

What is the Western Buddhist Order?

A message from Urgyen Sangharakshita

On 17th, 18th, and 19th March 2009, a small group of senior Order members put to me a series of questions about the nature of the Order, and related topics, and I replied to those questions. Our exchanges were recorded and I have gone through the transcript of the recording, giving clearer expression to some of the points I wished to make and cutting a few digressions which, though interesting in themselves, had no direct relation to the questions I was being asked.

Now that I am in my 84th year, I am glad to have had the opportunity of placing on record my views concerning the nature of the Order, and related topics. My replies to the questions put to me may, indeed, be seen as my Last Will and Testament for the Order, and I therefore request all Order members not only to 'read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest' its contents but also to give it appropriate expression in their lives as Order members.

(Signed) Urgyen Sangharakshita
Madhyamaloka,
8th April 2009

Questions and Answers, 17th-19th March 2009

Q: What defines the Order?

Sangharakshita: Basically the Order can be defined as the community of my disciples and the disciples of my disciples and the disciples of my disciples' disciples and so on.

To understand this more fully, we have to go back into the origins of the Order. The Order began when I decided that a new Buddhist movement was needed, initially in Britain. I was leading meditation classes and giving talks, and people came along who found that my particular presentation of the Dharma helped them to grow spiritually. That then faced me with the question of what sort of organisation we should have for these people. I was quite clear that there were two models I did *not* want to follow. One was that of the Buddhist Society, which simply provided a platform for teachers of various Buddhist traditions; the other that of the English Sangha Trust, which was a purely monastic model. I therefore decided that the structure should be that of an order, not a society, but an order that was neither monastic nor lay.

The difference between a society and an order was that a society required no commitment to anything, you joined just by paying a subscription, whereas an order required one to make a definite commitment. That commitment was represented, so

far as I was concerned, by going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and undertaking to observe the ten precepts.

In founding the Order in this way, I was simply following an ancient pattern that we find again and again when we look at the history of Buddhism. We find that teachers arise, they study whatever Dharma teachings are available in their time, they then give their own presentation and that attracts people, and that develops into a Sangha, into a school or a tradition. At the highest level, this is the pattern that was established by the Buddha himself. He had started by trying the various practices and traditions of his time and had found them wanting. He then discovered his own solution to the problem of existence, taught it to others, and founded a Sangha for the people he attracted.

This is exactly what I have done. The Order is the community of my disciples.

Q: You say that what you have done is quite traditional. Are the various traditions and schools usually defined by a single teacher and do they continue to follow his definition over a number of generations?

S: Yes, they generally are and do. In the case of the Buddhist Sangha as a whole, that single teacher is the Buddha himself. Each of the subsidiary Sanghas, formed and reformed out of his original Sangha over the centuries, has had its single, principal teacher who is usually, but not always, the founder of that school.

The lesson of the history of Buddhism would appear to be that you need a specific 'defining' teacher for any particular Sangha. That Sangha will last as a school or tradition until it either splits or divides or becomes corrupt and disintegrates. Then a new presentation of the Dharma will be required and a new Order will arise based upon the teaching of a new teacher.

Q: But there are, of course, other versions around of what defines the Order, or even of who defines it, especially the view that could be summed up as that the Order is what Order members collectively think it is – the Order collectively decides what the Order is.

S: I wouldn't agree with that. My version is that, directly or indirectly, I decide. The Order cannot be redefined democratically. The Order was founded by me as the community of my disciples who are practising the Dharma in accordance with my teaching. Some of those disciples are direct disciples of myself and some are disciples of my disciples and so forth, continuing into the future. But, in a sense, all are my direct disciples inasmuch as they follow my understanding of the Dharma and the general range of practices that I have taught. But of course they will have relations of more particular or personal discipleship with their own Private and Public Preceptors.

The duty of my disciples is to adhere faithfully to the teaching they have received from me, to practise faithfully in accordance with that, and to do their best to hand it faithfully on to others – and, of course, to remain in personal contact with me and with their own Preceptors, while that is possible. That is what the overwhelming majority of Order members do, I am sure.

Q: You speak of faithfulness. Could a disciple be faithful to you and your teaching while going to other teachers? Should people have to decide whether you are exclusively their teacher or not? Why shouldn't they be guided and inspired by you and by somebody else as well – what's wrong with that?

S: It is a question of being wholehearted about following and practising a teaching, especially when teachings of different teachers are so different. You can't practise them simultaneously, and if you skip from one to another you never achieve any depth. Most Buddhist teachers would agree with that, regardless of their particular affiliation. They expect commitment and loyalty, which is quite traditional.

I'm not saying it's necessarily right just because other teachers have that attitude, but that my attitude is a quite traditional one. My approach stems from the nature of spiritual life itself. For commitment to be strong it has, in a sense, to be narrow. It is only through intensity of commitment and practice that you achieve any results. You will not achieve that intensity if you try to follow different teachers and their different teachings and practices at the same time.

You need to follow a particular set of teachings and practices within a particular framework under a particular teacher in order to experience any real progress. And you must have confidence in that teacher and his teaching otherwise you will not be able to apply yourself consistently and successfully. Going to other teachers is often a sign of lack of confidence in what one already has. This is the case with at least some of our friends who are going to other teachers, although there can also be other reasons.

Q: Could not one of your own disciples in the Order simply do what you have done? Could they not, after practising your teaching under your tutelage for many years, say that they have discovered their own approach to the Dharma and now wish to teach that to other people? Would they not simply be doing the same thing as you have done?

S: Anyone who has practised within the FWBO and who finds the FWBO unsatisfactory is, of course, free to start teaching their own disciples and found their own organisation as I have done. But they would be leaving the Order. They cannot try to gather a group of disciples around themselves within the Order or movement to whom they are imparting something that is basically different from what has been taught by me.

Because, to put it in a slightly different way, every Sangha presupposes a Dharma: a particular Sangha presupposes a particular presentation of the Dharma. The Order and the FWBO presuppose the particular presentation of the Dharma which I have given over the years.

Q: Can you make 'particular presentation of the Dharma' more precise? Is Dharma not just Dharma.

S: Yes, but the Dharma needs to be made specific to a particular Sangha. It needs to hang together, doctrinally and methodologically, if it is to be the basis of a Sangha or Order. Everybody needs to be following the same founding teacher, be guided by the same doctrinal understanding of the Dharma, and undertaking broadly the same set of practices. If they do not do that they will not have sufficient in common to be an effective Sangha and will not be able to make progress together on the Path.

My particular presentation consists of those teachings and practices I have stressed during my teaching life, through speaking and writing, and I hope by example. What I have taught pertains both to doctrinal understanding and to practice and it is what I have said about these that is the basis for the Dharma as practised by my disciples in the Order and as taught by them – the basis of our 'particular presentation of the Dharma'.

At the doctrinal level, I see the teaching of *pratītya-samutpāda* as most basic and from it follow the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve and Twenty-Four Nidanas, and also the teachings concerning Nirvana, *anātman*, and *śūnyatā*. My teaching of Dharma as doctrine is essentially based upon and derived from, directly or indirectly, these teachings that, of course, go back to the Buddha himself. And I explicitly exclude whatever ideas are incompatible with them.

My teachings pertaining to method, and therefore those of my disciples, all centre, directly or indirectly, on the act of going for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These comprise all the practices that I have myself taught: for instance, the observance of the Five or Ten Precepts; the performance of the Sevenfold and Threefold Pujas; the practice of meditation, in the framework of the System of Meditation; the group study of the Buddhist scriptures; the cultivation of spiritual friendship, and the enjoyment of poetry, music, and the visual arts as aids to the spiritual life. These teachings pertaining to method are connected, directly or indirectly, with the Buddha's teaching of *pratītya-samutpāda* through the sequence of positive, spiral *nidānas*, for all these teachings contribute, in one way or another, to my disciples' progress to ever higher levels of being and consciousness, even from the mundane at its most refined to the transcendental. Looked at from another point of view, they contribute to the deepening of my disciples' going for refuge, so that from being provisional it becomes effective, and from being effective it becomes real in the sense of being irreversible.

One could also explore my particular presentation of the Dharma in terms of the Six Distinctive Emphases of the FWBO; to give their headings: critical ecumenicalism, unity, Going for Refuge, Spiritual Friendship, the New Society, and culture and the arts. Of these, my emphasis on Going for Refuge is the most essential and probably the most distinctive. The others too are distinctive, for instance, the emphasis on the importance of spiritual friendship is certainly not explicitly taught by any other Buddhist school.

These teachings and emphases, together with the range of institutions I have established, between them create something not really definable: a certain atmosphere or attitude that is found within the FWBO and nowhere else. All of them are contained in a network of spiritual friendship and they are to be handed on faithfully from generation to generation in a chain of discipleship.

An Order member remains truly an Order member because he or she accepts that definition and works within it – and I mean accepts it effectively, through real understanding of my teaching, active practice of the methods I have taught or sanctioned, and diligent participation in the life of the Order I have founded. This is what the great majority of Order members try to do.

The great danger for the Order in future will be that there are people who are in fact no longer members of the Order in this effective sense, who are no longer my disciples following my teaching, but who remain members of the Order in name because of confusion in their thinking or in that of the Order members around them, or because it is convenient for them to be seen as an Order member. They have, perhaps, got lots of contacts in the Order and movement, they can take classes and build up their own little circle, so they retain their membership. Or the movement is the social context in which they have been for so many years and simple inertia keeps them in it.

Q: But didn't you yourself have eight teachers, Bhante? Why shouldn't we?

S: Those eight teachers were not my teachers in the sense that I am your teacher, because I didn't then belong to an order in the same way that Order members do now. When I was ordained, my principal motivation was not to join an order; it was to be a monk or bhikkhu, and to be recognised as such. I saw the monk as the full-time practitioner, which is what I wanted to be and had been trying to be for the previous couple of years. That is not, of course, how I see things now, especially since I have seen many monks who weren't really practitioners at all.

In a certain sense, I was still 'shopping around' at that time, still trying to make spiritual sense of what was available to me. The situation of Order members is quite different because they are understood to have done their shopping around before they even became mitras. When someone becomes a mitra, under the new arrangements, they declare that they wish to practise the Dharma within the context of the FWBO,

and that means they have stopped looking elsewhere. So Order members belong to an order and have chosen this particular order rather than any other that might be on offer. And choosing this Order means choosing me as your teacher and not shopping around for others outside the Order.

However, the fact that I am the teacher of the Order does not mean that Order members cannot learn a lot from others within the Sangha. Recently someone wrote in his letter resigning from the Order that it is a great weakness of the Order that it has only one teacher, but the matter is not so simple. Another Order member responded in *Shabda* rather beautifully: she made quite clear that her spiritual allegiance lies with me, but she then wrote very movingly about all the other people she had learned from. She pointed out that, in a sense, there is only one teacher, which is me: but one also learns from one's Preceptors and those who take study and lead classes and so on. So there is not one teacher in the Order in the sense that that ex-Order member meant. Here perhaps one has to distinguish between the principal, founding, defining teacher of one's particular Sangha, school, or tradition and one's own particular and immediate teachers within that Sangha.

Q: On the Refuge Tree that you devised for the Order, besides your eight teachers, are the sixteen teachers of the past. Each of these teachers founded or continued a particular tradition, most of which are still active today. Can we draw from those particular traditions? Do their teachings constitute part of your presentation of the Dharma?

S: No, not put so simply. We need to see what I had in mind when I devised the Refuge Tree and placed those Teachers of the Past on it. I included them because I wanted to give people an idea of the very rich historical background against which we practise. I therefore selected the most prominent teachers of the past, especially those who had been founders of schools or important traditions. But these figures do not represent our lineage in the way that figures on a Nyingmapa or Gelugpa refuge tree would be their lineage.

We cannot look at them as our lineage because they belonged to different traditions and functioned within different frameworks with different notions about the Path and therefore progress on the Path. For instance, for Buddhaghosa the Path was the Path to Arahantship; then Tsongkhapa thought in terms of the Mahayana Path to Full Enlightenment, which meant traversing the ten Bodhisattva *bhumis* throughout a succession of lives, spanning three *asankhyeyas* of *kalpas*; and then those of the teachers that followed the Vajrayana had a different conception of the Mahayana Path to Full Enlightenment, because they believed that it can be telescoped into seven, or even less, lifetimes through esoteric practices.

How can one determine how all these teachers of the past are related to one another if there is no common framework of reference? How can one judge their relative spiritual attainments if there is no conception of the path common to them all? It

would be rather naïve, in the circumstances, to regard them all as equally enlightened. I have come to the conclusion that we can't really work it out satisfactorily and that there is no need to try. I regard the Teachers of the Past as what I call, 'Buddhist religious geniuses', who made a contribution to the Buddhist life of their times in various ways, but not one that I necessarily accept, in all respects.

Just because a figure appears on the Refuge Tree doesn't mean that what he taught can be taught at an FWBO centre. It may be that it can, if there is something that is useful and compatible with our particular presentation of the Dharma, but not necessarily. In the case of Dogen, for instance, we must acknowledge that much of Far Eastern Buddhism, especially Japanese Zen, seems to have been greatly influenced by something of a Vedantic character, which therefore calls into doubt the complete orthodoxy of all of Dogen's teachings in that some may depart from the Buddha's fundamental teachings of *pratītya samutpāda* and *anātman*.

So these figures are on our tree because they represent our historical background – even if it is, in certain respects, a flawed history. We are not going for refuge to them. Our refuges are the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha: Shakyamuni being the Buddha, the books of the scriptures representing the Dharma, and the Bodhisattvas and the Arahants representing the Sangha. When we prostrate, saying, 'To the best of all refuges I go,' we are going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. At the same time, we are paying our respects to the Teachers of the Past, who contributed in one way or other to the history of Buddhism – sometimes doctrinally, sometimes organisationally, sometimes rightly and perhaps sometimes wrongly. In bowing to them, we are aware of that historical background. It's our religious hinterland, as it were, even if in certain respects some of their teachings may be flawed or even questionably Buddhist. Of course, one might find some of their particular teachings very useful, although one would need to look carefully and critically to see how these would fit in with the teaching we follow in the Order.

One can certainly respect the teachers of the past and one might have very strong feelings towards some of them. We can allow ourselves to be inspired by their lives, in certain respects. For example, when Atisha was invited to Tibet, we are told that he consulted the Bodhisattva Tara and she said, 'If you go to Tibet, your life will be shortened by twelve years,' but he chose to go anyway. That is an admirable example of someone's willingness to sacrifice part of his life for the sake of spreading the Dharma. But that does not mean we necessarily follow any particular teaching that Atisha gave – although it is at least possible that we may find aspects of his teaching useful. It is the same with Hsuan Tsang. We can admire his courage in going all the way from China to India for the sake of the Dharma, but that does not mean we necessarily follow his interpretation of the Vijnanavada.

Thus we can respect their achievement in some contexts without necessarily agreeing with them wholeheartedly, and even differing from them in some respects. In other words, we need to take a rather more critical attitude. Just because a teacher is there

on our tree does not necessarily mean that their teaching can be taught in our centres.

Q: Does that apply in a similar way to the teachers of the present?

S: Yes, though the case is somewhat different insofar as I had a personal relationship with them and was free to discuss their teaching with them. As to where my teachers stood spiritually, I have always said I have no view about that. I regarded them as more spiritually experienced, more advanced than myself, and that was enough for me. I did not try to locate them on any particular scale. To make my point, I tell that story about three of my teachers, one of whom said in reply to a question, 'One of us is more advanced than the other two, but you people will never know which one it is'!

Q: But are you not expecting something different of us in relation to you? To what extent are we at liberty to disagree with what you teach?

S: That depends on whether you mean liberty as a disciple or as a human being. As a human being you are at liberty to disagree, but if you disagree beyond a certain point as a disciple you cease to be a disciple. Of course, I don't expect people to follow blindly and uncritically whatever I have said or taught, but I expect them to take me very seriously and think very carefully about it, as most Order members do. If Order members find themselves disagreeing with me on significant issues, I expect them to discuss that with me, while I am still available, or with their own teachers within the Order. Otherwise being a disciple doesn't mean very much.

Q: Some people are arguing that we should be 'going beyond Bhante'. We have benefited from your teaching and guidance in the past, but now we should have a critical perspective on your teaching, they say. They want to separate out teachings they agree with, from teachings they don't agree with. Or they are looking at your earlier teachings in relation to your later and detecting what they consider to be inconsistencies. They suggest this critical approach is necessary.

S: A disciple should be critical, but a lot of what passes for criticism these days is not criticism in the way that I understand it. True criticism in relation to a teacher should be part of an effort actually to understand, rather than simply accepting out of blind faith. A true understanding cannot but be critical in this sense. But the criticism should take place in the context of an assumption that something is being said by the teacher that is of spiritual significance. If you cannot make sense of what your teacher says or cannot agree with it, you should first assume that you may have misunderstood or not got it clear yet, and then you should try to understand through intelligent, critical discussion and inquiry. If you cannot make that assumption you have probably already ceased to be a disciple.

Q: One of the critical distinctions being made by some people at the moment is between what you have to say on the Dharma, and what you say, for instance, on

men and women or on social questions such as single-sex, lifestyle and so on. So it might be said that Sangharakshita is my teacher when he is talking about the Noble Eightfold Path, but not when he is emphasising the renunciation of family life or whatever.

S: Well, the Buddha also emphasised renunciation of family life, so I can point back to the Buddha's own teaching and example, as well as having my own views about the best kind of lifestyle for practising and teaching the Dharma. However I also say that commitment is primary and lifestyle is secondary. So although I do emphasise the importance of single-sex communities, I certainly do not say that someone not living in a single-sex community cannot make substantial spiritual progress. Nor do I say that a disciple who decides not to live in a single-sex community is necessarily an unfaithful disciple – it would depend on that disciple's motives and attitude.

Q: Let's take perhaps the most contentious issue there has been, which is the issue of men and women and their respective aptitudes or whatever. There are people who have come to a definite conclusion that they do not agree with you. So how does that affect their discipleship, as far as you are concerned?

S: I regard that as a difference of opinion that does not affect their discipleship. Although my view of the matter does come from my personal experience and relates to the Buddhist tradition through the ages, it is not scientifically demonstrable, as far as I know.

In addition, even supposing that women had less spiritual aptitude than men, at least in the early stages of their spiritual life, the whole weight of current popular opinion is so strongly against such a view that it would be wise not to insist on it, since it is not critical to someone's practice of the Dharma, and one doesn't want to discourage anybody without good reason. Thus, if someone believed that men and women have perfectly equal spiritual aptitudes, that would not be incompatible with their being my disciple.

It is worth saying also that an Order member is not obliged to believe that men and women are exactly equal in their spiritual aptitudes.

Q: Suppose someone were to say they were completely against the 'single-sex idea'?

S: That would be a much more serious matter. To be against all single-sex activities is much too doctrinaire. Just this morning I heard a programme on the radio about the history of feminism and, amongst other things, the contributors were celebrating the fact that women could have their own space. They were saying that there are certain things that women cannot discuss if men are present. It seems to be generally acknowledged that women need their own space sometimes, as do men. If someone was actively propagating their rejection of single-sex activities and, say, discouraging

people from going on single-sex retreats, that would surely bring his or her membership of the Order into question.

The difference between the case of the relative aptitudes of men and women and the case of single-sex activities is that the former is my observation, which I cannot prove and which has little bearing on the actual practice of the Dharma, whereas the latter is something that I specifically recommend to my disciples for their spiritual benefit. I strongly recommend to everyone that they make sure there is a significant single-sex element in their lives, especially with regard to single-sex communities, retreats, chapters, etc. If someone says this is not necessary, they are not taking me seriously as a teacher and that must put their membership of the Order into question.

Q: Although this is not a distinctive part of your own teaching, let me ask it here. Order members have been asking what is it acceptable for them to believe or not believe as regards rebirth. To what extent is non-belief compatible with membership of the Order.

S: My teaching is firmly based on the basic teachings of the Buddha, especially as found in the Pali canon, and 'rebirth', to call it that, is found there. Rebirth is therefore part of the essential teachings on which the Order is based, so you cannot be an Order member and say that there is no such thing. You cannot, as an Order member, be asserting a view that contradicts the universal Buddhist tradition and that the Buddha appears to have entertained. You are not obliged to actually believe that there is rebirth, but you cannot categorically assert that there is no such thing.

Q: Can you think of other important views of yours that we can clarify whether or not they are necessary to membership of the Order?

S: I have said that I don't think that the Order or movement should be Sangharakshita writ large, by which I mean that my own particularities of character and interest should not determine other people's interests. For instance, in my own case, I haven't had any particular interest in the sciences, but I am certainly not saying that is not a valid area of interest for Order members and others in the movement. In fact I have tried to encourage more interest in the sciences, but with limited success. I would consider that as probably my major personal limitation that was not to be followed.

Q: Suppose there was someone, in that connection, who did not agree with your teaching of the Higher Evolution?

S: It depends what exactly they disagree with. If they disagree with the whole of modern science and are asserting creationism or the like, that is one thing, because they are coming into conflict with basic principles of the Dharma. If however they disagree with how I align evolution with the Dharma, that is another matter. I wouldn't say that an Order member is obliged to find what I have to say about the higher evolution of man an acceptable presentation of the Dharma: it being presumed

that they do accept what else I have said about the spiritual path and are practising that. But I know that some people from the very beginning of the movement have had difficulties with the language of the higher evolution and have dropped it, and that has not affected their discipleship with me.

Q: Some people have recently been comparing what you said early on in the history of the movement with what you have been saying more recently. They allege that there is a definite and substantial difference.

S: It seems some have been quoting Sangharakshita against Sangharakshita! It is inevitable that my views on various issues should have shifted a little in the course of almost sixty years of teaching, if we include my earliest writings like the *Survey*. People have to try to see the development of my thought, to the extent there is development, as a totality over the whole period of my teaching life. And it is not just a question of being aware of that development of thought, but of recognising that I have addressed different situations and contexts and different audiences in different terms. One cannot just pit one quotation against another.

Q: It has been said that now you are stressing your own 'particular presentation of the Dharma' whereas in your talk, *Is a Guru really necessary?*, given in the early days of the movement, you said that the Buddha has no view, no philosophy, no system of thought....

S: To pit what I said in that talk against what I have been saying more recently is like pitting what the Buddha said in the *Atthakavagga* of the Sutta Nipata against, for instance, his teaching in the *suttas* of the Majjhima Nikaya. The Buddha himself said different things to different people on different occasions, according to the needs of those people and the needs of the situation – and no doubt according to his own inspiration.

It is true that the Buddha had no view – in the sense of something to which he was attached in an egoistic way. I've sometimes pointed out that in the Buddhist texts a distinction can be seen between wrong views, right views, and no views. But you don't attain to the realisation of no view without taking your stand on right view. Or to put the matter in terms of Nagarjuna's thinking, the *paramartha satya* does not abolish the *samvriti satya*. In effect, taking your stand upon the *samvriti satya*, you realise the *paramartha satya*.

The guru responds to people spontaneously, nonetheless, behind his various responses, there is something that unites them all. They are not completely random and unrelated. And he establishes institutions within which that sort of spontaneous connection can take place and be properly understood. That is the way to resolve the apparent contradiction between what I said in that talk and some of the things I have been saying more recently about the importance to the Order of my particular presentation of the Dharma.

In this case there is no inconsistency of substance. It is a question of really understanding what the two positions mean. But, to take the general issue of consistency, let me be a little provocative and quote two authors: Blake says, 'A man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind'; then Emerson declares that 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds'. I do not claim to be completely consistent. I think it is unreasonable for anyone to expect me to be, over a period of sixty years, completely consistent in everything I've said or written.

Q: Really the issue is not so much to do with the specifics of what you've said on particular occasions, but that it is said that you were very radical in the early days and you are now much more conservative. To begin with, so it is asserted, your attitude was an entirely open one: for instance, you said in about 1972, 'The only thing that cannot be changed is Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels'; whereas now your stress is on conserving your particular body of teachings, practices and institutions.

S: But what did I mean when I said, 'The only thing that cannot be changed is Going for Refuge'? It was not intended to mean that 'Anything can be changed, it doesn't matter', but to highlight the extreme importance of Going for Refuge. This is an example of a well known rhetorical device, especially in the Indian tradition: you highlight or praise something in an exaggerated way to emphasise its extreme importance, but what you say is not to be taken literally. Sometimes I do speak a little provocatively to get people thinking, like when I said, 'An Order member without a chapter is only half an Order member'. Clearly it would be absurd to take that literally.

I remember the occasion when I gave that answer, 'The only thing that cannot be changed is Going for Refuge'. It was while I was in retreat in Cornwall and I was asked, 'What can be changed, Bhante?' Immediately the thought came into my mind, 'Oh dear! We've only been going six years and already they are thinking of changing things!'

It's not a question of pitting one unrelated quote against another – that's just the kind of polemics you see in politics; it's not serious. My thought has to be seen over the years and seen in its totality. There certainly have been changes; for instance, I see the Tibetan Triyana model now very differently to how I saw it some years ago. There have also been changes of emphasis. So we must acknowledge at least some changes in my thinking over the years, but there is certainly continuity. I illustrated that in one particular area in *A History of my Going for Refuge* and perhaps it could be illustrated in other areas as well.

Q: At Madhyamaloka there has been some discussion of your use in the early days of a particular kind of 'capitalised' philosophical language and

terminology, for example, 'The Absolute' and 'The Unconditioned' and so on. It seems to suggest something rather eternalistic. Would you want to use that now?

S: These are examples of what I call poetic terminology and what David Brazier, in *The New Buddhism*, calls rhetoric. It is a terminology I would be unlikely to use now, having learned from experience to be a bit careful and realising possibilities of misunderstanding are greater than I had thought. When reading my work, one must always look carefully at the context and try to understand what is being said in that context. In these cases, I don't think my fundamental understanding has changed at all. I did not mean anything eternalistic when I used that language, even if it is perhaps too easily understood in that way.

Q: Say a member of the Order heard that other Buddhist teachers were coming to a nearby city, just as your teachers came to Kalimpong, and decided to sit at their feet as well as sitting at yours. What would you say to that?

S: Well, one might ask, why? If you want to practise the Dharma, you've got enough to be getting on with already. What is the nature of your interest in these other teachers? You might think that you could learn something new and different from them, but what you learned would most likely be just a source of confusion for you. If one was firmly established in one's own practice and had faith in one's teachers within the Order then one would not go off sitting at the feet of other teachers in that way. And most Order members do not do that.

Q: Isn't there an argument that in some cases, some of our central teachings can be augmented by voices from other sources within other traditions while remaining faithful to our own framework of teachings ?

S: I think it is difficult to do that. If you go to a teacher outside the movement, you don't usually get just the one particular teaching you want. Along with him comes the tradition to which he belongs and that informs what he says about the teaching that you are interested in. You can hardly involve yourself with him to any extent without becoming involved in his tradition. You will then find yourself immersed in a whole package that is unlikely to fit smoothly with the framework we have within the Order, and that will therefore take you out of the Order. It is safer to go to books for particular teachings, because you can read critically and take what you want. You can also discuss the book with other Order members.

Q: Are there not things we can learn from other Buddhist groups, without compromising our own system? For instance, to take a somewhat marginal example, some people in the Rigpa Sangha have given a lot of detailed attention to the support of the dying. There does not seem to be any conflict of principle for us in learning from them.

S: There have been several examples recently of Order members helping their own

dying friends or relations through that experience. That does seem to be a natural part of the Order's life. So there could be no objection to a group of people within our Sangha, on the basis of their existing commitment as Order members and without prejudice to it, devoting themselves to this work in the same way that people within the Rigpa Sangha have done.

If they wanted to see what they could learn about this particular matter from others outside the Order, whether the Rigpa people or anyone else, there are a number of considerations that should be borne in mind. They should be very sure about their basic commitment to the Order and their understanding of its principles. They should consider carefully their own motivation: is their interest in investigating what others are doing a sign of restlessness or dissatisfaction, as we have found in a number of such cases, or is it a desire to enhance our collective life and practice, while respecting our own framework of understanding? They would certainly need to have thoroughly discussed all this with their Preceptors and spiritual friends and been very open to what they had to say.

They would also need to consider whether what they wanted to investigate was something genuinely worthwhile, especially given everything else we have to do. Maybe a list needs to be drawn up of the sort of investigations that are considered useful. People might have all sorts of different ideas about what it might be valuable to bring back into the Order, and that would need assessing and prioritising.

Before such investigations take place, guidelines and procedures need to be worked out for their conduct and for the assimilation of whatever emerges from them. I laid down some principles for this in my talk on *The Five Pillars of the FWBO*, in which I referred to the Pillar of Experiment. I spoke of experimentation being conducted by a small group of senior Order members and the results being communicated afterwards to the rest of the Order and movement. I did not mean that anybody could do what they felt like doing and call it an experiment. To give an example, if it seems that a particular meditation that we don't already practise may be of use, then let a small group of senior and experienced Order members try it and see what the results are. The exact mechanisms for this the Public Preceptors will have to decide upon, no doubt in consultation with the Chairmen or others.

Q: Quite a few Order members have been to Buddhist teachers outside the Order and consider that they have derived benefit from that, to varying degrees. Some would say they've gained something spiritually important that was not available to them in the Order. How does that affect their discipleship with you and therefore their membership of the Order?

S: People who I have ordained should, as a matter of courtesy, consult me before going to another teacher – or they should consult their own Preceptors, if I did not ordain them. That is the traditional thing to do. In a very few cases, people have consulted me, but I am a little surprised that most have not – I don't know whether

other Preceptors are consulted or not.

However, even when people have come to see me about going to another teacher or taking up a practice or teaching I have not taught, very rarely are they asking me in the spirit of being prepared to follow whatever I say, whether it be 'yes' or 'no'. Very often, they are really seeking my approval for what they have already more or less decided to do. They are not prepared to accept 'no', if that is what I happen to say. I can only remember one person consulting me and definitely taking 'no' for an answer.

Q: So, given that there are quite a number of Order members in the West who have gone to other teachers, what should they do now, Bhante? From what you have just said, many of them are, in a sense, in an irregular position. How should they regularise it?

S: It would be good if that could be rectified as soon as possible. If those who have not consulted, or have consulted but without really being prepared to accept 'no', want to regularise their position, they should come and see me or their own Preceptors and make their position clear. In the first place, they should affirm that, even though they have taken some teachings from elsewhere, their heart is definitely with me and with the Order and FWBO.

Generally speaking, that is the key question: where is one's primary allegiance or loyalty? It is in principle possible to learn things from teachers from traditions outside the FWBO and bring that back into one's own practice and the practice of the Order. But one must be careful that one does not get so absorbed in what one has learned that one ends up identifying more and more with the tradition from which it comes and moving away from the Order, as has happened in two or three cases.

However, people need to be clear it is not simply a matter of where their hearts lie, what they feel about it. One should resist the tendency to fudge – to try to have one's cake and eat it too, because there is the larger question of how whatever they have learned fits into the total pattern of my teaching and therefore of the Order's teaching. Probably many people would not be aware of that and would not be able to work it out. They would need to do that in dialogue with their Preceptors and other senior Order members who really understand the issues.

Q: One of the most problematic issues connected with other teachers concerns the question of *tathagatagarbha*, Buddha nature etc. I've spoken to a number of Order members who have said that, while they do not attach importance to *tathagatagarbha* as a metaphysical doctrine, they found an approach that emphasises the natural purity of the mind, whether deriving from Dzogchen, Mahamudra or whatever, spiritually liberating. Someone told me that, when they were introduced to this idea on a non-FWBO retreat, for the first time they experienced a positive perspective on the spiritual life – which they had not got from their previous experience of being taught within the movement. These are

Westerners who seem to be speaking with complete sincerity and genuineness and who feel some pain because they understand that this is bringing them into conflict with what they understand to be your views – and they have otherwise no quarrel with you.

S: The criterion is, did they give up practising? If they don't give up practising they are saying in effect that *tathagatagarbha* is a potentiality, not something you possess in the here and now. It seems that there are two traditions of *tathagatagarbha*. One says *tathagatagarbha* represents potentiality, the other tradition asserts that *tathagatagarbha* is somehow actually present within one here and now. It is the second of these two versions of *tathagatagarbha* that I criticise as eternalism, not the first, which speaks in terms of potentiality.

As long as *tathagatagarbha* is used as a language of potentiality, used in a poetic, metaphorical, or even rhetorical way to indicate potentiality and to encourage faith and confidence, it's not too much of a problem. However, it has a tendency to slide into something metaphysical. If it is made into something metaphysical, it leads to the undercutting of practice. Indeed, it becomes a form of antinomianism, where it may even be asserted that the precepts are unnecessary.

This antinomianism is, it seems, present in some aspects of Far Eastern Buddhism. I have recently been reading David Brazier's book, as well as *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, edited by Jamie Hubbard and Paul Swanson, which is about a Japanese movement called 'Critical Buddhism'. Both these books make it clear that there is much about Zen that is not truly Buddhist. In some ways it's quite startling. David Brazier writes about Yasutani Roshi, a very prominent twentieth-century master, and that is really quite an eye opener; almost horrific in some ways. Yasutani Roshi, supposedly an enlightened Zen master, supposedly having received full transmission coming all the way down from Shakyamuni, actively supported Japanese imperialism and wrote violently anti-Semitic books. Some forms of Zen or of Dzogchen or Mahamudra, as some forms of Vedanta, would seem to claim there is no difference between skilful and unskilful, because both have the same basis in the Buddha Nature or whatever. Then there is no need for effort or practice, no need for renunciation, etc.

One must therefore be careful that one does not get too far from the Buddha's thought. Even if one can speak metaphorically of one's ultimate purity, one still must transform the greed, hatred, and delusion in one's mind, as the Buddha repeatedly taught. And you have to make ethical judgements.

If some people say that the language of *tathagatagarbha* has been helpful to them, one cannot deny their experience. The question is, what do they make of that experience, where do they place it in a broader context? It is not possible to comment further without knowing who taught them or exactly what was said, what the emphasis was in any particular case. Of course, if people are concerned that they may be in conflict with what I have taught, they should come and see me.

Q: What happens if people do learn something outside the Order, without discussion with you and without going through any sort of process of assimilation, and then practise it and teach it to others, whether at a centre or not? What is their position?

S: To be blunt, I see them as going outside the Order, assuming what they teach or even just practise is not compatible with the teaching we have within the Order, or has not been made compatible. If they were to teach as important or central something that was incompatible with what I see as basic Buddhist teaching, that would put them outside the Order. In the end there are certain doctrinal understandings and practical expressions of those understandings that are fundamental to membership of the Order. Fortunately I doubt if many are in this position, if any at all.

Q: On what basis should we accommodate other practices and why? What variety do you need? How many different practices are necessary for a full spiritual life?

S: I've always emphasised going more deeply into what one has, rather than trying to accumulate a whole array of practices. What we've already got is, broadly speaking, sufficient. We've got Mindfulness of Breathing and Metta Bhavana, we've got awareness in general, the Four Satipatthanas, the Four Brahma Viharas, the preliminary practices, the Six Element practice, and so forth. There is so much there to be got on with. I think some people want something new without having a full acquaintance with what already is available. One must admit, however, that sometimes these practices are perhaps not presented in a sufficiently imaginative or inspired way.

In principle, though, there is probably hardly any practice from the Buddhist tradition that cannot be accommodated in our system. But whatever practice one does it needs to be fitted in and practised within the overall framework. In some cases this may require very careful thought and quite a bit of trimming of elements from their original contexts so that they can be placed in our system. For instance, many practices coming from the Tibetan traditions will have very strong buried assumptions about the Triyana, which will need to be dealt with.

There is the question of where the so-called 'formless practice' fits in – although I've never been too sure what that means, it's always seemed a bit vague to me. To the extent that I've understood what people are talking about, I've always regarded it as an extension of the Just Sitting that I have taught from the beginning. Some people have put more and more emphasis on that, having found it useful. However, one must be very careful to practise it in the context of the overall System of Meditation: one should not practise Just Sitting on its own – it has to be alternated with periods of making an effort through one of the other practices, as I described in that talk on the

System of Meditation. I doubt very much whether Just Sitting or 'Pure Awareness', as it is termed, will take you all the way by itself, and it seems to leave quite a bit of room for self-delusion.

Then there are the broader issues of making sure that there is a high degree of commonality about the practices that all Order members are engaged in. If everybody is doing different practices it becomes harder and harder to have a sense that we are one Order, as some people begin to feel more and more allegiance to the group of those who do their own particular form of practice. In addition, the more variety of practice there is, the harder it will be for people to find guidance in their practice from more experienced practitioners within the Order. We are a united spiritual community and so we need to keep a common body of practice, a common vocabulary of practice, without unnecessary or whimsical variety.

Q: I know it can't be all buttoned down, but at the same time it still seems too loose to me. I'm not quite clear yet what criteria we should use. On what basis should we judge whether or not people can learn and then teach something new, especially from teachers outside the Order?

S: In discussing this with anyone, we should start with some investigation of motives. Have they really engaged with the practices and teachings already available? People often want to learn something new because they have not got on well with what they already have, and that very often needs going into. There may be some personal factor at work there that needs sorting out.

Similarly, if they want to teach something new, we need to ask why are they so keen to teach it? Do they just want to be a teacher, gather a little circle around them, and so forth?

Secondly, we need to look at their relationship to teachers, kalyana mitras, and preceptors in the Order, if they have them. They may be looking for, or even needing, some guidance in their spiritual life and practice, and that may attract them to learning from other teachers. They may have misunderstandings or confusions about the way to do the present practices, perhaps because they have not been taught very well. We then need to investigate why they have not found that guidance within the Order and see if we can help them to do so. Thus we need to make sure that the motivation is healthy and that everything is going well generally in that person's spiritual life and their membership of the Order and that they have the guidance they need.

Then, if all this has been clarified and we think that there is some real spiritual benefit to be gained from the particular teaching being learned and then taught, that needs to be brought to the attention of the Public Preceptors and they should arrange for it to be looked into more closely.

The Public Preceptors need to discuss these matters very carefully, if necessary with me, and come up with some way of sorting out what is valuable from what is not. They need to evolve very clear and effective procedures. Other Order members need to cooperate with them to that end and not just react to authority or whatever – most of us are rather too old for that! Again, I am sure that the great majority of Order members would have no difficulty with co-operating with the Public Preceptors and would happily support them in the carrying out of their various responsibilities.

Q: Why is it that the Public Preceptors are the ones to set up a system for integrating innovations in spiritual practice?

The Public Preceptors are the spiritually seniormost Order members and they are the Preceptors to all I have not myself ordained. They are therefore the most competent in this particular area. They would not necessarily have to do it all themselves: they could appoint others they considered best qualified for any particular purpose. And they would need to consult with other Order members carrying weighty responsibilities, such as the Chairmen and Chairwomen.

Q: There are those who are questioning the position of the Public Preceptors in the Movement. They are questioning whether this is the best way for the Order to decide who gets ordained or to decide who decides who gets ordained.

S: Well, what are the alternatives? You cannot have people selected according to simple seniority, because that would not necessarily produce the right people for the responsibility. Public Preceptors don't come out of thin air: they come from the ranks of the existing Order, usually after being a Private Preceptor first, and previously having been a kalyana mitra and having taught at a centre and led retreats and so on. People move up through the system as they are seen by others, and especially by those carrying a responsibility, to be qualified to take it on themselves. If some senior Order members haven't moved up through the system, presumably there is a good explanation for that: either they don't want to function in that way or they are not suited to it or ready for it, for one reason or another.

The other alternative would be a democratic system, but you cannot vote people into this sort of spiritual responsibility. Just because someone has the largest number of votes does not mean he or she is spiritually qualified. The majority of Order members do not yet have the experience to make the judgement of who is ready to take the responsibility of Preceptor. Of course, the comments of any Order member who knows the person concerned should be carefully considered by those who do have to make that decision, and that is why the Public Preceptors have established a consultation process for new Preceptors.

There would also be practical difficulties about voting. For instance, all Order members would have to be able to know the candidates. And the whole Order would have to be involved, very much including the Indian part, which would present all

sorts of other problems. If you regionalised the process it would become very hard to maintain the overall geographical unity of the Order and movement. When it came to electing new Preceptors, the candidates would have to put themselves forward, they would have to have their own publicity machines and so on. Sooner or later you would have canvassing and hustings, party and faction, and so forth. I have the history of the Theosophical Society in mind as a warning of just how dreadful this would be: in its early days it was a smaller organisation than we have now and there was vigorous campaigning for election to the presidency, and all sorts of charges and counter-charges were made against the various candidates. In short, how could Public Preceptors be voted for by the whole Order? I think it would be wrong both in theory and in practice. I won't say the present system is infallible, but I can't think of a better one.

Q: What about the position of the College in the overall architecture of the Order and movement?

The Public Preceptors, because of their spiritual responsibilities, clearly have the key position in that architecture, but there are various groupings of senior Order members who have overlapping responsibilities that, between them, cover the whole Order and movement: Public Preceptors, Private Preceptors, Chairmen and Chairwomen, Presidents (the office of President, it seems, needs reinstituting), Order Convenors, Mitra Convenors, Chapter Convenors. There needs to be some liaison between them all so that they are not each just going their separate ways or coming into some sort of conflict. I know that a process of liaison has been started and I am hoping that that will result in much clearer collective objectives for those particular bodies and perhaps some overall structure. We definitely need such a structure if we are to be effective, and we need even some sort of headquarters at which that structure is focused.

Talking of objectives, we need to be careful what we mean and in what context we are speaking. It is all right to formulate objectives, as I have just suggested, for spreading the Dharma, for instance: where and how we should do it. But I sometimes get asked what I see as the future direction of the Order. I find that a very odd sort of question. It's almost as though we are a political party: the objective of a political party is to gain or keep power and everything is mobilised to that end. We don't have a finite end in that sense. I therefore think that it is entirely a pseudo-question: all I can say in response to it is, 'I see all members of the Order seeking to deepen their practice of the Dharma and to spread the Movement.' If one wanted to be grandiose, one could say, 'Our objective is Enlightenment and that is the direction that we are moving in.'

Q: In what you have said so far, Bhante, there is a strong emphasis on what might be called conservation: making sure that the Order remains faithful to its founding principles, embodied in the teachings, practices, and institutions established by you. In your interview with Mahamati, shown at the Bodhgaya

Order Convention, you mentioned an, as it were, balancing factor to conservation: development – responding creatively to new circumstances and needs. Why are you stressing conservation here and not development?

S: The general mood of the times favours constant innovation, and that influences us, and the mood has to be resisted. There is, however, room for development - depending on what one means by development. If it means considering a new way of communicating the Dharma, that is to be encouraged: the development of Buddhafield was an example of that. It may be useful for there to be developments in terms of the medium used and the manner of presentation, but there should not be any development that is inconsistent with whatever teachings, practices, and institutions we already have and there should not be innovation in terms of principles.

Although I certainly see an important place for development in this sense, I feel the need to stress sticking to our basic principles and basing ourselves firmly in my particular presentation of the Dharma. That is because I detect, within the Order and movement at present, that the voices raised loudest seem to be in favour of, what could be called, innovation. I don't hear equally strong and numerous voices being raised in favour of conservation, to call it that. I therefore see that innovation is the current danger, especially in view of the general climate around us and the craze for what is new and different – the new for new's sake.

Q: I suppose a few people may be talking about doing things differently because they do not have confidence either in the results they have had from their own practice or in their understanding of what the Order is, or in your teachings. What would you say to them?

S: It is difficult to generalise: it depends who is saying that. In many cases, one might just say, 'You need to practise harder' or 'You need to practise within more supportive conditions' – because people often put themselves in situations that are not at all supportive of their practice of the Dharma and then are surprised that they do not make progress and blame the movement or the practices they are doing. But, if they are convinced, after discussion with me and with their other teachers in the Order, that they are not finding the FWBO and its principles and practices of any use to them in their spiritual lives, then they had better leave the Order and look elsewhere.

Q: Someone has recently been asserting that ours is not yet a real Buddhist Order, because we don't have the teachings and the guidance to gain Insight and that we'll have to sort that out once Bhante has gone. Is it possible to gain Insight within the Order and movement? Do we have what we need to do so or do we have to look for something new?

S: One doesn't need very much in order to gain Insight, in the sense of Stream Entry. In the *Mahaparinibbana suttanta* in the Digha Nikaya, the Buddha offers a 'Mirror of

Dhamma' whereby you can tell if someone has gained Stream Entry: one looks to see if they have unshakeable faith in the Three Jewels and are perfect in morality. Unshakeable faith and perfection in morality! That's quite a tall order! We therefore know what the criteria are and we should be able to apply them at least to ourselves.

However, I think that a few people are over-concerned with Stream Entry and Insight. In some cases the concern becomes almost neurotic: it seems to indicate a lack of faith in the Dharma and certainly a lack of faith in what we are practising. One should just be concerned about practising the Dharma to the full extent of one's ability, then Stream Entry will look after itself. And the average Order member has more than sufficient resources in terms of teachings, practices, and supportive institutions to gain Insight.

Q: But don't you need detailed guidance from a teacher in order to gain Insight?

S: In reality, all you need is a few lines from the *Dhammapada*!

Q: But don't you need a detailed highway code of what exactly to do as you are meditating and don't you need the detailed personal attention of a teacher, such as you might get apparently in a Zen tradition and that sort of thing?

S: Some teachers may indeed offer that but you don't really need it. One must beware of what I've called 'pseudo-spiritual technism'. As for the Zen tradition, well what does one really get? You see a Roshi every now and then, you submit your answers to the *koan*, he says, 'No, it's not that. Go away!'

People are often lacking in self confidence. They want to be told, 'You're OK, you've got it right, you're not doing it wrong.' They want to know exactly what to do. Some people want mentoring, as distinct from Kalyana Mitrata in our usual sense, which of course everyone needs. We therefore should take that into account and give them encouragement and reassurance.

Of course, in order to make spiritual progress, you do need to know very basic things, like how to deal with hindrances and the importance of balanced effort. But you can quite easily get that knowledge within the FWBO. I have written about these matters at some length in many places and people need to refer to that, perhaps more than some do. If you study the teachings that you have got from me, if you apply them systematically and regularly over a period of time, don't worry, the results will come. And they do come: I have seen people grow and change even over comparatively short periods. That's been obvious from the very beginning of the movement.

Q: Is ours a real Buddhist Order?

S: Some people have ideas about authentic traditions and so on. I will at least say that we are more of a real Buddhist order than some others I could mention. We are of

course a young order, but we may already have some Stream Entrants here and there who don't blow their own trumpets.

But people want reassurance, that is the problem, and often that is due to lack of confidence in themselves and what they are doing, and in the Dharma they are practising.

Q: Some people are wondering whether or not you have changed your views on the value and importance of living in single-sex communities and working in Team-based Right Livelihood.

S: No, I definitely have not and I feel the need to emphasise them more than ever. Team-based Right Livelihood was a development of the general principle of Right Livelihood, found in the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, and I continue to see it as essential. It's not enough for us to practise Right Livelihood as best we can out there in the world. The ideal work situation is Team-based Right Livelihood, where dana is generated and spiritual friendship can be developed more intensively.

I also still believe in the single-sex communities and other single-sex activities. The fact that they are less popular with some people than they used to be does not mean there has been any change in my thinking. In other words, they weren't just an adaptation to the circumstances of the sixties and seventies. They are of permanent value.

Q: Some are suggesting that the Zeitgeist is different now and people are less inclined to work in Team-based Right Livelihood Businesses or live in single-sex communities so therefore we should be changing our approach.

S: The question is, how would you change your approach with regard to Right Livelihood? And anyway, even if people don't want to work in team-based businesses or live in single-sex communities, that is irrelevant. After all, most people don't want to practise the Dharma. One goes on proclaiming what one thinks as good and right regardless of changes of fashion.

Of course, the Dharma still has something to say to those who cannot or chose not to live and work in these ways. If you are not working in a Team-based Right Livelihood business, you will need to earn your living somehow, and the principles of Right Livelihood still apply to you. Similarly, I strongly recommend single-sex communities, but if people do not want to or cannot live in them, they still need to apply the Dharma as best they can to their situation and to try to make that situation as supportive as possible of their spiritual efforts. If some people want to set up family-based communities as an alternative, for instance, I've no objection to that, though I continue to think of the single-sex community as the model.

It is worth stressing, however, that a single-sex community will not automatically

fulfil its potential simply by virtue of being single-sex. It may have a lot more potential than living in a nuclear family, but that potential is not automatically going to be realised: that is dependent on the efforts of its members. It's not difficult for a single-sex community to degenerate into mere shared accommodation, especially if you find that numbers are dwindling and rent needs to be met.

Q: What about the basic institutions of the Order and movement? There seems to be a drift away from the structures that we have: obviously, a smaller proportion of people are living in communities or working in Right Livelihood businesses, but also it seems that not so many Order members are giving much time to teaching the Dharma or helping at centres. In addition, it seems that many Order members are not in chapters and many chapters do not have Chapter Convenors. Fewer people attend regional and national Order weekends, and the proportion of Order members attending Conventions is diminishing. Do these institutions need rethinking?

S: They only need rethinking in the sense that some Order members should rethink their attitudes to them, if they have lost their sense of the significance of those institutions. If some Order members are not ensuring that they have truly supportive conditions for their spiritual practice, they are not going for refuge as effectively as they might be. It is the same if they are not actively working to spread the Dharma, especially through our centres. And it does seem that a smaller proportion of Order members are actively participating in the Order's institutions. If that tendency continues the Order will simply become a kind of society or social club, and all the benefits of the Order, both to oneself and to the world, will be lost.

I believe the problem is that we are affected by the wider social trend towards a private life, with less and less participation in a public world. This is especially strong in Britain. No doubt some loss of inspiration and commitment also comes into it, and that loss will almost certainly be increased by withdrawal from the shared life of the Order. This must definitely be reversed if the Order is to survive. The solution lies with the individual Order member making more of an effort to participate in the life of the Order and movement.

Q: Isn't the Order less creative now than it used to be? Isn't there less possibility of creativity, especially since you are so much concerned about boundaries? In the early days we weren't bothered about boundaries, we were more concerned with principles, there was much more freedom.

S: I wouldn't agree with much of that. For a start, there is a misunderstanding about the nature of freedom. Freedom doesn't mean you are in a position to do anything you please. I think that's probably where the confusion lies. For practical purposes we need to agree upon limits, otherwise there couldn't be a Sangha for people to belong to. Boundaries, both at the entrance and the exit, are an inevitable part of setting up an Order, which after all is something distinct. All Order members know

this, because they went to some trouble to cross the boundaries into the Order at their ordination.

In its early days, the Order certainly was very creative, in the sense that we had to work out for ourselves all the basic principles and create all the basic institutions. Later Order members are not in the same position. But even in those early days we were 'confined' by what the Buddha had done. He had discovered the Dharma once and for all, as far as this world period is concerned, and no one could therefore do what he had done. The Buddha in that sense was more creative, no one can match the creativity of the Buddha. Thus there is less creativity or originality now, because so much of the work has already been done and needs to be developed rather than originated.

The early Order members did what later Order members, by the very nature of the situation, cannot do, but they can do something similar, by going forth and setting up new centres, communities, and Team-based Right Livelihood businesses. If they do not wish to do that and wish to experience that creativity of the early days, yet don't wish to be confined by the FWBO that was created all those years ago, let them go and set up their own order. I can assure them, it's no easy matter!

There is now within the movement every bit as much scope for Order members' creativity, in the sense of initiative and originality, even if it is of a different kind. They can go off to some place where the FWBO isn't known and they can pioneer there: there are many towns even in Britain where we don't have any activities, so there is plenty of scope for their creativity. But I suspect that there are many who don't want to do that. They don't want to leave their job, family, girl or boy friend. They hold themselves back very often, in so many ways. I wish more Order members would go and pioneer: why should dozens of Order members cluster around a single urban centre when they could be spreading the Dharma and the FWBO somewhere else? If the Order is less creative now than it was, perhaps that's because some people aren't as inspired and don't practise the Dharma as hard as most people did in the very early days.

Q: Why is there not more gratitude and appreciation in the Order for what those early Order members did, rather than feeling that they have no scope for their creativity now?

S: People are constantly expressing their gratitude to me, both in writing and in person, for my own work and for what they have gained from their Preceptors and their spiritual friends, their communities and chapters, and in fact from the whole movement.

Q: A lot of your responses have focused on your role in defining the boundaries, if you like to put it that way. After you die, of course, you will still remain important in defining the boundaries through your teachings, but a key element

will be missing, which is your physical presence. For instance, at present anyone who wants to regularise their position as regards other teachers can come and see you and sort it out. And if they see their own Preceptors, those Preceptors can clarify any point of principle that is not clear to them with you.

S: You've got quite a substantial body of literature to consult... But there is something about the movement, the Order and even about me that is not easily definable. There is a touch of something that cannot be buttoned down, something that cannot in the end be defined. Even the desire to button it down or define it is a mistake – that was the mistake that the Theravada made in connection with its Vinaya. Everyone will need to take care of that rather mysterious, indefinable spirit that gives the movement life and energy.

Everyone must play their part in keeping the Order and movement alive, especially in terms of that indefinable element. But ultimately it's the Public Preceptors who are the principal key, inasmuch as they are the keepers of the gate into the Order, and other Order members will need to cooperate with them.

Q: Do you still have confidence in the Public Preceptors, collectively and individually?

S: I have confidence enough!