

LOTUS REALM

a new voice for Buddhist Women



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Why Ordination?

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LOTUS REALM

is produced by women members of the
Western Buddhist Order and their friends.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS

The Editor of Lotus Realm will be stepping
down after the next issue (June 2002).
Regretfully, no new subscriptions can be
accepted until a new editor is appointed.

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.

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.

* 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.

THE TWELFTH ANNIVERSARY OF MY ORDINATION fell on 11th September this year. As it happens I was leading a small study retreat on the Metta Sutta - that ancient text in which the Buddha explains the path to Enlightenment in terms of the development of ethics and of metta or universal loving-kindness.

Whatever living beings there be: feeble or strong, tall, stout or medium, short, small or large, without exception; seen or unseen, those dwelling far or near, those who are born or those who are to be born, may all beings be happy!

Let none deceive another, nor despise any person whatsoever in any place. Let him not wish any harm to another out of anger or ill-will.

Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, let him cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings.

Let his thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world: above, below and across without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity.

Karaniya Metta Sutta

That afternoon one of my friends came over from the community house to tell me the news from America. In the days that followed as we continued our study and as news reports continued to come in, it seemed I had rarely been so unavoidably confronted with the potential in mankind for Good and for Evil.

Rarely have I felt so keenly that 'hatred can never be overcome by hatred but only by love.' Rarely have I seen so clearly that as long as there is greed, hatred and delusion in the hearts of men and women, there will always be war and acts of violence. Rarely have I felt the urgency of the need to eradicate from my own heart those same forces of destruction and to plant there the fine seeds that will eventually blossom as wisdom and compassion.

I wrote to our MP, to Tony Blair, to President Bush, to our local papers. The *Whitchurch Herald* printed the letter in full under a large heading: **VIOLENCE IS NOT THE RESPONSE**. Even if he didn't share the sentiment, the editor told me, he thought it a good letter. I was glad a Buddhist voice was being heard here in darkest Shropshire.

But although I wrote to the papers and so on, I knew in my heart of hearts that what we were witnessing was just samsara boiling over once more, things coming to a head in certain regions of the world and being brought unavoidably to our notice. Terrible things happen all the time but when it does not affect 'our'

(western) interests we don't pay them too much attention.

As the weeks have gone on, I have realised as never before that as a Buddhist it is impossible to identify with a particular nation. It's not that, say, as a European, I don't appreciate European culture very much - I do. But I cannot feel 'our' western world and its people are to be valued more than our fellows in other parts of the world, not least Afghanistan. Lying in bed in our apparently safe community house, I have been aware of people in Kabul listening to the approach of bomber jets. I have been aware of people in New York facing up to a terrible tragedy. I have been aware of terrorists dedicated to a 'holy war'. And the words and the sentiment expressed in the *Metta Sutta* have come to mind again and again.

Events such as those of September 11th jolt us from our sleep, it seems, and make us (or some of us) realise what we really need to do. But perhaps they also help us see the extent to which we are already doing what we need to do. Some friends have said it has made them realise that the life they are leading is exactly the one they want to be leading. To be practising the Dharma is in itself an offering to the world at such a time. And so we get on with our lives of meditation and ethics and fostering spiritual community with one another.

And I have been getting on with editing this issue of *Lotus Realm* - and

it is time to let all of you, our readers, know that next Summer I will be stepping down as editor. I have been involved with the magazine for some twelve years - in fact ever since I got involved with the failing *Dakini* magazine and helped to re-establish it. Along with Vajrapushpa, for many years my co-editor, and with the help of many others we have continued to bring out our Buddhist magazine for women twice (and for a while thrice) a year. Some years ago I tried to hand on the editorship but was not successful and knowing well the value of the magazine to many people, I decided to keep it going.

This time, however, I have decided it is time to step down even if another editor cannot be found. I have felt the need to move on to other things and to give in other ways. But I hope very much that a new editor will step forward from the ranks of the now many Dharmacharinis in the WBO. Perhaps it will not happen straight away. Perhaps there will be a pause before another magazine rises phoenix like - with a new voice, a new approach. I feel we in the women's wing of the FWBO have a lot to say, a lot to offer - and I hope that will soon find a place again in a special publication.

The last issue that I will edit will appear in June 2002 and it will be a celebration of our magazine over the past fifteen or so years....

Kalyanaprabha

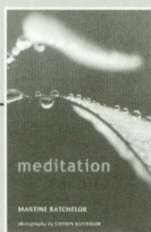
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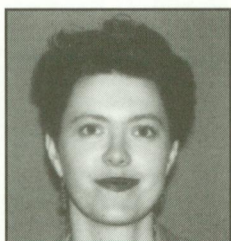
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Contributors



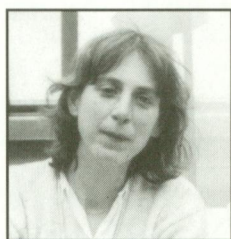
Janina Egert grew up in East Berlin. When the wall came down in 1989, she was studying painting and drawing. As a student she spent a year in Russia (1984/85) and afterwards returned there many times. She began attending FWBO classes in 1996 and in 1998 she asked for ordination. She has recently completed training in Desk Top Publishing. She is a lover of nature.



Joanna Hughes was born in Wales. On obtaining her Master's degree in documentary film from Goldsmiths' College, London, in 1997, she began freelancing professionally as a director. The same year she asked for ordination. She completed a video on women and ordination earlier this year, working with Vidyamala. Her current interests include immersing herself in the Spanish language and culture and reading and writing new poetry.



Jody Goch grew up in Canada. Having worked as a truck and school-bus driver, horse wrangler and dog groomer, she decided to give it all up in pursuit of like-minded people with whom she could live and work and practise the Dharma. Her interests include basket ball, poetry and country and western music.



Kalyanaprabha comes from the English Midlands. She spent many years working with the FWBO in Manchester whilst also bringing up her daughter and editing a well-known Buddhist magazine for women. In 1998 she moved to Taraloka Retreat Centre to join the newly established Retreat Team. She has been a regular visitor to the sanghas in Stockholm and Germany.



Siddhisambhava grew up in London. As a young woman in the mid-1970's, she became involved in left-wing politics and the gay-rights movement. She worked for *Spare Rib*, the magazine of the women's liberation movement, for the GLC under Ken Livingstone - and then changed tack completely when she came across the Dharma. She was ordained in 2000 and is about to embark on a year's journey in Australasia including a three-month solitary retreat.



Vidyamala was born in New Zealand where she had a career in photography and film-making. Since coming to the UK she has undertaken a video project documenting women and Buddhism and produced three videos on these themes. She also runs courses at the Manchester Buddhist Centre for people with chronic pain and ill health using mindfulness and meditation to teach pain management. She lives in a women's community.

Why Ordination?

Kalyanaprabha

'Name?'

'Kalyanaprabha.'

'Can you spell that?'

'K-a-l...'

'Surname?'

'I haven't got a surname - I just have that one name.'

Raised eyebrows; a quizzical stare.

'It's a Buddhist name,' I add, trying to be helpful.

'Oh.' My questioner looks uneasy, doesn't know quite what to say. After a pause she enquires, 'Did you choose it yourself?'

'No, the name was given to me - I'm an ordained Buddhist.'

What, I sometimes wonder, is left in the mind of my interrogator at the end of such a conversation. What does she imagine me to be when I tell her I am 'ordained'. The term conjures up images of priests, monks, nuns, bishops, churches...

The dictionary defines ordination as 'the conferring of holy orders' or 'the acceptance of holy orders'. 'Holy orders' is further defined as, 'the sacrament or rite whereby a person is admitted to the Christian ministry.' I am sure when I was ordained I was not accepting admission to the Christian ministry. And I certainly did not see the act of ordination as a sacrament, special grace conferred upon me by God.

Why then, do we use this term 'ordination' at all? What does it signify in a Buddhist context? And why should ordinary women of today wish to participate in an ordination ceremony? These are the questions I want to address here.

After all, to be a Buddhist, we are told, simply means to Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. To make striving after Enlightenment the central meaning and highest value of your life is to go for refuge to the Buddha. Going for Refuge to the Dharma is to have recourse to the Buddha's teaching as a means of achieving one's goal. To do that in fellowship with others similarly committed, in particular with those who have developed some degree of spiritual

maturity is to Go for Refuge to the Sangha. Surely one can just get on with one's life and practise as a Buddhist - developing one's ethical sensitivity, becoming more mindful, practising meditation, developing wisdom....Why, then, ordination?

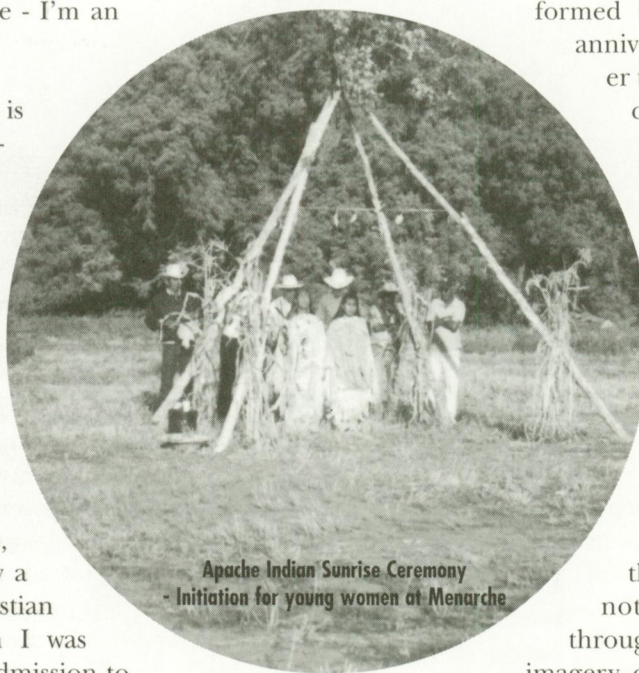
The Significance of Ceremony

As Buddhists we refer not to the *sacrament* of ordination but to the *ceremony* of ordination. Here the dictionary is quite helpful: a ceremony is defined as: 'a formal act or ritual, often set by custom or tradition, performed in observation of an event or anniversary.' Now we are getting nearer to the heart of it. Ordination is a ceremony, a formal act, a ritual, that is set by custom and tradition and it is performed in observation of an event.

The need for ceremony to mark significant life events is well known. I believe all tribal peoples' lives include - are even centered upon - various kinds of rituals and ceremonies which mark significant events.

But why has mankind developed all these ceremonies, all these rituals? Just as a poet cannot convey meaning merely through concepts but has recourse to imagery of all kinds that can more fully bear that meaning, so too in the course of human life, people need ceremonies that enact or express for them something of the significance of certain events that take place, that can express the deeper meanings, the deeper mysteries that we are confronted with in the everyday occurrences of birth, of death, and of other significant events. Ceremonies also have a social dimension. When a young woman receives initiation into menarche, it signifies taking on new responsibilities in the tribe. And when the ceremony of marriage takes place, a whole new pattern of family or tribal relationships is implied.

One of the symptoms of present-day cultural malaise is the lack of appropriate ceremonies to mark significant events. A new baby is born and parents, overjoyed at the safe arrival of their child, or full of wonder at the mystery of birth, want to make something of the occasion. So they



Apache Indian Sunrise Ceremony
- Initiation for young women at Menarche

arrange for baby to be baptized. But do the young parents mean it when they reply to the priest's question, 'Do you turn to Christ?' with 'I turn to Christ.' Of course not. They are just saying the words. And do young couples - who only ever went to church a few times in order to qualify for the proper white wedding - believe it when the priest intones the traditional injunction, 'those whom God has joined together...' No, they know marriages these days very often end with divorce and re-marriage. Funerals can be even worse. Many of us have no doubt attended the funeral service of some good friend, a confirmed atheist, and had to listen to some well-meaning clergyman talking about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. On these occasions we are conscious that something is very badly amiss.

What has gone wrong? It is, I think, that we have no universally accepted religious or spiritual context to which the great events of life can be related, and which can bring out their deeper significance. We no longer believe that our children are born with sin on their souls which must be removed by the rite of baptism. We no longer believe that marriages are made in heaven (were we to think that we would have to conclude that heaven is a very confused place....) As for what happens after death - about that we are most unsure of all.

A ceremony or a ritual is only effective if it gives expression to people's fundamental beliefs and values. These days ceremonies cannot do this. Yet without ceremonies, life becomes flat and dull. It is like a book devoid of imagery or poetry. We need ceremonies.

So what relevance does this have for our exploration of ordination into a Buddhist Order. Does the ordination ceremony mark any kind of significant event, and if so, which event? And what are the higher values with which it links the participants? And what about the social dimension? Does it in any way transport a group of people to an experience of a higher dimension of common life? And does it redefine relationships within a group in any significant way? But before trying to answer

these questions, perhaps we should pause for a moment and have a look at the ceremony itself.

The Ordination Ceremony of the Western Buddhist Order

I well remember the occasion of my own private ordination ceremony. A dull September day in 1989. The six of us gathered in the still shrine room at Taraloka along with a number of senior Order members. Practising the metta bhavana meditation. One person quietly getting up and disappearing and then re-appearing some time later.

I myself getting up, leaving the shrine room, making my way across the lawn to another shrine room, carefully prepared by generous hands. A shrine of pure white. An atmosphere of mystery and something deep and awe inspiring. My preceptor waiting for me. Making the request to take the Refuge and Precepts. Chanting the ten Dharmachari/ni precepts. Vowing that the rest of my life would be dedicated to following

those training principles. Receiving the mantra of the Bodhisattva figure on whom I would try to meditate daily, and whose qualities I would try and embody more and more. And then hearing my new name. When I heard the name it was as if some wonderful gossamer cloak fell down upon me from above. It was as if someone was pointing out to me who I truly and most deeply was. Soon I was returning to the main shrine room, joining the others in their meditation. It felt as if a miracle had taken place. Later on, walking across the field, my over-riding feeling was one of tremendous relief. 'It's OK if I die now,' I thought to myself. Because the most important thing had been accomplished - I had set my life in the direction I wanted to go. I had made that commitment. Regardless of whether anyone else wanted me to or

didn't want me to, I had decided and I had done it. I had committed myself.

A significant event?

So what was the significant event which this ceremony was marking. It was commitment. But commitment to what? The commitment that is made on the occasion of



Kalyanaprabha, Ratnasuri (preceptor)

one's private ordination ceremony is commitment to pursuing the Higher Evolution, to the development of one's own individual consciousness, through the bringing into being of ever clearer, purer, and more positive states of mind. It is commitment to working towards total transformation of one's being 'in body, speech and mind' through various practices but in particular through recourse to the ten ethical training principles: training oneself to abstain from causing harm to living beings, training oneself to abstain from taking what is not freely given, from sexual misconduct, from untruthful, harsh, meaningless and slanderous speech. It is committing oneself to purifying one's mind of all craving, animosity and delusion. And from the positive point of view it is a commitment to developing love and compassion for all living beings, to communicating with them truthfully, kindly, helpfully, harmoniously, to developing a mind that is tranquil, compassionate and wise. The ethical training principles taken on by Order members are very demanding and very far-reaching indeed.

To commit oneself in this way is no easy matter. One can *want* to commit oneself, one can be *inspired* to commit oneself, but to be *able* to actually commit oneself is difficult. To go from wanting to commit oneself to being able to commit oneself is to move from provisional Going for Refuge to effective Going for Refuge, and it is this effective Going for Refuge which is the significant event that is marked on the occasion of the private ordination ceremony.

The process that anybody goes through from the point where they decide they *want* to commit themselves and so ask for ordination to where they are actually *able* to commit themselves is a demanding and challenging one. It means making radical changes - very often in one's outer life - and always in one's inner orientation and outlook. It means getting to know oneself much more deeply and being willing to confront and meet those aspects of one's being from which one has always turned away. To reach the point of effective Going for Refuge is a tremendous achievement as all those who have been through an ordination ceremony will testify. Because the ceremony marks a real and genuine event of very great spiritual significance in an individual's life, the ceremony itself can have a tremendous effect upon one. Many people experience their private ordination ceremony as a moment out of time, taking place within another dimension altogether, even a shattering experience of spiritual death and rebirth.

Spiritual Community

But the ordination is not yet complete.. There is a second part to the ordination ceremony. There is the public ordination. Having made your individual commitment in the private ordination ceremony, the miracle having taken place, some days having passed, you now sit alongside others who have done the same. Like you they have been reflecting in silence on what has happened. Like you they have been pondering on the meaning of their new name. And now something else is going to happen. After all, you have committed yourself to a Buddhist way of life - but

have you joined the Order? What does it mean to join the Order? And *why* join an Order?

As well as the need to commit oneself to a higher ideal, there is another fundamental urge within the human heart: the urge towards fellowship and community. Human beings continually create groups of one kind or another - but if their aim or purpose is a utilitarian one, the fellowship experienced is only partial and very often, unfortunately, the darker forces prevail, the forces that seek power, the assertion of the individual will over others, people end up manipulating one another or worse. Sooner or later such groups fail us. Only those fellowships based on higher common values give us a taste of that true fellowship for which the human heart so deeply longs.

There have been attempts to bring such communities into being all through history. In more recent times in the West, we find artists and literary figures searching for new kinds of fellowship, new societies, based on some common higher vision. Coleridge and his friend Robert Southey planned to found a 'pantosocratic society' on the banks of the Susquehanna river where men and women would live together in harmony and raise children untainted by selfish materialism. John Millais, William Holman Hunt and their friends founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with the common aim of redefining the role of the artist as one who would 'reveal vast visions of beauty to mankind.' W. B. Yeats, the Irish poet, was deeply involved in various Orders, Rosicrucian and others - (which were at times rather more political than spiritual in their proceedings.) D. H. Lawrence's great dream was to found a community of like-minded people 'dedicated to fostering "new shoots of life" within themselves, and subsequently to seeding the sterile ruins of Western civilisation.' None of these attempts was successful in bringing into being a lasting spiritual community. Some never began at all.

Sangharakshita has some very interesting comments about the creation of spiritual community and the failure to do so in an essay entitled, 'D.H. Lawrence and the Spiritual Community.'¹ It would make an interesting task to analyse each of the attempts mentioned above in terms of the principles which he enumerates as essential for establishing successful spiritual communities. Why did they fail? Contemplating this one realises what a tremendously difficult thing it is to establish a living spiritual community. It is a rare and precious thing in the world.

One of the fundamental principles for successful spiritual community which he enumerates is that the spiritual community 'must have a common ideal and a common method of practice.' In the public ordination ceremony there is the recognition that the ideals to which we have committed ourselves, the practices which we have taken up are ones shared with others. We now find ourselves amidst a community of like-minded individuals. This experience of acceptance into the spiritual community is one which can give rise to a feeling of unprecedented joy - as Sangharakshita records so movingly of his own bhiksu ordination that took place in November 1950:

'Whilst the ceremony was in progress I experienced an extraordinary sense of peace, satisfaction, fulfilment, acceptance, and belonging. It was a feeling such as I had not experienced before,

and in subsequent years I was never surprised when an elderly monk told me that receiving the monastic ordination had been the greatest experience of his whole life.²

Here at last we find an explanation or justification for our use of the word 'ordination' - for among the many definitions of the word 'order' that appear in our dictionary, we find the eleventh definition stating that an Order is 'a body of people united in a particular aim or purpose.'

But before we move on let us pause here - let us make no mistake that the spiritual community we join at the time of ordination is a flawless example of sangha. We know that it is not. But it is a collection of individual men and women committed to common ideals and practices who are striving to make those ideals more and more present in their lives.

The Great Myth

There are many ways of talking about what takes place at ordination. There is a myth that the Western Buddhist Order participates in - the myth of Avalokitesvara. Avalokitesvara dedicated himself to saving all sentient beings from their miseries and establishing them on the path to Enlightenment. So great was his ardour, so strong his determination that he took a vow that if his determination wavered for even a moment, 'let my body be shattered into a thousand pieces.' Giving himself totally to his great task he worked for endless aeons to save beings from all their myriad sufferings. But however hard he worked he never seemed to do more than help a tiny fraction of all the people in need. For a moment his dedication wavered - better that I myself enter nirvana than I continue to help all these beings. At that moment his head and body shattered into a thousand pieces. In agony he cried out to Amitabha. The great Lord of Compassion came to his aid. Restoring his body from the shattered fragments, he re-created Avalokitesvara with a thousand arms that could stretch in every direction. In the palm of each hand was an eye, an eye of wisdom to discern the needs of each being. And in every hand a dif-

ferent implement to respond appropriately to the suffering of all.

The image of the thousand-armed Avalokitesvara has become a symbol for the WBO. Each hand represents an individual Order member with his or her particular gifts and talents at the service of mankind. Alone one can do so little. In co-operation with a thousand others (and there are now nearly a thousand Order members) one can do a little more.

Two of the hands of Avalokitesvara are clasped to his heart and in them he holds a shining gem, the wish-fulfilling jewel, the bodhicitta. So each Order member aspires to develop a heart in common with all other Order members, free of the poisons of greed, hatred and delusion and full of love, compassion and wisdom. On those occasions when Order members gather and give themselves to real, deep, authentic communication with one another,

through 'dharma-katha' - talking about their practice and experience of the Dharma, or engaging in common spiritual practices, there comes into being that wonderful experience of a Third Order of Consciousness. Each individual uniquely themselves, and yet a commonality of experience in which all are deeply united. This is, I believe, the fullest consummation of that human longing for fellowship. This is what an Order is when it is being truly an Order.

New Relations

'You won't be different when you come back will you?' was the doubtful question one friend put to me when I went off on my ordination retreat. Well, yes and no. One doesn't return from an ordination retreat a completely different person. And yet one

does not return the same either. Something has happened. Something deeply significant has happened. And one cannot be the same again. One's relationship to oneself is changed. And one's relations with others also changes. Naturally. People treat you differently. Certainly people in the sangha. They expect more of you. They notice more how you live and what you say. After all, they now expect you to embody, to some extent at least, the





spiritual ideal which has inspired them. This can be something of a shock - and a challenge.

And there is a whole new set of relationships within the Order. One joins a chapter - a gathering of local Order members who meet each week to discuss their practice of the Dharma, to encourage and exhort one another and just to enjoy one another, to take delight in one another. Of course sometimes one finds other Order members a little difficult - they may even find oneself difficult! So there is the opportunity to grow in wisdom and compassion. Creating a spiritual community, after all, is not about liking other people. Rather it is about caring for them, sympathising with them, trying to understand them, wishing them well, and resonating to their striving after Enlightenment which may look externally so different to one's own. When after perhaps years of effort one breaks through to mutual understanding with someone whom one has previously not been able to understand - can there be any greater joy?

Conclusion

I wonder if I have made a convincing case for ordination? I wonder if I have conveyed something of the joy and wonder there is in participating in that ceremony? I wonder if I have conveyed to you the deep sense of fulfilment which the act of spiritual commitment brings, and the sense of fellowship that can arise when those similarly committed come together and have that commitment publicly witnessed? As far as I am concerned, that's why ordination...

Notes:

1. Sangharakshita, *Alternative Traditions*, Windhorse 1986
2. Sangharakshita, *Facing Mount Kanchenjunga*, Windhorse 1991, p117

Further Reading:

Subhuti: Sangharakshita, *A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Ch. 5 'Sangha', Windhorse 1994

Sangharakshita, *Forty-Three Years Ago: Reflections on my Bhikkhu Ordination*, Windhorse 1993

Subhuti, *What is the Order?* Padmaloka Books



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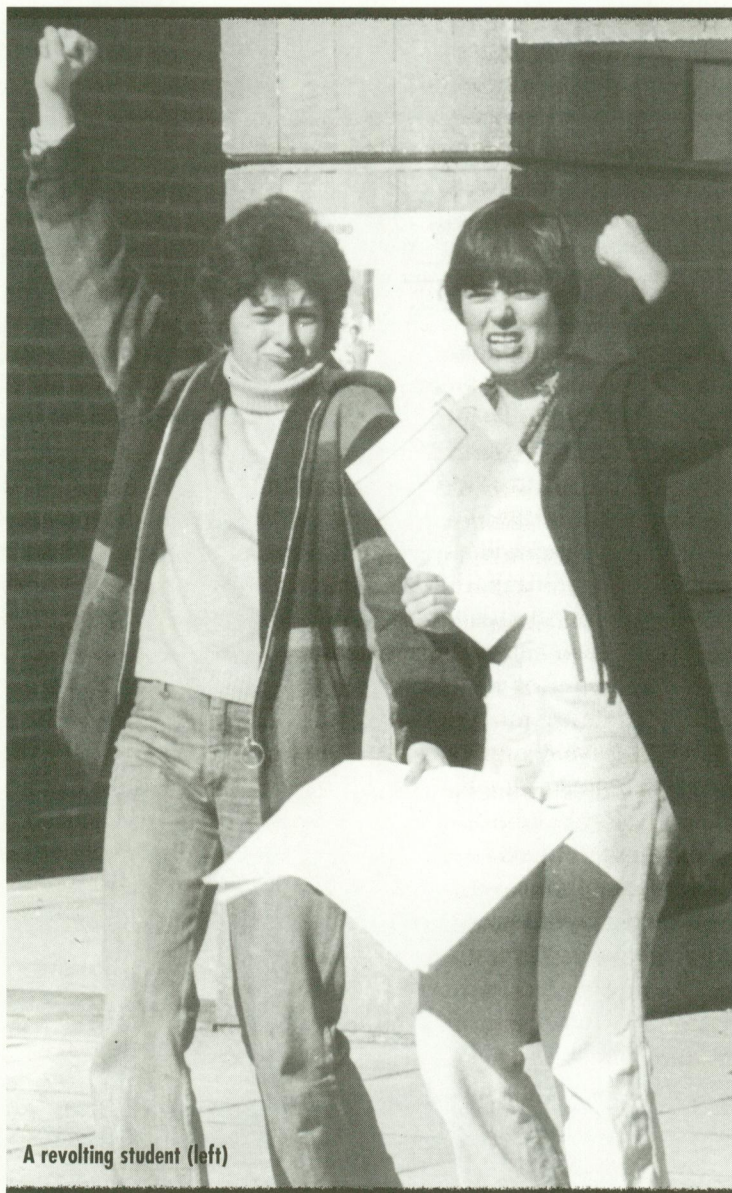
How To Change the World?

From Political Activism to Ordination

Siddhisambhava

I WAS A POLITICAL activist for fifteen years, from my teens to my early thirties. In October 2000, aged 44, I was ordained into the Western Buddhist Order. My brother Steve, interested in neither politics nor religion, wasn't surprised. 'You've always been idealistic,' he said. 'It's the same sort of thing really, isn't it.' Well, yes and no. What's changed is the end and the means, the goal and the path. What's the same is my conviction and experience that it's possible to change things, notably oneself - and that, the Buddha said, is the greatest miracle of all. My brother Steve says you can't change the spots on a leopard. He's changed a lot actually, especially since he fathered two children, yet maintains this view. If I agreed with him I wouldn't be able to get out of bed in the morning.

Sometimes when I mention my political background to other Buddhists



A revolting student (left)

they nod sagely and say I was motivated by hatred. I'm sure I had mixed motives - after all, that happens in the spiritual life too. What I recall most strongly was a desire to change the world for the better. As I moved from single-issue campaigns and the voluntary sector into local government and a final brush with Westminster, I can confirm that there is some truth in the stereotype of a politician striding the corridors of power in the pursuit of personal ascendancy. There are also many, many people motivated by trying to find a way to be involved in their community, give something back to it and improve the lives of their children.

As a teenager I was inspired by both Marx and the feminist movement. Believe it or not, Marxist economic

theory helped explain the world to me, though it seems absurdly simplistic now. What really moved me were his 1844 Paris essays. He wrote eloquently about the creative potential of human beings and how 'man' was made for more than work. I thought of my father who got up at 5am and finished at 7pm six days a week and wasn't good for much else the rest of the time. It's obvious our material conditions affect the possibilities of our lives. The new Buddhist movement in India came out of a struggle for social justice. Going on retreat taught me a lot about the importance of one's environment and effected a different, gentle revolution on me. Back in the 1970's I knew I didn't want to have children or a conventional family life. I knew too that a career, relationship and social life wouldn't completely satisfy me either. I turned to politics.

Thatcher was elected the same month I graduated. It was not an easy time to be politically active on the left in Britain but I was young, energetic, there was plenty of action and I had a lot to learn. I organised a lobby of Parliament and then a labour movement conference for an abortion campaign. I spent three years on *Spare Rib*, a women's liberation magazine that sold 25,000 a month. Then I took a step inside the system for the final and heady years of the GLC (London's city government) under Ken Livingstone. This was another world. I was issued with a memo pad and let loose in a building with seven miles of corridors. It was easy to get lost. I became a manager. The resources were phenomenal. Lots of crazy things happened - not least the GLC being abolished.

My next job was a step even closer to the world of politics with a capital P. I worked on lesbian and gay policy issues for all the Labour boroughs in London. It was already a hostile environment (this was soon after the advent of AIDS in Britain, often referred to in the tabloids as 'the gay plague'). When Labour lost their third election in a row, in 1987, it was like being led to a brick wall with a blindfold on. The firing squad soon arrived in the form of 'Section 28', an anti-gay piece of legislation. I now see this as an example of being blessed by adverse circumstances and feeling gratitude to one's 'enemies'. Sure, I'd had an effect, learnt how to 'operate', made things happen, set up a newspaper, a new organisation and so on. I was also sinking under the nastiness, smoking more and more cigarettes and dope in order to cope. It wasn't meaningful enough anymore.

I was deeply dissatisfied and thank goodness I was. I hadn't learnt to treasure dissatisfaction yet, as the first step on the spiral path. But it had meant I'd tiptoed into the London Buddhist Centre to attend a meditation class. I hardly told a soul and couldn't get to many classes. It was enough though for me to book onto my first retreat over xmas, with seventy other people, in a Sussex school. I rarely made it to the second stage of the metta bhavana due to crying so much in the first. I had no idea what the pujas were about yet I was in a blissful state and the last to leave the shrineroom every night.

I bought and read my first book on the Dharma, *Mind Reactive and Creative* by Sangharakshita, about the Tibetan Wheel of Life and the Spiral Path. It made an enormous impression on me. I began to realise how limited my previous 'vision' of existence was. The goalposts widened considerably and there was everything to play for. So I bought a book to take with me back into the fray - *Crossing the Stream*, also by Sangharakshita. Reading *Where Buddhism Begins and Why It Begins There* had an even bigger impact on me. '*Buddhism declares that the only possible religio-philosophical starting point is not a thought, an idea or a concept at all, but on the contrary, a feeling, the feeling of pain, physical and mental suffering, dukkha...By beginning with the fact of pain Buddhism involves the whole emotional nature of man from the very outset...Only when a man feels strongly will he act effectively.*' One of feminism's slogans I'd been taken with was 'the personal is political'. This had raised issues like 'the politics of housework' and discussions about non-monogamy - all very 1970's. We can't get much more personal than deeply looking at our own pain and suffering. I found it very exciting to discover this in a context that went deeper than psychology. It was the perfect introduction to the Four Noble Truths.

A few weeks later I was sitting in a cubicle in the House of Lords chamber listening to an appalling level of debate about homosexuality and Section 28. I was there to advise the Labour Lords - but nobody wanted any advice. Suddenly two women descended down a rope from the public gallery as a protest. The security guards went berserk and many of the Lords were in a fluster. They'd narrowly missed landing on me. I knew it would make the TV news that night and be on the front pages of the morning papers. It was a headline impossible to resist: 'Lesbians Abseil into the Lords'. On one level it was very dramatic. I felt deadpan. I collected my papers and left. World weary is the phrase that comes to mind. The *entire* situation I was in seemed completely ridiculous. It was drizzling and instead of heading for St. James underground station as usual, I hailed a cab. I realised why as I watched the river Thames go by through the window. I wouldn't be able to afford to get a cab home all the way to Hackney much longer. I'd had enough.

One, very long, year later I quit my job. I also resigned from every other political position I held or group I belonged to. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done and I can thoroughly recommend doing something similar. In that year, between deciding to leave and actually leaving, I went on more retreats, attended a study course. I also went into therapy to help me deal with my fear of becoming a bag-lady.

It took me years to build an effective daily meditation practice but that post-puja bliss on my first retreat had shown me the potential. One of the most valuable features of a meditation practice and an important way to reach peace within, is non-reaction. Whatever emotion comes along, we can see it as just a feeling which has arisen and will also pass away. Learning this from our meditation

practice means learning one of the most valuable lessons on how to handle ourselves and we can take this into daily life with us. It's a handy addition to the tool-box in any life-style, I found it especially

so in the world of politics. If I had to highlight the main benefit the Dharma and my practice has given me, I'd say it's taught me how to work with my emotions.

It also took me years to understand that miccha-ditthi's - false or mistaken views - are not arrived at by a purely objective, intellectual route that happens to be 'wrong'. We hold our views in accordance with an - often unacknowledged - emotion. It's often our emotions we need to tackle to change our ideas, or even be open to change. The clarification of our thinking process has at its root the purification of our emotions. I experienced this on my first Introduction to Buddhism course, studying the Noble Eightfold Path. I realised I needed to explore my views and often simply put them to one side. Some strong opinions were being turned upside down and the kind atmosphere in which this took place also made its mark. It was in painful contrast to many of the meetings I spent a lot of my time in. The main reason I quit politics was because my heart wasn't in it anymore.

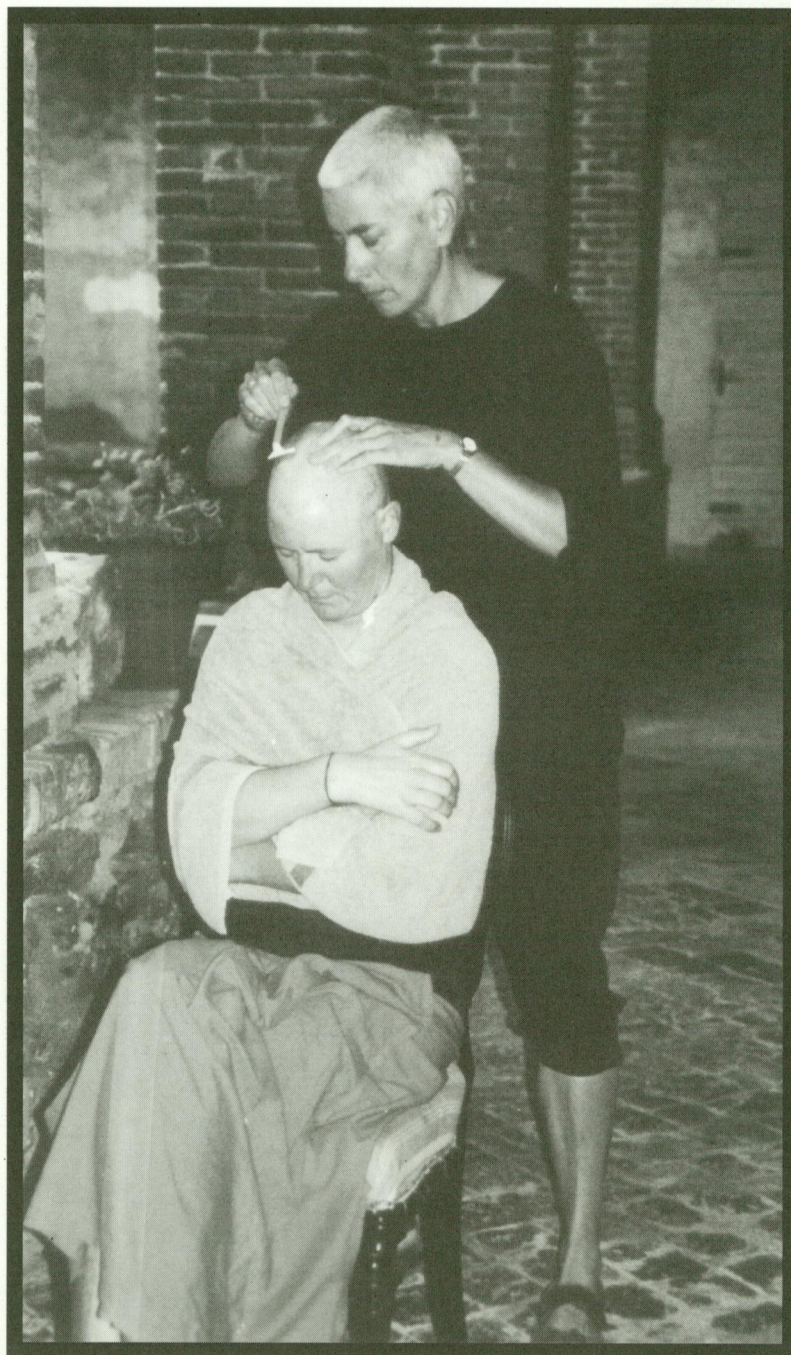
These days I'm more likely to be inspired by the mystery of the Dharma. I enjoy the endless paradox in it. I realise, with a smile, that ordination is the biggest commitment I've ever made in my life and it's a commitment to... the unknown!

In studying the Noble Eightfold Path I'd learnt about the Buddhist approach to ethics too. These days I'm more likely to be inspired by the mystery

of the Dharma. I adore the endless paradox in it. I realise, with a smile, that ordination is the biggest commitment I've ever made in my life and it's a commitment to...the unknown! What I was deeply impressed by - and needed -

in my fledgling stage was how specific the Dharma was. In politics the word 'ethics' is used and the rationale of morality is bandied about but it's often staggeringly vague as to what is actually meant by that. What I discovered, and soon decided to take on myself, was spiritual PRACTICE - the mental, vocal and bodily nuts and bolts of every minute of living. Being a Buddhist, or becoming one, is not about believing in something or agreeing with an idea. It's about GOING for refuge.

Soon after I quit politics I also left London. After travelling for several months I moved to the Norfolk countryside for two years. I turned my life outside in, which was both a relief and a trauma. I wasn't used to living like that! Slowly I turned inside out again. I became a Mitra, began working for Windhorse Publications, moved into Norwich, asked for ordination. The path of the Bodhisattva Ideal



is said to be one of creative tension between self and other. In my experience sometimes it is creative and sometimes it's pure tension. I'm still very much honing that craft. It's a strong koan for me. As I write it's my first Order birthday and three weeks after the 11 September attacks on America. The talk of war is dying down but no-one knows what's going to happen next. I haven't followed the news and thought about politics this much for a long time. I've recently moved out of a community and stopped working for the Norwich Buddhist Centre after four years. I'm of no fixed abode for the foreseeable future, and plan to travel in Australasia for a year including doing a three month solitary retreat.

It's an interesting time to reflect on values and the place of idealism. If I was writing this for *Women's Realm* perhaps I'd urge readers to take up meditation, study the Dharma, practice ethics. But I'm writing for a Buddhist audience and I find myself wanting to conclude on a different note. We all need, of course, to deepen our practice, in all circumstances and many friends tell me recent world events have 'sharpened their edge'. Even if everyone meditated daily it's naive, simplistic and abstract to think this would on its own create world peace. As I head off to a hut in the bush I'd like to urge you to consider becoming more involved in the world. What exactly that means and how best to go about it would take another article. One slogan that's wearing well and comes to mind is 'think global, act local'. Others are 'do your homework' and 'reflect on your motives'. Bhante suggests keeping out of party politics. Hear, hear. He also says that it's possible to present a united front with regards to ends. This could mean simply taking fifteen minutes to write a letter to your MP (assuming you know who your MP is...).

The FWBO doesn't, of course, encourage people to only sit on a meditation cushion. Spiritual communities, right livelihood businesses and public centres are cornerstones of the movement and address the way we live, work and interact with the world. They are a 'new society in miniature'. How I've wished in the last three weeks it wasn't so miniature and the Buddhist voice had more influence in the world. Politics is often about that curious space between the present and the future. We're part of an old tradition yet still a tiny experiment in the 'modern West'. In order to survive as well as make progress and influence the world our spiritual institutions will need to value social engagement as highly as meditative attainment. I've been dreaming about how things could be in ten, twenty, fifty years time and realise I'm as idealistic as I've always been, maybe more so now.

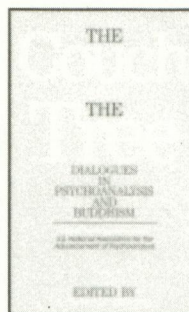
Everything could be so different. I can even imagine going back into politics if it was 'deep politics' (to use a phrase of Thomas Moore's) where the essential point of it was to care for citizens and create an environment that gave the fullest possible support for spiritual development. I wonder if that's possible? I guess that's up to all of us.

Recommended Reading

For a comprehensive outline of Sangharakshita's thinking on politics read chapter nine, 'A New Society' in *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition* by Subhuti (Windhorse Publications, 1994).

Other survivors of political activism in Britain may also enjoy John O'Farrell's *Things Can Only Get Better: Eighteen Miserable Years in the Life of a Labour Supporter* (Black Swan, 1998)

- a very funny book, the best therapy.



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Why Go for Refuge?

Wisdom for the Bridget Jones Generation

Joanna Hughes

September 25th, 2001

Weight: 9st 6 lb (when last looked)

Minutes spent in hindrance in meditation: 20 (not v. good, will try harder tomorrow)

Dhyana factors: 2 (V. good!)

Biscuits: probably 3 (not v. good but broken in packet so hard to calculate)

Minutes spent obsessing about where to go with boyfriend on weekend and feeling resentful at being loaded with the decision: 40 (but working on it)

My first email address read, 'joannahughes@urbanfeline.' 'Urbanfeline' said it all: I was a singleton; young, independent with wads of disposable income, wrapped up in my own existential crisis. Actually, I mustn't exaggerate. By the time I'd reached the status of singleton, I'd already met Buddhism and asked for ordination into the Western Buddhist Order. But I was 25, and I still wanted to pitch myself against the world, experience economic independence and carve out a career in my desired field. When I was offered a job as a television researcher, I snapped up the opportunity. It was there that I truly entered the world of singletons: young, bright women, fiercely ambitious, often workaholics who frankly knocked their male contemporaries into a cocked hat, despite, at times, being afforded fewer opportunities and possessing less earning power. They did retail therapy and lived in over-priced apartments a few steps away from chic cafe brasseries where they could be found slumped over a dish of £8 pasta at the end of a long day. Sounds glamorous - so why were these women, including myself, desperately unhappy?

The Singleton Phenomenon

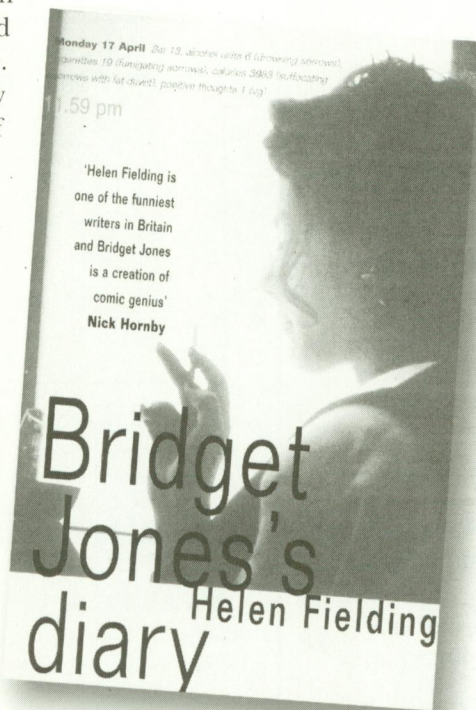
The 'singleton' is, for the most part, a product of femi-

nism and Thatcherism. We've been told we can have it all (career, motherhood, multiple orgasms), we're encouraged to consume passionately in order to secure our sense of identity (Clarins, habitat sofas, La Senza underwear) - and then we feel damn guilty and confused when we find ourselves psychologically and spiritually adrift. What do we have to be unhappy about when our grandmothers had at least five kids by the time they were our age? Interestingly enough, young women aren't alone in this spiritual crisis. Men have their own version of the 'singleton' in the form of the 'new lad,' as promoted by *Loaded* and *Esquire* magazines. Born out of a reaction against demands on men made by feminism, particularly in the

sexual relationship arena, the new lad is encouraged to be as promiscuous as possible (or at least noncommittal in relationships) and revel in an eternal teendom of football, chips and lager. Both stereotypes are rooted in consumerism and have mass cultural reinforcement: *Men Behaving Badly*, on the one hand, Bridget Jones and Ally McBeal, on the other. As a post-Thatcher generation, we're encouraged to Hoover up the whole package: the career, the lifestyle and the cultural equivalents

'We women are only vulnerable because we are a pioneer generation daring to refuse to compromise in love and relying on our own economic power,' asserts Shazzer in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. But we discover through Bridget's diary that after all the singleton has yet to find a secure footing in postmodern society where, ironically, we're told that traditional roles are up for grabs. It is

clear that the singleton is neither valued nor respected: 'You better hurry up and get sprogged old girl,' advises Cosmo, one of the smug marrieds, 'time's running out.' Shazzer feistily retorts, 'I'm not married because I'm a singleton....we're as happy as sandboys, if you didn't conspire to make us feel stupid because you're jealous.' But Bridget is yet to be convinced. What she really wants is a boyfriend, that special someone to whom she will be perfectly



matched and who will fulfill her own sense of lack. In the run-up to her first date with her lecherous boss Daniel Cleaver, it becomes clear that despite being a singleton, with apparently everything going for her, she is sadly lacking in self esteem. After an athletic marathon of leg waxing and cellulite scrubbing, Bridget muses, 'Wise people will say Daniel should like me just as I am but I am a child of the *Cosmopolitan* culture, have been traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices.' After fantasising about a long hot summer with an even hotter boyfriend, Bridget discovers Daniel is not so daring after all. He insists on spending the summer indoors, watching cricket. She confides to her diary: 'Realise as the long hot days freakishly repeat themselves that whatever I'm doing, I think I should be doing something else.' It is here that Bridget has seen the world for what it really is - impermanent, insubstantial and unsatisfactory. But despite her moments of clarity, she is presented with no real alternative and so continues to go round the wheel. She makes changes without real transformation, switching jobs and boyfriends in the hope that it'll be different this time around.

So what happens when we suddenly, perhaps for a moment, see through it all. Where do we go from here? What are the alternatives to life as either a singleton or a smug married? Is there anything else?

Why Ordination?

Realising that it 'wasn't all that', certainly became my experience of being a singleton. The very term, 'singleton,' suggests a state of isolation and alienation. And this was my experience of that world, a sense of living on the surface of things without any deeper roots or connections. It was the realisation that such a state of being could never bring me lasting satisfaction that compelled me to ask for ordination into the Western Buddhist Order. However, this decision to radically change my life has not been accomplished all in one go. It is taking me years to disentangle myself from old values and work out the implications of such a decision - I'm still working them out.

So why have I asked for ordination? Partly because I realise that loft apartments, trendy clothes and a stimulating career aren't the answer, but partly because I have a vision of true potential that can only be actualised on the Buddhist path. Buddhism teaches the law of impermanence, that things are changing all the time. Far from being depressing, we can view this Truth as tremendously liberating. If things are changing all the time, then nothing is fixed. Human beings can therefore change for the better and live a richer, more satisfying existence in sympathy with other beings. Secondly, because all living things are subject to this law of impermanence, we are equally devoid of a fixed self or nature. All beings want to live happy and meaningful lives that are free from suffering. To see this is the wisdom of equality. This cuts through the type of competitive aggression that is needed to survive in the career world, where we are continually viewing other beings as either superior, inferior or, indeed, equal

to ourselves. It is a great leveler, as I found out a few years ago.

Whilst working on a documentary project, I fell victim to some poor communication with one of the bosses and ended up, with a number of others, being scapegoated and sacked. Up until that point, I had been very successful in my career and had begun to feel a sense of invincibility. Now I found myself cut down from my perch and laid fairly and squarely back in the arms of the human race. Reflecting on my experience, I realised that I had become alienated from the truth of interconnectedness, smug in my own success and believed that suffering was something that happened to other people and not to me. Although a humiliating and painful experience, I ended up feeling grateful to the particular manager involved as he had given me the opportunity to see through my delusion and open myself up to the truth of interconnectedness. It was this experience that led me to seriously re-examine my decision to follow a career in a cut-throat world and reflect on what kind of existence I wanted to lead.

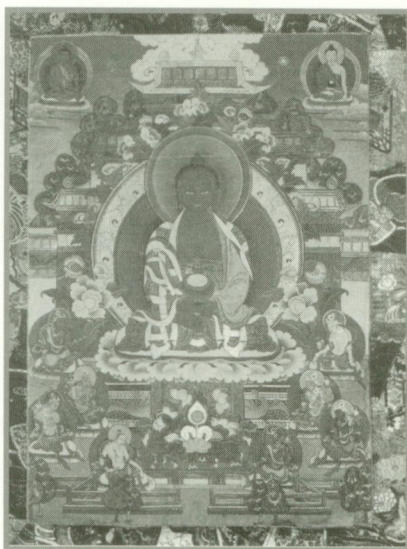


After the interview: Jo with French Rugby Player, Serge Blanco

Alternatives

The enlightened mind manifests five different kinds of wisdom. The wisdom of equality is one. Then there is the wisdom of discrimination, the wisdom associated with the Buddha Amitabha. The wisdom of discrimination sees that each being is unique, that each human life is a precious opportunity. It is here that the concept of potential enters into the picture - but in a very different way than staff appraisals or multi-skilling or 'head hunting'. The wisdom of Amitabha reminds us that our lives are a unique opportunity to live a rich, meaningful existence based on ethics and beauty, relating sympathetically to all beings.

Interestingly, Amitabha is the Buddha of the preta realm on the wheel of life. The pretas are the hungry ghosts, so tortured by craving that nothing can fulfill their sense of inner lack; their bloated bellies are in fact empty, and any hope of nourishment through their pin-prick mouths turns to fire in their guts. Similarly, any hope we have of completely satisfying our craving through samsara will end in tears. Amitabha appears in the preta realm to show the pretas the way beyond their suffering, offering them cooling nectar to abate their hunger and the fire in their bellies. The nectar can be seen as the giving of depth and meaning in life; the possibility of satisfying and nourishing communication and friendship. This is a rare offering in a



society where we are encouraged to fritter away our emotional resources on consumption and distraction and thereby float on the surface of our deeper potential.

The alternatives to the work place and the romantic myth are sangha and spiritual friendship. My desires for a life shared with those of similar ideals and for meaningful communication have found fulfilment in the sangha jewel. Unlike the work place, the sangha aspires not to operate in the power mode of hiring and firing, gossip and backbiting but in the love mode, acceptance and authenticity, encouragement and rejoicing in merit. Through spiritual friend-

ship we can connect with others on the basis of kalyana, love of the good, the ethical, the wholesome. This is a far cry from the paradigms of pleasure and use that so often characterise modern relationships whether sexual or not. It is my wish to live out my ideals more and more in the company of 'friends in the good life' - that is a prime motivation for me asking for ordination and my wish to join the Order.

The singleton still exists though, occasionally wearing Clarins make up and watching *ER* with friends on the habitat sofa. But she exists in relation to the Dharma farer; the strong, courageous and beautiful, seeking to make the most of this precious opportunity.

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Why Ordination?

Reflections from Berlin

Janina Egert

I GREW UP IN East Berlin when it was still part of the GDR. It was a very safe environment. Both my parents worked and there was never any danger that they might lose their jobs. In those days everyone had a job. When I was growing up, my political allegiance to socialism was quite loyal. On the whole I shared the propagated ideals of our society where the central aim was for everybody to live under better and better conditions. These were defined by the material goods one had. As was usual in our society, I was brought up as an atheist.

Looking back I can see a lot of good in the way things were. In particular, the relatively good social contact I had in school and during my student years (which continued after the wall came down in 1989.) There was a high degree of solidarity and helpfulness between people. We were encouraged to keep other people's interests in mind. These were propagated ideals and in my experience they really brought people together.

There was also a high degree of security - job, flat, health insurance and pension were all guaranteed by the state. I never worried or thought very much about those areas of life. Also, one had the feeling that society needed you, needed your work - that's one of the things I really miss today.

The most negative aspect of our society was the political repression which became more and more obvious as I grew older. I became aware that some points of socialist doctrine were not true but were very present in the official politics. For example, it was held that the working class was the leading class in society but in fact when it came to decision-making, all the positions were

held by intellectuals. Due to this sort of thing, a bigger and bigger tension arose in me, because it was not possible to do anything to change things. This sense of oppression grew stronger particularly after 1985 when the perestroika in the Soviet Union began. This softening of political outlook was not appreciated by our government in the GDR but we ordinary people had hoped so much that we could change our society too.

And as well as becoming aware of the political repression, I came to see that our society lacked the presence of anything spiritual.

Living Russia

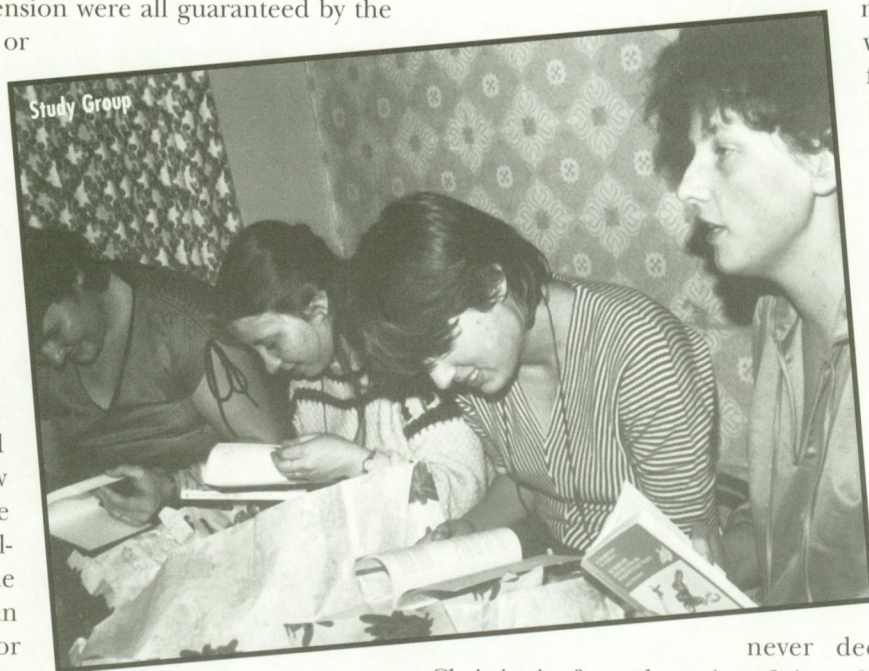
During my first years as a student, I spent ten months in Russia. Later, when I was studying painting and drawing, I began to travel to Russia regularly. The reason for that lay in my encounter with Russian spirituality. I was very much drawn to it. There was the Russian liturgy, the icon paintings, the churches and

monasteries which were of such wonderful spiritual expression and beauty. My heart opened. I also loved the infinitely stretching landscape with its atmosphere of melancholy. The religious feelings I had were predominantly feelings - feelings of infinity, vastness and the possibility of relating personally to something higher. But I was

never deeply interested in

Christianity from the point of view of its doctrine.

In Russia I felt at home. So I travelled every year to Russia and everything I painted was Russian and an



expression of that spirituality. Then came the breaking down of the Berlin wall - but I continued with what I was doing and lived more in a world of imagination than in the everyday world of here and now.

Turning Points

In 1992 I came to realise it was not okay to live in a world characterised by longing for a country so far away. I decided to stay in Germany and to try and be more in contact with my actual surroundings. The following years saw me in a deep crisis. I had an accident, was operated on, developed psychosomatic illnesses and finally went for psychoanalysis. The psychoanalysis was a turning point and brought me back to life and to the present. But although it was helpful, it was limited by its aim of simply making me able to function in the world. At this point the longing for a spiritual dimension to my life arose again.

I read two books. One was Govinda's *Living Buddhism in the Occident*, the other, Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Both emphasised that one should be active and take up the practice of Buddhism if the Dharma spoke to you. So after a few months I began to look around and eventually did a meditation course with Anomara in the Berlin FWBO Centre in 1996.

What spoke to me most strongly from my reading was the possibility of overcoming suffering. I could see suffering and the why of suffering very clearly in my life - that it arises in dependence upon craving.

Another thing that attracted me was everything connected with supernormal power. That was fascinating because it showed that my own experience of life is very limited, it could be very, very different. The fact that it is possible to perceive the world totally differently is something that really motivates me. There is a whole world which I can't perceive, where there is space and freedom and the most unbelievable things. I wanted to have the ability to experience the world in that way. I didn't find meditation very interesting but I began with it because I had read that this is what one has to do if one wants to practice Buddhism. I'm not so interested in supernormal power anymore - but this came with Dharma study. For example David Smith's book, *A Record of Awakening* about his experience of meditation is one of the most inspiring things I ever read.

Ethics was of no interest to me - even after a year of meditation practice. I heard about it somewhat reluctantly. To my ears ethics sounded boring. It was only some time later that I discovered that the prac-

tice of ethics was actually for my own good.

What I really liked from the beginning of my contact with the FWBO was my contact with people. It was the first time since the wall had come down that I had found myself in a group. Probably this is one of the main reasons I stayed with the FWBO rather than becoming involved with one of the many other Buddhist groups in Berlin. I got to know some of these other Buddhist groups and did short retreats with them but I couldn't find anything better for me than the FWBO.

This summer I visited Tiratanaloka Retreat Centre and then spent a few days staying in different women's communities in the UK. I again recognised how wonderful it is that one is welcomed everywhere. It is such a good quality that we try to be kind and open to people from the very beginning even though we don't know them. That makes a lot possible. You can come into quite deep conversation after a short time.

Another thing I value very much is the down-to-earth way of practising and explaining the Dharma. One can get a good understanding of the Dharma, the why and how of different methods and how they fit together. Everything is very practical. And the fact that we are practising together in the Sangha is a ground of practice in itself.

At this point I would like to express my gratitude for everything I have got from the Order.

My Way into Buddhism

Once it had become clear that Buddhism is the most important thing in my life, I asked to become a mitra and at the same time I asked for ordination. I did it out of the wish to go deeper. I wanted to be together with people who are really serious about their practice. From what I was able to see, being in the Order can be very supportive for one's own practice, it is demanding and encourages intensive practice. I knew I wouldn't intensify my practice on my own as much as I could do it by becoming a mitra and embarking on the ordination process. Last but not least I need a lot of advice and opportunities to review my practice to understand what I need to do to make progress.

In my experience, you need to become a mitra and ask

for ordination if you want to get more deeply into Buddhism from the practical side as well as have opportunities for study within the FWBO context. By becoming a mitra one can go on intensive meditation retreats. (I tried twice to go on such retreats before I was a mitra but was not allowed to participate.) There is also a study course to attend. Insight prac-

Russian landscape



tices are only given to people in connection with ordination. And Insight is the very heart of Buddhism. So not becoming a mitra and not asking for ordination felt like staying outside looking over a fence, not being allowed to jump over it. It was clear to me that I need to join the Order or I would have to look for a different Buddhist movement.

Encountering the Order

It hasn't always been easy. In the first years of my involvement I had a lot of difficulties concerning our centre in Berlin, which is quite small. I had fears and struggles with the Order.



What I was most afraid of was the possibility of group pressure. If views are very rigid or principles are applied in a strict, inflexible way I feel very unfree. I think as far as we are not enlightened, inevitably there will be group tendencies in the FWBO and

I suppose in the WBO too. I would find myself asking questions like, how will it feel to be in the Order if my way of practising and looking at things is not mainstream? Will that be all right, will I be accepted? Will I have enough strength to follow what I'm convinced of?

So my Ordination request was and is also a means of getting to know the Order better.

It enables me to get to know the women's Ordination Team on Going for Refuge retreats and also a lot of other women who are in the ordination process. I can ask other people about their experience with the

movement and talk over my own problems and fears.

From my experience so far, I would say it works well. I'm getting more confidence in the Order. Actually, after this summer I'm feeling quite happy with me and the FWBO. Some problems seem to lose their power. There is openness.

Dhanakosa

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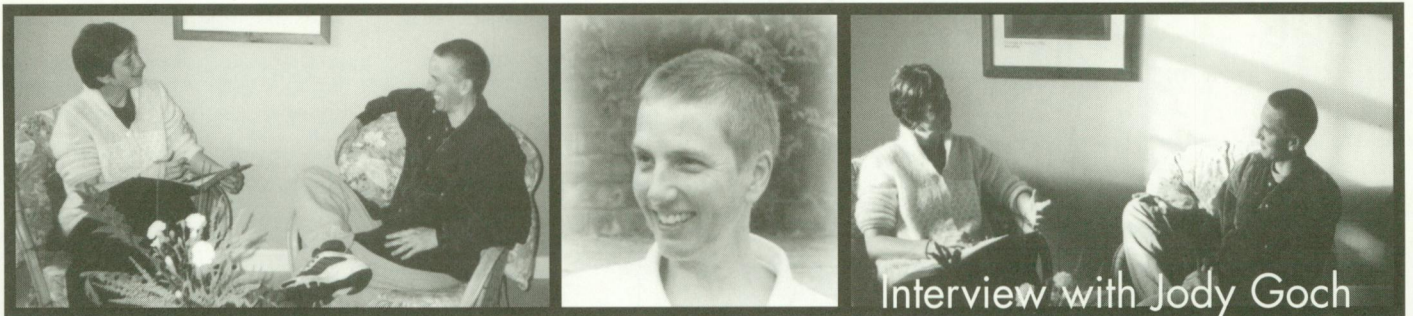
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Canadian Dreaming



Interview with Jody Goch

LR: Jody, you've lived all your life in Canada. Whereabouts did you grow up?

JG: On the West Coast

LR: Mountain country?

JG: Yes, mountain country - and coastal of course - lots of bush - lots of space. British Columbia has a landmass about the size of Britain and less than three million people living there.

LR: You stayed around the West Coast after you left school. What did you do?

JG: I've been a jack-of-all-trades. I've been mostly in transportation - driving trucks - and in transportation management. I've been a horse wrangler and a cow girl - I've worked lots of horses, I drove teams. I went to college and played basket ball and did creative writing - I've done all sorts.

LR: How did you come into contact with the Dharma?

JG: My first contact was through a Vipassana group. I learnt to meditate and I started to hear about the Dharma. My life was affected very quickly - I realised I would have to give up my job.

LR: What were you doing at the time?

JG: I was supervising in the Canada post, transportation management, trucks, drivers. The guys were great to work with but the management structure was so adversarial - that's how they worked. They didn't work on the premise that they could trust one another. They worked on the premise that they *couldn't* trust one another. People had to be punished. They didn't give incentives. I didn't go along with that. I remember giving everyone Solstice cards and I got heckled by both management and union - for being NICE! *(Laughter)* So I found as a Buddhist the harder I practised the more difficult it became to work in that situation. It just felt so negative.

LR: What happened next?

JG: I met Aryabodhi - he wasn't Aryabodhi yet, he hadn't been ordained.

LR: How did you meet him?

JG: Dog grooming. *(Laughter)* He was bathing and I was brushing. *(More laughter)* Ethical livelihood. *(Laughter)* It was this funny little dog-grooming shop. The boss was a lady right out of a sit-com. Nice lady - but she really did not want to hear about Buddhism so we'd be bathing a dog and whispering to one another about our meditation practice and we'd see her glaring at us and we'd smile over at her, it's OK - we're just bathing this dog.... *(Laughter)*

Aryabodhi invited me along to the classes he was running and I would go along from time to time. I wasn't regular for a while. Then he needed somewhere to live and moved in to live with me and my partner and I ended up going to more and more classes. That was January 1996. I asked to become a mitra in March and then a bunch of us set up a mixed community in June and in July I requested ordination. It seems quick but by then I felt I'd found the context I'd been looking for.

LR: Why did you ask for ordination? What made you want to join an Order? Why wasn't it enough just to get on with practising ethics and meditating?

JG: I felt I needed a context for my practice. I looked at the Three Jewels and realised what I was missing was the sangha. You don't just Go for Refuge to two of the Jewels, you Go for Refuge to three of them. After I came across the FWBO I read some of Bhante's books - *The History of My Going for Refuge, Forty-Three Years Ago* - all of a sudden I found the words for what I had been feeling. In the story, the Buddha didn't just get Enlightened. He carried on and formed a sangha.

LR: It seems to be part of the picture.

JG: Yes, it's part of the picture. So to join an Order is a reminder we're not practising alone. I can *think* I'd do great in the bush - sit out there and get insights and realisations - but they don't get tested until you rub up against other people. I spent eighteen months just living on my own - sleeping in my truck, staying with friends and relatives, just me and my dog. That was before I came to England.

LR: Why did you come to Taraloka?

JG: When I was in Vancouver, we women mitras would drive over the border to Seattle once a month for mitra study. (That could be up to a four hour drive.) But I felt I wanted more. Friendship was becoming more and more important. In an isolated situation you can do a lot with e-mails and telephone but it wasn't enough. I started visiting Missoula, Montana where there was a larger sangha. Some of the people there had a vision for creating team-based Right Livelihood and community living. So I tried to get to the States. I won't go into it all but in the end I couldn't get the visas I needed. That took almost three years. March 2nd last year, my friend Varada phoned up and said the visa hadn't come through. England was my second choice. I e-mailed Sanghadevi and said, 'I'm thinking of going to England. Where should I go?' Her immediate response was, 'Get hold of Taraloka.' But before I managed to, they got hold of me!

LR: How was it for a North American - a Canadian - to arrive at Taraloka?

JG: All I could think of when I finally got off the plane was, 'OK, I don't know any of these guys, they're all going to speak a different language, they're going to have accents - I have a heck of time with accents - I don't even know if I'm going to understand them - but they're all Going for Refuge and as long as I can get into the shrine room and do a puja, I'll understand what they're doing. At least when we do Pali we'll be speaking the same language. I knew it was going to be different. I knew my energy would be a lot different to what some English people are used to. When I got to Taraloka and walked into the kitchen I realised that the house was older than my country. People were walking by the kitchen windows and waving and I wondered if I would ever work out who they all were, what their names were, where their rooms were... I thought, well I'll just do what I usually do - I'll get to work. I need to find the shrine room and I need to get to work.

LR: How have you found it since?

JG: Being here at Taraloka has been the happiest I have ever been, the most content I have ever been - which are not things I usually have done in my life. They are new mind states. That's not to say it's been easy. I've learnt a lot and often felt shaky. But underneath that is that sense of steadiness.

LR: How is it to be living in a 'foreign' country?

JG: It really shakes things up. It shakes up your self-view. I'll respond in a certain way and then I realise it's almost the wrong response. I've had to really look at my view of myself - culturally - the culture of Canada is very, very different and I can't rely on everyone sharing that background. You start bumping up against what your projections are, what your expectations are.

In our team there's a New Zealander, the others are German, Scottish, English, Canadian and til recently there was an Indian - so really out of six of us there are six different cultures sitting round having a meeting every morning. What amazes me is it is a very good team - a very cohesive, caring, loving team. And we have found our common language, our common orientation - Going for Refuge and that includes commitment to communication, to clear communication. That is what I see in the FWBO - people actually want to know how you are, how are you emotionally, where are you coming from - unpicking the surface and seeing the person rather than just seeing a person's movements.

LR: Has being at Taraloka modified how you feel about having asked for ordination?

JG: It's given me a broader perspective. After I arrived here I realised there were more women Order members in the community house than there are in all of North America. I think it was watching the care people took in communication that made an impression. When someone was going through difficulties, watching the work in process. I think it gave me a sense of what the Order is actually about - a sense I couldn't get in North America. Team-work is a sort of hackneyed way of saying it.

LR: Sangha?

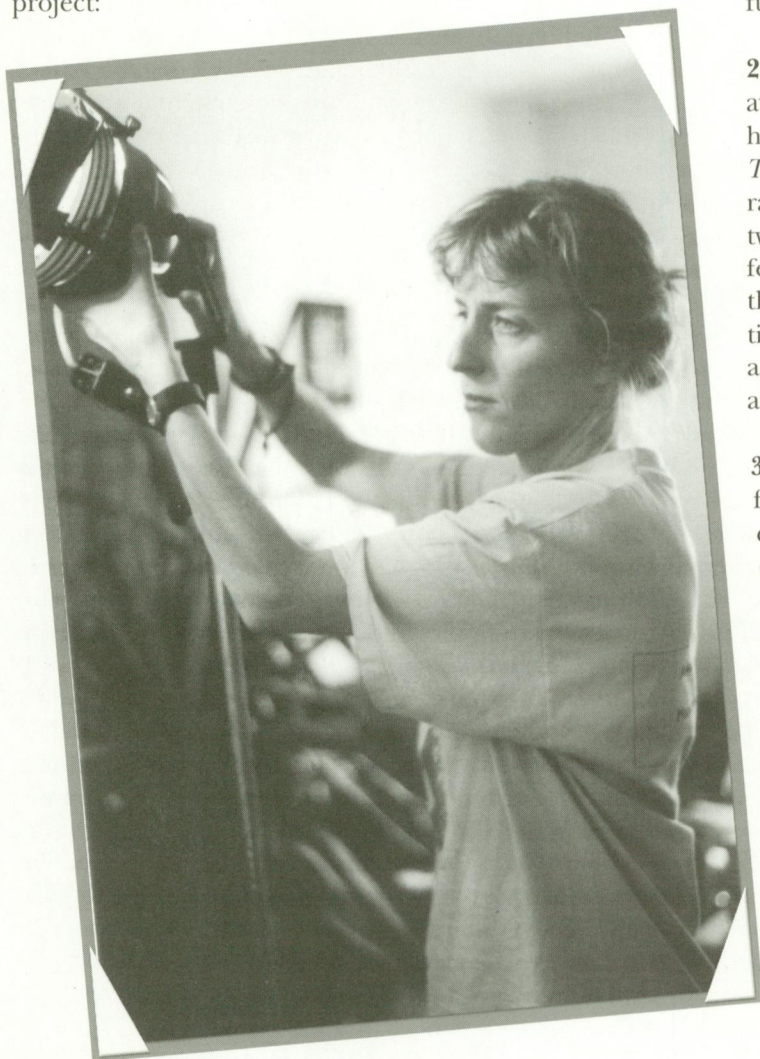
JG: Yes, sangha. And watching so many different people with different ideas and different ways of doing things...I'd watch them all getting ready to go on an Order weekend - this really divergent bunch of women all laughing together, getting ready, trundling off together - it was really powerful to see that - I could see the common denominator that they had as members of the Order. And there is this whole network - someone is friends with someone and they are friends with someone - there is this whole network of friendships. Before I came to Taraloka there was a bit of nervousness about joining 'the Order'. I didn't know really what it was. I was asking to join something that I had never really seen. Coming here has made me realise more just what it is and also it has made me appreciate even more just what energy and vision Bhante must have had to set things up and then to just keep going. And the people around him in the beginning just to keep going. So I feel a lot of gratitude. And I want to be a part of that.

LR: Jody, thank you very much.

Visions & Videos

Vidyamala

IN 1995, SOON AFTER my ordination into the Western Buddhist Order, I decided to pursue a vision to create a video document of the women's wing of the FWBO. I had followed a career in film editing in New Zealand in my early to mid-twenties, so I had some useful skills to offer. Now I was in the Order I felt I had sufficient perspective to at least begin this project and see what would emerge. I had several reasons for wanting to undertake such a project:



1. When I first became involved in the FWBO in New Zealand in 1987, there was no video material on women's practice. I was a long way from the heart of the Movement and I would have valued some videos of women's talks, or documentaries about what it is like to be a woman Buddhist in the modern world. I recognised that this lack of video material was probably in part due to lack of technical skills and saw that I could, at some point in the future, play a part in rectifying this lack.

2. As I read and studied more over the years, I became aware of how little material there is on women's practice historically. There are some wonderful documents like the *Therigata*, the poems of early Buddhist nuns, but these are rare jewels. I thought about this and realised that I had two possible responses: to complain about this lack and feel a victim of history, or to record women's practice in the present to create an historic record for future generations. I knew that the latter was the far more constructive approach and resolved to do what I could to bring this about.

3. Personally I consider the FWBO to be remarkable. I feel deep gratitude to the founder, Sangharakshita, and consider him to have been visionary in terms of the opportunities he has offered women. He has encouraged women to do all sorts of things which otherwise they might never have done such as founding their own retreat centres. He has created a new Buddhist Order relevant to the modern world, one where women and men are ordained on a completely equal footing. He has handed on responsibility to senior women Order members to conduct ordinations in their own right. He has always encouraged me to take initiative and responsibility, and he has always been very encouraging of my vision for the video project. I wanted to give women in the Order the opportunity to tell their stories on video. I thought this would be a very immediate way of bearing witness to the depth and breadth of the women's wing of the Order that has arisen out of Sangharakshita's vision.

4. This is an exciting time in the history of Buddhism, with its arrival in the West for the first time, and its resurgence in India, coinciding with revolutionary changes in the role of Western women in society in the latter third of the twentieth century. Women in the West have unprecedented freedom and choices arising from having control over conception, opportunities to travel, to pursue careers, to live outside the nuclear family and to pursue religious life in a variety of new forms. It seemed important to me to record these formative days of Buddhism taking root in the West and document how women are responding. The early members of the Western Buddhist Order are first generation Western Buddhists. I wanted to make sure their voices and faces were recorded for posterity as they have a remarkable story to tell: women who are making tough choices about whether to have children or not in the post-contraception age; women who have become Preceptors; women who are founding retreat centres; and women in India who are breaking free of socially conditioned roles.

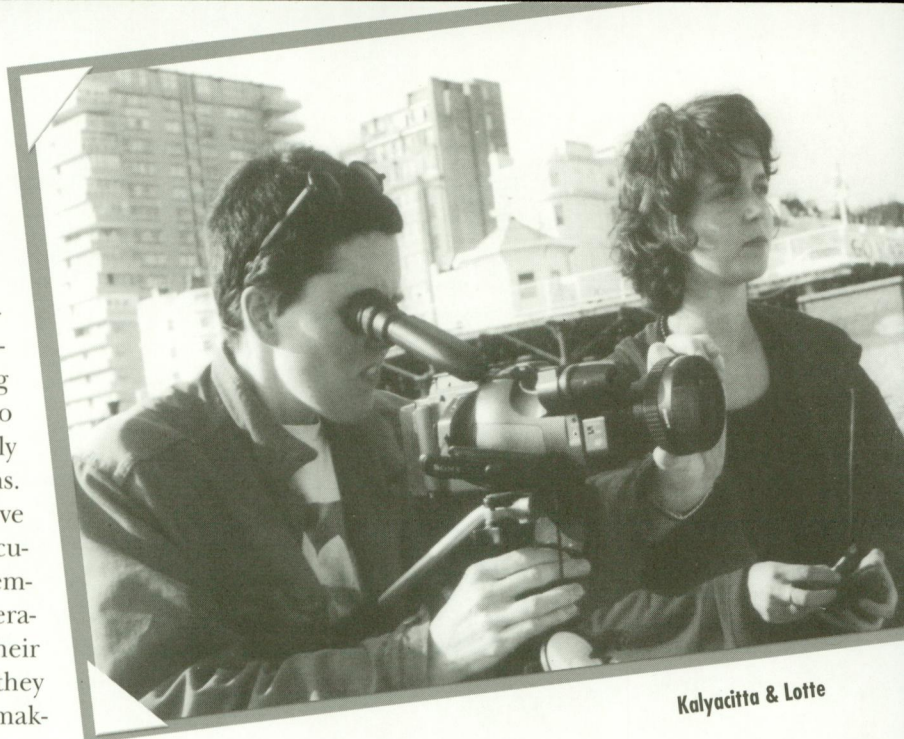
5. I felt it would be invaluable to be reflected back to ourselves collectively. It is not always easy to have perspective on our strengths and weaknesses as a new Buddhist Order, given there are no obvious precedents and role models. I felt video was one way of helping to gain this perspective: in a period of 30 or 40 minutes viewing time, it is possible to cover a lot of ground and pull together a wide range of topics and threads into a coherent whole.

Getting Going

Once I had clarified my vision the next step was to try to body it forth into the world. Late in 1995 I did a fundraising drive and on the basis of one mail-out got over £5000. I was also given a car to use for the project and later on one benefactor gave me £1000 when she got an unexpected share windfall from her bank. Another donor, who I knew lived on a very low income, sent me a £5.00 note each month for a year. All these acts of generosity were very moving and confirmed to me that my vision was in no way unique: others too were frustrated by the paucity of material on women's practice, in either book or video form.

Throughout 1996 I embarked on the process of travelling around the UK interviewing a whole range of women Order members about various aspects of their lives: motherhood, ordination, lifestyle, the arts, work, friendship, to name just a few. I gathered over 60 hours of material, most of it interviews. I worked with assistants gathered from the sangha, training them as I went, and this in itself was a spiritual practice for us all. We formed a temporary team-based Right Livelihood and all benefited from the opportunity to refine our communication and cultivate understanding within such an intensive working situation.

The main thing that stands out for me about this time is the quality of interaction I had with all the women I



Kalyacitta & Lotte

interviewed. It was a tremendous privilege to communicate with each of them about what is most precious, their Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, and give them the opportunity to talk about this in the context of their own unique circumstances. I appreciated more deeply the meaning of Sangharakshita's aphorism: 'commitment is primary, lifestyle secondary' as I witnessed a common thread of spiritual commitment that shone through, and unified, all the interviews, no matter whether the person concerned was living in a Retreat Centre or a busy family home. Over and over I was moved by this. I came to recognise the extraordinary and clarifying nature of spiritual commitment within the confusions of the modern world. I felt my own spiritual practice maturing and deepening through 'meeting' people so deeply in the context of the interviews. It was a very intense and luminous time of my life, despite all the struggles and practical difficulties the team and I inevitably encountered.

Overcoming Obstacles

Early 1997 I completed most of the filming but then hit a major obstacle: my health deteriorated when a long-standing spinal injury worsened to the point of being hospitalised. It soon became apparent that it would be impossible for me to continue the project without making major changes to how I worked and I was more or less housebound for several months. During this period I experienced the video project as a heavy weight that hung over me. I felt very alone, with the unedited tapes haunting me as I wondered how the material was ever going to emerge into the light of day. One day, out of the blue, I got a letter from another woman involved in the FWBO, called Jo Hughes. She was completing a post-graduate diploma in documentary film-making at Goldsmiths College and had heard about my project. She wanted to help and I of course leapt at the offer. Later that year we managed to release an interview with Sangharakshita on 'Women and the Spiritual Life'. This was an important milestone. Jo had helped me resolve an impasse I had reached with the project for which I felt deep gratitude. She soon took up a post with the BBC in Cardiff, but we remained in touch

and she continued to help me with preparing transcripts and script-writing.

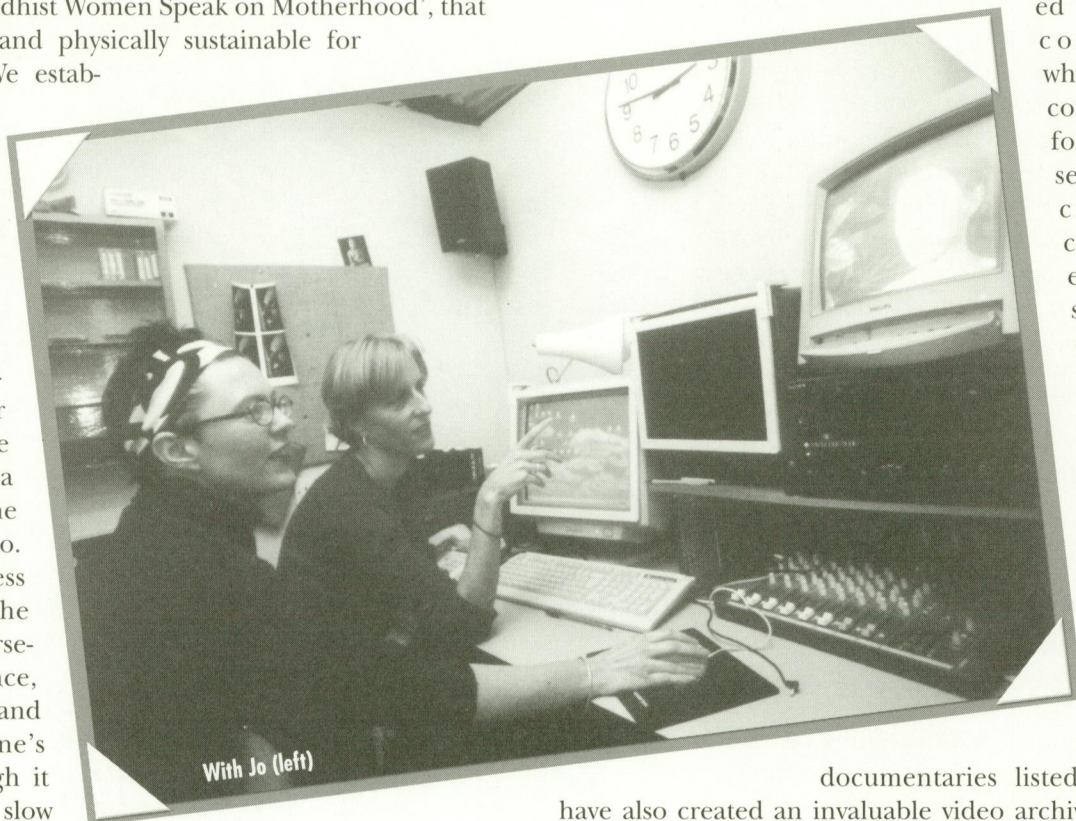
In 1998 I approached another woman in the FWBO for help: Rosalind Hewitt, an experienced video editor. Although she had professional commitments in London we managed to come up with a strategy for editing the next video, 'Buddhist Women Speak on Motherhood', that was practically and physically sustainable for both of us. We estab-

lished a routine where she came up to Manchester four days a month and we edited using equipment set up in my bedroom. After many months we had produced a rough cut of the 45 minute video. This process taught me the benefits of perseverance, patience, good humour and loyalty to one's vision. Although it was a painfully slow way to edit a video, it was also extremely rewarding. We took the time we needed to draw the very best out of the interview material and maintain its integrity. Rosalind later helped me get a bursary to complete post-production at a London edit house and we were able to do the 'on-line' edit to a high standard, including laying music that was composed by a pianist in the FWBO.

The next phase of the project saw Jo Hughes moving back to Manchester, enabling her to work with me on the more ambitious video, 'Buddhist Women Speak on Ordination'. This was completed in March 2001. Jo took on the role of director and worked full-time for five months over the summer of 2000, and in February 2001. She went through the footage we had already shot, gathered some extra material, structured the programme and worked intensively with Jeff Cole, the editor. I moved into the role of producer and worked with Jo more in a more advisory capacity, supporting her as a friend and taking overall responsibility for the project whilst not being so involved in the day-to-day tasks. This was much more manageable for me physically and was rewarding for us both. We also had research assistance from Savannah, a young woman who came over from the USA for a month to do an internship as part of her degree in journalism. I personally was delighted to be able to offer such a placement for her, enabling her to get wider experience of both film-

making and the Buddhist world.

To date we have now produced three videos: the interview with Sangharakshita, the documentary on Motherhood and the documentary on ordination. Stylistically I had a clear vision of wanting to produce videos that were pure, simple, uncluttered and with a light editorial touch. I want-



ed to create conditions where women could speak for themselves and communicate the essence of spiritual commitment in the modern world. I feel to some extent we have achieved that. In addition to the completed

documentaries listed above we have also created an invaluable video archive. There is material that is as yet unedited, but at least it now exists in concrete form which women of the future will be able to access. Audio-visual technology is changing very fast. Before long we will be able to store all the footage on digital formats that do not decay with time, and we'll be able to release footage on video CD, DVD and other new technologies. One idea is to create a library of all the interviews on video CD as a study resource. I don't think I'll be able to do it myself given the limitations of my health, but I have faith and confidence that someone will, some day.

Lessons Learnt

I have learnt many valuable lessons during the course of the project, major life lessons as well as lessons particular to the project. I shall try to list some of them here:

1. Firstly I have learned the lesson of loneliness. In the early days of the project I felt very alone and found it challenging to stand true to my vision. I struggled to find the confidence to take responsibility for the project on my own. I knew I had skills to offer but didn't feel I had sufficient spiritual 'weight' to decide on the content of the videos. In the end I came up with a strategy whereby I consulted with senior women Order members at crucial stages in the production, showed them various edits and welcomed guidance on matters of spiritual integrity. I think this was the best strategy under the circumstances.

I also experienced it as lonely in that, when I embarked on the project, the value of video was not widely appreciated in the women's wing of the FWBO. I found it challenging to gradually try to convince, even educate people, as to the value of what I was trying to do. Having said that, there was always a handful of people who stood behind me and encouraged me when I became despondent. I hope that I have pioneered a greater awareness of the value of video so that the future filmmakers in the women's wing can build on these foundations.

2. Another major lesson was that of patience. Initially I thought I'd finish the project in a year or so! I had envisioned three or four documentaries on different aspects of Buddhist women's lives and thought it would be reasonably straightforward to produce these. This was partly based on absurd naiveté and partly on having worked on big budget productions with big crews in the past. It has in fact taken over five years to produce three videos! Although it has been frustrating to have the project take so long to get this far, I have learned that if one just keeps a vision alive, no matter what the obstacles, then eventually progress will be made.

3. The most gratifying and heart-warming lesson arose from changing the focus of my own personal efforts from hands-on film-making to spiritual friendship. The

contributions of both Jo and Rosalind have been indispensable to the completion of the three videos released so far. I have tried to be a supportive friend to them both even though I initially tried to hang onto the project and had a lot of my own ego and identity tied up with it. This was difficult for me and difficult for them. Gradually this has changed and, in particular with Jo, I feel clear that she is in a much better position to develop film-making in the women's wing than I perhaps ever was. Certainly she is a more talented and skilled filmmaker. She is young and she is fit. She is the next generation and we need the next generation if any of our vision is to be deepened and new initiatives developed. I can say this now without feeling threatened, just immensely grateful that the vision I initiated has the potential to be picked up by others, in their own way, in their own time. The lesson I have learned here is that the most important thing is that vision is bodied forth in the world, and it doesn't matter who sees it through.

This has been a life lesson for me about letting go, trusting others, rejoicing in their qualities and helping create conditions for their qualities to flourish. My deep and strong friendship with Jo has been forged in the crucible of working together, egos clashing, our ambitious natures meeting head-on. Out of this has emerged a friendship that has blossomed into a lasting and respectful love for one another.



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Recent publications include: *A Dictionary of Pāli*, Part I, A–Kh, by Margaret Cone; *The Pātimokkha*, a bilingual edition of the rules for monks and nuns with Pāli and English on facing pages; and a new edition of *Group of Discourses*, a translation of the Suttanipāta by K.R. Norman.

Sacred Space

Some 420kms from Sydney - approximately 6 hours' drive away - is a property known as 'Toorooka'. It is situated 42km inland from Kempsey on the mid north coast of NSW and comprises 151 acres of mainly eucalypt forest with a few cleared areas and some river flat on the Macleay River. The land is long and narrow, following a ridge line that forms the tail of the Water Dragon dreaming track. It has views across the Macleay River valley which runs between low hills to the south and southeast, and views of timbered mountains to the north. A dirt road crosses the width of the property, and leads to some five other dwellings further up the valley.

The land is currently owned by Minmia, an Aboriginal woman and a long-term friend of mine. She teaches the traditional Aboriginal women's teachings and conducts traditional rituals and ceremonies intimately related to the land. She had intended using the land for this purpose and more generally as a place for retreat and spiritual healing. However, serious illness has meant she must move to live nearer a hospital and her family and she is now con-

cerned to pass the land on to others who will honour it.

Minmia has focused her efforts on creating a 'sacred space', mainly through planting a sacred grove which includes a Bodhi tree, establishing a meditation space (a stone hut) and several outside ritual/meditation spaces as well as a Rainbow Serpent waterway linking three ponds.

A number of women in the Australian sangha have been discussing the idea of purchasing land and setting up a vihara. We are very attracted to the idea of taking on Toorooka and developing the spirit which Minmia has cherished. So we have formed a non-profit organisation called *FWBO Toorooka Inc* and are buying the land in that name using

money that has been donated. Contracts have now been signed and we should own the land by early November.

There are two houses on the property, about 100 metres apart. One house is timber with a large living/kitchen area and two large bedrooms, plus a front verandah with a beautiful view of the Macleay River. The second house is fibro; it is larger but incomplete. There is a well-established orchard and landscaped garden around the wooden house that includes the sacred grove. And there are vegetable and herb gardens.

Our idea is to establish a women's vihara as something of lasting benefit to the FWBO and WBO worldwide. It would provide a place for women to live permanently or to spend shorter

periods of time during which they could focus on meditation and study. We also see it as a facility that will attract Dharmacharinis from overseas to visit Australasia and thus provide further opportunities for connections to develop between women from around the world.

Our current ideas about the form our vihara might take see as a residential community of perhaps 6 to 8 women (this might take several



years to build up). Members of this community might spend part of the year on solitary retreat and a part travelling to FWBO centres to lead retreats and meet up with members of the sangha.

We would like to create several solitary huts of different kinds, some remote, for long solitaires, others offering solitary facilities with catering, another hut with facilities for a disabled retreatant.

We would like to provide a good library for study and research and also some basic studio facilities so women could come there to focus on art work.

We envisage the vihara could also host occasional events for small numbers of women such as a long 'rainy season' retreat for Dharmacharinis, Order study retreats, and 'months' for women who want to focus on cre-

ative endeavours such as writing or art work.

We hope our vihara community will come into existence at the end of 2002. Over the coming year we will start work up there and some people will be using the land for solitaires.

Satyagandhi

If you are interested to know more, contact Satyagandhi at:

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Minto Heights,
Sydney,
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E-mail:
satyagandhi@optusnet.com.au

Sydney Sangha Welcomes new Dharmacharinis

There is great delight in the Sydney Sangha about the recent ordinations of three women: Shubhavyuha (ex-Shirley Robertson), Sudrishti (ex-Anne Reich) and Padmalaya (ex-Virginia Calov). There seems to be a steady trickle of new Dharmacharinis here with Nagashuri last year and Satyagandhi the year before. Perhaps it is even a flow of new Dharmacharinis in Sydney.

Gillian Hewitt

@ **indra.net**

go

Indra.Net is the name of a new women's class at the Norwich Buddhist Centre, UK. Why Indra.Net? Well I have to admit it - because that week I was finding the term 'women's class' a bit unappealing. I agreed to co-lead the class with Vajradarshini and Nagasri on condition we could change the name. 'Welcome to the Indra.Net,' leapt into my head as I imagined our new class. It's pronounced Indranet and written in a dot.com sort of way. OK, you've guessed - I used to be in public relations.

The new Indra.Net and a men's night replaces the old mixed Sangha Night which we have had in Norwich since time immemorial. Another new feature of the programme is a Full Moon Puja, where the whole Sangha comes together once a month.

If I might say so, I think Indra.Net is a very appropriate name, in English at least. That is if you put to one side as an irrelevant detail the fact that Indra in Indian mythology is king of the Gods. The word ending 'a' is a feminine ending in English.

The image of Indra's net seems to sum up so well what such an evening would be about. It would be about friendship, kalyana mitrata, that beautiful, lovely, ethical friendship which we are trying to create and which permeates the whole of the FWBO and WBO. For what are we but a network of friendships? Lovely friendship with those further along than us on the spiritual path, with our peers and that strong willingness to extend the hand of friendship to all who show an interest in what we are trying to do.

Indra's Net is a metaphor for things as they really are. For Indra's net is a net of jewels, innumerable jewels of all colours, shapes and sizes all reflecting one other. We tend to see everything as discreet and separate, not least of all ourselves and others. In reality, so the Buddha says, it is not like that. It is like Indra's Net, everything reflects everything else, indeed interpenetrates everything else. So how would it feel to see ourselves when we are gathered together as beautiful, interpenetrating beams of coloured light? Oh to see like that

and know it to be true.

To me this seemed to be the context for our meetings. We began the programme with people giving talks on the subject of 'One thing I have learned about friendship.....' From there, in many ways, the programme has developed along the lines of FWBO Sangha evenings the world over, perhaps it is more intimate with some report-ins in small groups to give newer people an opportunity to get to know each other. We have also introduced a news section for the first 30 minutes for people to share news.

I must say the evenings are going well, not, I am sure, due to a name, for what's in a name, but due to the beautiful qualities of those who share their time with each other on those evenings.

May we become more and more like interconnecting beams of light, may we see with such eyes. And if anyone would like to take the name and set up an Indra.Net website, it's just asking for it, isn't it? Do let me know.

Sinhadakini

New Retreats at Taraloka



The Game of Life: Ritual Arts Retreat

What is a Ritual Arts retreat? During such an event, the arts are used as a means to explore the Dharma and as a medium for expressing devotion. In a way, it's returning to the roots of art as an exploration and expression of how things are, both the here and now and the beyond.

The retreat format was devised many years ago by Kovida and others and has worked its magic a number of times. This year the retreat was put on as a women's retreat for the first time. The venue was Taraloka. It was led by Jayachitta, Mandarava and myself.

We looked at the six realms of existence as depicted on the Tibetan Wheel of Life: hell, animals, hungry ghosts, humans, jeal-

ous gods and gods. Looked at symbolically, the realms represent mental states that we are all familiar with. When we turn our attention to them, they become a magic mirror in which we can see ourselves.

The method we use is intense and effective. Each day we took a different realm and began with a talk which described that realm's particular characteristics and the mental and emotional patterns associated with it. We then divided into two groups. One group created a representation of the physical environment of that realm, while the other group devised a way of enacting the behaviour of the inhabitants. In depictions of the Wheel of Life, each realm has a Buddha figure who shows the beings of the realm the way out. Each evening there was a ritual enactment which included escaping from the distinctive torments and sufferings of that realm. For example, the jealous god realm took the form of a game show with highly competitive participants who finally accepted the message that

only by working together could they really win.

The approach we have on Ritual Arts retreats is not psychodrama, nor is it amateur dramatics. It is a way of exploring one aspect of the Buddha's teaching and getting to know oneself better in the process. It's also very enjoyable, because it is meaningful play. Using drama, music and the visual arts to enact the mental states we get ourselves into is sobering - but also very funny. It gives the wider perspective we all need, kindly.

Srivati

Lessons in a garden

*The bee is not methodical amongst the
foxgloves.*

*Tall poppies bow before the wind.
Moles have no need of
a perfect lawn.*

*Swallows have no flight plan,
but still find their way home.*

*It's best not to weed someone
else's garden.*

*The water lilies are not wishing
they were lotuses.*

*The wisdom of grass lies in its
gentle persistence.*

*The baby rabbit has forgotten what
frightened it before.*

Sparrows are not inhibited in public.

*Hoping it won't rain makes
no difference.*

*Trees understand the importance
of staying put.*

Roses just are.

Srivati
Taraloka June '01

A Hidden Jewel

On this retreat we come to see that what we need for Insight to arise is really all within us. I found Ryokan's poem summed it up:

I want to ask you: in this whole world

What is the most profound most wonderful thing?

Sit erect and meditate right to the end

As you meditate, you'll find a clue

And everything will naturally become clear.

Keep your concentration

don't miss your chance.

After a while, your mind will be pure your wisdom ripe

Then you won't have to fool yourself anymore

Karen Mold



In September there was a meditation retreat at Taraloka for the first time specifically for women who have asked for ordination. Rather appropriately, the retreat coincided with the festival day of Padmasambhava, the Guru of Transformation. However, this retreat, which is called 'Meditation and Transformation', isn't directly about Padmasambhava but about transforming ourselves through the practice of meditation and seeing meditation as a doorway to the gaining of Insight.

For the past two years I've noticed the importance of nourishing my meditation practice as a way to expand myself. On this retreat there is the opportunity to deepen your practice through meditation and periods of reflection.

Over the ten days of the retreat the stillness and silence in and out of the shrine room was tangible - a testimony to the commitment and whole-heartedness of the practitioners. During the extended period of silence (we were in complete silence for five days) the occasional words of encouragement from our leader,

Vajragita, were like an extension of the silence itself.

Ordinations at Il Convento, October 2001

The 21 women ordained came from America, New Zealand, Australia, Finland, Sweden, Holland and the UK

8 Private and Public Preceptors seated on front row



Germany: Women Buddhists Retreat Together

In March this year I attended a three day conference for Buddhist Women in Cologne. This was the first of its kind in Europe and the initiative of Sylvia Wetzel and Sylvia Kolk, two Buddhist teachers well-known in Germany. The main speakers at the congress were Tsultrim Allione and Joan Halifax.

I gained many impressions from my contact with the women who attended the conference - both generally through my contacts over the three days and more specifically through a workshop I ran entitled, 'Women and Responsibility: Responding to the Cries of the World.'

The strongest impression I had was that there were many seriously practising women and many very faithful to a particular tradition or teacher. But I noticed they lacked a sense of Sangha or a context in which they could build up friendships with other women practising the Dharma. Often their main contact was their teacher and as they followed him or

her around to attend retreats, there was little opportunity to maintain contacts with others. Some women even went as far as expressing a sense of isolation. Some felt under pressure to find 'the right teacher' to give them a sense of belonging somewhere.

During the congress the FWBO ran a stall with information about events and activities for women including women's communities, businesses, Taraloka Retreat Centre and the WBO's ordination process. Visitors to the stall often expressed surprise that we not only offered all this but had been doing so for some considerable time! Retreats for women, led by women, are not so common-place in the western world, it seems.

I realised how little known the FWBO still is in Germany. I also realised that what is so fundamental to our approach is not generally appreciated: that an essential ingredient to spiritual life is spiritual friendship, comradeship, support, encouragement and exchange. I asked myself, where would I be now without spiritual friendship? and taking a broader perspective, I felt that the consistent unfolding of the experience of the sangha jewel is what is most needed for the Dharma to stay

alive for as long as possible. Why, then, did I not share my experience of sangha with others not involved in the FWBO? I was also keen to have more contact with women practising within other traditions. So I decided to run a meditation retreat at our new Retreat Centre - a retreat for Buddhist women from any tradition. Eventually four women signed up (although we had quite a few more enquiries) and, together with 10 women from the FWBO, attended the retreat. We had people from the Zen tradition as well as women who regarded Ayya Khema or Jack Kornfield as their teachers. All were serious meditators with a disciplined practice, people who engaged with their practice on their cushions and in daily life. I found I learnt a lot from having them on the retreat. There were some gentle remarks about the silent periods not being made use of more fully; surprise expressed that coffee was served on retreat; and that rather a number of sweet things seemed to keep popping up. Food for thought...And perhaps on their part they got a flavour of the spirit of sangha as we have developed it in the FWBO. If so, it will have been a worthwhile experiment - certainly it is one I want to continue.

Kulanandi

Lotus Realm was pleased to receive from the Dharma Friendship Foundation the following account of one of Thubten Chodron's recent publications:

Blossoms of the Dharma: Living as a Buddhist Nun Thubten Chodron, editor

Buddhism is now one of the fastest growing faiths in America, and people see Buddhist nuns in the grocery store, at the airport, and in schools. Their curiosity is piqued, 'Who are these women? Why did they choose this life style? What do they do? Are they happy? What message do they have for society?' *Blossoms of the Dharma: Living as a Buddhist Nun* answers these questions and more. The nuns describe their personal

experience, explain the history of the nuns' order and the monastic discipline, and discuss the variety of lifestyles a nun may live. The contributors come from all the major Buddhist traditions and their essays are informative, yet personal, with the personalities and humour of the nuns shining through.

Here we learn about life at Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village, Trungpa Rinpoche's Gampo Abbey, and Ajahn Sumedho's Amaravati Monastery. We hear what life is like for Korean nuns, Tibetan nuns in exile, Western nuns working cross-culturally to bring Buddhism to the West, Zen priests at Rochester Zen Center, and Chinese nuns trying to restore Buddhism after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution. We hear from therapist Ven. Wendy Finster about Buddhism

and psychology; from Ven. Khandro Rinpoche, a recognized incarnation of a great Buddhist master; and from Ven. Tenzin Palmo who spent twelve years meditating in a cave in India. This book includes a message from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a foreword by Sylvia Boorstein, an interview Western nuns had with the Dalai Lama, and photos of the nuns. It's great reading!

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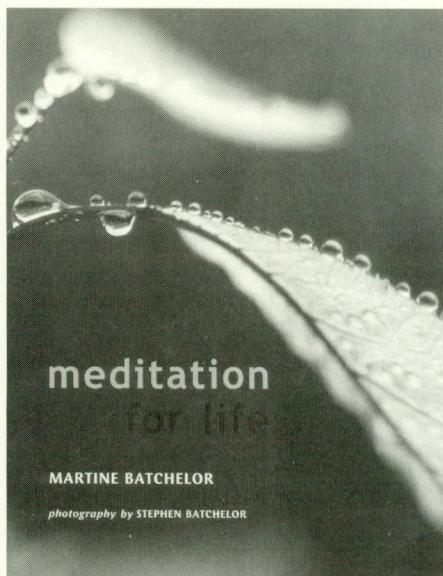
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Meditation for Life
Martine Batchelor
 photography by
Stephen Batchelor
Frances Lincoln, London 2001
168 pages,
£14.99



That this is the age of the image has never been more obvious. Pictures of burning planes and falling towers, of night bombardments and Afghani children, painfully haunt the mind and the imagination. Fortunately, positive images have their own power, as has been well understood by the Buddhist tradition from early times. The image of the meditating Buddha is often said to convey all one needs to know about his teaching - and this is no doubt attested by the threat apparently posed by the Buddhas at Bamiyan, those immense, ancient and beautiful figures so recently destroyed.

I have often thought that books about Buddhism - not just coffee-table books, but books explaining aspects of Buddhist teaching - could make more use of images as a dimension of communication. I am very glad, therefore, to welcome this new large-format introduction to meditation, with text by Martine Batchelor and photographs by Stephen Batchelor. Not that the pictures illustrate the text in any literal or specific way - it is more that there is a play between words and images, and both have the indefinable but distinct flavour of meditation. The subtlety of the link between the two is itself expres-

sive, and pictures and text are often placed so that there is a kind of resonance between them.

In a 'photographer's note', Stephen Batchelor describes his experience of the relationship between taking pictures and meditating: 'Both photography and meditation require an ability to focus steadily on what is happening in order to see more clearly. To see in this way involves shifting to a frame of mind in which the habitual view of a familiar and self-evident world is replaced by a keen sense of the unprecedented and unrepeatable configuration of each moment.' His photographs - focusing on seldom-observed details and unexpected views ñ have this quality of clear seeing; one of my favourites, a picture of a monastery kitchen in China, reminds me of the paintings of Vermeer.

So the book looks - and feels - beautiful. How does it shape up as an introductory guide to meditation? The text is the fruit of Martine Batchelor's deep experience of the meditation practices of a number of Buddhist traditions, and she helpfully and straightforwardly explains how Tibetan, Zen and Theravada practices relate to the basic aims of meditation - 'concentration and enquiry'. Through a flow of anecdotes and personal examples, she makes meditation seem appealingly accessible, rather than a mystical adherence to the forms of any particular tradition: 'The moral is: in meditation, use your common sense. Adapt or let go according to the circumstances, and be wary of taking things too seriously or becoming excessively pious.'

Is this too individualistic, the charge often laid at the door of approaches to Buddhism which encourage picking and choosing among the traditions? I don't think so. Martine Batchelor balances the importance of a playful and experimental attitude to meditation with an emphasis on the need for commitment and patience if one is really to change: 'Master Kusan would use the analogy of ice in winter. If the sun shines for a day, the ice does not melt. But if the sun shines for many days, the ice melts and then there is water for washing and cleaning. In the same way,

if we do not practise regularly and assiduously we will not be able to break through our patterns and habits to awakening.'

As well as drawing on the teachings of her own teachers, Martine Batchelor gives us many glimpses of Buddhists trying to practise. You get a sense of what being a meditator is really like, and the general effect is both realistic and encouraging. Batchelor's style is unfussy and refreshing - good for beginners, but experienced meditators will find new things here too, or - even better - old things newly expressed.

Each section of the book has three parts: the first sets out the ideas behind meditation practice, the second is a more technical introduction to an aspect of meditation, and the third is a step-by-step guided meditation. While the three elements of a section do not always relate to one another directly, so that the book has a kind of mosaic quality, the overall pattern is clear, and it allows the author to include material on many topics, including ethics and the role of a teacher - on which latter subject Martine Batchelor is especially helpful. Written meditation instructions are perhaps never really satisfactory, but these are clearly set out and thoughtfully written. I appreciated the reflections on thoughts, sounds, death, and even conversation and cooking (though I still don't have an answer for the question 'What is more important, to eat or to cook?')

While all the various elements in the book do their job very effectively, what makes it special, I think, is that, in its subtle, very contemporary way, it creates an atmosphere of beauty, spaciousness and a kind of robust cheerfulness - the atmosphere, one might say, of meditation. While in a way lavishness seems out of place in the world today, one could see this beautiful book as a precious assertion of what is most important. The author, the photographer, and the publisher (Frances Lincoln) are all to be congratulated.

Vidyadevi

flow



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