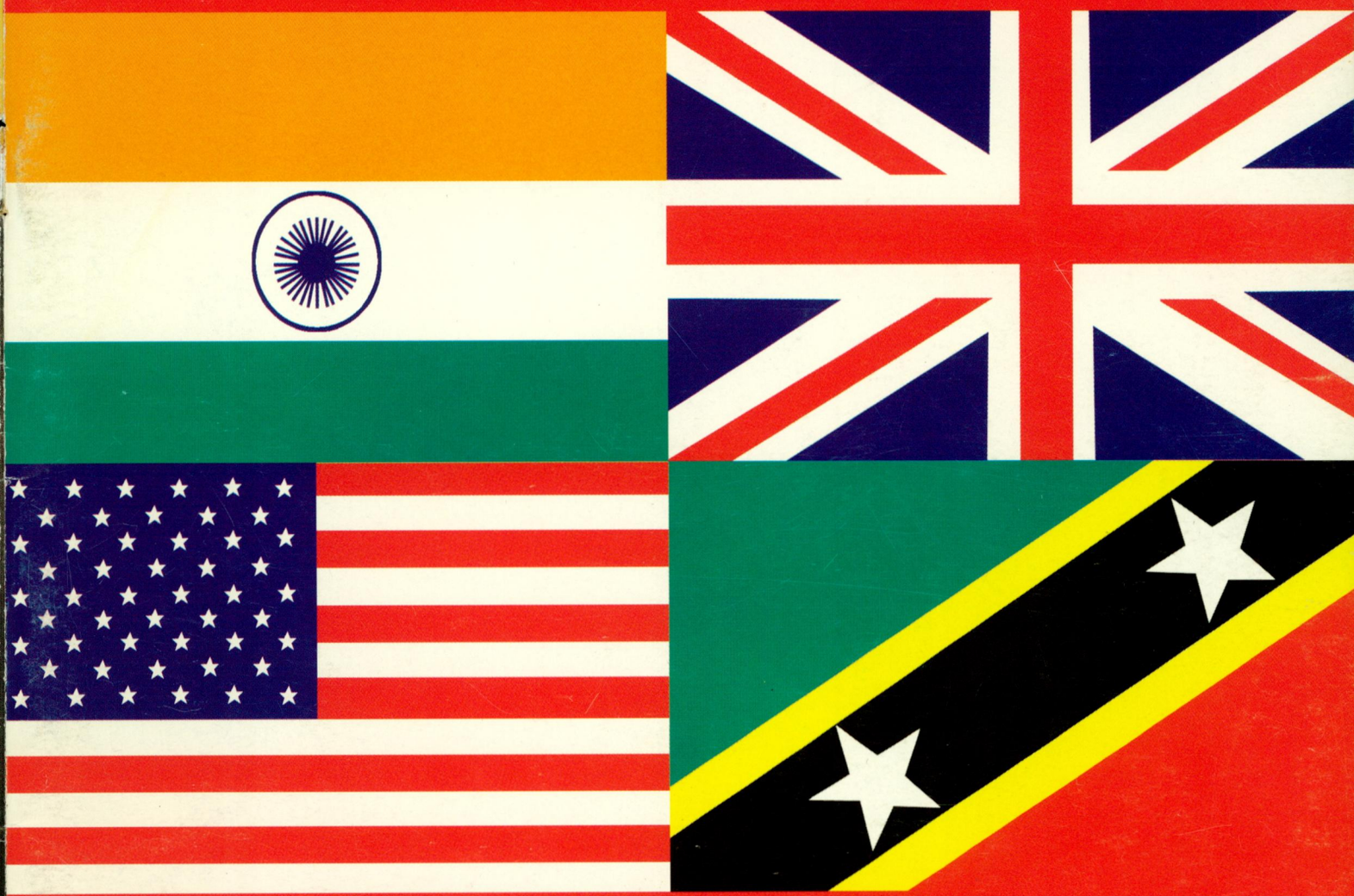
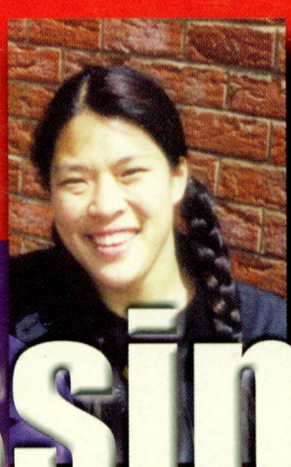
LOTUS REALM

a new voice for Buddhist Women





Crossing Cultures

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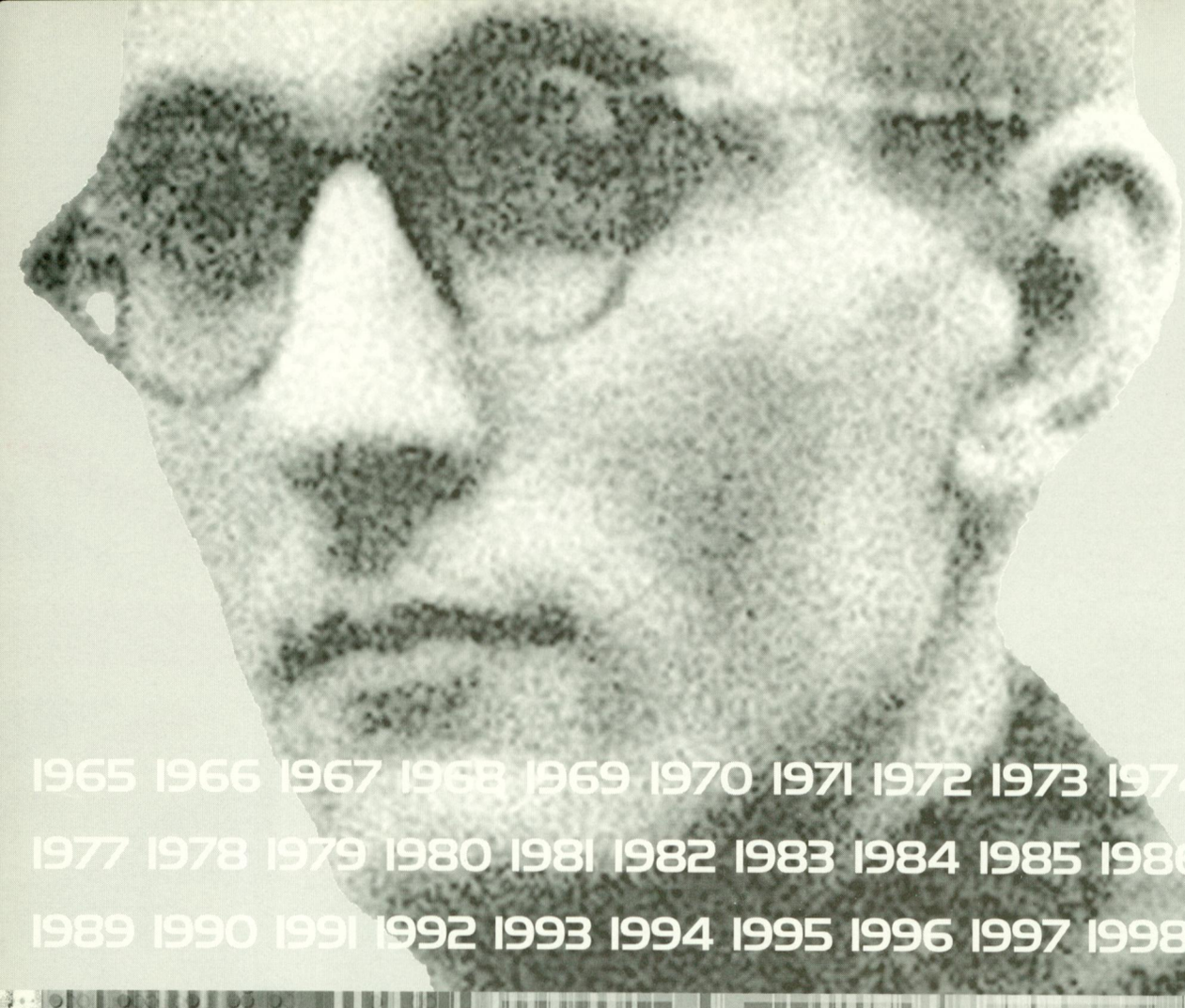

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BE THERE THEN
BE THERE NOW

lectures, readings, poetry by Urgyen Sangharakshita
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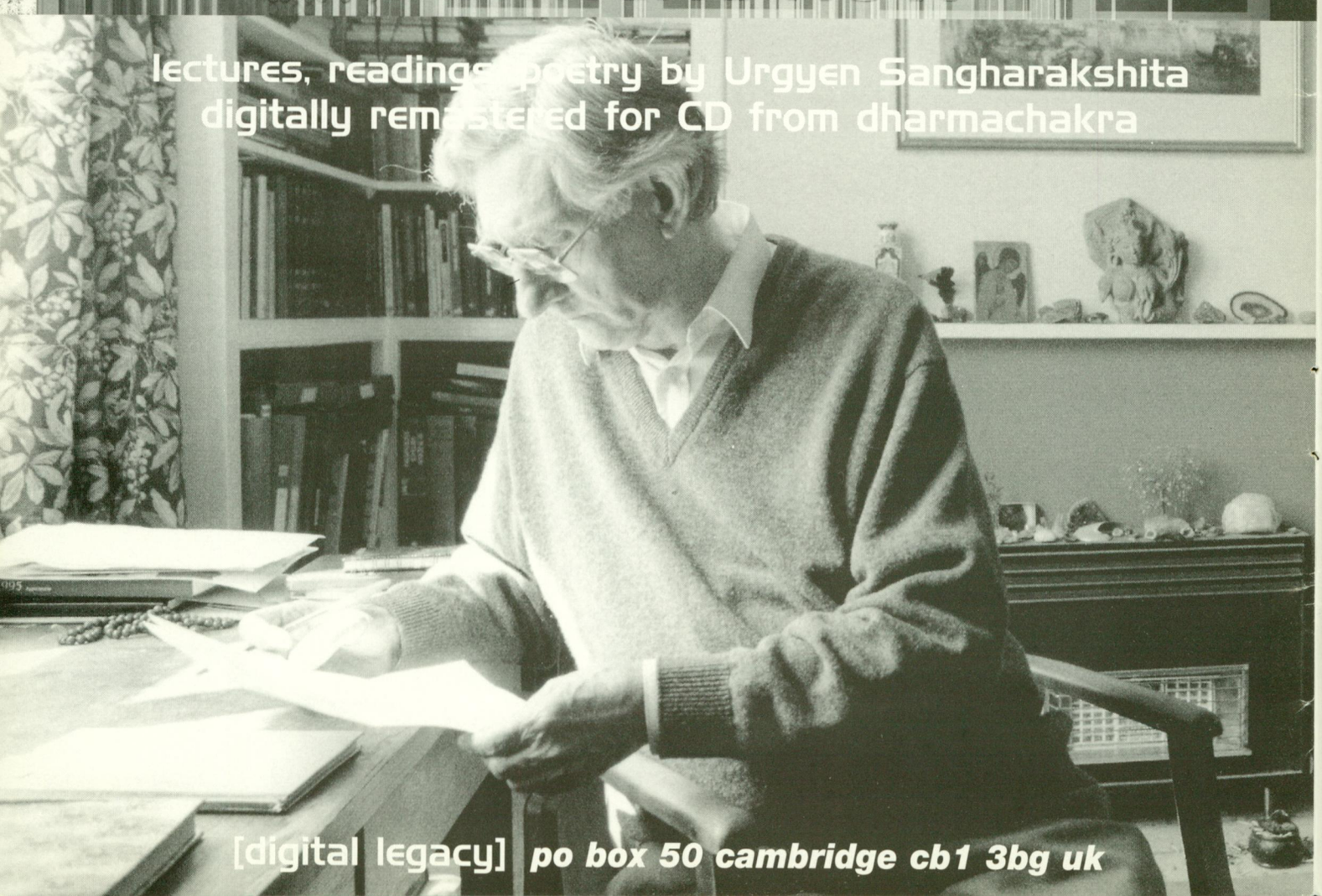

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The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) is one among many Buddhist movements seeking to establish Buddhism as a genuine path for modern people to follow. It was established in 1967 by Urgyen Sangharakshita, an Englishman who lived for many years in India, where he studied, meditated and worked for the good of Buddhism. There he came into contact with accomplished teachers from all the main Buddhist traditions.

In setting up the FWBO*, Sangharakshita wanted to establish a new Buddhist movement that responded to contemporary needs, whilst keeping faithful to the ancient and unchanging essence of the Buddha's 'Dharma' or spiritual vision.

The Western Buddhist Order (WBO) is at the heart of the FWBO, and includes men and women of many different nationalities who are committed to following the Buddhist path in fellowship with one another.

A radical aspect of the WBO is that it goes beyond the age-old monk-lay divide, recognising that it is commitment to the realisation of Enlightenment that is the crucial aspect of ordination. Lifestyle - whether 'monastic' or as a 'householder' - is secondary. The WBO is also radical in that there is no distinction between the ordinations of men and women. In participating in the work of the Order, women can - and do - hold the same responsibilities as men, including the responsibility for ordaining other women.

Members of the WBO work together with others to run public Buddhist Centres. Some run rural retreat Centres; others are full-time artists; whilst others (especially in India) are engaged in social projects. Some work in team-based Right Livelihood businesses; and many work in a whole variety of 'ordinary' jobs. Some live in single-sex residential communities, a radical alternative to family life. Others live with partners and children, bringing Buddhist values into their homes.

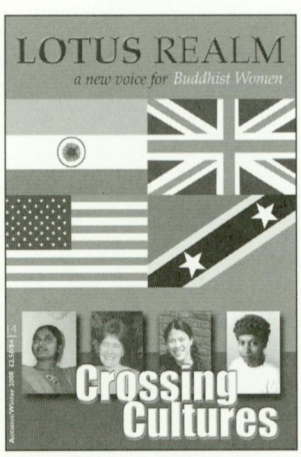
The Lotus
is a universal symbol of spiritual growth and development. The 'realm of the Lotus' is a realm where spiritual values are supreme. It is this realm that members of the WBO seek to bring into being.

Lotus Realm
is produced by Dharmacharinis, that is, women members of the WBO. It is firstly a magazine for women (and interested men) involved with the FWBO, for Friends, mitras,**, and Order members. It is also published with the desire to share the experience we are gaining as women practising the Buddhist teachings under modern conditions with women Buddhists from other traditions, as well as interested women (and men) everywhere.

** In India the FWBO is referred to as TBMSG, an acronym which translates something like 'the Community of Helpers of the Buddhist Order of the Three Worlds'.*

*** A mitra is someone who has declared their intention of following their spiritual path within the context of the FWBO.*

For Buddhist Women
Lotus Realm is produced by and mainly for women out of the recognition that men and women have a somewhat different experience of and approach to life - even to spiritual life. At the same time we recognise that men and women - especially men and women following a spiritual path - have far more in common. We hope therefore that the struggles, aspirations and inspirations which inform these articles will be of universal interest, and will stimulate and sometimes inspire both men and women, Buddhist and non-Buddhist.



L-r Alokasri, Srimala, Viveka, Muditasri with Indian, British, American & St. Kitts flags.

LOTUS REALM
is produced by women members of the Western Buddhist Order and their friends. It appears twice a year in May and November

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It's been a big year...

for all of us in the FWBO. In the early months we were still hearing about difficulties our Indian brothers and sisters were experiencing as those twin demons, rumour and malice, did their - happily not very successful - worst to cause division between people who were striving to create spiritual community.

It was a particular delight, therefore, to join in the FWBO Day celebrations in Cambridge which marked the 33rd anniversary of the founding of the movement which spans both East and West. It seemed a moment of great significance when Ratnasagara, an Indian Order member currently living in Manchester, led the several hundred people present (most of them westerners) in the sevenfold puja. I wondered what Dr Ambedkar would have thought, Dr Ambedkar who, with such heroism and sacrifice, had led his people out of 'the hell of caste' to the Dharma - would he have dreamt that such a thing would ever be possible, given not only the legacies of caste, but also of British colonialism. Surely what we were doing was breaking through a hundred human prejudices and conventional attitudes that have divided human beings for centuries. The Dharma, it seems, is capable of working miracles.

There was another important gathering in the UK this year. On August 26th hundreds of people travelled by car, bus, train or even aeroplane (I don't know if anyone came by bike) - this time to Birmingham to celebrate the 75th birthday of Sangharakshita, the founder of the FWBO. It was an historic event for, as we all knew well, it was on this occasion that Bhante, as Sangharakshita is known to his disciples, was to hand on the last of his formal responsibilities, that is, he was to hand on the Headship of the Western Buddhist Order. Of course, there had been speculation as to who that lucky - or unlucky - person might be. But, with that characteristic mixture of great kindness, thoughtfulness and foresight, Bhante explained he had decided it would not really be quite fair to hand on such a responsibility to just one person, and so the Headship of the Western Buddhist Order (or Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha as it is known in India) would now be held collectively by the eight members of the College of Public Preceptors.

Bhante's short talk was followed by a longer one given by Subhuti, who had been appointed by Sangharakshita as the first 'Chairman' of the College (perhaps a new nomenclature would be found in due course.) In future, the Chairman - who could be a man or woman - would be elected every five years from amongst the College members. Subhuti's talk is well worth hearing, if you haven't had the chance. Of the many areas he touched upon, one thing in particular stayed with me. He pointed out that the process of Bhante handing on the Headship of the Order wouldn't be complete until the new (joint) Head had accepted that responsibility. Although the other members of the College had not known exactly what was to be announced on that day, (Subhuti himself having heard only shortly beforehand,) the harmony between them was such, the mutual understanding was such, that Subhuti knew he could, with confidence, speak on behalf of all the members of the College in wholeheartedly accepting that very considerable responsibility. That eight people of very different backgrounds and temperaments, both men and women, could have achieved such a degree of harmony filled me with great optimism and, reflecting on Subhuti's words afterwards, I found myself uplifted and full of gratitude, remembering, in fact, the many kindnesses that several of those individuals had extended to me over my many years in the Movement.

'I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony,' the old song goes. Well, many people may *wish* for harmony but to achieve harmony between human beings, real genuine harmony that doesn't deny difference, that doesn't squash individuality, is very difficult indeed. And yet that is what all of us who participate in the FWBO/TBMSG are trying to do to a greater or lesser extent. And those of us who have committed ourselves to making the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels central to our lives, have, in doing that, committed ourselves to the very difficult, the very challenging, and yet the very wonderful task of creating a genuine fellowship amongst human beings of all backgrounds, nationalities, ages, classes, and so on, a fellowship that, when it is achieved, becomes 'an incomparable source of goodness to the world'.

In this issue of *Lotus Realm* I have asked some of those Order members to speak about how their practice of the Dharma has made it possible for them to cross cultural divisions that might otherwise seem insurmountable. I hope their accounts inspire all our readers to find ways of 'crossing cultures' and so to bring a little more of that longed-for harmony into the world.

Kalyanaprabha

MUDITASRI was born on the Caribbean island of St Kitts and moved to England at the age of eleven. She later worked as a social worker and trainer of social workers. Since her ordination into the Western Buddhist Order in 1989, she has led many classes and retreats, often under the auspices of the London Buddhist Centre. Currently she spends her time writing her memoirs and deepening her friendships with women involved in the FWBO.

PARAMACHITTA was born in India but brought up in Britain. Before her ordination into the Western Buddhist Order in 1990, she had studied law and worked as a legal adviser in a Law Centre in London. Having spent ten years involved with the London Buddhist Centre, Paramachitta moved to Spain to help establish the FWBO in the Spanish speaking world.

PADMAVASINI grew up in a Protestant family in Belfast, Northern Ireland. She went on to train as an art teacher and lived and worked for many years in London. Having trained as a yoga teacher, she joined 'Bodywise', a women's Right Livelihood business connected with the London Buddhist Centre. Not long after her ordination, she moved to Dublin to help establish the FWBO in Ireland.

SRIMALA is a leading figure of the FWBO. She is a Public Preceptor and member of the Preceptor's College with special responsibility for the women's wing of the Order in India. For many years she lived in Norwich where she worked in various capacities for the developing FWBO and brought up two daughters. Her experiences as a Buddhist mother are recorded in her book, Breaking Free.

VIDYADEVI is English and grew up in England. She has been an editor of Sangharakshita's 'spoken word' books for many years but nevertheless managed to spend a good deal of time travelling - visiting India, America and elsewhere. She will shortly be moving to Missoula, Montana for a longer stay. She is planning to give more time to her own writing, as well as continuing her work as an editor.

Contributors

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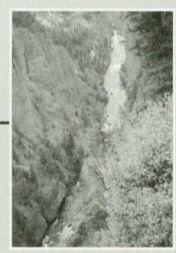

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Letter to an English Daughter

Dear Shanti,

I can hardly believe that you are now back from your travels. And it's quite amazing that you maintained such a high degree of interest, enjoyment, and your own inimitable delight in all that you saw and experienced - with only one serious mishap.

I was particularly glad that you managed to visit India on your way home. Of course it would have been much better if you'd been able to come during one of my visits. I had been so hoping that would have been possible. Still, at least you have now been there. You have stayed in Pune with Lokamitra, Ranjana, and your cousins. You've met Ranjana's parents, brother, sisters, brothers- and sisters-in-law, nephews, nieces and a few others besides. You visited the Girls' Hostel and the community where I sometimes stay. And you met my friend Pratibha. I really was glad that you managed to meet her. I've been so wanting you to meet some of my younger friends in India - there are quite a few who are about the same age as you. I've felt sure you would get on well with them, even though you come from such different worlds.


Srimala & Shanti

I gather, however, that Pratibha was not at her best when you met her. She was still upset having been involved in a very difficult and complex situation in her work for the movement. I believe she was, therefore, rather subdued. Normally she is extremely bright and I'm sure would have been fascinated to hear about your travels, your work, your education, your life-style, and I dare-say rather curious to learn more about me from a daughter's point of view. I hear, too, that she didn't find it very easy to understand you. Well, I'm not surprised. Even I often have to ask you to slow down and stop running your words into one another! I think I am reasonably easy to understand, though. Partly because people there are used to me but also because I take care to speak clearly. You were obviously not around long enough for Pratibha to get used to your way of speaking. But you probably had no trouble communicating with her baby. She's very sweet, isn't she? I bet you felt broody.

I was sorry you couldn't meet Ojogita. She lives in Nagpur and works overseeing the social projects in the movement there. She was ordained in January and is our youngest Dharmacharini in India. She must be about the same age as Pratibha, in fact they are old childhood friends. She is unmarried and at the moment has no wish to enter into family life. For a good many years now she has been fairly free to involve herself fully in the life and work of our movement and she is well aware that married life could present her with many restrictions and difficulties. She is not in an easy position. There is a lot of pressure on her to get married,

not least from her younger sister who insists that she can't marry until Ojogita has done so. You must remember, of course, that the situation is so very different in India. For most of the young women involved in our movement the choice is married life (which usually implies a great deal more than the taking on of a husband and one or two children) or a life of celibacy. In a sense, this makes things a lot more straightforward than they are, say, here in England. Sometimes I think we have created far too much confusion and difficulty for ourselves. But perhaps this isn't the time to try and work out the pros and cons of such aspects of a traditional society. I'm convinced, anyway, that for anyone trying to lead a spiritual life, although certain lifestyles may be generally more helpful, there will be struggles and difficulties to contend with whatever option is chosen.

Since Ojogita is not imminently going to get married, I am hoping that she will be able to come over to England next year for a longish visit. So then you must meet her. I must admit I am a little nervous about her coming. I want it to be a really worthwhile experience for her. I'm sure it will be but it can also be a very strange and lonely time. The main trouble is that in England we tend to think we are the centre of the Universe. The way we do things is the right way. You know what I mean? Even within our movement I'm afraid we often don't really appreciate the fact that we are an international movement. I think I personally began to take that on board after working in India for a number of years. But, as you must have appreciated from travelling, it is not so easy to broaden your perspective if you don't move far from home. It will be an enormous change for Ojogita to come to England. We talk of culture-shock and I have no doubt that she will be shocked - in particular by the weather and many of our habits of dress, speech and general behaviour which will strike her as immodest to say the least. I can only hope that she will be looked after with sensitivity.

If you had gone to India at a time when I was there, I think that I would have taken you on retreat with me. Not, I hasten to add, in order to make a Buddhist of you - though it might help! - but because I think it would be the best way for you to meet some of my friends, and I think that through meeting my friends you would get an idea of what I am involved in, in a way that I doubt you could get by any other means. On retreat you would see me at my best and you might begin to understand why, although I can find it extremely tough, I continue to spend a substantial part of every year in India.

I wish you could have met Chandan. She and Ojogita were the very best of friends. I don't think I have seen such a lovely friendship between two young women as existed between them. But, tragically, Chandan was killed in a road accident last year. So you will never meet her now.

From a very early age Chandan responded to the

Buddha's teaching. (I guess in a way you did too, through some of the stories I read to you and through the activities we held in and around the Centre to include children, and perhaps also through the efforts of your parents to deepen their own response and commitment.) Of course, Buddhism is much more embedded in Indian culture, although there has been little living evidence of it for many, many years until quite recently, most significantly through the work and example of the great Dr Ambedkar. Chandan would have been born just a few years after the ceremony in Nagpur during which Dr Ambedkar and hundreds of thousands of his devoted followers converted to Buddhism. So the Buddha's teaching was in the air once again. And Chandan responded. She responded so deeply that she imagined herself one day becoming a nun. She was fortunate that the movement got going in Nagpur just at a time when she was able to throw herself into it, and she played a big part in helping to establish women's communities and Right Livelihood projects. Actually, if she had lived she most probably would have got married and not become a nun in the way she imagined when she was small. However, I am convinced that whatever her lifestyle, her commitment to the Three Jewels would have been primary and she would have made an enormous contribution to the development of Sangha and the spread of the Dharma.

I remember, a couple of years ago, inviting Chandan to go for a walk with me. Now walking in India is quite a different matter to what we are used to in England. It can be very difficult to get a decent walk, especially in the city, and more often than not I don't even try. Most of the time it is too hot and you can hardly avoid the traffic, the noise, the dust, and the fumes. And then, especially if I am alone, I get stared at, or hassled - sometimes quite delightfully by fascinated children, but more often I can feel a bit intimidated by the degree of

persistence and aggression. On this particular occasion Chandan was only too happy to accompany me. By the time we set out it was dark; a good time to go as then my pale skin wasn't so likely to attract attention. Although, in the event, I was so engaged in communication with my lovely companion that I lost interest in whether or not I was noticed by others. From Veshrantwadi, where the Girls' Hostel and the women's community are situated, we walked up Alandi road towards the centre of Pune. It is a busy road, especially in the early evening. It is noisy, dusty, smelly, and dangerous. Although engaged in lively talk, we had to pay constant attention to the hooting of lorries, cars, and rickshaws as they hurtled, ambled, or meandered rather drunkenly along. But, of course, you've been to India now so you know what it's like. As we passed a particular spot Chandan became even more alert and she told me of an accident she had once witnessed there. A small boy was trying to board a bus which moved away before he was safely on. He fell and was struck by another vehicle. Chandan was agitated as she recounted the story. For a moment I caught myself feeling a little surprised that she was so upset, after all such accidents are so common. Then immediately I was shocked with myself for thinking that people must get used to such suffering and therefore become a little hardened to it. Chandan would have been a lot more familiar with this kind of suffering than I was, but in spite of that, or maybe even because of it, her response was more deeply felt and more of the nature of true compassion than was mine.

Let me tell you one more thing about Chandan and then I must finish this letter as it's my turn to cook supper tonight.

Last summer, on the way back to Pune from the retreat centre at Bhaja, I had a very minor accident. There were six of us on the crowded train and we had planned to get off at the stop before Pune station. We knew that the train wouldn't stop for very long, and with quite a few bags between us we had to be ready to get down quickly. I'm sure you know from your brief experience of Indian trains that getting on and off them can be a major operation. Unfortunately we weren't all quite quick enough. I had alighted safely onto the platform but another woman was still manoeuvring her bags when the train began to move away. I reached out to help her; she jumped, lost her balance and together we staggered and fell to the ground. Later on, when the excitement was over, Chandan told me that if I ever jumped off a moving train I should face the direction that the train was going in, rather than against it. She knew, because as a small child she used to play, barefoot, jumping on and off the moving trains.

I wish I had heard more from Chandan about her life. I didn't take the opportunity when I should have done. Now it's too late. If she'd lived, she would have been ordained by now and we would have had one more than the precious few Indian Dharmacharinis we do have. One more working for the benefit of the world. We are left with our memories of her and the inspiration derived from what we knew of her. On my desk I have a photograph, taken about seven years ago during a retreat. Chandan sits embraced in the arms of Vimalasuri and her dear friend Babita who is now Ojogita. The three of them radiate love and delight in each other and in the new life they have discovered through the Dharma. Chandan in looking directly at me with her wonderful smile and a typical, slightly mischievous, glint in her eyes. Perhaps I should send you a copy. Or maybe you'll come and visit me in Birmingham soon. Then you can show me all your photographs and tell me more about your trip.

Must go.

Loads of love,
Mum

American Journey

Vidyadevi

'... by coming to America, whoever you are, you re-create yourself and can become whatever you declare yourself to be.'[1]

Leaving San Francisco I drove east, finding my way through mountains and plains, alone. The land and sky, vast and empty, wrapped themselves around me. Once, the curves of the mountain road were mirrored in rainbows. As I crossed the prairies, the sun was my companion, dawn to dusk. I drove all the way to the other ocean. In my solitude, this land became my friend.

People were another matter. Waitresses in diners, friendly enough, loved my accent, they said, but couldn't understand it. A police car yelled: 'Get out of the way, lady.' Cities awed me but I couldn't stay there. My security was in space and emptiness.

I drove thousands of miles. But somewhere in that wide country, I acknowledged that I didn't know where I was going.

East in another sense, it turned out. That same year, on a retreat back in England, I discovered another broad landscape, another vast sky, and a direction: the Dharma.

The wide open spaces haunted my imagination. In my first days as a Buddhist, I dreamed I was in the centre of a plain. I knew I was free to move in any direction. Horizons stretched away on all sides. Frightened to move an inch, I flattened myself to the ground, like a scared animal.

The dream felt real, but how could I make it end differently? How could I embrace the freedom I sensed was all around me? As has been observed, there is `freedom to' and also `freedom from'. From what? Essentially, from what the Buddhist tradition sometimes calls the `biases'. We are not free to move spontaneously or respond creatively because we are tied to certain ways of seeing things. The plain of our consciousness has well-worn paths, leading us towards what we crave - which is often simply what is familiar to us - and away from what we dislike or fear, the unknown.

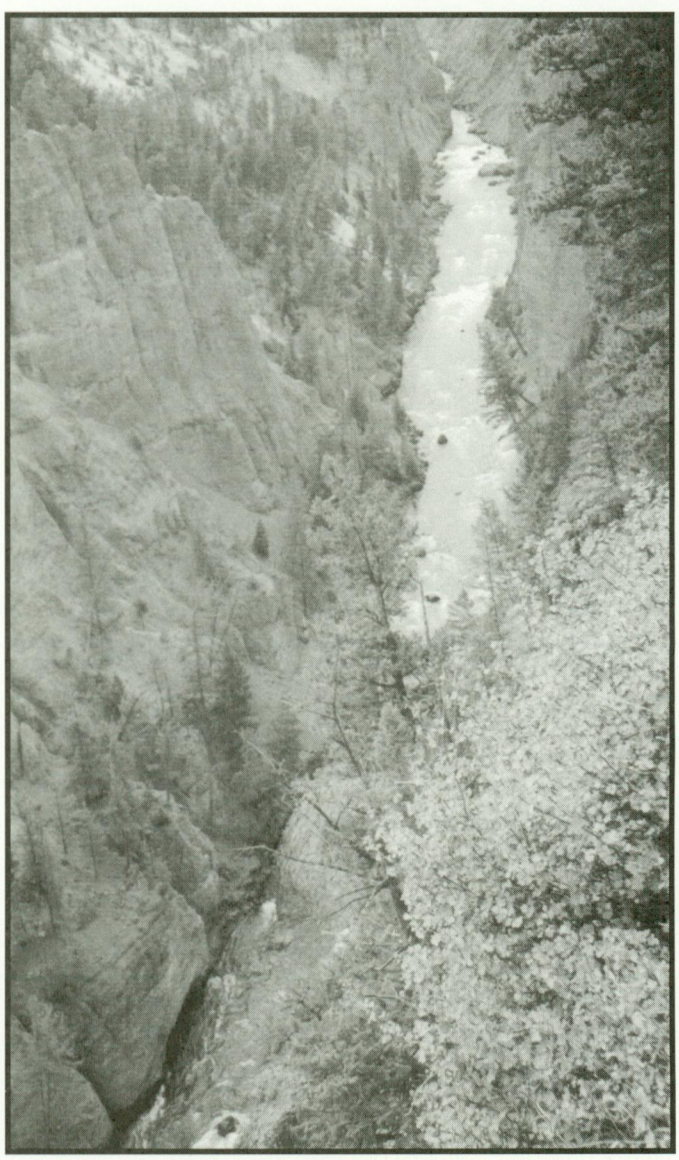
These biases are not 'real'; the well-worn paths exist in our minds, like the plain in my dream. In Land of No Buddha, Richard Hayes says:

'The Buddha ... repeatedly emphasized that one of the first steps towards a peaceful mind is the realization that families, clans, tribes, nations, occupational groups, gender affiliations, and religious organizations are all merely social conventions and not things that exist unless we insist on believing in them.'[2]

So the expanse of the plains is in a sense an inner space. The Tantra refers to 'mind-space' or 'heart-space', using for 'space' the beautiful Sanskrit word akasa, which literally means 'shining'. We are to imagine a bright inner spaciousness, in which we can move freely. The Buddha said: 'This consciousness is luminous, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements.'[3] That is, the mind has an intrinsic radiance, here associated with purity, but that radiance and purity is obscured by 'adventitious defilements'. 'Adventitious' here means 'added from outside'.

If we connect this statement with Richard Hayes' observation about social conventions, we see that the way to freedom of heart, freedom of movement around the plain of consciousness, is to realize that all the categories we identify with, however closely we identify with them, are not intrinsic to us, but have been 'added from outside'. Seeing this, we can let go; how to see it, is the question.

Perhaps we are especially liable to feel that our nationality is intrinsic to us, an essential part of who we are. A story I am fond of speaks of the 'giant so big he couldn't



be seen'; nationality is like that. It affects everything about our life - what we think is important, how we see things, the way we live - and yet it is almost impossible for us to see it. Not that the values and way of life associated with one's nationality are necessarily a bad thing - not at all - but if we are to live freely, we need somehow to become aware of what is directing and shaping us.

Since I became a Buddhist, I have travelled a lot in Eastern countries, and reflected on the contrasts between East and West. I am on a quest, I feel, to understand what it is to be a Western Buddhist, and this has led me to wonder what it is to be 'Western'. This quest has taken me to many places, literal and literary. So far, most light on the subject has come not from the mysterious East, or from the cities of Europe, instructive and wonderful though both have been, but from the mysterious West - from my ongoing relationship with America.

British people have a general impression of America which amounts to a sort of mythology, with Snoopy, Superman, John Wayne, Marilyn Munroe, Nike (did you know Nike was the Greek goddess of victory?), and Bill Gates among the thousands of deities in its pantheon. They are the gods of British idolatry too, these days, in a cultural homogenization which many people on both sides of the Atlantic deplore. But this is only the most superficial layer of American-ness. Other dimensions are revealed through film, of course - witness the recent 'American Beauty', an astonishing critique of American culture - and also through music, art and literature. These influences have been with us all our lives.

Going to America is something else again. I have spent a lot of time there since the country first befriended me, and it always gives me a sense of a different kind of life, one that challenges ideas about how to live that I didn't even know I had. The differences go far beyond the fact that light switches are the other way up and all the other details of everyday life that intrigue any visitor to a foreign country. Jeremy Paxman says in The English: a portrait of a people, 'Geography matters; it makes people who they are.'[4] The simple fact that I am from a small and crowded island defines my experience of life.

If Britain as a nation (or rather, several - none of us in fact relate to being 'British') has been shaped by smallness, continuity, and ties to the past, by contrast, America is all about size, newness, and freedom. I was not, of course, the first to discover a sense of liberation in those open spaces. The development of America was guided by freedom, the 'bright constellation which has gone before us,' as Thomas Jefferson said. In their different ways its early European settlers sought freedom from the tyrannies of the life they left behind - at the expense, famously, of the liberty of those who already lived in 'their' new country.

As, with much struggle, they established a new nation, the early Americans invented an identity to bequeath to subsequent generations. Wherever you were from, you could become American. But what did that mean? I once heard a programme on American radio about the Harley Davidson motorbike. Why did this machine have such mythical significance for many Americans? 'The hunger to be free,' said the reporter. This hunger could be said to have shaped the land of the free.

What kind of freedom? While the ideal is mocked for having dwindled into the freedom to acquire things or sue people, it still lives as an ideal. The search for freedom has drawn many Americans to Buddhism, and that practice includes an energetic self-critique, a refusal to allow Dharma practice to be compromised by what has been called spiritual materialism - or, of course, material materialism. (Which is crucial, in the context of a nation whose use or preservation of natural resources is certain to affect the future of the entire planet, one way or the other.) I love the expansiveness, confidence and purity that characterize American Dharma practice.

Of course, all these are generalizations, and I am not well-placed to make them; for the comments of someone who knows what they are talking about, read Richard Hayes' Land of No Buddha. Just as with a person, it takes a very long time to get to know a country, and America is astonishing in its complexity and diversity (I sometimes think it resembles India in this respect). One constantly has the salutary experience of realizing one's ignorance. Part of the practice of internationality, as Dharmachari Subhuti has called it, is to let go of generalized views and preconceived ideas, whether we are enamoured or mistrustful of what we see. Perhaps the best way to do this is through that essential feature of Buddhist life: friendship.

You can't really make friends with a country, although I felt I did on my first journey across America. My relationship with America has been given an entirely new dimension by my friendships with Americans. Mind you, this wonderful gift is not always easy to accept. Picture the scene. It's a baking hot day in Missoula, Montana. We are on our way to a retreat center called Deer Park, out of town on the Blackfoot River. At least, we should be on our way. In fact we are trying to resolve yet another complexity. I have parked the van while we work out how to get everyone and everything into it. Some response to the situation must be evident in my expression; I have (unfortunately, I sometimes think) a 'speaking countenance'. Responding to whatever my face is saying, my American friend grins and says, 'In England they'd be snorting Rescue Remedy by now, right?'

'I wouldn't know,' I say in my primmest, stuffiest English tones, apparently offended at this slight to my Rescue Remedy addicted compatriots. Such moments, embarrassing though they are in retrospect, are instructive, revealing as they do how much I still identify with being English. I love and am proud of my nationality, but such irrational defensiveness on behalf of one's country (or any group to which one belongs) is clearly the root of a great deal of evil in the world. It's exhilarating to realize it and let go, and also to revel in being 'un-English' on occasion.

I find it fascinating, though sometimes uncomfortable, to be part of a Buddhist movement that began in England and has now put down roots in America. It's as though the ghosts of old colonialism are still hovering. I had thought - and I'm sure I'm right - that the brand of Englishness which would drive Americans crazy would be one in which unfortunately I specialize myself - an apologetic, self-deprecating 'Oh, I don't mind' attitude. (Though I think my English friends sometimes find me rather shockingly assertive these days.) But some of my American friends have told me that they have a hard time with another English trait (one I don't have) - an autocratic imperialism that is very sure of the proper way to do things, and will insist on it at whatever cost. Imagine that attitude meeting

this one, described by Henry James: 'It's a complex fate being an American, and one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe.' Mutual awareness during such (probably unconscious) clashes is crucial, and transformative.

But much more often the awareness is simply of great delight. I have spent long enough in New Hampshire in recent years to have a favourite rock by the ocean. 'My' rock is all shades of grey, and it juts out into the sea so that when the tide is in, the waves run past you. This summer Dayalocana and I went to the coast for ginger icecream with rhubarb sauce (I am also American enough to appreciate the aspect of consumer choice that specializes in icecream). There was a storm out at sea, and as we stood on the rock, a rainbow came into being. Its ends arched into the water, making pools of rainbow light. As we watched, all seven colours appeared, and then, beneath the inner arch, two more bands of violet light.

There we stood, my American friend and I, filled with wonder - the kind of moment human beings must have shared since ancient times. Sangharakshita once wrote that 'Getting to know another being is like exploring a new continent or another world.'[5] My dear friend, so exuberant and so reflective, so robust and so sensitive, so adamant in her views and so light in her being, connects me with something beyond nationality, is a whole world in herself. And I can say the same about all my American friends; there is a remarkable sense of transcendence about those relationships.

I am writing this in Birmingham, but soon I will be leaving, 'to look for America', as the song says, when I move to Montana in the New Year. Perhaps the move has been inevitable since that defining moment in my life, somewhere in the prairies of the mid-West, when I realized I didn't know where I was going.

It isn't that I am desperate to leave England (as I once was - and ended up in Papua New Guinea - but that's another story). My friends and family here are as dear to me as my friends in the United States. (From this point of view I am glad the world is smaller these days, through email and phones and jet travel.) And I am very fond of my native country, its seasons, its landscapes, seascapes, and cityscapes; this autumn I am full of an anticipatory nostalgia - an emotion which is, of course, typically English.

And I am not drawn to America because it feels like home. Indeed, the appeal is perhaps that it is not home, although I am at ease there, because I have friends. Perhaps I am still looking for new directions, different ways to move in the infinite space of consciousness, ways to re-create myself. So, like so many before me, I am going West in search of freedom. I feel fortunate that, because I am aware of East as well as West, I know what kind of freedom I am looking for.

Material Materialism

Dayalocana and 'My' Rock

Me with Dayalocana

Notes

1 Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1997, p.24
2 Richard P Hayes (Dharmachari Dayamati), *Land of No Buddha: Reflections of a Sceptical Buddhist*, Windhorse, Birmingham 1998
3 Anguttara-Nikaya 1.10
4 Jeremy Paxman, *The English: A Portrait of a People*, Penguin, London 1999, p.3
5 Sangharakshita, *Peace is a Fire*, Windhorse, Birmingham 1995, p.65

Bridging Culture & Race

Muditasri

WHEN, IN 1492, Christopher Columbus 'discovered' what he subsequently named 'the West Indies', he was looking, in fact, for India. By any stretch of the imagination, the so-called West Indies were a long way from India. Hence from here on I shall refer to those Islands as the Caribbean, which is more in keeping with what he found - the Carib Indians. Later, when there was an attempt to enslave the Caribs to the growing of sugar cane, they fought valiantly against the Europeans. Most of them were slaughtered or driven into the ocean. Fortunately, however, some took refuge in the rain forests on the various islands. Lacking, therefore, indigenous peoples to work on the sugar plantations, the Europeans turned to Africa for labour. Thus began the dastardly slave trade in which millions of Africans were transported to the Caribbean to work on the sugar plantations and in the cotton fields. This is the backdrop of my history. These slaves are my ancestors.

GROWING UP ON ST KITTS

Come with me, then, to the small Island of St. Kitts, (sometimes known as St. Christopher,) in the Eastern Caribbean, where I was born in 1948 and where I lived until the age of eleven. For as long as I could remember, almost all the people in the most prestigious professions, the doctors, lawyers and priests on 'my' island were white. These white people owned spacious houses, often situated high up on the hills overlooking the ocean. They also owned the few large shops and food markets. They created their own afternoon-tea and drinking establishments, as well as their own tennis clubs. Their servants were always black. My mother was one of them, thus giving me access into the white people's world. I had never seen a white person doing a menial job, such as cleaning their own car, watering their own garden or washing their own clothes. Occasionally, when their maid was sick, they rose to the challenge and cooked 'a light meal'. As a child I went regularly to the post office or accompanied my grandmother to the bank. Again, in such environments 'the chief' - a nickname for the boss - was white and male, but most of his employees would be light skinned. No dark skinned person would be visible. Those images spoke loudly to me. They were indelibly printed on my mind, even when I did not and could not fully understand them.

I was fortunate to be educated at a small fee-paying establishment where all the teachers were black and female. Two white families sent their children to this school. This was relatively rare and we were all treated much the same - all queued for drinking-water and all were protected from the sun. I also remember my mother clearly telling me not to treat white children as special. We were taught to view England as 'The Mother Country', and to that end studied English history and geography. Years after the island's currency changed to Caribbean dollars, my school continued to teach the English money system, pounds, shillings and pence.

Throughout the Caribbean, teachers were - and still are - highly respected. Education was viewed as a vehicle through which we could gain greater control over our lives and thus have more choices and opportunities. It was a means to financially supporting our families - and with less degradation. It provided us with greater mobility in the world, e.g. we could go to England or America to study further. More importantly, it was a means of preparing ourselves to take hold of the institutions of government at the end of the colonial era.

In my home, within the extended family and the wider community, the giving of hospitality was unquestioned. For example, one always cooked more than what was needed as any visitor present at mealtimes would be expected to join the table. Food, shelter and clothing would rarely be denied. It was important that those more fortunate aimed to alleviate the suffering of the less fortunate and did not wait for them to ask. If you had a visitor you would give them your bed. My mother continued to do this for many years in this country when we eventually moved from living in one room and acquired our own home.

In the sphere of ethics, honesty was paramount. In my household you were never punished if you told the truth, irrespective of the incident's gravity. To be found lying warranted punishment and a big loss of face. You would regularly hear elders saying 'a liar you can never trust

even when they speak the truth.' Elders were highly respected and we children gladly ran errands, carried out age-appropriate tasks, and received approbation and rebuke from any elder. We were not just our parents' children, we were parented by our community. Any dispute in which our parents or family elders were engaged was outside the remit of us children. It was none of our business. We were expected to greet those elders with the usual salutation depending on the time of day.

Religion was extremely important. Sundays was often referred to as 'the day of rest' - apart from going to church and Sunday school - of which I did both, even though, as I grew older, I protested vehemently. I clearly remember going to confirmation classes at the age of eight and telling my mother 'I do not want to be a Christian'. Her response was 'Whilst you are living under my vine and fig tree, you will go to church and you will be confirmed'. Parents saw this as an important responsibility. Thus at the age of nine, I was confirmed into the Church of England. Fortunately I loved and was fascinated by the elaborate liturgy and its attendant rituals but neither loved nor feared god. As I grew older I regularly removed from our dining room wall my mother's copy of the ubiquitous print of 'The Last Supper', a copy of which hung in most Caribbean homes then - and even to this day. I loved the hymns, especially those which depicted the changing seasons of England.

Steelband music, both religious and secular - together with Meringe and Calypso - pervaded the island and fierce competition existed between the various bands. The annual carnival was the highlight of our secular year, commemorating and celebrating the end of slavery. Almost everyone was directly or indirectly involved in this fiesta and the calypsonians came into their own with their barbed songs peppered with irony.

Living mainly in small villages and close to nature, one naturally developed a love and respect for it. Most families had a garden and children participated fully in its care. The oral tradition was valued and respected and it was through this medium that I received my earliest education tucked up in bed or whilst having my hair plaited. Africa was never mentioned and when later I came across it in books, it was characterised as 'a dark and dangerous place full of savages.' Thus, dear reader, you have had a glimpse of the cultural environment in which I spent my first eleven years.

A SHOCK IN STORE

As Britain began rebuilding her country after the war, my mother, like so many thousands of Caribbeans, responded to the call. We needed work and Britain had plenty. We arrived in June 1960. 1 anticipated that my education to date would have prepared me well for this new life. After all I knew its history, I knew its literature, I knew its landscape. But what a shock was in store for me.

For the first time I saw white people doing menial jobs. I saw poor white people. I met white people who were coarse in manner. For the first time in my life I was a member of a minority group - minority because of my skin colour. For the first time in my life I experienced overt racism, was taunted and called names at school. The English spoken by my new peers at the secondary modern school I attended was strange. It came with a marked Birmingham accent. As my mother and I combed the streets in Moseley Village in South Birmingham looking for a room in which to live, the newsagents' noticeboards read 'Rooms to let. No blacks' or 'Rooms to let - no coloureds,' and, worst of all, 'Rooms to let - no niggers'. Skin colour was the defining offending feature. As a consequence of this, we lived in houses owned by Jamaicans. But rarely had we time to settle in before we were on the move once more, making way for their relatives or friends. This itinerant lifestyle, with its attendant insecurity, has had a marked effect upon me. It has taken

As a teenager in Birmingham

Caribbean Sugar Mill

Carnival

me decades to overcome it. As Caribbeans we were all lumped together, irrespective of the Islands from which we came, our ethics, preferences, or the particular hue of brown or black of our skin. Thus very quickly strong bonds were forged between us all. We can see the legacy of this early lifestyle and segregated living in many of our inner cities in Britain today.

As a result of the above experiences, my mother instilled one very clear message.

'You must work hard at school. You have to achieve higher grades than your white peers otherwise you will have very limited opportunities in this country.' Subsequent experiences proved her right and I am glad that I took her injunction to heart.

This is the cultural environment in which I spent my teenage years, in marked contrast to my life in St. Kitts, and I yearned for something more. I yearned to be involved in the arts - and in particular with music and poetry. I yearned to sit alone in a quiet wood and look into the eyes of a flower. I yearned to grow flowers again. I yearned for anonymity and yet I wanted to be with other human beings who, irrespective of skin colour, shared similar values and aspirations. At the age of nineteen, I left home and Birmingham to assuage this feeling. I searched for something whose defining factor would go way beyond appearances and family ties. When, twelve years later, I came across the Buddha-Dharma, I seized it with both hands. As I walked into the London Buddhist Centre in January 1979 I knew intuitively that I had come home.

I yearned to sit alone in a quiet wood and look into the eyes of a flower. I yearned to grow flowers again. I yearned for anonymity and yet I wanted to be with other human beings who, irrespective of skin colour, shared similar values and aspirations.

ISSUES OF COLOUR

I arrived at the LBC not expecting to find any other African Caribbean people and thus suffered no disappointment. It was much the same as the other institutions in which I'd been involved during the previous twelve years. These institutions (like the LBC) were generally frequented by middle-class ex-hippy types, children of the sixties - the people with whom I had stood shoulder to shoulder at demonstrations (anti-apartheid and anti-war) during the late sixties and early seventies. I had no problem relating to them, even though my own views on race, gender and class may have been very different to many of theirs. I had come for spiritual guidance. Reading and listening extensively to Sangharakshita's exposition of the Dharma confirmed that irrespective of my colour, I was in the right place.

By then, I had been a social worker for many years and during that time had been vocal around ethnic minority issues - e.g. how to make the service offered attractive and applicable to all; how to value different methods of parenting and so on. Often being the only black worker in an office or district had proved exhausting. I did not want to take on that responsibility in the FWBO so soon. I was also not psychologically ready to live in any of the then FWBO communities which seemed quite drab, sometimes damp and uninviting. I was redressing the balance from the earlier years when my family lived in one room in different districts of Birmingham in environments which seemed similar to those of the early FWBO communities. Living in that way was not a challenge or an experience I needed then. I was also still committed to my vocation as a social worker and did not involve myself with any of the early FWBO businesses. I was, however, involved in Centre activities and was gradually deepening my understanding of and commitment to the Dharma and the Movement. Many years later I was relieved that I had followed my own heart and done what was appropriate for me.

It might be helpful to the reader if I listed some of the issues which were problematic for me as a woman of African Caribbean descent during those years.

1. The issue of language: the regular use of the word 'black' to describe mainly negative experiences.

2. The absence of another person from the African Diaspora with whom to discuss certain pertinent issues and even share a joke in patois - much of my humour is rooted in that manner of speaking.

3. I had not long thrown off the mantle of my earlier Eurocentric conditioning, a conditioning in which white European values were always dominant and superior. I was reading and reflecting on issues from a more Afro-centric perspective which had been absent in my formal education. Yet here I was in a movement whose means of articulating and conveying the Dharma was through a Western cultural model. Though of course I could relate to it, it was imperative for me to maintain my contacts and friends in what I call my more Afro-centric world so that I would continue to value my own cultural heritage, much of which was absent in my formal education.

4. My social and cultural conditioning had instilled the idea that in order to succeed I had to be better than my white peers. I wasn't consciously aware that I was still using that model until an Order member suggested that this might be the reason I had not yet asked for ordination, even though I had been involved with the FWBO for nine years and wanted to commit myself to the Dharma. He was right. I asked soon thereafter and was ordained within eighteen months.

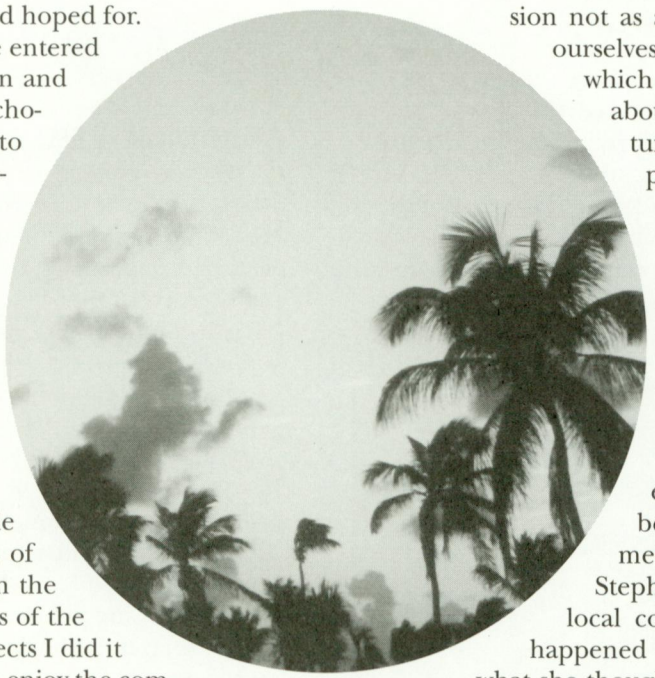
ENTERING THE ORDER

Eleven years have passed since I entered the Order. During that time - until this year - only one woman from the African Diaspora has been ordained. It has, at times,

been a lonely journey, yet in this respect not one unfamiliar to me. My profession, interests and activities as a black woman had, since the age of nineteen, led me into a world in which I rarely saw myself reflected back. A world in which I had almost no role models.

Buddhism is, however, a universal religion or path and is available for all to practise, irrespective of colour, class or ethnic background. Buddhism's history is a testimony to this. I take solace in there being two aspects to the ordination ceremony - the private and the public. I draw inspiration from the fact that ultimately as human beings we are all alone and this is one of the things that the private ordination symbolises. The public ordination, however, acknowledges and celebrates the fact that we make our journey in the company of like-minded others 'as, one by one...the Sangha grows.'

In being ordained into the Western Buddhist Order, I experience a growing reciprocity and responsibility towards other Order members in a manner in which I had not expected but had hoped for. I feel more and more that I have entered into a journey with other women and men who - by and large - have chosen to put their energies into other-regarding activities by creating conditions in which individuals can Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. This is something I had hoped for when I left my parental home. In a world full of distractions, I feel fortunate indeed to have found this movement.



REACHING OUT

Once I was ordained I was able to begin to fulfil a dream: that of taking the Dharma - primarily in the form of meditation - to members of the black community. In many respects I did it for my own benefit as I wanted to enjoy the company of more black people in our movement but it was also a means of strengthening the altruistic dimension of the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. I was keenly aware that my early education and conditioning, and the world I'd inhabited since the age of nineteen, made it easier for me than it was perhaps for some other black people to enter the FWBO. In this respect I was privileged, and thus I wanted to act as a bridge between the two cultures. There was at that stage no one more suitable to do this than myself. I could draw on a history peculiar to the African Diaspora. I could draw from our cultural heritage. I reflected, if the medium through which we teach the Dharma is inappropriate, we will alienate the recipients and not do justice to the Buddha's message. In other words the Truth will be lost in the medium. How sad this would be in a world which desperately needs the Dharma. Again, I reflected, our movement is relatively young. Very little is laid in stone, as it were, perhaps I could play my part in shaping it. I was, however, keen to ensure that this was not the only thing I was involved in as I did not want to be typecast. There is more to me than my skin colour.

If the FWBO and the WBO are to reach out to people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, we will probably need to change far more than we realise. For example, we will need to be better equipped to meet black people who, having participated exclusively in black meditation and Dharma events, are now trying to take the next step into the mainstream of the FWBO. Almost all of these people will have suffered some form of racism. As a movement we will need to be ready to meet this.

The 1991 census tells us that 1.3 per cent of Britain's population is from the African Diaspora. The majority of these people will have been educated here. Ask yourself, do you personally know say two such people fairly well, people you can call your friends, whose homes you've visited? Have you read any novels or poetry from this culture? If more black people are to become involved with the FWBO, we will need to read more widely to find out about other cultures. We will need to see television not as an evil from which to protect ourselves but as a medium through which we could learn a good deal about other people and their cultures. We will also need to be less parochial in the sense of being mainly concerned with our own Buddhist communities. Often, not very far from some of our Centres, there are large communities of people from different cultures, especially in the inner cities of Britain. Do we know what's going on there? Local events - which sometimes become matters of national media interest such as the Stephen Lawrence affair, may affect local communities deeply. (When I happened to ask a white friend of mine what she thought about it, she said she didn't know who Stephen Lawrence was.)

Open discussion on racism and cultural diversity must not be taboo and irrational guilt needs to be transcended as this stultifies communication on the subject. We need to be friendly to people not just when they are in our Centres but also when we meet them on the streets. Much courage to change will be needed if we really want to reach others who appear different from ourselves.

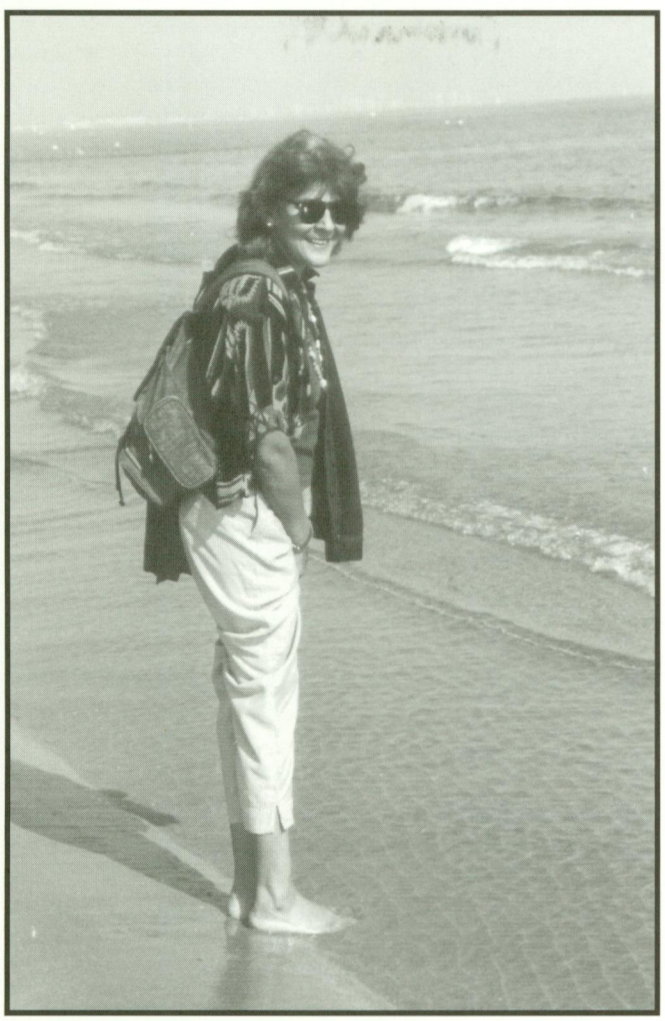
THE DHARMA CAN SET US FREE

The name I received at my ordination is of great importance. Prior to this I carried - like so many others from the African Diaspora - the surname of our slave masters. Now I have a name given to me by my very precious teacher, Urgyen Sangharakshita, who has always been able to see the best in me. I am, as ever, engaged in the struggles of my ancestors, for the ugly face of racism still haunts human society, but I sincerely believe that the Dharma is ultimately the only weapon which can be humanely used to overcome this pernicious mind-set of greed, hatred and delusion and to this I pledge my fidelity.

Bringing the Dharma to Spain

Paramachitta

IN 1992 I LEFT London with all my most important possessions in a van, together with my very good friend Parami, to embark on an adventure which has proved the most spiritually fulfilling, as well as the most frustrating and at times painful experience of my life. Our mission was and is to establish the Western Buddhist Order in a new place, to make it possible for Sangharakshita's teaching and interpretation of the Dharma to be known by many more people in a new country. We came to Valencia to join Moksananda, who had moved there a few years previously to set about establishing the first FWBO activities.



A MEDITERRANEAN DREAM

After many years of cogitating this possible move, the change came rapidly. Almost overnight my life in the East End of London had transformed itself into what seemed like a sort of Mediterranean dream. Something many years previously had called me to Spain - call it a karmic connection or just a basic sensuous desire to live somewhere warm where palm trees grow - I don't know - I only know I wanted to live in Spain before I had even set foot in the country. And when I finally did, I was not disappointed. England is a beautiful country - if you like the combination of shades of green and shades of grey with the occasional pale yellow thrown in. I happen to like earthy browns, primary reds, blues and yellows, the scrubby texture of the grass and the brilliant contrast of the pine green against the blue sky that you find on the Iberian Peninsula Born in India, my body responds to the heat - I am more alive, erect, open to the elements under the warmth of the sun. I love contemplating the sea - its power, its strength its currents - unseen and yet so strong; the smell, taste and sound of it, at times silky and playful - but at no time to be underestimated.

These were my first impressions of Spain, albeit on the level of sense experience - but for that they are the strongest, the most personal, the most primordial. These impressions impregnated my imagination with more light, more colour and there has been a corresponding effect in my meditation practice. Visualising an infinite blue sky no longer needs the same effort of imagination since I can now contemplate it in reality as I go about my daily life.

The weather plays a great part in the cultural development and life of a people. For example, it governs the extent to which life happens outside the home. More happens in the Spanish street than in the English one - and at all hours. There is more noise but also more life. The street is common space, not just some-

where you pass through as you go from A to B. These are just some of the differences we encountered when we arrived in Spain.

GARDENERS

I have always responded to the image of the Dharma being like the rain falling on all living things, nourishing them all alike, yet allowing each one to grow in its own fashion. I would liken our job to that of 'Dharma gardeners', taking seeds and planting them in different soil; watching the first shoots which need to be cared for, fertilised, watered, exposed to the sun, given light and warmth, protected from dangers and things that could destroy them, especially when they are still young and vulnerable; helping the roots to spread and grow deep so that the plant is not blown over in the wind. The seeds in us as Order members had already been planted by others and cultivated so that they had strongly taken root and grown into substantial plants. New ideas, like bees, have helped our plants to cross-fertilise so that we are healthy. Each of us has grown in our different way but the seed is the same. We were taking that seed to plant in a place where the weather was different, the soil was different, where the bees, too, were different. Weather and soil, culture and history, the particular conditions in which Spanish people live and grow, these were the conditions to which the seeds we brought would have to adapt and find a way to grow - or else perish.

CROSSING CULTURES

I am not sure if I had any preconceived ideas about what to expect, what it would be like to live in another country and how the Spanish people would respond to me, to us and to what we were bringing. Cultural conditioning is sometimes so subtle and often only recognised when you come into contact with others - The Other. I consider myself to have been politically educated. I consciously resisted taking on the ideology and the stereotypes propagated by the media such as Manuel, the famously silly Spanish waiter in the English TV series Fawlty Towers. But cultural and national stereotyping is a common pastime and it is difficult to avoid imbibing something of those attitudes.

From talking endlessly to Spanish people about their contact with the English, I know that preconceived ideas abound and are largely based on ignorance. For some, the English are still thought of as a band of pirates - never forgiven for the rout of the Spanish Armada - and where is all that gold anyway? For others, 'the English' are the beer-swilling Benidorm lager louts. For most, the English represent good manners, punctuality, reserve and all the things that drive the Spanish up the wall.

'Impossible to know what they are thinking!'
'Very difficult to get into communication with them!'
'No passion!' etc.

A popular dinner table topic, always a good place to savour our differences, is that the English seem unprepared for the fact that when the Spanish greet each other, they give two kisses, one on each cheek. It is said that the English take two steps back when approached by someone intending to greet them with the customary kisses. They may then rather stiffly acquiesce but obviously prefer to maintain the regulation two feet distance, especially when meeting a complete stranger. In my experience, however, after the initial shock, the English quite take to the habit!

I am Indian by birth, but I grew up and went to school in London. Growing up as an immigrant in a hostile society, I have always considered myself to be a stranger in a strange land - a useful preparation for the situation in which I now find myself. My family certainly conditioned me in a different way to my peers and all that, lumped together with my particular psychology, means that I must present a rather confusing element to the easy stereotyping that some people would like to engage in. There is always the tendency to reduce things to the simple and recognisable. What people meet in us that they do not like or do not understand is easily dismissed as an aberration due to our cultural background. Sometimes we can find ourselves being regarded with this kind of dismissive attitude when we are actually talking about our commitment to the Dharma. It is one of the challenges facing us in trying to bring the universal Dharma and make it accessible to others in a very different culture.

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Any Marxist will know the importance of the historical perspective. I would say for anyone bringing the Dharma to another land, it is almost as important as

knowing the Buddhist scriptures. Before I came to Spain I knew only a little about recent Spanish history from my studies at school. I didn't realise how strongly the experience of the Franco Dictatorship is still present in Spanish society, at least for those of a certain generation. The Dictatorship, it seems, meant the antithesis of liberty. It meant control, discipline, hierarchy. It meant polarities: you were either radically for it or radically against it. To be right wing meant accepting everything fascism stood for; to be left wing was to oppose it. You were either Catholic or atheist - the Catholic church supporting the regime, atheists in confrontation with it. A dictatorship robs the citizen of all power. The state has all the control and as a person you either accept it or work it to your own benefit. An understanding of this explained a lot. For example, it explained the difficulties we had in trying to present a positive idea of hierarchy, of participation and responsibility.

I remember one evening talking to one of the Spanish women who had started attending our classes, Africa as she then was, (now Saddhakara, my sister in the Order and very good friend.) We were discussing some of the institutions of the FWBO. When we came to the single-sex idea, I saw she was in tears. She couldn't believe that the most creative thing to enter her life contained something that reminded her of fascism. Franco had introduced the 'Women's Section' where girls were separated from boys at an early age to be taught cooking, sewing and how to keep a good home in the best Spanish tradition. Separation for her meant being taken out of the way of the men, having to concern herself only with what women were supposed to do and having to make do with low aspirations.

The best Spanish traditions include the extended family as the central focus of life. The family is still generally regarded as a morally valuable institution without the repressive overtones that it has in other European countries, so it has not been easy to present community living as an attractive alternative. Nevertheless, a women's community has been established and, over the eight years of its existence, has proved itself one of the best contexts in which we have been able to put our ideals into practice and show how to live a spiritual life day to day. Africa intuitively took the step of joining Parami and myself in forming a community. Without individuals like her, who respond to the rain of the Dharma, and who are willing to step out of the conventional and get involved with us, our work would not have been so effective.

GETTING ACROSS

Of course, the most crucial conversations about the principles of the FWBO took place in my rudimentary Spanish. Language was perhaps the biggest and most painful cultural barrier to cross. So much is transported by our voices and the words we choose. I was often trying to communicate complex ideas or personal impressions with an imperfect grasp of which words I should be using, which sometimes led to gigantic misunderstandings. It is one thing to have learnt the vocabulary and know the grammar. It is quite another to gauge what a person is really saying, to recognise the tone, to see the emotions behind the words; to recognise humour, sarcasm, irony, pain, affection. It is like growing up all over again: learning to speak, facing the humiliation of making ridiculous mistakes so that people laugh at you or look at you with total incomprehension on their faces.

In spite of the language difficulties, the Dharma does come through. People hear something even though they may not understand every word. Images and rituals help to communicate in a different way; as do we as people, how we behave, how we are with one another. Here we found some of our greatest successes and greatest pitfalls.

EXEMPLIFICATION

As Order Members we were always under the spotlight. We were looked to as exemplars and we were watched as we sometimes floundered under the strain of the responsibilities we had taken on. Relationships within the Order group were frankly quite bad at times and

being at the heart of a very new sangha, this had its consequences. Parami and I already had a long standing friendship but the difficulties put a tremendous strain on it. Yet we knew it could be a potent and visible example of the spiritual ideals which we were trying to communicate. We kept going, and our commitment to one another as kalyana mitras or spiritual friends took us through the difficult times and is now stronger than ever.

The FWBO is a complex thing, difficult to describe to people without reference to existing institutions such as exist in the UK. There, the principles and practices are well established and people can see how they work; they can meet others who live the life. In Spain there was just us, trying to convey the infinite variety of the FWBO. We could not present ourselves as immediately recognisable 'holy people'; Order Members don't wear robes and as a rule we don't cultivate teacher/disciple relationships in the traditional Eastern way, there are no clearly defined limits to the spiritual life as can be found in a monastery, a vihara or even a retreat centre. What it means to be a Buddhist is found in the way we live our lives, how we express ourselves, how we earn our living and spend our free time and above all the way we as Order members relate to one another and in the friendships we form.

AN EASY LIFE?

It has been tough! There is no way I could paint a rosy picture of what it has been like, firstly to give up one's whole life in one place and to start from scratch somewhere so different, learning the systems of a different country, creating a secure base from which to go out and make a living. But that is only the beginning. There follows the hard work of forging relationships with people, creating trust, confidence and the elements of spiritual friendship. This will always be difficult in another country. An outsider is an outsider and therefore attracts all the unconscious and conscious projections that being an outsider implies. There is an ease of understanding that exists between people who have shared the same experiences, growing up, going to school, living the customs of the place etc., which the outsider cannot have. If we want understanding, we have to create something more. We have to strive to create trust, we have to make an effort to take our communication on to a deeper level and this is where our spiritual practice really counts. Living as a stranger in a strange land certainly puts your views about the rest of humanity to the test. But I believe, like Sangharakshita, that it is possible for any human being to communicate and be friends with any other human being regardless of race, nationality and all the other conditioning factors.

Throughout its history the Dharma has travelled to different countries and has adapted to the culture. There is no doubt that this is happening here. Although it is still in its early days, FWBO (Valencia) has developed some very definitely Spanish features. Our retreats, for example, have a definitely Latin ring to them. True, tea breaks are creeping in - but having supper at six or seven in the evening is just not on; discussions around the dinner table are passionate and noisy, the siesta is a sacred space. Silence is gaining in popularity - but going for walks in pairs is still considered a little eccentric.

I don't think I was prepared spiritually for what faced me and without my commitment to the Three Jewels which has given my life meaning and the strength to live out my ideals, I would have given up a long time ago. I have matured, I have faith in what I am doing. I am more convinced than ever of the need to make connections with people across all boundaries, to break down the social and cultural barriers that divide us. And looking back I can see how the experience here has made me grow up and become more of an individual, it has forced me to go deeper in my understanding of the Dharma and in my desire to Go for Refuge. I wouldn't change that for an easy life.

IRISH ROOTS

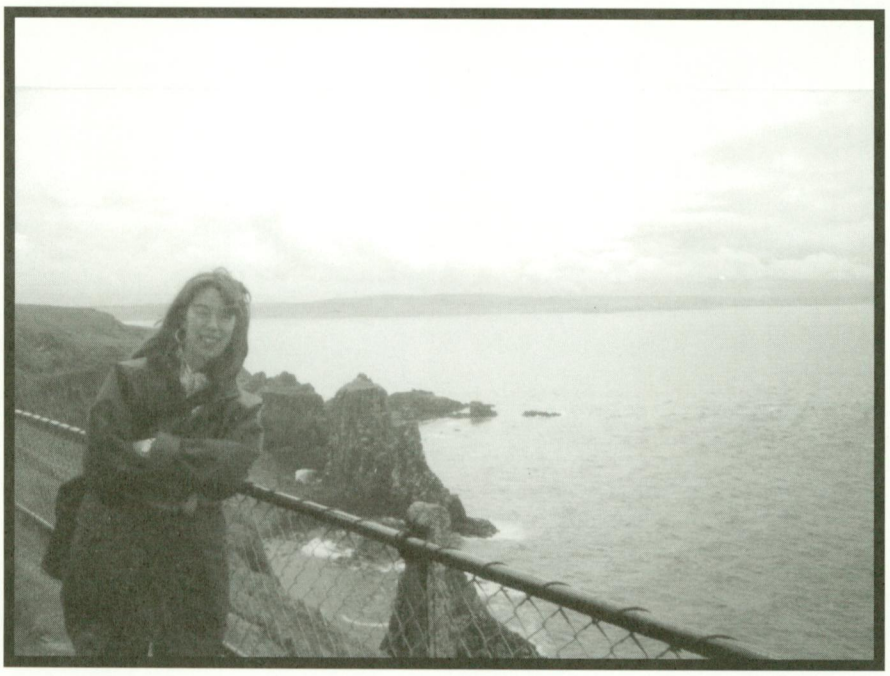
PADMAVASINI

IRELAND IS A BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY. One of its most beautiful features is the coastline. In the West it meets the Atlantic with granite rocks and huge, breaking waves, while the east coast is bathed with the calmer waters of the Irish sea that lies between Ireland and Britain. From the north-east you can see Scotland, while the south faces France and the rest of Europe.

My grandparents lived on the north Atlantic coast and there were aunts and uncles around Armagh. Childhood was exploring rock pools, climbing and clambering over rocks or watching from a safe distance the crashing waves; and childhood was roaming through fields and hedgerows where the wild-life was still abundant. It was a time before television. (Television arrived in my house when I was eleven.) Ours was a world of adventure books, of general knowledge, of imagining and inventing - and usually being in trouble for something that was 'not allowed.'

Growing up in the North

I grew up in a Protestant family in Belfast in Northern Ireland. With one exception, I had no Catholic friends until I went to College. I grew up in an atmosphere of austere prosperity and urban respectability. Visits to the uncles and aunts and cousins who still lived in the country were always exciting. I used to travel with Grandad on the coach and got to share his packets of Wrigley's chewing gum (not allowed at home). On the farm we could wear shorts and tee-shirts all day, it was a time of flirtatious freedom with my cousins, we felt our awakened senses around the beasts of the farm. Farm-life meant showing your courage by putting your hand into a cow's mouth, and there was being forced to watch how one of the dotty chickens became Sunday's dinner. And there was running back to the house from the outside toilet, my sister and I, running in the dark, both in a panic because we had seen the still, silent silhouette of a man standing on the road. In the evenings we would watch as our cousins put on their coats, picked up their rifles and went off to patrol the fields after dark.



I might have lost my other grandfather if he hadn't been 'tipped off' by a quiet tap on the window, a whisper warning him to flee, along with the rest of the family, before the bomb went off.

I grew up in the 1950's when political unrest was still under the surface in Irish life. I was too young to understand the politics, but I was aware of the tension and fear that pervaded everyday social life.

The extraordinary tension in which we in Belfast lived, brought me to a point where find-

ing out the truth of the matter, any matter, was crucially important to me - so much so that I would find myself upset for days when I could not get answers to my questions. We were continually faced with the 'knowing smile' when we raised questions to which no-one wanted to give an answer.

My mother said recently she had felt for me when the local clergyman would never answer my religious questions. I went to Sunday school and then to church from the age of four. I knew more Biblical stories than almost anyone I knew. I was a stalwart of the Girl Guides and helpful around the church - but when I asked questions about the Creed which I had had to learn by heart, the answers were purely academic or simply evasive. I was bitterly disappointed. I became agnostic.

The period of life from fourteen when I was 'confirmed' into the Protestant faith until 24 when I performed my first Buddhist puja was a time of anguished searching within a fairly ordinary outer life of school, exams, friends and so on. As my search continued, I began to find myself more and more at odds with the values with which I had been brought up.

Moving Away

When children take their first steps, parents are over-joyed. They don't mind if their child's steps go in another direction to their own. They scoop the little one up with great hugs and happy acknowledgments. Unfortunately this is not the usual response to a child's growing individuality, when children begin to develop views and beliefs of their own. There came a point when my parents and I realised we disagreed about almost everything. My father belonged to the Church of Ireland, my mother was Presbyterian. I refused to go to church at all. My family voted Tory - I realised I was a socialist. Life most families, mine ate meat. I found I could no longer eat meat. Then I broke the rules about no sex before marriage.

In countries where there has been both poverty and sectarian violence, religious and social values seem to move towards tribal values. Issues that people in more affluent countries may have become more relaxed about, are matters of life and death to their poorer neighbours. In the nineteenth century, unmarried women who became pregnant had been cast out from home and left to die in ditches. It was a little more relaxed in the twentieth century - such women merely became the black sheep of the family.

I was 21 when I left Ireland for the Welsh capital, Cardiff, to train as an art teacher. A number of shocks were in store for me. It was in a debate in the student common room that I had my first opportunity to join in a discussion about socialist values. I raised my arm and started to add my thoughts to the discussion - and then stopped. I sounded to myself like Enoch Powell or Ian Paisley - so fundamental, conservative and non-negotiable. There began the long, slow painful work towards creative and inspired thinking and speaking which really took off when I met the FWBO.

Another shock was to realise that although I had a poster of the revolutionary Che Guvera on my wall, read Martin Luther King and listened to the songs of Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell, and although I had strong feelings for civil rights movements, I was unable to find a voice to express those feelings. As an Ulster Protestant I felt others would see me as one of the Oppressors of the Oppressed.

It was in London where I had moved to take up a job as teacher that I first came across a certain amount of anti-Irish feeling. (I thought it a small price to pay for the wonderful feeling of freedom.) I worked on my vowels and changed my accent so that I sounded Scottish. No more questions about Northern Ireland.

I began to change my identity in other ways. I bought a little Hindu goddess to smile on my ever-changing bed-sits. I explored friendships and sexual relationships. I studied Ouspensky, R.D. Laing, the I Ching. I came across the *Dhammapada* and the Hindu goddess was replaced by a statue of the Bodhisattva Green Tara. For by now I had met Sangharakshita.

Encountering the Dharma

Spiritual life is full of paradoxes. In fact, it is a paradox. Looking back, I see my meeting with Sangharakshita as being both inevitable and a chance in a million. Both are true! Around this time I had made myself a precept to always find an honest answer to any question that was asked of me, even it it took time. In Sangharakshita I found someone who at long last was prepared to really address *my* questions even when the answer is not simple.

I began attending the Archway Centre, the first FWBO Centre, and then joined a community and began working in team-based Right Livelihood businesses. Through sharing my life with people in this way, through study and discussion groups, I began developing friendships with people from very different backgrounds. Sometimes we told one another our life stories. I found this a very good way of becoming more objective about myself and my life. In the context of friendship and shared lives, realisations about oneself can be strong and deep. One can begin to put an end to the oppressions that one unconsciously perpetuates. It was around this time that I lost the guilt I had had around sexuality. Through my practice of meditation, yoga, study and friendship, that weighty burden was resolved.

It was extreme conditions in my upbringing that led me to the Dharma. But it was those same extreme con-

ditions that made my progress slow. There was a deep fear of 'religion'; a fear of speaking publicly about beliefs; of daring to challenge the beliefs of others when I did not agree with them. There was a fear of being 'inside' a group and a fear of being outside a group. So it was some years before I was able to trust in my own experience that the Western Buddhist Order was a spiritual community (as distinct from merely a group.) Then my Dharma practice flowered into my being able to effectively Go for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and to join the Order myself. By that time I had begun to feel I wanted to return to my 'roots' in Ireland. As there was no FWBO Centre in Northern Ireland, I made the decision to move to Dublin.

Return - to the South

Times have changed since I left Ireland more than twenty years ago. Ireland is now part of the European Economic Community and taking up common enterprises not only with Britain and Europe but also with America. It is a country that has experienced extreme hardship - it is only about one hundred years since the potato famine in which a million people died and a further million emigrated to America and Australia, a country that has lived through colonisation by Britain, under whose rule insurrection was treated with extreme harshness, and that lies still in Irish memory.

Arriving in Dublin three years ago, I soon became aware of the dark shadow of colonialism and Catholicism that persists despite the outward changes and I became aware that there had been incredible suffering in this country. It is very good to have arrived at a time when things are changing. When my doctor asked me what I did for a living I told her I taught yoga classes and

"Buddhist studies'.

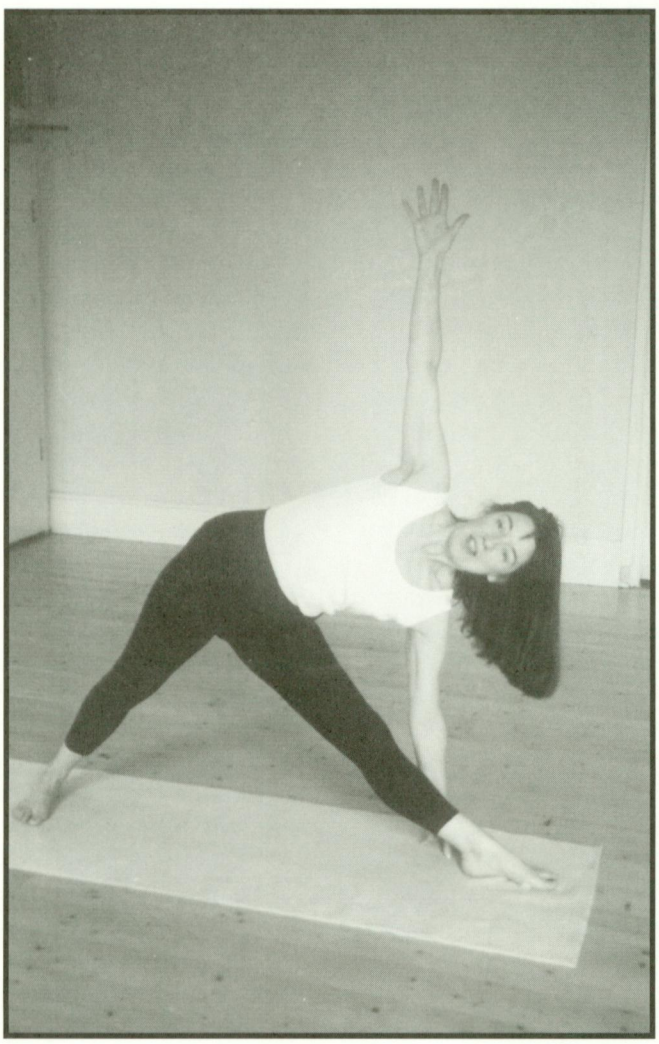
"Buddhism!' she exclaimed. 'You are a brave woman to even think of bringing religion back into Ireland.' And she went on to tell me yet another story about he oppression of Catholicism.

During my years as a practising Buddhist in London, I had become happier and more confident, I had a sense of being effective - and in some ways I was less aware of the more painful sides of life. Returning to Ireland these rather superficial 'embellishments' have been thrown up like so much driftwood on the beach. Moving to a new situation, a new culture, forces you to 'go deeper' - to find a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Buddhist and live a Buddhist life, and how to respond to people of quite a different background to the one from which you have come.

Here in Dublin I work part-time in our women's team-based Right Livelihood business, teach yoga to support myself and teach meditation and Buddhism at our Centre. I notice the way people look to me as a teacher. They are respectful but distant, as if I have some sort of power. Such attitudes are long gone from evening classes in Britain. It has taken quite a bit of perseverance to get people to talk to me - so it is a great joy when we do 'break through' and begin to connect, especially when we start talking about the Dharma.

There are other differences to get used to. Irish society is still far more based in the family than it is in England. In London I enjoyed a certain 'identity" that was independent of my family background. People see you more in terms of what you have or in terms of the beliefs and ideals you subscribe to. But in Ireland it doesn't matter if you are wearing a pearl or a hatchet in your ear - you are still someone's sister or brother. (though of course these days you can't see people's ears so well - they are covered by mobile telephones - but that is another story!)

Probably you could teach yoga in any country in the world and gain some insight into that culture. But although cultures differ so much from country to country, people everywhere recognise inspiration and it is inspiration that I try to communicate both through my yoga classes and in teaching meditation and the Dharma. Working as an Order member connected with a Buddhist Centre, you realise your own practise comes up for close scrutiny by others, especially when there are not many Order members, as in Dublin. It is a challenge in this situation to constantly replenish one's own sources of inspiration, and scrutinise one's beliefs and the way one is living. You have to stand firmly within your own Buddhist practice, your own going for Refuge to the Three Jewels and not lose contact with it. That way you discover how deeply, in reality, your commitment to your teacher, friends and practice really goes and how effective they can be in trying to transform the world.



living internationalism

Kalyanaprabha interviews Alokasri

KP: Alokasri, you first came to England from India for a short visit in 1997, but in 1998 you arrived for a longer stay. What were your impressions of this country?

AS: I arrived when the winter was just beginning - I found it horrible - I had never had this kind of experience. In the part of India where I come from, we don't have winter like this. I realised how weather has a very strong effect on human beings. In India hot weather has an effect on people. Here the cold weather affects people.

KP: What did you notice about the way the cold weather affects people?

AS: The body goes tight, we go inside ourselves, in the emotional sense as well, we protect ourselves from the cold weather and wear lots of clothes. In India it's the opposite. The sun is hot and people are going outwards all the time - they never go inside themselves! (*Laughing*)

KP: You must have found the food very different here.

AS: Yes, in India we can't eat any food without spices! I was interested to notice that here people eat all kinds of food - not just English but also Italian, Spanish, Greek...

KP: Even Indian!

AS: Yes. Here people accept all these kinds of food but in India they only want to eat spicy, Indian food. Well, they do eat pizza nowadays - but it has to be spicy pizza! (*Laughter.*)

KP: What about clothing?

AS: In India it is very hot, people wear very thin clothes. Here, in the winter, people cover the whole body with many clothes. I find it difficult to cover the whole body - my body isn't used to it, but I realised to protect myself from the winter I had to do it. But I noticed another interesting thing. Here, when the sun appears again, people are taking all these clothes off! (*Laughing*) We can't do that in India - our culture is different.

KP: What about manners - the way people behave?

AS: I could see that here people have very strong manners. If they want to say anything, they ask politely. But in India if we are always saying 'please' like that, people don't like it. They would say, why are you being so formal? They feel you are being distant. If we say , 'Please give me,' someone will say, 'Just say, "Give me!"' They feel that is more friendly.

KP: But in England if you say to someone, 'Give me that!' they will think you are being rude.

AS: Yes, now I've learnt these English manners! It's been very interesting to observe and learn them.

KP: You mentioned the other day that you found people here knowledgeable.

AS: Yes, I found people here have a very wide knowledge compared to people in India. The teaching system here is very good right from kindergarten. The child is taught a lot from very young and children are taught through games. I think that approach is coming in India but most people find study very difficult. In this country people also know what is going on in other countries but in India most people don't know much about what is going on outside India. Some people do - but there is a caste difference. High caste people have a good education and can be quite knowledgeable but low caste people don't have much education.

KP: How did the fact that there is no caste system in England strike you?

AS: It was very good to see that here there is no casteism, people are not looking down on other people. There is equality. Everybody is willing to give respect to others.

KP: Do you think that is more within the FWBO? I was thinking that some people of say Asian or Afro-Caribbean backgrounds also experience being put down.

AS: I have seen subtle differences in the way people from other countries are sometimes treated. But I've found that people are still very good in the way they treat one another compared to how people of different castes can treat each other in India.

KP: You came to join what is quite a large community here at Taraloka with twelve other people. Can you remember your first impressions?

AS: I was very impressed how well established it was, and how systematic things were, for example communication. There are spiritual principles behind it, but what I noticed was, for example, if there was a phone call, the message was passed on very quickly. I also saw how well the work rota was followed, or how information was passed round - everything is well settled.

KP: Is that different to how things were in India?

AS: (*Laughing*) Yes, it is different in India.

KP: You were a founder member of the first FWBO/TBMSG women's community in India.

AS: Yes, Bhante inaugurated it and gave the community a name, 'Shakyadhita'. None of us had experience of community life, so we read Bhante's talks and Subhuti's talks. At the very beginning Padmasuri came and led us in some study and answered our questions and then we tried to put it all into practice. We had to learn everything for ourselves - through our own experiences - good experiences and sometimes bad experiences. We had communication problems - oh horrible. (*Laughter.*)

KP: Well, you can get that in any community, especially when you are all new to it. Taraloka is a much more established community.

AS: Yes, it is much more established and there are much more experienced people living here.

KP: What else did you find living at Taraloka?

AS: People here have a strong spiritual practice, strong meditation practice and strong ethical practice. The principle of generosity, for example, is taken very seriously. People give to one another in many different ways as part of their practice. Some people like to make things clean and tidy. There is also generosity expressed in the way people communicate. For example, sometimes two people may not be in good communication - but other people are generous in the way they respond, not spreading any rumours - they are very aware of how they behave, very ethical. People are not forming little groups. People do have a difficult time here sometimes, but it doesn't get really bad. People give one another support.

Another thing I noticed when I came here is that in Taraloka we don't make a strong difference between Order members and mitras. Of course sometimes we do - for instance, when the Order members meet as a chapter, but usually I feel we are just one community with Order members and mitras. Mitras here are free to take a lot of initiative.

KP: Are other distinctions made, do you think, given that in Taraloka there are people of many different backgrounds, nationalities, ages and so on.

AS: Yes, this is an interesting area. Taraloka is an international community - we come from New Zealand, Germany, India, Holland - soon someone will be arriving from Canada. I find people are generally very open-minded, accepting a person's culture. Of course, misunderstandings do arise, but mostly people do bear in mind that cultures are different and people try to learn about the culture, try to understand what effect her culture is having on that person.

KP: What about language - English is not your mother tongue, but English is the language of the community.

AS: Yes, I've really struggled in this area. I found when I arrived that people often couldn't understand my English. If there is no language, there is no communication. I found I couldn't communicate myself, I couldn't express my emotions to other people, and I found my emotions becoming blocked. I made a lot of effort to improve my understanding - it made me very tired. Taraloka people were very kind and encouraging. When I spoke wrongly they helped me, and made effort to understand what I was trying to say. They would check with me what I wanted to say. But one thing I found very painful was the conversation after meals. I couldn't understand what people were saying and I was thinking, 'Oh no, I want to know what is happening!' But I felt very shy and frustrated and sometimes irritated that people didn't tell me what they were saying. I learnt to ask people to stop and explain to me what they were saying.

KP: Could the community improve in this area do you think?

AS: I think when someone comes from a very different culture and there are language difficulties, yes, although the community is very good, I think more could be done to involve that person in conversations and discussions - otherwise that person ends up feeling very lonely.

KP: Are there other ways that cultural differences made difficulties for you?

AS: Well, there was the experience of being ill. In India, when you are ill everyone wants to come and see you. But here when I arrived back from hospital, everyone put cards in my room to welcome me back but only one person was there to look after me and I was wondering, why are they not all coming?

KP: How do you think being a Buddhist makes it possible for people from different cultures to come together?

AS: When I came here, I saw that East and West are such different cultures. Everything seemed different to my culture - food, manners, clothes - everything. I saw only one thing was similar - that was Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. I realised that what I am doing, Going for Refuge, is the same thing that these people are doing. That is the one thread between us. It is the central point and I found that meant we could understand and cross the cultures quite easily.

KP: How did you recognise this Going for Refuge, how did it show itself?

AS: I could see I am doing ethical practice, they too are doing the same ethical practice. I am doing meditation and study of the Dharma, they are doing the same thing. What I am following, they are following.

KP: In the ordinary world differences between people often lead to clashes and even violence. How do you think being a Buddhist helps people go beyond cultural differences?

AS: It's not easy to understand other cultures but if we are Going for Refuge it will make us want to understand other people and other cultures. People who are Going for Refuge are not only thinking about themselves. They are practising generosity, kindness, compassion and on that basis they try to understand other people and their culture.

KP: In the FWBO we say that friendship is a very important practice and that it is possible for any two people to become friends.

AS: Yes, we try to understand one another and one another's backgrounds. When people are trying to develop friendship with me, they are trying to understand me and my culture and I am trying to understand them and their culture, how that person is 'built up'.

KP: Their conditioning?

AS: Yes, their conditioning. When there is metta, it is easy to understand these differences without anger or anxiety. Actually it helps to create a broad view. We need a broad view. Well, we are trying to understand the whole world, actually, as Buddhists. (*Laughter.*) Another thing is that as Buddhists we are not attached to our culture, we are not saying my culture is best and other cultures are bad. Instead we are saying, yes, there are differences, what are these differences. If we are adaptable, it is very easy to go into other cultures and learn from them. But if we are not adaptable, then it is very difficult, we find everything difficult. I think living in another culture is a very strong spiritual practice - it requires adaptability and kindness. It is a challenge for our ego. When I first came here and I saw how knowledgeable everyone was, I felt very challenged, I thought, oh dear, I, too, want to have lots of knowledge.

KP: That's why you were going to the library so much!

AS: Yes, I was getting lots of books, doing lots of reading. But I think the main thing about living in a different culture is that we have to learn to make our heart open, if we can't do that, we will make a big separation between ourselves and others, and if we do that, we can never have an international sangha.

KP: Has anything you have discovered about your English friends' conditioning surprised you?

AS: Yes, I remember one day in the community we were discussing death and what we wanted to happen on the occasion of our death and I noticed something very interesting. People were talking about having memorials after their death. And I was wondering why I wasn't thinking about memorials. Then I realised that our countries are different. In my country we never have memorials, we just put the ashes in a river or the ocean - we never keep them! (Laughter.)

Another interesting thing I noticed was when I was listening to people singing mantras. In India we just chant mantras in the traditional way, but here people like to do a sort of singing, they do something different with mantras sometimes and then I remembered that here people are singing in church so perhaps this is why they are singing mantras in this way.

KP: What is the most important thing you've learnt from your time in England so far?

AS: I've seen good examples of people leading a spiritual life. I've learnt how to be a good example and also how to set up good conditions for people who want to lead a spiritual life - good conditions for oneself and for others. I've also learnt a lot about team-work through my work with the Taraloka Support Team. It is like a team-based Right Livelihood. Our team looks after the running of the Taraloka Retreat Centre. In working with that team, I also saw that women can do any work - carpentry, building maintenance, plumbing and so on. In India women don't do all these kinds of work.

KP: What do you think western women can learn from their Indian Dharma sisters?

AS: I think they could learn to laugh more! (*Laughter*) Also I think they could learn to express their feelings more. Another thing I can mention is friendship. There are two aspects to friendship, there is the aspect of duty and there is the aspect of what Bhante calls 'taking delight'. I noticed in this country people are very good in fulfilling their duty but I think when they are living and working together they could do more to just take delight and enjoy one another. (In India we are very good at taking delight but maybe not so good in duty.) So I think this 'taking delight' in our friends is something my western Dharma sisters could learn from us in India.

KP: Alokasri, thank you very much indeed.

New Order Members with Dhammadinna (seated centre)

~ Ordinations ~

I AM WALKING SLOWLY down a path in the deepening dusk. The dew is soaking my feet and covering them with bliss. Slowly, relishing each step, relishing the anticipation, I approach the place. Flags, crystals, burning torches, joyous jewels show the way. My heart is full. I can let the fullness of this moment lay my old self to rest. My old self brought me to this point. My next footsteps are to take me into the unknown. Someone new is to be brought into being, as I follow the ancient tradition and Go for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

Candles throw their warm glow against the walls of the small room in which we are seated, a simple shrine before us. Opposite me is Padmasuri, my private preceptor. She, perhaps more than any other single person has helped me glimpse the Sangha jewel. For nearly four years she led my mitra study group - and she led other study groups that I've been part of too. She works part-time in the Evolution shop where I work full-time, and she spreads an even and positive atmosphere around her. Last year she became one of my Kalyana Mitras, life-long spiritual friends to help me along the path. She is witnessing my Going For Refuge to the Three Jewels, she gives me my sadhana practice, she gives me a new name, Tejasvini, 'she who possesses radiance, fiery energy, moral and spiritual influence'.

The day for the public ordinations arrives. The shrine room at Tiratanaloka is packed - with retreatants, members of the Ordination team and invited friends and family who have come especially for the occasion. Dhammadinna is presiding masterfully, wonderfully. With her informing, light touch, it becomes yet another mysterious and joyful occasion. One by one we seven ordinands make our offerings and receive the initiation. Kesas finally around our necks the new names are revealed: Shraddhi (ex-Marlene Heap), Pasadaniya (ex-Kim Murray), Tejasvini (ex-Rosie Bell), Sudurjaya (ex-Marilyn Therza), Vishrabdha (ex-Emily Gray) and Tejapushpa (ex-Carolyn Entwistle). The room erupts with a snowstorm of confetti, a trumpet of sadhus, laughter and delight. Gifts, congratulations, tea, photographs and, all too soon, the goodbyes.

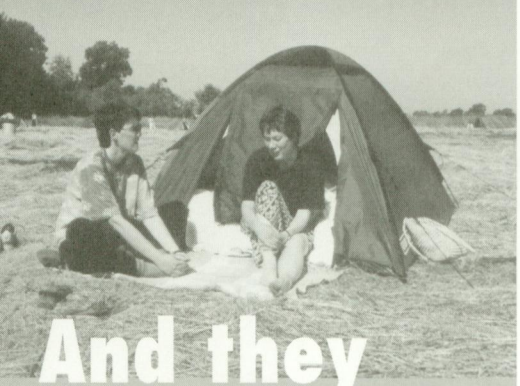
Tejasvini & Padmasuri

This is how I became the fifth of seven women to be ordained at Tiratanaloka in August. The ordinations took place at Tiratanaloka during a retreat for women who have asked for ordination. The theme of the retreat was the Ten Precepts, the ten ethical principles we undertake to live by when we enter the Western Buddhist Order.

As I write, eighteen women are on a six-week ordination retreat in Tuscany, but the seven of us were unable to be away for so long, either because of ill-health or family responsibilities.

Now I am back home in Cambridge with my teenage children, at work again, starting out on the path to find out what it means to be a member of this unique and wonderful Order. I am fortunate to live in such good conditions to support my practice, with a thriving local Buddhist Centre, a great team of other Buddhists to work with, a Chapter to be part of, and my family. I think of the friends I made on retreat, particularly the other newly ordained Order members. I think we enriched and strengthened the retreat enormously for each other, we were very fortunate to be as many as seven. The links we made will I'm sure last for the rest of our lives. May they all be well, inspired and happy.

Tejasvini



And they gathered in great numbers....

Taraloka's field became the venue for an outdoor retreat for three warm July days. Two marquees and scores of tents dotted the field where 145 women from all the over the world gathered together.

The Great Gathering (which all women, both Friends and mitras, are welcome to attend) has been organised by the UK women Mitra Convenors for the past three years. Ratnavandana, the Overall Convenor of Women Mitras for the UK explained:

'The Gatherings create an opportunity for all women, whatever their level of experience, to practise the Dharma, to hear the Dharma, to be moved and transformed by the Dharma. Judging from the cards and letters I've received, we certainly achieved that this year.'

With Wisdom being the theme, a golden Prajnaparamita shrine was the focus of this year's event, (Prajnaparamita is a Bodhisattva of Wisdom.) One marquee was transformed into a shrine room in which meditation, ritual and talks took place. The key-note talk, 'The Play of Wisdom', was given by Kulaprabha who drew extensively on the *Vimalakirti Nirdesa*, commonly regarded as one of the greatest scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism. A symposium of three shorter talks explored the topic of Wisdom from three different angles: Dayanandi spoke about the development of Wisdom through meditation, Vidyadevi about its development through study and reflection and Srivati about Wisdom and the Arts. All four talks were greatly appreciated, stimulating a good deal of inspiring discussion.

Another Great Gathering is planned for next year

News from Taraloka

Report from Elizabeth Smith

Handing on at Taraloka

AFTER NINE YEARS AS Chairwoman of Taraloka Buddhist Retreat Centre, Dayanandi formally handed on her responsibilities to Saddhanandi during a two-day ritual in September. The entire Taraloka community took part in the various events which were presided over by the Retreat Centre's President and former Chairwoman, Sanghadevi.

Dayanandi has lived and worked at Taraloka since 1986, joining the community just nine months after its inauguration. She explained that her vision as Chairwoman had been the creation of Tara's realm at Taraloka. (Tara is the Bodhisattva of compassion in female form.)

'I thought it was important that we should really engage with our spiritual practice with one another in the community since this would extend naturally to creating an environment in the Retreat Centre that would be welcoming and friendly and exemplify sangha. We found that women who came into this atmosphere soon felt at ease and able to get on with their spiritual practice,' Dayanandi explained.

The end of her term of office was marked by planting a mountain-ash tree outside the main Retreat Centre shrine room.

'It's an organic symbol, a symbol of something continuing to grow, blossom and bear fruit out of my time as Chairwoman.'

Dayanandi plans to spend next year visiting FWBO centres in New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Estonia and Scandinavia. During her visits she will be leading a number of retreats and events before returning to Taraloka in 2002.

Ratnasuri, a founder member of the Community, said having a different Chairwoman makes a gradual but large impact on Taraloka.

'Each woman brings a different flavour. Sanghadevi was the pioneer. She had a very strong vision of what Taraloka would become and paid very close attention to the detail of how it would get there. With Dayanandi, Taraloka become more friendly, kind and outgoing. Saddhanandi is a people person - the friendliness will develop even further, I think.'

Saddhanandi has lived at Taraloka since December 1994. She was ordained in 1995 and became manager of the Taraloka Support Team in 1997. On the evening of September 6th, in the context of a sevenfold puja led by Sanghadevi, Dayanandi placed a jade and turquoise mala around her

Saddhanandi, Sanghadevi, Dayanandi

neck, symbol of her new office.

Saddhanandi said she does not plan any radical changes of direction for Taraloka.

'Taraloka was bought and developed by women in the movement. It is still totally owned and managed by women for women. It's an inspiring example for women all over the FWBO,' she said, continuing, 'I want women to feel comfortable about coming here, including women who may never have been on retreat before. I also want Dharmacharinis to take advantage of the scope available to them. We have the resources and the systems in place and I'd like them to feel they can be really creative in the retreats they run.'

European Chairmen's Event

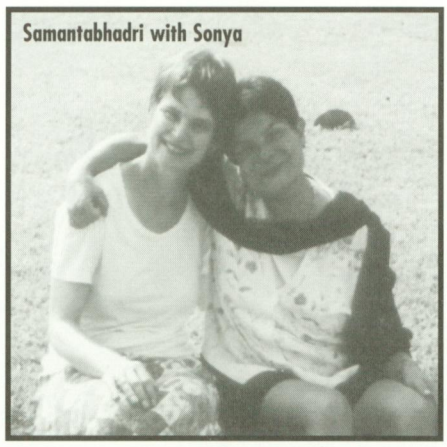
The biennial FWBO European Chairmen's Event was held this year at Taraloka. Thirty-seven men and women attended. (This was a one-off event, retreats at Taraloka being otherwise only for women.) It gave the Chairmen of FWBO Centres the opportunity to experience for themselves the facilities available to women who want to go on retreat. A good deal of appreciation was expressed by those who were visiting Taraloka for the first time.

The co-ordinator of the event was Surana, chairman of the Cardiff Buddhist Centre and secretary to the Chairmen's meeting. He explained the purpose of the Chairmen coming together regularly is to facilitate friendships between them, to discuss the FWBO in general and their own individual situations in particular, and in this way to promote the unity and growth of the FWBO.

The theme this year was the Bodhisattva Ideal and included a talk by Parami, Chairwoman of FWBO Valencia.

'As a Chairperson you are, to quite an extent, taking responsibility for the spiritual well-being of other people and that to me is related to the whole idea of creating a Pure Land. Any Order member is a trainee Bodhisattva and the more responsibility you take, the more focused on the Bodhisattva Ideal you become.'

News from Mexico City


Samantabhadri with Sonya

'What do you want silence and solitude for? What most people enjoy is company and chatter.' This is the sort of comment you might hear from a Mexican if you tried to talk about meditation. Sometimes it is only when people have had a taste of meditation that they begin to understand the value of silence. In Mexico city our sangha is creating a haven where people can have at least a glimpse of serenity, where people can come together to meditate with friends in a room that is tranquil - even when outside the noise is everywhere: the rhythmic drumming of the indigenous Indians in the square, the newest hit-parade song, car alarms, street vendors, dogs barking.

BEGINNINGS

To begin with Upekshamati was the only Order member in Mexico City. He offered meditation lessons and Dharma talks every Saturday and Sunday in a rented room. Over the years more than 5000 people have attended those weekend classes. Later he found a building that became our own Buddhist Centre and continued organising and leading not only meditation and Buddhism classes, but also puja nights, study groups, single-sex and mixed retreats and workshops, as well as celebrations and festivals, like Wesak. He initiated other activities that are now a regular part of the Centre programme, such as yoga classes, and Tai-chi and Shiat-su workshops. But most importantly of all, he befriended those who came regularly to the Centre, men and women of different backgrounds, ages and professional interests. It was in this context that we Mexicans began to learn about Sangharakshita, to understand his teachings and begin to put them into practice.

One of the things we learnt was that human beings could grow as individuals. Up until then most of us had simply let ourselves go along with social customs. In Mexico this means constant chatter and huge crowds, always seeing ourselves as part of the family group and the wider social group. As part of the group, we easily lose our individuality and never have the opportunity to get to know ourselves more deeply. Women are particularly constrained by the emphasis on family life. The burden of responsibility for 'holding the family together' lies heavily on us at times, along with an all too frequent lack of economic independence.

DHARMACHARINIS VISIT

Upekshamati used to tell us about the women's wing of the FWBO which was so well developed in Britain particularly. We were eager to meet and get to know some of the women Order members, to have an exemplar in female form with whom we could develop friendship and share our aspirations. In August 1995 a Dharmacharini came to visit Mexico City for the first time. This was Rupachitta. As you can imagine, her visit was very important for the group of women that had become involved at the Centre. What we were most curious about was the way women Order members led their lives. Rupachitta shared with us her experiences, bringing a great deal of clarity, in particular about the role of single and married women within the Order.

Rupachitta's visit gave us a taste of what it would be like to have a Dharmacharini amongst us. And then, in 1998, Parami came to visit us and the following year Sinhadevi paid her first visit. We were overjoyed to learn that both these Dharmacharinis would be visiting us on a regular basis.

On one visit, Parami led a workshop on self-esteem which helped many of us to start changing our priorities and values. She helped us understand that it is fine to be a working woman, to be fearless, independent and single - which is not always encouraged in 'macho' Mexican society. It is fine not being a mother and not wanting to be a mother. It is also fine to be a mother and to want to embrace the Dharma.

Last spring, Parami led our first women's retreat. One or two of us had been on a women's retreat in England, but it was very different having one in Mexico, in our own language. It was an opportunity to talk about and clarify the single-sex principle and it gave rise

to a good deal of joy and tears as we talked about developing spiritual friendship. 'Como lloran ustedes!' (How much you women cry!) Parami would say to us, after opening our hearts through her talks.

A GROWING SANGHA

From her first visit, Sinhadevi began warmly developing friendships with us. Her determination and clarity when teaching the Dharma, her enthusiasm in learning about Mexican life, her generosity in giving so much of her time to come to Mexico and help us has been a great example.

We were delighted to hear last spring that Sinhadevi was to become our Mitra Convenor. This makes it possible for Mexican women to become mitras. It was a very joyful occasion when, on the 24th of August, Sonia, Gina, Thea, and Liliana had their mitra ceremonies in the company of the Sangha and with many family members coming to the Centre for the first time. Sadhu sisters!!

During that same month, Sinhadevi organised a retreat for us which she led with Samantabhadri's support. Nearly forty women attended, several of them newcomers. The theme was mindfulness. Through the impact of such retreats, the example and friendship of Sinhadevi and Parami, and through our own determined efforts, we have begun to develop a real taste for what it can be like to lead our lives devoted to the Three Jewels. There are now four 'home-grown' mitras here in Mexico City. There are several women who have asked for Ordination. There is a growing number of women attending study groups, retreats and other activities, and a constant flow of new women coming through the doors of the Centre to hear about and partake in Dharma activities. All this without having as yet a permanently resident Dharmacharini!

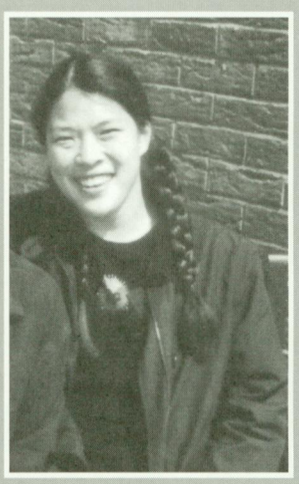
Being part of the FWBO and at the same time not having all the institutions that characterise it, such as Right Livelihood businesses, residential communities, and retreat centres, has been something quite strange and mysterious. We have created communities and businesses in our minds and imaginations, and argued for or against them but they remained a myth - until one day three women decided to take a risk... 'Abhirati' is our first womenπs closed community, and was dedicated in May this year. It started out as a dream, an idea, an adventure, a desire for better conditions for our everyday practice. Now it is a reality, providing a very good context in which to deepen Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels and develop friendships. 'Abhirati' has inspired other women (and men) - an example that others can follow.

So we can say that Buddhism is taking root in Mexico. The FWBO is growing in Mexico. Our Sangha is blossoming in Mexico. We wish to deepen our Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We want to feel a part of this great wheel that Bhante gracefully started rolling more than 30 years ago.

by Sonia Rodriguez, Thea Wiersman and Georgina Martinez.
With translation by Tere Valdevere

Preparing flower petals for a Mitra ceremony

Handing On in San Francisco



On the same day that Saddhanandi took on the Chairmanship of Taraloka, Viveka became Chairwoman of the San Francisco Buddhist Center. Viveka came across Buddhism after taking a university class on Chinese philosophy in 1986. In 1997, at the age of 29, she was ordained into the Western Buddhist Order since when she has been teaching meditation and Buddhism classes and leading retreats for the San Francisco Buddhist Center. A Chinese American, Viveka works on social justice issues in the Bay Area's communities of color. She is also a hospice volunteer with the Zen Hospice program at Laguna Honda Hospital.

The chairmanship was handed on from Paramananda - a good friend and mentor of Viveka, who was instrumental in helping her to become ordained into the Western Buddhist Order. He had moved to San Francisco from England seven years ago to assist North Americans in the development of the FWBO Center in San Francisco. The handing on of the Chair marks a significant development for the four Order members who are working co-operatively to spread the Dharma through the SFBC. Viveka sees taking on this responsibility as, 'a precious opportunity to live in the spirit of the Bodhisattva and to share the inspiration and liberation I've witnessed and experienced through practising the Dharma'.

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transform ourselves
led by kalyanaprabha

stream of tranquility

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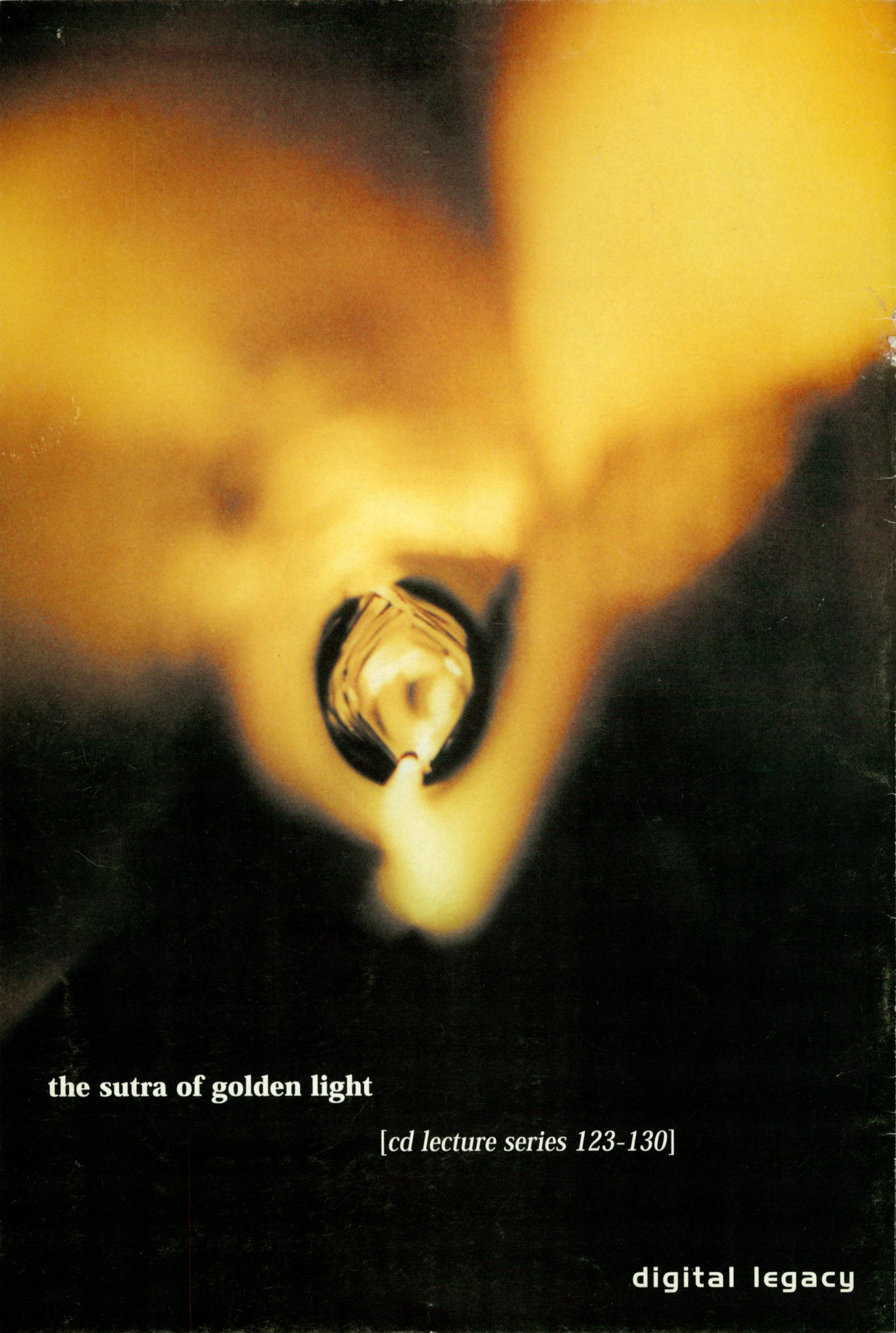
being fully alive and
deeply tranquil
led by vajragita

freedom of heart

6-13 january
for mitras

follow the metta bhavana to
freedom of heart
led by ratnavandana



the sutra of golden light

[cd lecture series 123-130]

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