Charing Cross Road bookshops. One day I went into the public toilet there

and, as I was relieving myself, a man standing near me exposed himself to me. I remember it very well: he was quite a tall man, dressed all in black with a black hat, and, judging by his appearance, a senior civil servant or the like. When he exposed himself, I was quite alarmed. I knew quite well what it meant. I realised, even then, that this was something not to get mixed up in and I left as quickly as I could. Some time later, I reflected on this: here is this man, who is probably a senior civil servant in Whitehall, and he is taking this appalling risk. If he was caught, in all likelihood he'd be prosecuted and might even go to jail, and he would certainly lose his job. If he was not caught there was always the possibility of blackmail and that was a very terrible thing. One way or another, his life could be ruined – his family life, his reputation, his job, his social relations, everything.

That incident helped to make me aware of the strain and tension under which many men lived before homosexual activity was decriminalised, either concealing their deeper nature or acting upon it and having to pay the price, whether socially or in a legal sense – or both. I have always known that I was very fortunate not to feel any shame at my homosexuality. I have been well aware that this was only because I had a lot of self-confidence and that many men with the same sexual feelings that I had just did not have that strength or confidence. I have always been very conscious of the fact that, in the West, due to the influence of Christianity, with Judaism in the background, many thousands, if not millions, of men must have lived quite tormented lives in this respect. It was only after the Kinsey report on male sexuality came out in the late forties that there came to be a general appreciation of the large number of men who were either homosexual or bisexual and of the great amount of suffering that many of them had experienced as a result.

This was also a big part of the reason why I was quite determined that, within the FWBO and especially within the Order, there should not be discrimination on the basis of sexuality. Luckily, by the time I founded the Order, homosexual acts between consenting adults in private had been decriminalised, thanks to Roy Jenkins, Home Secretary in the Wilson government. That said, there is still a definite streak of homophobia within British life, even today.

To go back to my own story, I realised quite early on the nature of my own sexuality and I realised that it was disapproved of by society and was illegal. At the same time, I had no guilt about those feelings: I did not think there was anything wrong with them or would be anything wrong with my engaging in sexual activities of that kind – although I did not do so. Then I was conscripted into the Army and in the Army, even more than in civil life, there was no question of homosexual activity, although it was quite obvious to me that there were some men who were drawn to one another a bit more than was customary or normal. But the punishment for homosexual behaviour in the Army was then very harsh – I believe even now it is not really approved of. After I left the Army, I had my wandering period and then became a monk, so there was no question of sexual activity. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if there had not been a war and I had not been called up into the Army. I suspect that sooner or later I would have become sexually active and



thereby risked prosecution. You might then say I was 'saved' from myself by being in the Army and then becoming a monk. By the time I started the FWBO, by a happy coincidence, the law had changed and I was sexually active for some seventeen or eighteen years, ending with a period of monogamy, about the time AIDS came along. It seems almost providential that my period of sexual activity was between the repeal of the law prohibiting homosexuality and the arrival of AIDS.

It was only after I started having serious doubts about the Bhikkhu life itself that I started having a different attitude to the possibility of becoming sexually active. Those doubts and that possibility went along together.

*Subhuti: Before you became a monk, was the fact that you had no sexual outlet troublesome to you or was it just something you accepted?*

Sangharakshita: In my teens and even when I was in the Army, I can't remember any particular struggle. While I was a Bhikkhu, it was troublesome sometimes – I won't say that I found celibacy easy. I don't think I am celibate by nature, so it was a definite struggle, but of course it was a struggle in which I believed at that time. I think probably the period of the greatest struggle was during my earlier years in Kalimpong, when I was between about 25 and 35. It was quite difficult remaining celibate during that period, although I did manage.

Something of this struggle comes out in some of my poems from this period – I've more than once said that my poems can be seen as a sort of spiritual autobiography, revealing things I did not write about elsewhere. There's one poem in particular that can be seen as having to do with my reticence and reserve in certain situations, not feeling able to express my feelings – that is the poem *Goldfish*, written early in my time in Kalimpong. One has to read between the lines a bit, but it is fairly obvious what I am writing about. And there is another poem where one has to read between the lines, called *The Cult of the Young Hero*, with an acknowledgement to Stephan George, the German poet, who was the centre of a sort of homoerotic circle in the twenties and early thirties. I think one could read that as also having some bearing on my sexual feelings.

*Mahamati: You once told us about a friend you discussed the matter with while you were with the Army in Singapore....*

Sangharakshita: When I talked with that Army friend, we didn't talk about sex in general. We just acknowledged there was that feeling between us; we didn't really discuss it. I think he would have found it very difficult to talk about it. We were drawn to one another and joked about it a bit between ourselves. I think if circumstances were different we might even have had a relationship. I remember that I wasn't very serious about it. To me at that time not having sex was not a big problem. But this friend was a married man and had been away from his family for several years and I remember he had quite a difficult time with it, as did some of my other married friends, who were often talking about sex, missing sex. After all, being married, they'd had it regularly. There were five other

youngsters in the unit the same age as myself and none of us had had any sexual experience – that was the way things were in those days. I don't think we felt the pinch like the married men did.

*Mahamati: You said that celibacy was part of the package, as it were, of being a Bhikkhu. How would you have seen that at the time? In what sense was it part of the package?*

Sangharakshita: Even before becoming a monk, I saw being celibate as an aspect of the overall commitment. That was the tradition: you gave up family life and along with that you gave up sex.

*Subhuti: But celibacy was not a particular ideal for you: it was simply tied to that particular way of life?*

Sangharakshita: I can't remember thinking of celibacy as an ideal.

*Mahamati: For instance, you have more recently spoken quite a bit about Brahmacharya as a more integrated and subtle way of life, of which the natural corollary is not engaging in sexual activity.*

Sangharakshita: I don't think I thought of it in that way when I was a Bhikkhu. It did not feel Brahma-like, because there was a constant struggle that would not be there if one were really living the Brahma life.

*Subhuti: That puts your period of celibacy in India as a Bhikkhu in a particular light: would you say in retrospect, you think it was unnecessary, but you don't regret it?*

Sangharakshita: I certainly don't regret it.

*Mahamati: Did you benefit from it, do you think, apart from avoiding arrest?*

Sangharakshita: I benefited from it to the extent that one benefits from observing any discipline.

*Mahamati: It doesn't sound as though it was entirely 'natural', if that is the right word. You'd had to be very circumspect about your own sexuality and its expression and had become a monk while that was the case. I'm not clear how you view that in the context of your whole life.*

Sangharakshita: Perhaps it is necessary here to give a bit of overall perspective on sex in my life. I'll start by reminding you of my general analysis of sex-life into six different kinds, then I can relate that to my own history. First of all, I distinguish between neurotic and non-neurotic sex. By 'non-neurotic' I mean healthy, normal, guilt-free, non-obsessional, without violence or the like. Then I distinguish between promiscuous sex, monogamous sex, and celibacy – although one must be careful not to misunderstand the

word 'promiscuous', which can have a definitely negative ring to it, implying an unrestrained and even compulsive indulgence, which is not what I mean, at all. I mean having, during a particular period of time, a number of partners sequentially without any commitment to continuing sexual relations. So that gives you six categories of sex-life: unhealthy and healthy promiscuity, unhealthy and healthy monogamy, unhealthy and healthy celibacy.

We can then look at the history of my own sexual life in these terms, seeing five distinct phases. First there was a long phase of celibacy, starting from my birth, to be quite literal, up to my forty-second year. That phase of celibacy itself had two distinct periods. Up until my mid-twenties, I did not experience much conflict or constraint. There was of course the fear of the law, however I do not think I was at that time looking for a sexual relationship, although had opportunity arisen, safely and appropriately, I would probably have taken it. From my mid-twenties until my early forties, my celibacy was not entirely healthy, insofar as it was a matter of discipline. I took Going Forth as a Bhikkhu seriously and celibacy was part of the package, so to speak, so I took that seriously too and did not engage in any sexual activity during that time. But it did not come naturally to me and was a matter of discipline that was, at times, something of a struggle. But I did not break that discipline.

After that first phase of prolonged and latterly somewhat unhealthy celibacy, came the second phase, a phase of monogamy, which started when I was forty-two and lasted for about a year and a half. Then came the third phase, during which I had a number of partners over some ten years or so. During the fourth phase I was monogamous. That tailed off in the mid-eighties and since then I have been celibate, which makes the fifth phase, which I am still in. During this last phase, celibacy has come quite naturally and happily to me – it is the way I want to be. I regard all these last phases as having been healthy or non-neurotic, whether the monogamous second phase, the promiscuous third phase, the monogamous fourth phase, or the present celibate fifth phase. I have felt no guilt or inhibition or constraint in any of these four phases and consider that they were conducted in a context of positive human relationships.

*Subhuti: That leads me onto a characteristic that you have mentioned on other occasions. You seem usually to have done things more on the basis of intuition or even spontaneously in response to the situation, rather than having a plan. And this comes out in relation to your commencing sexual activity: it wasn't that one day you thought to yourself, 'Well, I think I will start being sexually active now.' Is that correct?*

Sangharakshita: The circumstances were that I had been thinking about things and had changed my attitude to some extent, so I took advantage of an opportunity that was offered.

*Subhuti: Thinking about things?*

Sangharakshita: I had my critique of monasticism almost from the very beginning, which meant that I came to have more and more uncertainty about wanting to continue being a monk – which of course opened up the possibility of engaging in sexual activities.

*Mahamati: Since the beginning? Do you mean, literally, since your ordination?*

Sangharakshita: I became a Bhikkhu in 1950 and I wrote the *Survey* in 1955, although I gave the talks it was based on some time before, and in that work I express some strong criticism of monastic formalism as found within the Theravada. So my doubts began developing quite early on. At that stage, my criticism was more from within the system – to do with the way the system was conducted, rather than the system itself. I did not disagree with the strictness of the Vinaya, for instance, but what I disagreed with was people making a pretence of observing it when they weren't. Another aspect I had begun to question was the merit-making side of monasticism, which is really its economic basis in many parts of the Buddhist world.

*Subhuti: But, by 1965-6 you'd begun to really question the whole system? There are quite striking points described in Moving Against the Stream, where for instance you consciously don't get up in the morning and where you decide not to wear robes when out and about. These all seem, to me, to be steps away from the system. Is that a fair way of putting it?*

Sangharakshita: Yes, I think so. In the case of the robes, I didn't feel very happy standing out so much and being so much an object of observation. Some monks rather liked that, but I certainly didn't; I preferred to be inconspicuous. In later years, after being the centre of attention for a while, say at the London Buddhist Centre, I used to quite enjoy going off on my own and looking in the bookshops down Charing Cross Road and experiencing myself as no different from anybody else. That, by the way, is one of the things I can't do now – that is one of the disadvantages of old age: I can't go out on my own; I can't move about freely.

*Mahamati: From your memoirs, I get the impression that there was something about the way British Buddhism was at that time that you did not feel comfortable with?*

Sangharakshita: That is certainly true. At the Buddhist Society and the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, there were very strange ideas about the Bhikkhu. These strange ideas were the legacy of previous Bhikkhus, because there had been some very strange characters before me. There was a very unreal atmosphere surrounding the Bhikkhus that I definitely didn't like. Among Eastern Buddhists, even among Theravadins, Bhikkhus are respected and honoured, but it's much more natural and relaxed than it was among British Buddhists in those days. It was very self-conscious, very tense and I quite deliberately went against that at the Society's Summer School, barely a week after my arrival: I went and ate with the lay people, which was really a shock for some of them. That showed me the sort of aura that had surrounded Bhikkhus before me, almost as though they were Arahants – it was really like that.

I must say Christmas Humphreys was quite aware of this. He rather resented all the adulation that the Bhikkhus got automatically. After all, he had been working for nearly 40 years, doing what he could for the good of the Dharma and then these Bhikkhus came, some quite recently ordained, and were treated almost like gods. From the beginning he himself related to me quite straightforwardly, much more so than others. Some of the women related to me quite straightforwardly, once they got over their initial apprehension – of course, people are always afraid of doing the wrong thing.

*Subhuti: You talked a bit earlier about thinking about things and then an opportunity arose, so presumably you'd been thinking about things in the area of sex?*

Sangharakshita: Yes.

*Subhuti: Is there anything you can say about that process? When did you begin to think, 'I don't need to identify full-timer-ship with Bhikkhuship and Bhikkhuship with celibacy'?*

Sangharakshita: I don't think it was so clear cut as that. The process was much more gradual and, in a sense, less conscious. First of all there was my growing recognition of how hypocritical and even corrupt so much of Theravada practice was. At the same time, I was aware that the picture was not so simple. I have mentioned in *Forty-Three Years Ago* that I knew some Bhikkhus, some of whom were good friends of mine, who were not actually celibate, although they really were devoted to the Dharma: they were good Buddhists even if not good monks. They were doing what they could to establish the Dharma in India.

Contact with my Tibetan teachers also played its part in undermining that conflation of celibacy with the dedicated spiritual life. Some of them were not celibate but were clearly very much full-timers. Dudjom Rimpoche was married and he was certainly full-time for the Dharma, likewise Dilgo Khyentse – and even arguably Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche. All that made an impression on me.

*Subhuti: I see. The process began right back then, but for you, given your commitment to the Dharma, your particular sexual inclinations, and the nature of Indian society and of Theravada Buddhism, there was still no option but celibacy while you were in India. But when you came back to England, you entered a different milieu.*

*I am still quite interested in that process of transition, even if it was an inchoate one. Can you remember what went on? From what you have said in the past, it sounds as if an opportunity arose more or less by chance and sex happened. It doesn't sound as if at any point previously you had decided to stop observing celibacy or to find a sexual partner. The opportunity arose and you took it.*

Sangharakshita: Yes, a young man needed somewhere to stay and I was willing to put him up because nobody else wanted to. Everything followed from there.

*Subhuti: Presumably, had that opportunity arisen a year or so before, you would have felt, 'I'm a Bhikkhu, and that's what a Bhikkhu doesn't do'. So at some point an inhibition went. Previously you wouldn't have...*

Sangharakshita: ...probably would not have responded in the way I did – probably. In the meantime, I had been thrown out of the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara and I no longer felt myself bound by the conventions of Theravada Bhikkhu-hood, especially in its British variety of that time. Although I was not happy to be banned from the Vihara after my return from India, I felt very glad to be free from all that.

I think the transition may also have had something to do with Terry Delamare and my discussions with him, because he was certainly drawn to the Dharma, but he had no time for, as it were, traditional Buddhism. This is only just now occurring to me, but I think it is true.

*Subhuti: Like he wouldn't call you 'Sangharakshita' – he would call you 'Dennis'.*

Sangharakshita: That's right. It didn't matter to him whether I was celibate or not, although I don't think we actually discussed this. He wouldn't have considered it important. Through my contact with him and discussions with him, I think I became a bit more 'secularised', but not in a negative way – a bit less 'traditional' in the more superficial sense of the word. I think his attitude may have had quite an influence – Terry was very serious about spiritual life, but robes and celibacy didn't mean anything to him and it didn't matter at all to him whether or not I ate after 12 o'clock.

I should stress, to avoid possible misunderstanding, that there was never any question of sex between Terry and I. He would simply not have been interested and that was not the nature of our friendship. But my contact with him did help me to move away from even my own, by then, very attenuated version of Theravada Bhikkhu-hood and therefore predisposed me to take the final step away from celibacy as a mere discipline.

To draw today's discussion to a close, I hope this all helps people to understand how I 'tick', as you put it, Mahamati. I have tried to tell you about how I see my own character.

*Mahamati: You haven't said much about confidence as a distinctive characteristic. You spoke of it in connection with not feeling guilty about your sexual feelings and you said you thought that was because you had a lot of confidence. I'd like to hear more about that – you seem to have been born with a certain confidence in yourself.*

Sangharakshita: What is confidence? A part of confidence is not allowing oneself to be unduly swayed by the opinions of other people; it is the ability to think for oneself. As regards my sexuality, I knew very well what the opinion of society was about that particular kind of orientation and behaviour. But that certainly did not make me feel guilty about having those particular feelings or think that I ought not to have them. I saw

that I had them; they were with me. I had not asked for them – I was born with them. I had not asked for them any more than I asked for brown eyes or brown hair, so there was no reason to be apologetic about them. In *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra*, I quote that poem by A. E. Housman, 'Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?... Oh they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair'.

*Subhuti: You said that you thought that you got that self confidence from your father.*

Sangharakshita: Yes, I think that self-confidence was at least in part due to my upbringing by my parents, especially my father. For instance, they both encouraged me to follow up whatever subjects I was interested in. They always made efforts to get the books I wanted, before I was able to go to public libraries or bookshops myself. They did not question, 'Well, why do you want this book?', they just went and got it. Soon after I got out of bed and was walking a little bit again, I came across references to Plato's *Republic* so I wrote on a piece of paper, 'Plato's *Republic*', and gave it to my mother, and off she went to the public library and got it for me – although she had no idea why I wanted the book. I always had that sort of support. My interests were not questioned, doubted, or undermined and, indeed, they were actively supported. I am sure that helped me to develop self-confidence.

However, my self confidence may have come from a deeper source, maybe among the *samskaras* with which I was born. I'll give you another little example. When I was very little, I was quite naughty and one day my mother went out and bought a little bamboo cane – I don't know if she intended to use it or if it was just a warning to me. But, when she next went out shopping, I took the top off the stove, which I was not supposed to do, twisted the cane into a ball, thrust it in and burnt it. It was one of those ranges with the oven on one side and the firebox on the other with a circular plate above it that had to be lifted off, which it was not easy for a small child to do. But I did it. I don't remember what my mother said on her return, but I do remember that little incident, which, I suppose, showed a certain amount of self-confidence and decisive action, on my part.

Some people might say I have too much self-confidence, but without that self-confidence I could not have founded the Order or at least not the sort of Order that you have now – although it was never that I had an ambition to found a new Buddhist Order: that was, in a way, forced upon me by circumstances. My preference as a Buddhist would have been to lead a more literary life, studying the Dharma, travelling around giving talks. I would have been very happy just doing that, as I was doing in India; I think that would have satisfied me. I didn't have any particular wish to start up any new organisation, even though I had discovered that I could organise things.

*Subhuti: There is something else that seems very characteristic of you. I recently was reading through your work and I was struck by the Platonic or Neoplatonic strand that runs through it. Obviously, there is A Note on 'The Burial of Count Orgaz', and I was struck by it in The Veil of Stars, which has something of The Symposium about it.*

Sangharakshita: Yes, it obviously goes back to Plato's *Symposium* and that has always been an important text for me, besides being a really great work of art. I remember one of my poems, *A Crumb from the Symposium*:

'A reveller reeling  
From Plato's feast  
Has cried to the Morning Star  
High in the East:  
Let the torch burn on:  
We shall waken at morn  
To loves colder and purer  
Than snows or the dawn.'

*Subhuti: Was this Platonic element in any way the background of your sexual life?*

Sangharakshita: I think it probably was, though of course without necessarily accepting Plato's metaphysics in their entirety. What also was of interest to me about Plato was how he resolves a philosophical issue with a myth, as if to say, reason or dialectics can't carry you all the way: there has to be something else, something imaginative – even a sort of revelation. *The Symposium* itself deals with the sublimation of emotion, but it doesn't commit itself to any of his later metaphysical positions about Forms and so on.

*Subhuti: The Veil of Stars has that theme of the ascent of love, just as in The Symposium.*

Sangharakshita: Which of course you get in the Sufis – in their case, too, there is a Platonic and Neoplatonic element. I do have a very much later poem that I called *The Neoplatonists*.

*Subhuti: That sort of thinking or rather, that sort of idealism was there for you, running through your sexual and emotional attraction?*

Sangharakshita: ... and my aesthetic life.

*Subhuti: It struck me that this is quite an important element in your attitude: not rejecting the sensuous realm, even in an erotic or sexual sense, but seeing in it the possibility of sublimation – real sublimation not sublimation in the sense of ... evasion...*

Sangharakshita: ... or displacement. And of course the idea of beauty, human beauty, has always been important to me.

*Subhuti: So your sexuality for you was never out of key with your ideals.*

Sangharakshita: Exactly.



*Subhuti: At the same time it was real sexuality, not 'sex in the brain', as D. H. Lawrence would say. You were not working out any theory, even if you had a natural Neoplatonic outlook?*

Sangharakshita: I think what you say about the importance of Neoplatonism in my general outlook and character is quite significant. One might say, leaving aside any sort of doctrinal or metaphysical issues, that I am a Neoplatonist by temperament as Shelley was.

*Subhuti: In the sense of, especially...*

Sangharakshita: ...in the sense of a sort of idealism, and a sort of upward movement, as it were.

*Subhuti: It's an upward movement that does not seem to deny the sensuous...*

Sangharakshita: ...that does not deny the ground from which you take your departure: in your upward flight, you do not entirely lose sight of the earth from which you spring.

We have then gone through what I see as some of my main characteristics: I look up with a strong sense of veneration; when I get interested in something I want to investigate it thoroughly; though I empathise at the time and am capable of total identification, I can appraise critically afterwards; I have great self confidence; I am naturally reticent and reserved; and I have this sort of Neoplatonic attitude or temperament.

## **DAY TWO: Bhante's Explorations**

*Mahamati: You told us quite a bit about your character, yesterday, and incidentally about the background to your moving out of celibacy and its place in your whole life. Perhaps because of that reticence you talked about, there is quite a bit we don't know about all that. Can I ask you to fill in some more of the background to your sexual activity? What actually happened? How did you actually begin sexual activity? What was the story? Do you mind going into that?*

Sangharakshita: I certainly don't mind telling you, although I do not know how interesting it will be – or even whether people should be interested. However, it is very much part of my history and perhaps illustrates my character, so let's fire ahead. My only concern is that it is difficult through the present medium to communicate what I actually was feeling at the time. Those reading it may not get a very good idea of what it was like for me. Inevitably it may seem a bit distant and factual. It would obviously have been better if I'd been able to write about it all nearer the time, but that wasn't possible for various reasons, and it is certainly not possible now. We'll just have to do our best.

But it occurs to me that there are a couple of other preliminary comments I should make before I go much further. I am very aware that I am potentially addressing the whole Order and Movement through this exchange and that more than a quarter of Order members live in India, where there are quite different cultural attitudes, especially to sex in general and to homosexuality in particular. We all, East and West, need to have some understanding of these cultural differences and learn to view them sympathetically. In the West, we have to understand the strength of tradition in India and we must not lightly ignore the very positive aspects of that tradition or dismiss Indians' fears and reactions when they believe those are threatened. For instance, within our Movement in India, people would take a husband or wife's adultery very seriously indeed, especially on the part of an Order member, while in the West we'd take it much more lightly. In the West, we have had the 'permissive' movement, which has not happened in India. I am not, by the way, altogether in favour of permissiveness, in the extreme sense, however, gay people have benefited from that, even if some have misused the freedom they have been granted.

I think each side has to understand the cultural parameters of the other. In the particular instance of homosexuality, I think Indian Order members, Dhammamitras, and Dhammasahayaks have to understand that we see things a bit differently in the West. There is a different history, even a tradition of very positive acceptance of homosexuality, going back to the Greeks. It has not always been seen as something sordid or immoral. More recently, there is a widespread understanding and acceptance in general society, in Britain at least, that some people are simply born like that and that they are not wrong in expressing what for them are natural feelings. I hope that in the Indian wing of the Movement people will bear this in mind, just as I hope that in the Western wing of the Movement people will bear in mind when they go to India that the culture is different, for instance women should not expose too much of themselves etc. Of course, there has been a recent Indian court ruling that appears to have removed the criminalisation of homosexual relations, so in India too things are changing in this respect.

*Subhuti: Actually, Bhante, I think Indian Order members have a remarkably sophisticated acceptance of the cultural differences. They are able to maintain their own cultural perspective whilst appreciating that things are different in the West, even though many can't really understand the situation there. This is especially the case in relation to you. I have been very impressed, again and again.*

Sangharakshita: I am aware of that and it says a lot for them that they are able to accept such different cultural conventions. By way of a footnote, it occurs to me that I see a similarity between the persecution of homosexuals in the West and the oppression of the Dalits in India. Both, in different ways and for different reasons, have suffered a great deal of oppression over many centuries. I have worked directly for the cause of the Dalits, but not for the cause of homosexuals in the West or even in Britain. In some ways, I would have liked to have done so, but of course I had my hands full setting up the Order and the FWBO. However, at least I have ensured that the Order is open in principle to all, regardless of race, culture, education, social background, and sexual orientation. In one

way and another, maybe quietly rather than obviously, I have made it easy for people to be openly gay within the Movement in the West. So I feel some satisfaction about that.

One more preliminary comment before telling you that story: I have never thought of myself as 'gay' or 'homosexual' and I don't like the terms, even though it is hard now to avoid them. They've both got connotations that I am not personally happy with – especially because to use 'gay' in that way is to misuse an old English word with a very particular and useful meaning. For many people, 'gay' and 'homosexual' seem to imply a whole lifestyle of parties, excess and so on, and certain practices I have very little sympathy with. I want to make it clear that, though I was sexually active for a number of years, I never had any penetrative sex, either actively or passively, although of course I know that goes on in homosexual circles. One of the reasons I've never used the term homosexual in relation to myself is because I did not want to give the impression that I participated in those activities. I am not saying I disapproved of them on ethical grounds, but I had a distaste for them; my reasons were aesthetic rather than ethical.

*Mahamati: You have also said on other occasions that you resisted the terminology of 'gay' and 'homosexual' because they implied an identity.*

Sangharakshita: Yes, as though that was the most important thing about you. It didn't matter so much that you were English or French, Buddhist or Christian, male or female. The important thing was that you were gay, homosexual. That is a subsidiary reason for my not talking very publicly about my sexuality. I did not want to be identified in that way and I still resist people drawing so much attention to that particular aspect of my character.

Let me, nonetheless, now give you the early history of my sexual activity, starting with a bit of scene setting, because the context is very important for what happened. At the time of the founding of the FWBO in April 1967, I was living at Highgate West Hill, in North London, in a flat that I at first shared with Terry Delamare and where I was to live for three years. Terry moved out after a while to a community in Chalk Farm, but that was not a success and he moved into a flat with his girlfriend, Mafalda, so for the last nine months of his life he was not with me, although we met very frequently, even most days. While I was living there, I was of course launching the FWBO and then, a year later, the Order – leading all the classes, giving quite a lot of lectures, conducting retreats, seeing many people and so on.

At the same time, I had quite a life outside the Movement and that was very important to me, too. Most significantly, I made friends with a circle of Art students from Goldsmiths College, whom I had met when I gave a lecture there, arranged by Durangama. They would come to my lectures, although not to meditation classes, and joined in celebrations, for instance a Wesak Day festival at Sarum House, now Aryatara. It was with them that I went off to Glastonbury and had those strange experiences I have written about in my long poem, *On Glastonbury Tor*. There were six of them and I was particularly friendly with Louie, a young blonde woman who always wore green. They were a bit interested in

Buddhism, but were mainly into the Arts – they called themselves, 'The English Mystical School', and hoped for a revival of the Arts. Through them I learned about Macrobiotics, the I Ching, and such like. We would, for instance, sometimes meet at my flat for incense burning sessions – in which we would sample the different effects of various incenses. Later they all went off to New York and I lost touch with them – although Louie wrote to me years later from Cambridge.

Overlapping with the English Mystics was a young American named Carter, who came along a bit later. I happened to go down to Sakura, our centre in Monmouth Street, one evening, on my way to a retreat, and there, unexpectedly, was Carter. He had arrived with a letter of introduction from Robert Aitken, the American Zen Roshi in Hawaii, and since he had nowhere to stay we took him off with us to the retreat. He was clearly in a very shaky state, having just come out of a Scandinavian jail. After the retreat, he went off to Ireland for a while and, when he came back, he was allowed to spend the night in our basement shrine room at Sakura. When I went down to the centre the following afternoon to take a class, I found a number of people on the pavement outside, and Carter looking very ashamed and upset. He had gone to sleep, leaving a candle burning, and it had set the place on fire. He was lucky to have escaped with his life. Everyone was very annoyed with him and, of course, no-one wanted to give him house-space. So, what to do with him? Rather reluctantly, I offered to take him back to my flat. When it was bed time, I asked him whether I should make up a bed for him on the floor or whether he would share my bed. Without hesitation he said he would sleep with me – and that was how our sexual relationship began.

*Mahamati: It sounds very unpremeditated and spontaneous. Were you thinking of that when you invited him back?*

Sangharakshita: It certainly wasn't on my mind, I am quite sure of that.

*Mahamati: You invited him back out of kindness because he had nowhere to go?*

Sangharakshita: Yes. When I agreed he could come and stay with me, it was because I felt sorry for him. He was a miserable sort of figure at that point, no-one even wanting to take him back with them. However, I'm not so sure that I could claim it was pure kindness, because I didn't really want to be landed with him.

*Mahamati: But you over-rode your reluctance....*

Sangharakshita: ..... slightly grudgingly. And it's almost as if I was rewarded. It happened without any planning on my part – it seemed almost providential, like a 'gift from the gods'. The fact that it happened as it did seemed somehow a confirmation that it was right. He was sexually very uninhibited, which was very important for me at the time. He stayed with me for about six months and it was a very happy time for both of us.

*Mahamati: What kind of a man was he?*

Sangharakshita: He was then in his early twenties and came from a middle-class family in California, against which he was in rebellion, especially his mother. Like many at that time, he was in active revolt against his upbringing – although his granny encouraged him, giving him money for travel and so forth. He was quite into drugs and was rather scruffy with long, unkempt blond hair. Though his introduction to us came from an American Zen Roshi, his interest in Zen was not deep – it was just part of the whole alternative scene at that time. I don't even think he was much interested in meditation – I don't remember him meditating, except on retreat.

At the same time, then, as I was setting up the FWBO, I had these friends with whom I spent quite a bit of time, who were very important to me but who were never very deeply involved with the FWBO. Carter and the members of the English Mystical School smoked quite a bit of marijuana and I would sometimes join them. Carter and I also smoked marijuana lying on the grass on Hampstead Heath, near which I lived. I remember having a very positive experience with the drug, just floating away as if on a magic carpet. I perhaps smoked 'dope' some 100 or so times, but after Carter left I never smoked again – and I never missed it.

I also took LSD with Carter. He had previously taken the drug eight times, but all the 'trips' had been bad and he now wanted to have one together with me. He was convinced that if he did this he would at last have a positive experience. I was interested, especially because some of the young people coming to classes were asking me whether LSD produced the same effects as meditation, and I wanted to find out for myself. Carter made very careful preparations for our trip, getting pure LSD from California and selecting the records to play – I remember that Donovan's were among them. We took the drug just after breakfast and its effects lasted for about ten hours.

*Mahamati: What happened?*

Sangharakshita: I had intended to write about the experience as it progressed, but all I could write was, 'As if brain being nibbled by little fish...!' I had a very positive experience that I can only describe as 'cosmic', as if I was carried back to the dawn of time and saw an infinite expanse of water with light shining on it – 'First light on first waters'. Again, I saw telepathically that two friends of ours from the Mystics were 'not really together', even though they seemed to be a very devoted couple – and indeed they soon parted. At the end, just as the effects of the drug were waning, the door bell rang downstairs. I remember going to the landing and looking down and feeling a tinge of fear – I realised then that it was very easy to become paranoid on LSD. Fortunately Carter had a good trip and so he was very relieved.

This period with Carter and the Mystics and others was quite idyllic and very liberating for me, in tune with the mood of the times. It was the first time in my life that I had had an opportunity of this kind. I was of course also getting on with setting up the Movement: taking classes and so forth. The two aspects were very much intertwined and were both

important to me. It was a very rich, fruitful, creative period and I had a lot of energy that expressed itself in all sorts of ways, including the sexual, as well as in Dharma talks, poetry, etc. Some of the things going on might have been seen as incompatible, but they were not, so far as I was concerned at the time. It all seemed right and natural.

However, Carter began to grumble a bit that I wasn't going out and about with him – I wasn't interested in many of the things he wanted to do and I didn't have the time. I suggested, half jokingly, that he needed a girlfriend, but he said he didn't know how to get one. I therefore suggested that he should go to parties where he might meet someone, and eventually he did find a girlfriend in this way. Rather pale and anaemic, she was very much into drugs and was, like him, in rebellion – her grandfather was a senior clergyman in the Church of England. After some time, Carter moved in with her but he would still visit me regularly and we continued our sexual relationship. For quite a while, all was well. He was quite happy with his sexual relationship with me and his sexual relationship with his girlfriend. I remember Carter sitting between her and me once, with his arms round us both, and saying that he had never been happier. He was with the two people in the world whom he loved best, he said. It was clear that she didn't like this state of affairs and that led to tensions – not between me and Carter, but between Carter and her. Little by little she put pressure on him to be exclusively with her. She worked on him, making him afraid of losing her. Gradually he became very dependent on her emotionally. This was a bit of an eye-opener to me – I had not seen anything like it in India. I now saw something of what happens between men and women and especially the emotional dependence that men can have on women.

I remember there was a turning point in my relationship with Carter. He was very keen that the three of us should have a holiday together. I said, 'Carter, this is not going to work', but he was quite sure it would. So we borrowed a car and toured around the West Country. One day, we were in a park, I think in Bath, and Carter and I wanted to have a quick walk around. She didn't want to come, so we agreed that she would just sit on a bench till we got back. We were gone for just ten or fifteen minutes, but when we got back she was no longer there. Carter panicked and it took us some time to find her. I therefore decided that it was best for me to leave them and go back to London. From then on I saw less and less of Carter. Previously they would sometimes come up to see me in the flat together, but now she began to wait downstairs when they visited and that would make Carter very anxious. Though he was still very much into our sexual relationship, his visits became rarer and rarer and then stopped altogether. At some point, before that happened, he said to me with great feeling, 'Just give me two years and I'll come back'.

A few weeks after I saw him for the last time I heard from one of Carter's friends that he had married her and they had left for the States. Two years later I learned that she had been alone one night on a California beach and was badly beaten up. She had then returned to London, apparently on her own, so I assumed that they'd split up. I never heard from Carter again.

*Mahamati: What about women? Did you ever have sex with a woman?*

Sangharakshita: No, although I did come close to it on one occasion. A young woman friend of Carter's once stayed over at my flat and she clearly wanted us to have sex. Just before it could take place I heard a voice, as if from outside me, telling me not to proceed. It was a very soft, even angelic voice, and, though it was so gentle, there was no question of my disobeying. Just a day or two later, a former boyfriend of hers called on me to tell me that she had infected him and several other men with syphilis and was refusing to get herself treated. He asked me to persuade her to go to hospital, which I did.

There was another woman I shared a bed with, in this case several times, although we never had sex, because she already had a boyfriend (a married man, with one other girlfriend as well!). She was a young, attractive woman who obviously liked me and liked talking with me and would come and stay whenever she could not sleep with her boyfriend because his wife was there. I always felt quite comfortable with her in bed. However, in neither case did I feel any real sexual attraction.

*Mahamati: What happened after Carter left?*

Sangharakshita: Eventually another young American, Richard, moved in with me. He was a very laid back, very easy-going sort of chap in his mid-twenties, who was studying at the American Film School in St Martin's Lane. I must have met him when he dropped in on the centre in Monmouth Street, although he was not much interested in Buddhism, being a follower of Guru Maharaj of the Divine Light Mission. We got to know each other and, one day, some time after Carter had gone and Terry had died, he mentioned that he wasn't too happy in the flat he was sharing with three or four fellow students – it was a bit noisy. I therefore suggested he come to stay with me – and we both knew what that meant. It was a very simple, straightforward relationship with no problems, no ups and downs of any kind. Like Carter, he seemed to have no sexual inhibitions – perhaps it was no coincidence that they were both Americans! We lived together for about six months and then it ended, quite positively. He told me one day that his girlfriend was coming from America and the next week they were off to India together, to pursue their interest in Guru Maharaj. I had an email from him a couple of years ago, saying he had very happy memories of the time we'd been together.

*Subhuti: Your relationships with both Carter and Richard were monogamous?*

Sangharakshita: Yes.

*Subhuti: After that, you moved from Highgate West Hill to St James' Lane, in Muswell Hill, in 1970, and you lived with Graham, now Siddhiratna, and Kevin. What happened then, in terms of sex?*

Sangharakshita: At that point, I began to have a succession of sexual relationships, none of which were long term and most of which were with people connected with the FWBO – because by now I was almost completely absorbed in setting up the Movement and had

very few other contacts. In other words, I began a period of what I regard as healthy promiscuity – using the word advisedly, in the sense I have mentioned earlier.

*Subhuti: I remember the period when you were promiscuously active and I am wondering how it all worked? Did you normally take the initiative?*

Sangharakshita: In the majority of cases I took the initiative, but there were certainly a number of occasions when I didn't – and didn't need to.

*Subhuti: You took the initiative because you were attracted to them, or the opportunity came?*

Sangharakshita: Certainly there was attraction. I can say I never had sex with anybody whom I did not like and was not attracted to – not everyone can say this: sometimes people have sex for the sake of an outlet. I can also say I always felt a degree of response from the other person. There were plenty of people around with whom I might well have had sex but it just didn't happen – they were around, young, attractive, even obviously available sometimes, but it never happened. There wasn't that chemistry between us. In the other cases that sexual chemistry was there, at least to a degree, and that is what made it possible for me to have a sexual relationship with them and even to take the initiative.

*Mahamati: Is it possible that what you picked up from them was an openness to you and an emotional intimacy, not a sexual one?*

Sangharakshita: No, so far as I was concerned, there had to be a definite sexual frisson and it certainly seemed to me there was one in each case, so far as I can remember. I went on instinct and mutual chemistry and even the look in the eye. In this sort of situation one knows, or thinks one knows. There were many young Order members and others around with whom I did not have sexual relationships because I did not feel that frisson between us.

*Subhuti: As far as you are concerned, everybody you had sex with had some degree of response on some level and was a willing partner?*

Sangharakshita: I did not feel I was forcing anybody and would have regarded that as a quite wrong thing to do. Perhaps in a very few cases they were not as willing as I had supposed at the time – that is possible. It is not always easy to find out what is going on in someone else's mind, especially if you don't know them very well.

*Subhuti: Did you ever have any sense that it was a complication that you were a teacher – indeed, 'The Teacher'?*

Sangharakshita: I don't think I did. I did not regard myself as a teacher with a capital T, as it were. As I said yesterday, I related to people on the level.



*Mahamati: Do you mean you related to people on the level in the sexual context or in every situation?*

Sangharakshita: In a sense, in every situation. I think I have spoken about this more than once: one should approach another person without any assumption that you are either more or less developed than them – you just approach them directly, individual to individual. I generally approached all people on the level, all the more so in the sexual context. I did not see myself as sort of coming down from on high in my sexual relationships with those younger than myself or who were part of the Movement. It was just me.

*Mahamati: What you are telling us is that it simply wasn't on your mind that people might not see it like that, especially where the sexual option might arise?*

Sangharakshita: I think it wasn't.

*Mahamati: What about in retrospect, given that a few people have given different accounts of what happened?*

Sangharakshita: My recollection of what happened is usually a little different. Of course, I can't remember exactly in all cases: it was a very long time ago, some 30 or 40 years ago now. When I look back to myself in those days, it's almost like looking at somebody else's history; it seems less and less to belong to me. But, broadly speaking, as I remember it, things happened spontaneously on the basis of some definite chemistry in which we both participated.

*Subhuti: I remember you saying, at that time, that you were aware that some of us weren't really able to relate to you completely as individual to individual, because of projection. But presumably if you'd felt that was going on you wouldn't have entered into a sexual relationship – if it had been a complicating factor?*

Sangharakshita: Presumably not. Put it this way, at the time it didn't appear as complicated as it appears to some people now, in retrospect.

*Mahamati: In those few cases where people have been, at least in retrospect, unhappy about what happened, is there anything you can say about that?*

Sangharakshita: I am a bit puzzled by that. There was the *Guardian* article and there was Yashomitra's letter in *Shabda*. Both the article and the letter contained allegations that were at variance with my own recollections, and I am therefore puzzled. In Yashomitra's case, I remember him and being with him, being at Padmaloka and at Il Convento in Tuscany for his ordination course. I remember going for walks with him and so forth, but I have no recollection of any sexual contact with him. I find that puzzling, because I thought I remembered every encounter, even if the details sometimes elude me.

*Mahamati: If it is puzzling, is it possible to solve the puzzle?*

Sangharakshita: I don't think so, because what is the problem? Memory is the problem and memories can change.

In the end, one has to acknowledge that in any human encounter there are risks of misunderstanding on one or other side or on both, and that is also true of the sexual encounter, especially given some of the loading that sex has in British culture – although there are many for whom sex is not particularly loaded. Naturally, misunderstandings are to be regretted, but they are perhaps an unavoidable part of human interaction.

We should remember that I have had many, many human encounters, the great majority non-sexual, and most of those encounters, including the sexual ones, have been satisfactory for both parties. If there were any encounters that were not satisfactory for the other person, whether at the time or in retrospect, then that is a pity and I am truly sorry that that should be the case.

*Mahamati: I found it really helpful what you said earlier about your history. I have not myself had any problem with your sexual activity, but what you have said has given me more of an understanding of how you came to behave in that way, at this particular time in your life, fortunately or unfortunately – probably both are true. But that was you, and with you we got everything we got: all those lectures, the founding of the Order, the founding of the Movement – as well as a certain amount of sexual activity and certain complications!*

*Subhuti: Otherwise we'd have to say, 'If only Sangharakshita was a different man', and that would be absurd.*

Sangharakshita: I think that is some people's problem: they want a good Sangharakshita and a bad Sangharakshita. They can't square that there seem to be two Sangharakshitas – one of which they are very critical of and the other that they admire. They'd like to have one half of me without the other, but obviously that is impossible. People in the Movement need to see me as a whole person – they can't divide me up into separate bits. If they can't see me as a whole person there will be conflict within themselves. Fortunately there are many people who do see me as a whole person.

*Mahamati: I remember somebody telling me that you had once spoken of having a feeling that sometimes people put you in a box. Have you had that experience of people not seeing you and not relating to you?*

Sangharakshita: Certainly I have had that experience, even quite often. But it is a common one: people usually try to put others in some box or other.

*Mahamati: I hope this is not getting too complicated, but it seems that there are two senses in which the relationship between you and the person you were having sex with*

*may not have been on a level. There is first of all that people may have been projecting onto you as the great guru or whatever. But there is also what you talked of in your own case in relation to your own teachers: a natural reverence or admiration for someone 'greater' than oneself. In that latter case, their experience would not have been that you were on their level.*

Sangharakshita: We would not have been absolutely on the same level, but certainly there would not have been too much difference...

*Mahamati: In the sexual arena? In that particular context, your assumption and experience was that it would have been a leveller from both sides?*

Sangharakshita: Pretty much. Perhaps especially when the other person took the initiative, not me.

*Mahamati: I was wondering whether you thought in terms of 'Greek love'. I seem to remember that in the Greek tradition the younger partner was not supposed to be aroused or something like that. Was this in your mind?*

Sangharakshita: I had forgotten about that tradition. Greek love was not what many people seem to think it was. It was supposed to be an aspect of an educative relationship, in which an older man would help to educate and mature a youth through an intense friendship in which sex played its part. The youth was supposed to satisfy the desire of the older man out of gratitude or affection, but without being sexually involved himself. That does seem to have been the old Greek pattern. As far as I remember from what I have read, the ancient Greeks regarded sexual relations between two grown men as rather laughable. They definitely saw the healthy variety as asymmetrical, as we would say. At least that was the classic form of that relationship among men.

*Mahamati: Do you think that influenced your thinking?*

Sangharakshita: I doubt it very much. My principal thinking in this area was that fear of homosexuality seemed to prevent some men from forming strong or deep friendships with other men, because they were afraid of sliding into homosexuality – which of course they feared and despised. I think that was the point I was more concerned with.

*Subhuti: When you say 'more concerned with', in what sense? You weren't having sex for therapeutic reasons?*

Sangharakshita: No, I was having sex because I was attracted to the person and saw, or thought I saw, an answering response. However, I did see the benefits of it and I remember seeing those benefits quite concretely in a number of cases. I formed the view – and I still think it is true – that many men are afraid of getting too close to other men emotionally, fearing that this will slide into homosexuality. That was my thinking in those

days, 30 or 40 years ago. Though that is not so much the case today, there is still a homophobic element in society and some men will be affected by this fear.

*Subhuti: I remember at that time there were many ideas around, especially concerned with sex, men and women, and the like, that were often presented as coming from Bhante – although many of them I never heard from you. I remember hearing that you had said that homosexual contact was necessary for maturation – for turning from a 'boy' into a 'man'....*

Sangharakshita: No, I certainly never said that or thought that. One thing I did say very strongly was that I thought there were some men, maybe quite a lot of men, for whom fear of homosexuality inhibited their developing a strong or emotional relationship with other men. That was my position.

*Mahamati: It didn't need to be acted out but at least acknowledged...*

Sangharakshita: It might need to be acted out, but certainly needed to be acknowledged.

Nowadays, within the Order and FWBO, I don't think many men, if any, would be prevented from developing strong male friendships by fear of homosexuality. But I am pretty certain that sort of fear exists outside the Movement. That is no doubt the case in the general population, to some extent, but it is especially so among Muslims – a survey recently showed that 100% of Muslims in Britain disapproved of homosexuality, as against a mere 30% or so of the total population. Outside Britain, of course, the position of homosexuals can be terrible. It has recently emerged that in Iraq there is a campaign against them and that about a hundred have been murdered, many of them being mutilated.

*Mahamati: You seem to have emphasised in what you have said so far the natural and spontaneous character of your sexual activity. In an interview some years ago, you discussed it as a period of 'experimentation'. What did you mean?*

Sangharakshita: The word 'experimentation' wasn't a good word – 'exploration' would have been better, but even that is not fully appropriate. The point is that my sexual activity was part of a wider process in my own personal life – and one might even say in my Dharma life and in my attempt to communicate the Dharma. It was part of a general exploration. I was trying to explore how to live and communicate the Dharma in these very new circumstances of the modern West. I had become aware that there were aspects of life that were being given a new kind of attention in modern culture – aspects of life that the Dharma had never previously had to address. I had to work out for myself how the Dharma related to these aspects of life, since there were no clear and explicit models to be found in the scriptures or in traditional Buddhism. We have already seen that exploration in relation to my taking LSD. In many areas of life I allowed myself to open up to the world I found myself in, while holding fast to the essential principles of the

Dharma. Of course there were many false starts and many blind alleys, but eventually what emerged was the FWBO.

*Subhuti: My general memory of you at that time was that you were very open to possibilities, without any restlessness or anything like that. You were interested in opening a door and seeing what was inside. There you were in a completely new cultural situation, not just different from the one you had come from in the East but radically different from the one you had left behind so many years before. There were so many ideas about what it was to be a human being, where human fulfilment lay, and so forth. Whilst you never let go of the principles of the Dharma, you were willing to look inside doors that you came across and see what was there, even sometimes stroll into a room and spend some time looking in the cupboards, so to speak. That was the sense I always had of you: you were very firmly based in the Dharma but you had very few conclusions yet about the direction things should go in. It is very easy for us to forget that, because under your guidance we have created a fully adequate basis for the practice of the Dharma in the West. You'd had a false start in the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, but you had discovered there was a real possibility for the Dharma in the West – but what form should that take? The general attitude I got from you at the time was, 'Well, let's see. What form is Buddhism going to take now? What is there around that does relate and is valid, useful, and maybe even an extension of the Dharma?' 'Exploration' isn't a bad word, as long as it's understood in the right way. I suspect it was all less conscious and more intuitive, certainly than 'experiment' would suggest, and even than 'exploration'. It was as if you were saying, 'Let's see: that doesn't go anywhere... that does go somewhere...'*

Sangharakshita: I think that is true. That is certainly the background to my sexual exploration. A very important aspect of this broader exploration from the point of view of my sexual activity was my concern with what I've called in one of my lectures, 'the mystery of human communication'. I had already been thinking about communication before I came back to England. I felt this was an area of great importance that had not really been adequately expounded in the Buddhist tradition. Certainly, the Buddha speaks of the four kinds of Right or Perfect Speech in the Eightfold Path and in the Mahayana you have *priyavadita*, kindly speech, among the four *sangrahavastus*, but nowhere do you find discussion of what could be called pure communication that is not *about* anything. The nearest you come to it is in the Zen tradition, which is said to originate in that episode when the Buddha holds up a golden flower and only Mahakashyapa understands – maybe that was a form of higher or pure communication.

*Mahamati: What do you mean by 'pure communication'?*

Sangharakshita: It is not easy to say, because it is, in a sense, beyond words, even though words may be used. I first became aware of the possibility of this kind of communication in the early sixties, before my return to England, through my contact with Muriel Paine, an English educationalist working in India. Before that I'd thought a lot about communicating the Dharma and there were certain people with whom I had good, deep

communication – not very many, but a few – however I did not consciously cultivate better communication, as such. But after my contact with Miss Paine, I became aware of communication as a separate subject that one could work on, as, for instance, one works on one's awareness.

I'll tell you a little about her, because she was in many ways a remarkable woman to whom the FWBO owes some gratitude. At that time she was middle-aged and had spent some years working as an educationalist in India, and had been awarded an OBE for her work. She was not a highly educated person – she did not have a 'good' accent – but she was cheerful and down-to-earth, concerned and very emotionally positive. She was intuitive rather than intellectual and was a very interesting person. She later published a book, called *Creative Education*. And she was extremely good at communication and had specialised in the subject.

She had approached the question of communication as an educationalist because she had found in India that teachers, generally speaking, taught very badly. She came to the conclusion that that was because they were not able to communicate, either with their pupils or with one another. She therefore devised a series of communication exercises, which she introduced in schools and other contexts. I got to know her in Bombay through mutual friends – I think it was through my friend Maurice Friedman, a Pole who had been a Jesuit priest. I was quite impressed by her as a person, as well as by what she had to say on the subject of communication, so I gathered a couple of dozen or so of my friends and arranged for her to conduct a week-long series of evening workshops, at which she taught us her communication exercises.

I was quite convinced from my experience that these exercises did introduce one to a level of communication way beyond that which normally exists between people. During those exercises I experienced communication as I had never done before, especially when I did the exercises with her. You know that we have that exercise where you sit opposite someone and both of you say a sentence that has no real significance. Each of you, for instance, says, turn by turn, the ridiculous phrase, 'Do birds fly?' Through a verbal exchange that does not have any objective meaning you experience the other person as though there is, one might almost say, a merging of your two beings – it is very like that experience of the angels merging that Raphael describes in *Paradise Lost*. That was my own experience when I did the exercises with Miss Paine. Batting the phrases back and forth, you get to a point where there is a delightful mutual exchange going on, but not about anything. So that's communication in this more particular sense: when you say, 'Do birds fly?' or any other such phrase, it's as though you and the other person are two birds soaring in the air together.

Some years later when I was back in England and leading FWBO retreats, on one occasion things seemed to be a bit flat and people seemed not to be really in communication with one another. I therefore introduced these exercises and they proved very successful. Doing the exercises myself with some people, I again experienced a very high level of communication – almost as I had experienced before with Muriel Paine. I

did somewhat modify the exercises that she had taught, I don't remember in what way, but they are still substantially her devising.

*Mahamati: Do you think these exercises are still relevant in the FWBO? I think they are not much used these days.*

Sangharakshita: Perhaps people's communication has improved over the years, maybe they feel they don't need them. However I still think they are important and useful to give people a real idea of the possibilities of human communication – they are not merely therapeutic, to liven people up. The only caution I will make is that I have noticed a tendency for some people to misuse them, especially in the mixed context, so that they become more or less a form of flirtation. But that apart, I believe they are very important and useful.

However, let me return to the theme of exploration, I was already exploring communication before my return and after I arrived in England it seemed even more important. After I set up the FWBO and got more deeply involved with people I was very struck that there was quite a bit of discussion about the importance of communication. I found however that I wasn't always sure of the basis for some of the ideas that were expressed in this connection. In particular I heard again and again the view asserted that the highest form of human communication took place within a sexual relationship – and I heard this not only from people within the FWBO: I heard it expressed on the radio and read about it in the literature of the times – I seem to remember hearing it expressed sometimes even by Christian clergymen, in their case of course it was always to be experienced in the context of marriage. Although I was somewhat sceptical of this from the outset, it was there in the background of my exploring my own sexuality, for even though one has a certain scepticism, one has to be open, to some extent, to finding something unexpected. I wanted to see for myself whether or not it was possible to deepen one's communication as a human being with another human being by means of the sexual encounter.

In the end, I concluded it was very doubtful, to say the least, that the introduction of a sexual element really did enhance communication. Some people are inclined to confuse intimacy with communication, and certainly in the sexual relationship there is physical intimacy, but that is quite distinct from actual communication. With intimacy you have a physical experience of the other person that is unique to the sexual situation. You know the other person better, in certain respects, and there is also an emotional exchange, but that emotional exchange is very rarely a form of communication, because it is almost always mixed up with projection and craving.

So the net result of my exploration from this point of view was that I certainly enjoyed my sexual explorations, as I have mentioned, but I don't think they assisted in my communication with my sexual partners in the deeper sense of communication. I saw that communication in a deeper sense does not depend on a sexual relationship and I therefore

definitely disagreed with those who thought that the highest form of communication is to be found in the sexual relationship.

So in this way my concern to explore my sexuality and my concern to explore the subject of communication ran side by side and even intertwined.

*Mahamati: It was a time when you were really wanting to look into or explore sexuality in general and your own sexuality in particular?*

Sangharakshita: Yes, it was an aspect of my life and character that I had not previously had the opportunity of exploring, which I had been prohibited from exploring, and I now had the opportunity, given the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Britain, the fact that I was no longer bound by traditional notions of a Bhikkhu, and the very open and uninhibited mood of the times – and given my wish to see for myself whether or not there was any connection between sex and higher communication. It is unfortunate, in a way, that my opportunity to explore my sexuality coincided with my founding of the FWBO. It would have been tidier if I'd got all that out of the way and sorted out, neatly and nicely, before I started the FWBO, but it couldn't be like that. I couldn't have waited till I was 75!

*Subhuti: What you say about the messiness is true, as we know to our cost, but at the same time I think that the exploratory nature of it had a very powerful and positive effect on the Movement.*

Sangharakshita: It certainly meant that within the Order and Movement people could be openly sexually tolerant.

*Subhuti: I meant something more than that. It was an important aspect of a climate of creativity, which emerged very much from you personally. At the same time, I think the issue of your natural reticence is quite significant in connection with how it all played out in the Movement – it contributed to the lack of tidiness. To understand the way in which your sexual activity impacted on the early days of the Movement – the complications and the beneficial effects – it is important to take into consideration both the creativity and your reticence.*

Sangharakshita: Someone recently reminded me of something I'd written in *Moving Against the Stream*: '[My feelings] were buried beneath layers of reticence and reserve through which it was difficult for them to break'.

*Subhuti: The fact that there was not much open discussion of your sexuality wasn't a policy: it was simply the outcome of your natural disposition. Given your position as the founder of the Movement, that had an effect on the situation more generally. It meant there wasn't something to talk about, because it was not very clear what was happening, for non-participants, such as myself – but it was an innocent silence. There was an*



*interaction of your character with the circumstances: I think that's an important explanatory factor for the way it all played out in the Movement.*

Sangharakshita: Another thing to be taken into account in talking about all this is the attitude I have to sex and my experience of it. I must say my experience of it was always very positive and enjoyable – I say that because I know there are so many people who don't have satisfactory sex lives, even when they do have sexual partners, and it is not a source of enjoyment or pleasure for them. But it certainly was a very uncomplicated source of enjoyment and pleasure for me and I never had any inhibitions in that area. I am aware that, when some men have sex, sensation is focused only in one area, but in my case, I always had the experience throughout my whole body, my whole nervous system, as it were. I think that is the way it should normally be. Terry was very interested in Wilhelm Reich's ideas about this and I read his *The Function of the Orgasm*. What he describes was my personal experience. I found sex very satisfying – I won't say I found it fulfilling, that would be too much. I certainly enjoyed it, in what I think was a healthy way. For me, you could say, sex was something very pleasant and enjoyable, but no big deal.

As regards my general evaluation of sex, I am not happy with a crude, purely animal-like sexuality. On the other hand I am quite critical of any attempt to spiritualise or sacramentalise sex. I think it is just a normal, healthy human activity, which should not be depreciated on its own level – but which certainly should not be idealised.

*Mahamati: Please clarify: crude animal sexuality versus normal healthy human activity?*

Sangharakshita: The crude animal sort of sexuality is when you lose all consciousness of the other person: you are just absorbed in your own satisfaction and you don't care if you injure or harm the other person. The other extreme is when you are almost pretending you're not having sex: it's something wonderful and spiritual, a meeting of souls – that sort of thing. I have no sympathy with either point of view.

I am reminded by mention of 'crude animal sexuality' that I have always been averse to any kind of bad or obscene language – it has always disgusted me and I have never used it. I remember quite distinctly the first time I heard the 'F' word and how it affected me, even then. In other areas too I have a strong antipathy to anything that strikes me as crude or coarse behaviour. You could connect this with my Neoplatonic temperament, that I talked about yesterday.

*Subhuti: I have had a sense sometimes that you are almost physically affected by a lack of grace, bad manners, bad eating habits. But it seems visceral, almost physical, rather than a merely conventional attitude.*

Sangharakshita: Yes, that's true. I think that's quite an important aspect of my character.

*Subhuti: Moving back to the history, what happened at the end of your period of promiscuity? How did it end?*

Sangharakshita: After seven or eight years of promiscuity, I had a monogamous relationship for three or four years and then that gradually tailed off. Since then, from the mid-eighties, I have been celibate – very naturally and happily so.

The move into celibacy happened in a very natural way, as is illustrated by my dream life. Even before I ceased to be sexually active a series of very significant dreams commenced, in which I had a sexual encounter with another being, but that being was quite definitely neither male nor female and the experience was much more intense and joyful, even blissful, than anything I had experienced physically with another person. At the same time it was not anything like a wet dream, because there was no physical excitation – it was purely on the mental or, better, emotional level. There was a complete interpenetration of two whole bodies, as it were, and this reminded me of that passage I have already mentioned in *Paradise Lost*: when Adam questions the Archangel Raphael on how the angels love, he blushes and replies,

Let it suffice thee that thou knowst  
Us happy, and without Love no happiness.  
Whatever pure thou in the body enjoyst  
(And pure thou wert created) we enjoy  
In eminence, and obstacle find none  
Of membrane, joint or limb, exclusive barrs:  
Easier than Air with Air, if Spirits embrace,  
Total they mix, Union of Pure with Pure  
Desiring; nor restrained conveyance need  
As Flesh to mix with Flesh, or Soul with Soul.

I had that dream a number of times and it bridged the transition between my period of sexual activity and my period of celibacy. The dreams started a year or so before the end of my sexual activity and carried on during the first year or two of my celibacy. That was my transition from sexual to celibate – one might say, from *kamaloka* to *brahmaloka*.

### **DAY THREE: Sexual Life, the Buddhist Tradition, and the FWBO**

*Mahamati: Bhante, I'm very grateful to you for speaking so frankly with us yesterday – I hope not too much against the grain of your character. I think it is really very helpful for understanding you and our history. Obviously, a lot of people have wanted to hear something of all this for some time, especially after Yashomitra's letter appeared. Why didn't you speak up then?*

Sangharakshita: There is always a question of how much people really need to know of one's personal life – how much can they really know, even if you try to tell them? However much one says, there will always be more one could say and more that people

will want to know. But there is another factor. You remember my aphorism, 'Where there is trust, explanations are unnecessary. Where there is no trust, explanations are useless'. Quite a number of Order members didn't wait to hear what I had to say. They had already made up their minds, so I thought, 'Why waste my breath'. It seemed I would just have been blowing against the winds. Furthermore I was still recovering from illness at the time. I was not in a fit state to formulate a response, even had I been disposed to do so.

*Mahamati: Do you have anything to say about the kind of response there was in the Order to Yashomitra's letter?*

Sangharakshita: If I have anything to say it's with regard to the nature of some people's reactions. Some Order members reacted emotionally without any thought, in an extreme way. I had a sense of what Wilhelm Reich calls the 'emotional plague'. I was disappointed that even a handful of Order members fell victim to that, didn't pause or reflect. Not that they shouldn't question or disagree, but they should not react with such emotional negativity. One can't say anything while people are being so irrational, one has to wait for them to calm down – and in fact they have more or less calmed down now. It was quite an eye-opener to see, within a section of the Order, the kind of negativity that one expects within a group or in society as a whole, but not within a spiritual community.

I had wanted to start on a quite different note, by mentioning something about my emotional life that I haven't talked about before. This goes back to when I was 17 and working at County Hall. At that time, I became aware of certain trends in my make-up, which I saw as being quite distinct. As I have related in *The Rainbow Road*, I fell in love with Sonia, one of the girls working in the office there. It definitely was a falling in love, but there was no sexual element to it. At the same time, I was quite sexually attracted to a young man who worked one of the lifts, a very good looking young Irishman. I was very aware of those feelings: they were quite strong and definitely sexual and erotic. It seems he became aware of them too, and I was conscious that he was not very happy with that, so after that I avoided using his lift.

There was then this current of love with regard to Sonia, this current of strong sexual attraction to the young man, but there was also a definite friendship I developed with somebody else. He was one of the messengers in my department, the Public Health Department, and he used to bring along the mail every couple of hours, so I saw him regularly when I was working. It so happened that we also found ourselves on the same rota for fire watching – all male members of the staff had, by turns, to be up on the roof of County Hall at night, two at a time, looking out for fires started by the German bombers. Being up there at night together from time to time, we got to know each other and at the end of the shift, in the early morning, we used to go and have breakfast together in a café in Westminster Bridge Road. In that way we got to be quite pally. His name was Jack Waterman and he was about 40, while I was just 17. He was a real Londoner who lived at the Oval and I went home with him once and met his wife and had dinner with them. There was, of course, a black-out and I remember that after the meal we stood in the front door, just looking out at the searchlights picking out the German

bombers. I can't remember if we saw bombers shot down on that occasion, although I certainly did on other occasions. This was definitely a friendship: there was no strong love as there was for Sonia, certainly no sexual feeling as for that young Irishman, but a strong feeling of friendship for Jack, which was definitely reciprocated.

Thus I was well aware that there were these quite distinct strands in my emotional life, which I didn't confuse – they were all quite separate, they didn't run into one another: there was love, there was sex, there was affection. Later in life I read about Andre Gide. He was in love with his wife, however his sexual proclivities were entirely with regard to boys. He did have a daughter by his wife, but the exception proved the rule, so to speak.

*Mahamati: You were saying that at times celibacy was a struggle when you were a Bhikkhu. It seems that at times through your poetry you were expressing love and also sexual attraction. Was that a way to sublimate them, insofar as you were practising celibacy?*

Sangharakshita: Yes, I think it would have helped up to a point, but I don't think you can really resolve that kind of conflict entirely in that way. It is often remarked that Dante had his Beatrice, but he also had his wife and his children, which suggests that he didn't succeed in sublimating his feelings entirely. He sublimated them to some extent through his poetry, but there was quite a lot left over for Mrs Dante.

*Mahamati: Would it be too ridiculous to wonder if you would have married in India, as a solution to the conflict, had you been the marrying type?*

Sangharakshita: *If I had been of the marrying type....*

*Mahamati: Given that you saw that you had two teachers who were able to be married and full time....*

Sangharakshita: There would have been practical considerations: how would I have supported a wife? I was supported because I was a monk – I wasn't a Tibetan Tulku. The people who had been supporting me would have ceased to support me after I ceased to be a monk.

However, more to the point, I was never interested in family life. I've never wanted to have a partner, in the married sense. Even though I did have a monogamous relationship for a few years before I became celibate again, I've never thought in terms of marriage, or of starting a family. That was partly because of the nature of my sexuality, but it wasn't only that – after all, we hear of gay couples adopting children and wanting to set up ménages rather like conventional marriages. I've never had that sort of inclination. The only exception to that was when I was in Sri Lanka with the Army. There were two days during which I had the intense desire to have a son – not a child, but very definitely a son. This was quite overpowering, almost a craving for two days. It started suddenly and it ended suddenly and I've never felt anything like it since.

*Subhuti: Any trigger for it?*

Sangharakshita: Ah, there may have been! It was around that time that my sister had her first child, that may have been something to do with it. It's possible that was the trigger, but I can't remember if I had that experience before I knew that she was pregnant or not.

On the subject of the family, I want to make something clear at this point. Although I've never wanted a family myself and believe in the single sex idea and single sex communities, I can appreciate the value that the family has had, in the past. Despite what people sometimes say, I'm not really anti-family. I have always said I am anti the *nuclear* family, but I am not so opposed to the old fashioned extended family, such as we still see in India – that seems a more healthy set up. This is not a very fashionable view, these days, especially because it is associated in many people's minds with a patriarchal social structure. The extended family seems to be declining even in India.

*Mahamati: Are you saying that you'd describe yourself as anti nuclear family for those not involved in the spiritual life or are you talking about those involved in the spiritual life?*

Sangharakshita: I think for anyone, whether leading or not leading a spiritual life, the nuclear family is not a very healthy set up, although it seems to be the one we've arrived at in the West and are moving towards in India. I mean here the unit of mother, father, two children, with no close relations living nearby, so they're isolated and the strongest and most intense relationships are all within that nuclear structure. The solitary mother with one child living in isolation is probably the least satisfactory situation of all, and that is all too common today.

*Subhuti: You'd regard your own family as pre-nuclear?*

Sangharakshita: Strictly speaking, it was nuclear – mother, father, two children. However, we saw quite a lot of my granny – my only grandparent still living during my lifetime – and we also saw a lot of my many aunts and uncles – especially the aunts. We definitely had a sense of extended family, although we were not all living under the same roof, except at Christmastime, when people stayed overnight. I think my own family setting was a relatively healthy one. Also my father often made friends with his work mates and their wives and they also visited and we visited them and we were involved with them and they definitely interacted with us.

The key factor is that a child should be part of a larger community of varying ages, with a range of fairly strong relationships. Parents should not be the only adults children have strong relationships with, being left to interact only with other children or, in adolescence, just interacting with their peer group. Children are very vulnerable and of course have to grow up within some sort of group. As far as I can make out, the extended family is the best, the most positive option, not that it is ideal, but there are no other

models that are better. Anyway, this hasn't been a large part of my thinking and is an aside, so to speak, in the present context.

*Mahamati: Thinking back over what you have told us of your sexual activity, your explorations seem to be flatly against what the tradition regards as the norm for a full-timer, which is celibacy.*

Sangharakshita: I don't think the picture is quite so straightforward, when one looks a bit more closely. Just taking my own teachers as a sample, they represented a number of different models, all accepted within their own traditions. Kashyapji was celibate all his life. He almost certainly had no sexual experience at all, having become involved with the Arya Samaj at quite a young age – there was no question of marriage and I am quite sure he never had a girlfriend. Dhardo Rimpoche and Kachu Rimpoche were also celibate all their lives. Mr Chen had been married and had left his wife for the sake of the Dharma. Then Dudjom Rimpoche was married, apparently more than once, and Dilgo Khyentse was married, both of them having children – and Chetul Rimpoche was married. And there was Jamyang Khyentse. I am not quite sure about him, because Kachu Rimpoche assured me that his relationship with the Dakini was a purely spiritual one, but in the biography of Dilgo Khyentse there was some reference to Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche's marriage to the Dakini, and that seems to suggest that it wasn't a purely spiritual relationship, so I don't know – I regard it as uncertain or ambiguous.

There are then these different models among my own teachers, all quite openly and legitimately – married lamas being quite accepted among the Nyingmapa. Then again, I knew of many Theravada Bhikkhus who had mistresses, semi-openly even, and some of these were good Buddhists, as I have already mentioned, even if they were bad monks. And as time went on I came to know that amongst monks of a number of different cultures homosexuality was quite common and was taken quite lightly, even by some of the laity. I heard that Princess Kukula, the daughter of the then King of Sikkim, once said, 'There's nothing wrong with the monks going with men: it keeps them chaste!' I don't think there's much doubt it did go on in Tibetan monasteries. Kawa Guchi, the Japanese pilgrim who spent some time in Tibetan monasteries, speaks about it as a feature of them. The 'Yellow Monk', a Tibetan I mentioned in my memoirs, told me a bit about these things, and he said that Tibetan monks sometimes quoted what they alleged was a Vinaya passage – which I am pretty certain is apocryphal. The Buddha and some disciples were one day bathing in the river and a fish slipped between the thighs of one of the monks and the monk asked, 'Lord, is it permitted?' – the Buddha smiled... I never got the impression of any homosexuality among the Tibetans outside the monasteries. But certainly traditionally, although not according to the Vinaya, homosexuality among the monks was considered a peccadillo rather than a serious offence – the serious offence was sex with women.

I also came to learn from my monk friends that homosexuality certainly does, or used to, go on in some Sri Lankan monasteries. And there have recently been a couple of books published on the same phenomenon in Japanese monasteries. When I was in India, my

impression was that homosexuality was not so common among the Thai and Burmese monks, perhaps because in their countries it was possible to leave the Sangha with honour, and therefore marry, which was not the case in Sri Lanka. In the Buddhist world the phenomenon of homosexuality is by no means unknown and is frequently tolerated.

Incidentally, I am reminded of something in this connection about Anand Kausalyayan, the Bhikkhu who conducted Dr Ambedkar's funeral in Bombay. Anandji was definitely gay, as was obvious to me when he spent time in Kalimpong while I was there. 'Anandji's habit', as it was referred to, was widely known and got him into a lot of trouble. He was a politician, among other things, and his political enemies within his own party would use any stick to beat him – articles and even booklets detailing his activities appeared, which was quite embarrassing. That is why he was in Kalimpong that time: he was lying low. He certainly did his bit for Buddhism among the new Buddhists, but his reputation didn't help. However, he weathered it.

By the way, Dr Ambedkar was reported to have said to his followers on one occasion, 'There are only two Bhikkhus in India that you can trust: Anand Kausalyayan and Sangharakshita'. He was also reported to have said, 'There's only one Bhikkhu you can trust: Sangharakshita'. Even if he had *not* spoken of both of us in that way, it is nonetheless interesting and perhaps significant that, when he died in Delhi, Anand Kausalyayan flew with the body to Bombay and conducted the funeral ceremonies there, and I was in Nagpur, rallying his grief-stricken followers in that city.

*Mahamati: Something that is not quite clear to me is that while you were still living in India you obviously already had an exceptional spiritual understanding and commitment, yet celibacy was a struggle for you. You had written the Survey, and so on, and you were extraordinarily creative spiritually, but at that time for you celibacy was a struggle. Would that imply that for different people celibacy is more easy or less? For Dhardo Rimpoche it was fine, but you needed that later exploration?*

Sangharakshita: Yes. I don't think I was particularly drawn to celibacy as such. I simply saw it as part of the package.

*Mahamati: What struck me, from what you have been saying, and thinking of Order members now trying to practise celibacy, is that it's not easy to be celibate.*

Sangharakshita: No, not even with the help of meditation; it is not easy, especially for a young person.

*Subhuti: Does that mean that you think a lot of monasticism is not entirely healthy if it is connected with celibacy?*

Sangharakshita: I am not denying of course that there are perhaps many monks in the Buddhist world who are quite happily celibate – or if not happily, who manage – and who

are not hypocritical, who are fully celibate, and who do what they can for the Dharma, and in some cases may be working full time for it.

*Mahamati: Those of your teachers who were celibate, they were celibate in a healthy way, as far as you could tell?*

Sangharakshita: As far as I could tell, yes. But I do consider that in general there is a lot of unhealthy celibacy, not just in monasticism, but also among those following the priestly vocation. We have heard all these cases about priests and juveniles in the Catholic Church in Ireland and elsewhere. That in itself should sound a note of warning.

But there is a difference between Buddhism and Christianity in this respect. The difference is that homosexuality is regarded as a peccadillo in Buddhist monasticism, in some places at least, even though it is a serious offence according to the Vinaya. But in the case of Christian monks and priests there is the whole question of the sense of guilt, which is so strong. The priest or monk in the West will feel that he has done something extremely wicked if he breaks his celibacy, perhaps even that he has endangered his eternal soul, whereas the Buddhist monk in the East who is not completely celibate only feels he has been a bit naughty. It is therefore a much more loaded situation for the Western monk or priest.

*Subhuti: What you are saying, and what your own life says, suggests a quite strong critique of traditional Buddhism – or are you saying that traditional Buddhism has found its own accommodation with the reality of sexuality and spiritual life, which is unofficial but satisfactory?*

Sangharakshita: I wouldn't say it was a satisfactory accommodation because I don't think it has ever been spelled out or discussed.

*Subhuti: It is unhealthy because it is a fudge: it is somewhat hypocritical that a degree of sexual activity is licensed but not officially acknowledged?*

Sangharakshita: Yes.

*Subhuti: Let me try to spell this out. Traditional Buddhism, with some exceptions, presents itself as regarding the celibate, renunciant life as the ideal. You are saying that quite a lot of that is hypocritical, albeit in a fairly casual sense, and is probably not very healthy – nor is it necessary: actually being a full time, deeply committed Buddhist does not necessarily mean being celibate.*

Sangharakshita: Yes. However, the great advantage of monasticism is that one doesn't have a family.



*Subhuti: This comes back to the 'semi-monasticism' that you have advocated: not getting involved in unhealthy celibacy, but not becoming involved in family life, so that you have time and energy for spiritual practice and for working for the Dharma.*

Sangharakshita: One might say, avoiding the danger of healthy non-celibacy. I am not in favour of monastic unhealthy celibacy, but I am also well aware of the difficulties, from the point of view of leading the spiritual life, of a healthy non-celibate situation with family.

*Subhuti: But you would be in favour of a healthy non-celibacy as long as it did not lead to being tied down by family responsibilities etc....*

Sangharakshita: Yes. If you are living a monastic lifestyle there is less danger of acquiring a family and being tied by that. Of course it is possible to make spiritual progress while raising a family, and some people do very well at it, but it does generally greatly limit time and energy available especially for spreading the Dharma.

*Mahamati: Could you elaborate on that? First of all, what do you mean by unhealthy celibacy?*

Sangharakshita: Celibacy is unhealthy when it is too much of a discipline, when it results in the suppression, not just of one's sexual feelings, but even of one's emotions. That suppression can make one quite bitter and intolerant. I noticed this very clearly in the case of at least a couple of Dharmacharis when they were Anagarikas. It was quite obvious that the suppression of their sexual feelings resulted in the suppression of their kinder feelings, their human sympathies, and this came out in their quite cruel treatment of some people, and having rather harsh, negative attitudes, in certain respects. This is a common phenomenon among celibates. I have been listening to a programme about the problems the Catholic Church has had with priests and nuns who mistreated children. They often engaged not only in sexual abuse but also a lot of cruelty – not only the monks and priests, but also the nuns who were teaching in schools. In the programme there were interviews with people who had suffered, and in some cases their emphasis was much more on the cruelty they had suffered than on the actual sexual abuse.

But that is not to say that there are not some people who have, what the Church calls, the 'gift of chastity', though they may be among those who naturally have no sexual feelings, whether heterosexual or homosexual. According to an item I heard on the radio, one percent of the population is asexual: such people do not experience sexual attraction to anybody, although they have a definite capacity for friendship. That could explain someone who is not particularly interested in sex who might otherwise often be presumed to be gay – like, perhaps, the former British Prime Minister, Ted Heath. There are some people for whom chastity is a natural thing or at least not very difficult.

*Subhuti: Even if it is not better to marry than to burn, as St Paul says, it is better not to block those sexual feelings than to curdle your emotions.*

Sangharakshita: Well, that brings us on to the danger, as I see it, of healthy non-celibacy of the heterosexual variety. This is a very tricky business from our point of view in the Order. People form sexual relationships and maybe the relationships are quite positive and healthy, and maybe they are getting on with their Dharma practice and work for the Movement. But then one or other or both want to have children or she gets pregnant by accident – and then usually the whole orientation of their life is changed. And there are very, very few who, once they have a family, are able to continue to give the time and energy that they previously spent for the Dharma.

*Subhuti: I want to come back to what is effectively a critique of traditional Buddhism. Just to make sure I have got it clear: what I am understanding you are saying is that for most people sex is not so easily given up or transcended, especially when you are young, and that a full time life for the Dharma for most people can't realistically and honestly be a Bhikkhu life in the traditional sense, and that something new is required that allows for sexual expression but does not end up with family commitment.*

Sangharakshita: Yes. Which of course implies the use of contraceptives, which however are not infallible.

*Subhuti: More recently in Buddhist circles in the West, there has been a debate between those who would consider monasticism to be absolutely central and fundamental and those who regard a family life as an adequate and even equal basis for spiritual life. You are arguing for something between the two, which is what we used to call semi-monasticism. With all the experience you have had of the Order and Movement, would you still say there was a viable intermediate option: that people do not necessarily have to give up sex, but that they try to make sure that that sexual activity does not lead to a family.*

Sangharakshita: Yes, and also exercise some kind of restraint with regard to the sexual activity itself, see it as something that eventually needs to be phased out in a natural move to healthy celibacy. In the meantime, it means bringing greater awareness to bear upon one's sexual life, with regard for instance to contraception.

*Subhuti: Your own history is part of discovering this point, because to begin with you identified being a full timer with being a Bhikkhu and being a Bhikkhu with being celibate. Sometime in the sixties that finally broke down.*

Sangharakshita: Yes, you could say I saw that you could be a full time Buddhist in the true sense without being a Bhikkhu, and therefore without necessarily being celibate.

*Subhuti: Where you have ended up is wanting to revise even the Buddha's perspective on being a full timer! If you read the Pali Canon you certainly get a very strong impression that for the Buddha the celibate life was the ideal, and he would go to quite a lot of lengths to get young men and women to keep at it. How do you read that?*

Sangharakshita: The Buddha had to work within the perspective of society at that time – there were, after all, other Sramana groups apart from the Buddha's: that was a worked out option. But also one must consider that the culture was in many ways quite supportive, because life was so much simpler, it was lived close to nature, there were fewer distractions.

*Subhuti: So it was easier to remain sexually inactive even if you had those strong feelings.*

Sangharakshita: Yes, I think so. The whole surrounding culture and tradition supported a spiritual ideal and a renunciant way of life. At the same time there was a strong idea of marriage and the family and a condemnation of adultery.

*Subhuti: So, there was no half way house. It was either-or, as it is for most people in India even today.*

Sangharakshita: And to be part of a family meant playing out a particular role with very strong expectations upon you – there is that famous phrase of the Buddha's about the household life being cramped and dusty. And no doubt some people would be put off by that kind of rather restricted life.

*Subhuti: And there wasn't an intermediate option because there was no contraception.*

Sangharakshita: The only contraception was abstinence.

*Subhuti: So the option that you are advancing is as a result of the development of moderately reliable contraception; it gives us the possibility of something new.*

Sangharakshita: Yes.

*Subhuti: And because modern Western culture permits homosexual activity.*

Sangharakshita: Yes.

*Mahamati: Some people have suggested that heterosexuals who consciously want to avoid family life could choose homosexuality as an option? I am reminded of this because sometimes you are quoted – or perhaps misquoted – as saying, 'It's like choosing between tea and coffee'.*

Sangharakshita: I don't think it's a choice – I was being light-hearted when I said that. I was trying to say, 'Don't make it so important'. It's certainly not like a choice between tea or coffee – a few people do seem to choose, but they are naturally bisexual, perhaps. Although it may not generally be a choice, it isn't however a question of an *absolute* identification with one or the other. That is what I was getting at. I think whether you are

heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual is congenital and it is very difficult to change your character in that respect, beyond a certain point. Of course, when your circumstances change, you may change a little. For instance, if you happened to be in an all male situation, like in the Army or in prison, and are deprived of female company for years together, you may, in some cases, satisfy yourself with another man, but that is only under extreme circumstances and, when circumstances change, you return to 'normality'. But apart from that, I think sexual orientation is innate, part of one's character, not to be tampered with.

*Subhuti: It seems then that we need not think of your sexual history as merely an unfortunately delayed piece of personal exploration, but as part of an important development for modern Buddhism. You personally explored the possibility of a full time life for the Dharma, which included sexual activity.*

Sangharakshita: And it was made easier in my case because there was no possibility of a family arising to impede my activities. If I had been blatantly heterosexual, I could have ended up with quite a number of children, and that certainly would have hampered my efforts.

*Subhuti: It would probably then have been quite a different Movement, wouldn't it? On the other hand, if you had been one of the one percent who had the 'gift of celibacy', you might have just gone on being a Bhikkhu in a fairly traditional sense, which would have meant that we had to be lay people or, in many of our cases, unhappy monks and nuns.*

Sangharakshita: What we have developed then is a broader range of possibilities for leading the spiritual life than have traditionally been found. So long as one is careful, it is possible now, at least in the West, to live without a family but without renouncing sex, at least until one is able to be happily celibate. Our semi-monastic institutions of communities and Right Livelihood businesses make this possible and are therefore a vital and unique contribution to the practice of the Dharma today. That is why I am surprised by the extent to which some Order members have moved away from single sex communities and team based right livelihood, as well as shared public activities around centres.

*Subhuti: Taking all this into consideration, it becomes clear that your own life has been an exploration of what Buddhism means today. I don't think we should be discussing your sexual activity as some unfortunate aberration that needs explaining away.*

Sangharakshita: That's why I say that the Movement shouldn't be defensive about it – I certainly don't feel defensive about it.