

## A Complex Personality: A Note

In the personal statement that I issued on December 30th 2016 I said, among other things, 1) that the FWBO/Triratna sometimes bore the marks not of the Dharma but of my own particular personality and 2) that that personality was a complex one. These words have been the subject of much discussion within the Order and in some quarters they have been seriously misunderstood. The fact that I spoke of the FWBO/Triratna sometimes bearing the marks not of the Dharma but of my own particular personality has been taken to mean that those marks were always negative. Far from this being the case, I believe that those marks were almost entirely positive, as will be seen if we take a look at some of the strands that go to make up the complexity to which I refer.

I do not know if phrenologists still exist, but I am confident that if one of them was to examine the bones of my skull he would say that I had an especially large bump of veneration. In other words, he would say that I had a natural tendency to look up to and to revere what was above me in any way, whether in human life or thought or culture. This bump of veneration developed at an early age, and may indeed be congenital.

The fact that I had a natural tendency to look up to and to revere what was above me meant that I had an affinity with Buddhism inasmuch as the path taught by the Buddha led to higher and ever higher states of being and consciousness. In a sense, I was a born Buddhist. This strand of my personality is closely connected with another strand, that of my being drawn much more to the arts than to science. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of Order members should resemble me in this respect. In the Order we have writers of every kind, from poets to playwrights, besides painters, sculptors, and musicians. One of the six distinctive features of the FWBO/Triratna is that it encourages the appreciation and practice of the arts as an aid to the spiritual life. This is not to say that an interest in science is discouraged. I have more than once expressed a wish that we had in the Order more people who were drawn to science, a knowledge or understanding of which can be for some people an aid to the spiritual life. In recent years I have myself been greatly struck by the vistas opened up by recent advances in the exploration of the universe in which we live, from the infinitely small to the infinitely great. These vistas cannot but induce a sense of wonder and awe in anyone with a little imagination.

Closely connected with my natural affinity with Buddhism is my preference to think in terms of what is to be cultivated, such as equanimity and compassion, rather than what is to be rooted out, such as greed and delusion. This is not to say that there is nothing in us that needs to be rooted out but my natural tendency is to emphasize the positive aspects of spiritual life, an emphasis which most people find helpful. There is also a practical side to my nature. As friends both old and new have remarked, I am a good organizer, which is probably the reason why we have an Order rather than an organization of a looser structure. I am also cosmopolitan, and have always delighted in meeting people of different nationalities, cultures, and religions. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Order should be an international one and bear this mark of my personality. Neither is it surprising that one of the distinctive features of Triratna is that it is open to all, irrespective of nationality, gender, race, social position or sexual orientation.

Thus my nature is a complex one. I have a natural affinity with Buddhism, prefer the positive to the negative, am drawn to the arts rather than to science, am a good organizer, and am cosmopolitan. Moreover, friends have always been important to me, and recognizing the spiritual significance of friendship to the spiritual life is another of the distinctive features of Triratna. The nature of this friendship is still a matter of discussion in Triratna, and I suspect that it will be a long time before the last word on the subject will have been spoken. Meanwhile, personal experience has shown me that it is better to keep one's sexual relations and one's spiritual friendships separate.

One would have thought that this was quite enough complexity for one person, but there are still more strands to be teased out, some less obvious than others. The first of these is that I am by nature conservative. I have always loved what is old, whether old churches, old books, or old

manners and customs. Being conservative, I do not welcome change, especially sudden change, which tends to make me socially and politically a gradualist. Nonetheless, this natural conservatism has not prevented me from being what has been called 'a new voice in the Buddhist tradition' or from founding a new Buddhist movement. As befits a conservative, I am a collector of what used to be called curios and are now called collectibles. As a boy I collected cigarette cards, postage stamps, and old coins, while later in life I have collected Buddhist artefacts and semi-precious stones, many of them being given to me by friends. 'Collecting', being akin to acquisitiveness, is hardly a Buddhist virtue, and I have sometimes had to curb this tendency of mine. I am also critical, especially of wrong views, which makes me a critic of 'scientific Buddhism', of mindfulness without the Dharma, of 'Buddhism without belief', and of so-called 'secular Buddhism'.

I need hardly say that I am also a writer. Indeed, I have sometimes found it difficult to say whether I was a Buddhist who writes or a writer who was a Buddhist. Be that as it may, I have always enjoyed the process of writing, down to the feel of the pen in my hand and the pressure of the nib on the paper. As such, the act of writing was almost a sensuous experience. Whether writing about the Dharma or the arts, I have always sought to give expression to what I genuinely thought and felt. This has often meant asking myself what I really thought and what I really felt and then finding the exactly appropriate word or phrase. It has also meant going carefully through what I have written and doing my best to eliminate hackneyed similes and clumsily constructed sentences. This has always been the case, even though my literary style has changed considerably over the years, from the youthful eloquence of the *Survey* and other early writings to the more succinct style of *The Three Jewels*. There is also the straightforward narrative style of the many volumes of memoirs, as well as the rather magisterial style of some of the book reviews.

The American poet and activist Alan Ginsberg once told me that he was surprised that someone so radical in his Buddhism as I was should write such traditional poetry. He was only partly right. Much of my poetry, especially my early poetry, is indeed traditional, but more than a handful of later poems are experimental. By this I do not mean that I experimented deliberately, but that what might appear to be experimental was the natural expression of what I was trying to say. Probably the most notable example of this more 'experimental' style is the long poem 'On Glastonbury Tor', written shortly after my first visit to that ancient site of pagan and Christian pilgrimage. In it I run words together, for example, as though I was writing in Anglo-Saxon or German rather than in modern English. Whether traditional or not, my poetry could be described as 'occasional' in the sense that each poem expresses what I was thinking or feeling at the time. Some of the poems are about the Buddha, some about the natural world, and some about places and people. Written as they were over seven decades, the poems between them add up to a sort of autobiography, in some cases including insights that are not to be found in my prose memoirs.

On the whole, I have written for a comparatively small audience consisting mainly of Western and Western-educated Buddhists and lovers of poetry and the fine arts. Only rarely have I ventured into the arena of public debate. One such occasion was when I gave a public lecture on 'Buddhism, World Peace, and Nuclear War'. Another was when I spoke on 'Buddhism and Blasphemy', in which I put forward the idea of what I called 'therapeutic blasphemy'. Both lectures were published as booklets and a passage from the latter was quoted in Parliament in the course of a debate. Though I have rarely intervened in a public debate I am not in principle opposed to doing so, either as a Buddhist or as a writer. It has been a question of what, in the circumstances, was the best use of my time and energy. It could be argued that a Buddhist teacher, especially a monk, should not become involved in worldly affairs in this way (perhaps I thought so myself at one time), but there is no doubt that a writer, both as a writer and a citizen, should be so involved. In modern times there have been a number of writers who, in the interest of truth and justice, have dared to criticise an oppressive or tyrannous regime, sometimes paying for their temerity with their lives. Now that I have retired from active participation in the work of Triratna, I may feel like involving myself in matters of public debate. Some of my friends may consider this a better way of

using my time and energy than writing about my complex personality, which may seem rather self-indulgent.

Sangharakshita

Adhithana

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