



ensuring a high  
degree of  
commonality of  
practices and  
teachings

**dharmachari  
subhuti**

## **preface by sangharakshita**

*At 88 I am aware that I do not have much longer to live, and that the Triratna Buddhist Order, which I founded in 1968, will soon be without the benefit of my leadership and guidance. Order members are by no means unaware of this impending development and Subhuti, the president of Adhithana, and Dhammarati, the chairman of the College of Public Preceptors, have therefore produced a serious and substantial paper on the importance of ensuring a high degree of commonality in the practices and teachings of the Order. In this paper they elucidate the principles on which this unity must be based, and the strategies by which it may be achieved and maintained, and their suggestions and recommendations have my wholehearted support, being as they are in harmony with my own vision of the future of the Triratna Buddhist Order. I therefore commend the paper to the earnest consideration of the members of the forthcoming Colloquium.*

*(Signed) Sangharakshita*

*Adhithana 29/3/2014*

## **continuity and creativity in a united order**

**dharmachari subhuti**

*This paper follows through the implications of some of Bhante's comments in the interview with him, published as 'What is the Western Buddhist Order?' Everyone is recommended to re-read that interview as a background. Key extracts have been included here as an appendix.*

Bhante's recent illness has reminded us yet more sharply that we face a future without our teacher. He has for so long been our ultimate source of unity, not merely symbolically but through his active vigilance and guidance, that it is obvious his departure will require a new response from us all if we are to remain united. As we approach this delicate transition, it is important that we have everything in place to pass through it as smoothly and effectively as possible.

Over the past five years, Bhante himself has actively precipitated a final process of clarification of fundamental principles, which he himself characterised as a 'refounding of the Order', and the Public Preceptors, in particular, have worked with him to bring those principles to bear on our collective life. This final phase began with the conversations with Bhante in 2009, published as 'What is the Western Buddhist Order?' In that paper, Bhante especially made clear that the Order is the community of his disciples and disciples of disciples, practising in accordance with his particular presentation of the Dharma. This can be said to have settled an element of uncertainty among some Order members and we can now safely assume that anyone remaining in the Order does so because they see themselves, directly or indirectly through their own preceptors, as a disciple of Ugyen Sangharakshita.

The conversations raised the question of what is Bhante's particular presentation of the Dharma, although he went some way to answering that in the paper. Through a further set of conversations, I have tried to clarify with Bhante the essence of his approach from various points of view and I have published the fruits of these conversations, with

Bhante's full endorsement, in a series of papers. Although there is much that could be explored further, the outlines of the main fundamentals of his approach are now set out in a series of documents, beginning with 'What is the Western Buddhist Order?', then 'Revering and Relying upon the Dharma', 'Reimagining the Buddha', 'Initiation into a New Life', 'A Supra-personal Force', and 'A Buddhist Manifesto'.<sup>1</sup>

Another very important step in establishing a firmer and more united basis was the renaming of the Order and movement by Bhante, as 'The Triratna Buddhist Order' and 'The Triratna Buddhist Community', since the names are shared everywhere, translated into local languages, and connects us with what, as Bhante has emphasised, we hold most deeply in common: our Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

Bhante took this step unilaterally, judging that it was unlikely to be done any other way. However, it was clear that it would probably not be appropriate for him to take such a major step on his own authority again and that the Triratna Community as a whole needed more effective mechanisms for discussion and cooperation. Bhante had set out the principles for these kinds of structure in 'What is the Western Buddhist Order?'

On this basis, the Public Preceptors, under Dhammarati's leadership, have established the International Triratna Council, which has a clear

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<sup>1</sup> For these papers, see '[Seven Papers by Subhuti with Sangharakshita](#)'

constitution that sets out how it is to function. The Public Preceptors' College already has such a constitution, as has the European Chairs' Assembly. The International Order Convenors have still to finalise a structure for the Order, although its outlines are clear in the chapter system and the various arrangements for regional and area Order convenors. There is also a need to provide an overall structure for the 'movement strand', perhaps with an international office of some kind to ensure that the system works effectively and that a recognisable unity is discernible everywhere. However, the broad outlines of a structure that can provide cooperation and leadership at all levels and all over the world are now clear and have begun working effectively.

There is also a slowly emerging clarity about the principles and mechanisms for suspending and expelling Order members and moral standards are being discussed widely. The necessity for this process emerged most sharply in India in 2012 and resulted in a paper, 'Safeguarding the Order in India', published by the Indian Public Preceptors Kula and later endorsed by the College as a whole. The Public Preceptors have initiated a discussion in other areas of our Community about the application of the principles set out in that paper.

All this gradual re-clarification of the basis of the Order and movement brings us to the point where we can take a further, and perhaps for the time being final, step. The explication of the essentials of Bhante's presentation and the formation of those community structures especially give us the opportunity to work out how to make sure we

have a coherent approach to teaching and practice that is at the same time authentic and alive. Bhante says, in *What is the Western Buddhist Order?*, that the unity of the Order depends on there being a 'high degree of commonality' of practice, which itself must imply teaching, among Order members. How do we maintain that high degree of commonality, whilst remaining open to the development and evolution of our overall system? How do we make sure that any new approaches are faithful to the spirit of the Order and have some kind of collective acceptance, whilst allowing for creative and useful innovation and development? How do we retain a sense of community through the views that we hold and the practices that we do, whilst giving space for individual spiritual flowering?

Of course, these questions have been faced by Buddhists throughout history, as each school or tendency has sought to validate its own particular presentation by connecting it with the teachings of the Buddha himself. Many have done so by presenting what are in fact new developments as ones the Buddha himself taught at later stages of his own career. The Mahayana schools, for instance, have understood their own teachings to be based on Sutras, such as the *Sadharmapundarika Sutra*, that they believed the Buddha himself taught, although modern scholarship shows that much of what they have to say is demonstrably of later composition. This expedient is obviously not open to us in Tiratna, given the much greater historical information available to us and the stronger emphasis on evidence.

However, one element in later Buddhist tradition does offer a clue to the principles on the basis of which the questions can be resolved. In the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra*, which is foundational for the Yogachara, the Buddha presents the teachings that are the Sutra's content as a new 'Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma'. The Dharma-wheel was first set rolling in the Deer Park at Sarnath, its teachings being the subject of the *Dhammachakkapavattana-sutta*. The contents of the second turning are to be found in the *Sadhama Pundarika Sutra* and the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*. The *Samdhinirmochana Sutra* sees each successive turning of the Dharma-wheel as an explication of what was implicit in the earlier turning or turnings, itself being the final one.

According to this perspective, the first turning sees itself as presenting an explicit teaching; the second makes explicit what was actually, from its point of view, only implicit in the first; while the third explicates the teachings that are, from its perspective, merely implied in the first and second. Commenting on this way of viewing successive historical phases, Bhante told me in a recent conversation that this is a way in which the tradition explained to itself its own evolution, in default of the critical historical awareness we have today.

And indeed one can understand Bhante's own teaching in this way. For instance, going for refuge to the Three Jewels is mentioned many times in the Pali Canon and other early recensions of the Buddha's own words. However, one will not find mentioned either 'levels' or 'dimensions' of going for refuge, nor will one hear going for refuge described as the central and definitive act of the Buddhist life. In

talking of the act in this way, Bhante is drawing out what is implicit in what seems to be the Buddha's own terminology, justifiable in the Buddha's own terms but not found in them.

Similarly, the teaching of the five *niyamas* is not found in the Pali suttas. One particular commentary draws out the meaning of teachings found in the discourses by analysing the processes of conditionality into these five levels. Bhante's own interpretation of the *niyamas*, and especially of the Dhamma-niyama, builds on the commentary to make much more of the teaching. What he makes of it is fully justifiable from the point of view of the suttas, but will not be found in so many words: it is implicit, and Bhante makes it explicit.

This then gives us a basis for us, as faithful disciples of Ugyen Sangharakshita, to work with his particular presentation of the Dharma. We learn it, put it into practice, and teach it to others, remaining as faithful to it as we can. However, all the time, we are drawing out its implications for ourselves and for others. Usually, our explication of those implications requires no new development: it merely explains and amplifies what Bhante has said on the basis of what the Buddha has said. But at times making explicit may amount to giving a new teaching or practice and this is where we need to work to maintain a high degree of commonality, especially by rooting any new explication in what Bhante has said and opening it up for critical discussion by others in the Order before we start to teach it. Above all, we need to ground all our teaching in what we have inherited from him.



On this basis, Dhammarati and I wish to suggest a set of principles and strategies to bring about and maintain that high degree of commonality of teaching and practice upon which the unity of the Order and movement depends. These derive essentially from what Bhante says in 'What is the Western Buddhist Order?' and subsequent discussions with him. We would like all Order members to consider these principles and strategies as set out below and to let us know what they think, via the chapter system. At the same time, we will be discussing them with Order members holding key responsibilities throughout the Triratna Community worldwide.

We recognise that this highly compressed statement, which amounts to a series of theses, can never be completely satisfactory. We hope nonetheless that it encompasses the main substance of what we all need to agree to and work with. Naturally, we are open to suggestions for modifications, corrections, and additions that might improve the document. In the end, it is intended simply as a focus for widespread discussion and agreement, rather than as a legal code.

*The fundamental point that lies behind our suggestions is a desire for unity on the basis of the principles laid down by Bhante, whilst at the same time making sure that that unity is alive and creative, capable of responding to changing circumstances.*

In the first place, we would like all Order members to consider whether or not they want that kind of unity. If we all do want it, then we have to work to maintain it: ensuring that what we do fits into the overall

system of practice and being vigilant about what happens wherever we carry responsibility – at the same time as engaging in a sympathetic and respectful way with those whose teaching and practice we wish to question from this point of view.

This is what we would like every Order member to ask themselves – and especially those who hold key responsibilities and actively teach the Dharma within our movement: *Are you willing to make the effort needed to maintain unity, on this basis?*

## **a high degree of commonality: principles**

### **a. the basics**

1. Naturally, we start from the most fundamental of first principles, our going for refuge to the Three Jewels, with all that implies about our convictions, our aims and aspirations, and our individual conduct and practice. It is on this basis that we have joined the Order and that we all meet now.
2. The Order is, in Bhante's phrase, the community of his disciples, and disciples of his disciples, practising and teaching the Dharma in accordance with his particular presentation.
3. The duty of Bhante's disciples is, as he says, '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'.

### **b1. the value of unity**

4. It is important to do what we can to ensure the continuing unity of the Order on this basis of an authentic commitment to the Three Jewels and faithful discipleship of Sangharakshita for as long as possible, because:
  - i. It allows us each to realise our refuge in the Sangha Jewel as a self- transcending collective experience, carrying us beyond our self-centred clinging;

- ii. It enables us more effectively to communicate the Dharma more widely, thereby reaching a far larger range of people;
  - iii. It enables Kalyana Mitrata to flow more effectively from the more to the less experienced, encompassing a wider range of types and temperaments.
5. It is important that the Order continues to support and extend a united Community or Movement as the highest and best contribution we can make to the world, because:
- i. That enables us and others to give ourselves to something more than our own needs and interests, thereby contributing to ending self-clinging;
  - ii. It enables us to respond to the needs in the world at the most fundamental level;
  - iii. It is a vehicle for the transformation of the lives of many people and thereby of society as a whole.

## **b2. right view and the order**

6. Unity of both Order and movement depend on quite a range of factors, such as effective communication across all the different boundaries and levels, a high degree of face to face contact, effective institutions and systems for arriving at coordination and consensus, a high degree of sharing of meditation practices and of customs and ceremonies, and a broadly shared understanding. In Sangharakshita's own phrase, it depends on a 'high degree of

commonality' of teachings and practices throughout the Order, and thereby the movement.

7. Of these, it is probably the shared understanding that is most important, because everything else derives from it. Right View, *samyag drsti*, is fundamental to the survival of the Order and movement. Of course, it is vital insofar as without it the Order would be based on wrong views and could not be an authentic Buddhist Sangha. But it is also vital as the most fundamental source of unity. The Buddha himself is presented as saying, in the *Kosambiyasutta*, *Majjhima Nikaya*, 48:

*“There are six principle of cordiality that create love and respect, and conduce to cohesion, to non-dispute, to concord, and to unity.*

*Of these six principles of cordiality, the chief, the most cohesive, the most unifying is this view that is noble and emancipating, and which leads the one who practises in accordance with it to the complete destruction of suffering..”*

*(Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation)*

8. *Samyag drsti* is ultimately a direct, non-conceptual realisation. However, for the purposes of practice leading to realisation, it must be expressed. Our Order is based upon the Enlightenment of the historical Buddha, Guatama Shakyamuni, and his teaching, especially as recorded in the Pali canon and other early recensions, is the fundamental touchstone of everything we do.

9. The Buddha's teaching is extensive and was communicated in very different circumstances to those we face today. A presentation of the Buddha's teaching is needed that is more directly applicable to the various circumstances in which we now practice and teach and that makes sense of our vast inheritance from the long unfolding of the tradition. In the Order, we derive that presentation from our teacher and founder, Urgyen Sangharakshita. The Order is, as he has asserted, the community of his disciples and disciples of his disciples, practising the Dharma in accordance with his particular presentation of it. That is the fundamental basis of our unity as an order.

**c. keeping sangharakshita's presentation alive throughout the order**

10. All Order members should themselves be practising the majority of the core teachings and practices taught by Sangharakshita, so that we do share a common vocabulary. If we teach the Dharma at all, it should be from this core of teachings that we draw so that those we are teaching are able to get guidance from a wide range of Order members who will share that same vocabulary.

11. A key task then is ensuring that Order members generally are deeply imbued with Sangharakshita's particular presentation of the Dharma and that it is the basis for what they practise and teach.

12. This requires some coordinated training in cooperation with institutions such as the Preceptors' College and Private Preceptors,

the Chairs meeting, Mitra Convenors, and Order Convenors. This will be a principal function undertaken at Adhishthana.

13. Responsibility for maintaining a high degree of commonality of teaching and practice rests with every Order member. This entails discipline on the part of each and every one: the discipline of working to keep their own practice and teaching of the Dharma in harmony with the overall system of teaching and practice within the Order, faithful to the teaching of Sangharakshita – and to work with others to maintain an integrated approach that is alive and creative. This requires the active acceptance and work of all Order members. That discipline is not, however, merely an institutional requirement, for the sake of unity. It can itself be a very effective means of transcending pride and self-clinging and of participating in the common spirit of the Order.

14. Responsibility for such coordination rests more particularly with those who hold various responsibilities throughout the Order and movement. Preceptors, both Public and Private, Presidents, Order Convenors and chapter convenors, mitra convenors, and centre chairs need to put the principles and strategies outlined here into practice within their own spheres of responsibility, following the guidelines set out here. The Steering Group, Area Councils, and the International Council carry special responsibility for ensuring that unity is maintained, and the Public Preceptors' College is the ultimate guardian, since it has the responsibility for 'guarding the gates of the Order'.

15. The system of consultations and reviews for Preceptors, the selection by various groups of Order members of Chairs, Order and Mitra Convenors etc, offers the opportunity for dialogue and discussion about candidates views and practices to make sure that those taking such key responsibilities are actively working within the overall system of teaching and practice.

**d. key principles for the maintenance and evolution of a presentation of the dharma that remains faithful to sangharakshita's presentation**

16. Although our basis should remain in those teachings and practices that Bhante has directly taught us, those themselves require continuing assessment for their effectiveness and consistency. At the same time, the system of spiritual discipline as a whole needs to be constantly reviewed to see that it is truly effective in the ever-changing circumstances.

17. All teachings and practices must be tested against what the Buddha himself taught, as well as key teachings that evolved later as further explications of what he taught.

18. This requires the application of the most recent and reliable historical and philological knowledge to the material inherited, so that it can be seen and understood as accurately as possible in its context.

19. It must also be possible to relate all teachings and practices to Sangharakshita's own teaching, since the Order consists of his disciples and disciples of his disciples.



20. Whilst at present it is not so difficult, on the whole, to apply his teachings, questions of interpretation will undoubtedly arise as time goes by and it will be necessary to set what he has written and said in its context – and that will become a more demanding task in the future.

21. A teaching is ultimately to be judged by its effect on the individuals who practise in accordance with it and the community that is built upon it. The tests here are:

- i. Ethical: are people acting more and more in accordance with the precepts;
- ii. Psychological: are people experiencing positive and refined mental states;
- iii. Dharmic: are they demonstrably becoming free from ego-clinging?

One might add a larger criterion, applied to the Triratna Community as a whole: *is the Sangha itself harmonious and deeply committed to the Three Jewels?*

22. Teachings should be accessible to critical appraisal, that is open to investigation based on accurate reasoning and historical, philological, and experiential evidence.

23. Teachings should be relevant to the circumstances, situations, and individuals they are directed to.

24. Although the teaching of the Buddha and Sangharakshita's presentation of it are always the touchstone against which all innovation should be tested, it should be possible for the body of teachings to evolve, in accordance with changing circumstances and experience.
25. New teachings and practices can be assimilated where there is a clear case for them, whether they derive from the unfolding experience of individuals and communities within the Order or are borrowed from outside it.
26. Any new teaching or practice should be fully assimilated to the existing corpus so that it is consistent with the overall architecture and does not lead to confusion or contradiction. Above all, it should be consistent with the spirit of the Order and contribute to the flow of Kalyana Mitrata throughout the Order. There should be clear reasons for its adoption into the general body and a managed and conscious process of collective digestion undertaken.
27. All Order members need to play an active part in maintaining the integrity, faithfulness, and effectiveness of the overall system of teachings and practices. However, those holding responsibility within the various strands of the movement's structures especially need to work to preserve the spiritual vitality and unity of our common system of practice and teaching. There needs, moreover, to be a coordinated approach., under the direction of the Public Preceptors' College,

working closely with the Steering Group of the International Council and the various strands of the movement.

#### **e. the spirit of this approach**

The process of retaining a unified approach that is faithful to our teacher's presentation of the Dharma, whilst being capable of beneficial evolution, is a very delicate one, never settled and perhaps never entirely pleasing to all. There will, perhaps inevitably, be much opportunity for polarisation, based on genuine concerns, as well as temperamental or cultural biases. The main antidote to such differences of concern becoming sources of real schism is engagement and discussion – and discussion that is honest and forthright, whilst being reasonable and respectful. We trust that that spirit will inform debate about such matters in the Order – including debate about this particular paper.

## **a high degree of commonality: suggestions towards a coordinated strategy**

In 'What is the Western Buddhist Order?', Bhante makes the following points:

The Public Preceptors need to discuss these matters [concerning new teachings and practices] 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.

On this basis, as a starting point, I propose the following procedures:

**a. procedures for reviewing and coordinating the overall system of practice**

1. The Chair of the College should carry overall responsibility for coordination on behalf of the College. He or she may delegate that responsibility to an individual or a standing committee.
2. The Chair or delegate will, as soon as resources are available, enquire throughout the Order to see whether any Order members consider there are any teachings and practices
  - i. taught by Bhante that require review, whether because they are considered unclear, not effective as presently taught, or deserve new emphasis;
  - ii. not presently found in our system that could usefully be included in it;
  - iii. introduced into the Order and movement without Bhante's having taught or endorsed them.
3. The Chair/delegate will then work with the Steering Group and others to compile a list of those teachings and practices that emerge from this enquiry and to assign some preliminary priorities for further investigation.
4. In the case of those teachings and practices that require most pressing investigation, either because the need is urgent or because they have already gained some unofficial currency, a methodology should be established for each, taking into account the various particularities of the case.

5. In most cases, a panel will be established for each issue. The panel should be constituted of proponents of the matter, as well as senior Order members with deep experience of teaching at all levels and, wherever possible, scholars with knowledge of the Buddhist background and training in critical thinking about such issues. Members should be appointed having regard for the need for input from all three strands of the Triratna Community.
6. All such enquiries should commence with an exploration of the principles contained in this paper, so as to ensure that all members have a common agreement about unity in the Order and what it is based upon.
7. Any enquiry should then engage in a thorough survey of Bhante's own teachings in respect of the particular issue under question. Care should be taken that whatever is the subject of discussion is considered in the light of Bhante's teaching.
8. On this basis, the panel will conduct a full enquiry into the matter and will report their findings to the Chair/delegate.
9. If the panel recommends that a change does take place in the overall schema of teachings and practices, whether by way of addition or modification or even excision, the Chair will discuss the matter with the College and Steering Group and, if they are in agreement, will discuss appropriate means of implementation and notification.

10.If the panel recommends that the matter go no further, the Chair/ delegate will report to the College and the Steering Group and, if they are all in agreement, will publish that finding to the Order, with full reasoning.

11.It should be recognised that the full execution of the procedures outlined above is a major undertaking, requiring resources that we do not presently have. There will need to be a gradual approach, taking up pressing issues as they arise, but always with this wider perspective.

#### **b. preliminary work**

12.It should be noted that such investigations are very time-consuming, occupying the attention of some of the most experienced and capable Order members who already have much to do. They should therefore only be undertaken where there is a real need or benefit. All Order members will need to respect these processes and that may well require a certain amount of patience and understanding. The modification of a unified and dynamic system, however slightly, is not to be undertaken lightly and requires a widespread appreciation and acceptance of the process involved.

13.So as to avoid overburdening the Chair and College and other senior Order members, anyone who is considering putting forward any matter for consideration according to the above procedures,

should first engage in active preliminary work, as outlined in Bhante's comments in 'What is the Western Buddhist Order?'.

- I. Anyone who is inclined to suggest the investigation of teachings, practices, or teachers outside the Order, should first discuss the matter with their own teachers, Preceptors, and Kalyana Mitras within the Order.
- II. Discussion should first centre on motivation:
  - i. Those wishing to carry out investigation of this kind should be very sure about their basic commitment to the Order and their understanding of its principles.
  - ii. They should be sure that their motivation is healthy: Restlessness or dissatisfaction are not proper bases for such research, nor is desire for a 'Dharma skill' that can establish one as a teacher with followers.
  - iii. The proper motive for carrying out such an investigation is a desire to enhance our collective life and practice, while respecting our own framework of understanding.
- III. It should then be established that there is a clear and recognised need for such investigation. It should be possible to identify that need and to demonstrate that it is not presently satisfied by any of the teachings and practices we already have.



14. In the past few years, in the absence of these clear principles and guidelines, quite a number of Order members have studied with teachers from outside the Order and/or taking up teachings and practices from outside Bhante's presentation. Whilst in many cases this may have been with the blessings of Bhante or their Preceptors and what was learned has been assimilated to our overall body of teachings, anyone who has engaged in such an exploration should actively and honestly ensure that their position is 'regularised' in accordance with these guidelines and principles.

### **c. the role of adhishtana**

15. Adhishtana was purchased in fulfilment of Bhante's request that we find a country centre in the UK that can act as the principal centre for training Order members in his particular presentation of the Dharma and thus a key focus for preserving, developing, and evolving that presentation.

16. Bhante also sees Adhishtana as a symbolic focus for the movement internationally because it will be where he lives out his last days and is the headquarters for the Public Preceptors' College and the International Council.

17. Various kinds of training need to be developed that can be carried out at Adhishtana in fulfilment of this project: training of Order members and others, training of teachers, seminars to explore aspects related to Sangharakshita's presentation, seminars and

meetings to work out and sustain a common approach to preserving, developing, and evolving that presentation.

18. Such trainings need in future to be unrolled in other areas of the movement outside Britain in a coordinated way, so that there is a broadly common experience.

## appendix: extracts from ‘what is the western buddhist order?’ <sup>2</sup>

**Sangharakshita:** The Public Preceptors need to discuss these matters [concerning new teachings and practices] 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?***

**Sangharakshita:** The Public Preceptors are the spiritually senior-most 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: *What defines the Order?***

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<sup>2</sup> This paper can be [viewed and downloaded here](#) along with the others in the series.

**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.*

**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.*

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

**Sangharakshita:** 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, *anātmān*, and *sūnyatā*. 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: To what extent are we at liberty to disagree with what you teach?***

**Sangharakshita:** 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: 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?***

**Sangharakshita:** 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.***

Sangharakshita: 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?***

**Sangharakshita:** 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?*

**Sangharakshita:** 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: 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?***

**Sangharakshita:** 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?***

**Sangharakshita:** 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?***

**Sangharakshita:** 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 cooperating 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 senior-most 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: 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?***

**Sangharakshita:** 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?***

**Sangharakshita:** 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: 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?***

**Sangharakshita:** 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: 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.***

**Sangharakshita:** 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.