

Meditation and Transformation

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A new voice for Buddhist women



CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

IN THE DRAGONFLY'S EYE:
Beyond Consumerism

MEDITATION IN ACTION

GREAT WOMEN MEDITATORS



*"Those who seek transformation
must step into the tiger's cave..."*



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MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Dharmacharinis Viryaprabha, Kalyanaprabha
Vajrapushpa, Varabhadri, Kalyanavaca and Shrivati

EDITORS

Vajrapushpa and Kalyanaprabha

NEWS EDITOR Viryaprabha

REVIEWS EDITOR Vajrapushpa

PICTURE RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION Penny Morris

DESIGN AND LAYOUT Sophie Brown

ADMINISTRATION TEAM Jackie Cole

Penny Morris, Kay Stubbs

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Cheques in £ sterling payable to '*Lotus Realm*'
Send to *Lotus Realm*, Manchester Buddhist Centre
16/20 Turner Street, Manchester M4 1DZ, UK
Tel: 0161 839 2060, **Fax:** 0161 839 4815
email: lotus @c-vision.demon.co.uk

LOTUS REALM *A New Voice for Buddhist Women*

*"Just as in a pond of blue, red or white lotuses some lotuses
grow in the water, some rest on the water's surface and some
come right up out of the water..."*

So the ancient texts describe the Buddha's vision of
humanity – individuals struggling to grow beyond the
circumstances of their births towards that complete
unfoldment which is Enlightenment.

A symbol of spiritual growth and development, the
image of the lotus is known throughout Buddhist
tradition. We think not only of the Buddha's great vision
after his Enlightenment, but of Mahapajapati Gotami
joyfully taking up the eight 'rules of training' 'like a
wreath of blue lotus'; and we are reminded of the many
Bodhisattva figures of the Mahayana tradition, young,
beautiful, bedecked with jewels and seated on lotus thrones.

The realm of the lotus is the realm where spiritual
values reign supreme: where all the circumstances of life,
both individual and collective, conduce to spiritual
development. Buddhist tradition depicts such a realm in
a mythical way in its descriptions of the archetypal Pure
Land, Sukhavati.

In 1967 Sangharakshita founded a new Buddhist
Movement, the **Friends of the Western Buddhist Order**
(FWBO or TBMSG as it is known in India). At its heart is
the **Western Buddhist Order**, a spiritual community of
men and women committed to furthering their own and
others' spiritual development through traditional
practices of meditation, devotion, study and the develop-
ment of spiritual friendship, within the context of a
germinal New Society which the Movement seeks to
bring into being. Order members, Mitras (those wishing
to further their involvement with the Movement and the
Order) and Friends (those who participate in any way in
the activities of the FWBO) often live together in residen-
tial men's or women's communities; work together in
team-based Right Livelihood businesses and co-operate
together to run rural retreat Centres and city-based
Buddhist Centres where people can come into contact
with the Dharma. Some of those involved in the move-
ment are concerned with the development of the arts;
whilst others – especially in India – are involved in social
work projects.

In living out Buddhist values in the midst of
contemporary society, members of the Western Buddhist
Order and their friends hope not only to bring about
radical change within themselves, but also to effect a
change in contemporary life through their efforts to
bring into being a 'lotus realm'.

Since the time of the Buddha women have Gone
for Refuge to the Three Jewels, living a life committed to
the practice of the Dharma. However, their numbers have
been few (in comparison to men) and records of their
lives and realizations even fewer.

The technological and other changes in the
modern world have made it more possible than ever
before for women to take up the challenge of spiritual
life. Dharmacharinis, women members of the Western
Buddhist Order, who have participated fully with their
Dharma-brothers in pioneering this new Buddhist
Movement, have gained considerable experience in the
leading of the spiritual life under modern conditions. It
is this experience which they hope to share through the
pages of this magazine – for the benefit and interest of
all who may choose to read it.

The flower of Compassion...

AT NEW YEAR I found myself in the Sauerland in Germany on retreat. A light snow had fallen and as our retreat began, the temperature dropped. Day by day the frost crystals that clung to each branch and twig and blade of grass grew larger until we found ourselves in a magical realm of brilliant whiteness where the sun's beams struck fire from the snow and pure lights of many hues danced on the sparkling expanses of snowfields. Day by day our meditations deepened. I found my inner world becoming purer, brighter. Visualizing the form of the Bodhisattva White Tara who radiates Wisdom, Compassion and Beauty, it was as if an echoing antiphon sang between the outer natural world and the inner visionary one – the eyes all full of wonder and delight at the whiteness of the snow, the inner eye gazing on the purity of Tara's form, the heart on fire – and yet afraid to approach so much beauty.

As the retreat drew to a close a wind got up and one morning as we made our way in the clear dawn light to the meditation building, it was to see the snow had been blown from the tree-tops. The valley was no longer ringed-round by giant white protectors. It was a reminder that one cannot stay in those magical realms forever. The world awaits.

As, indeed, it did. We returned to the wet and dirty streets of Essen and I went on to the perhaps still wetter streets of Manchester! There the young lad who sits begging on the corner of the local shopping arcade is getting iller and thinner. A friend has died, another has given birth, still another has spent Christmas in his sickbed. The faces of the shoppers are full of anxiety and irritation. The news-stands bombard the passer-by with invitations to gratuitous satisfaction, titillating the senses until they groan with unsatisfied craving.

Years ago when I took up the practice of meditation some of my friends or relatives would ask, 'Isn't it selfish, spending all that time just thinking about yourself!' But meditation is not, of course, a matter of thinking about yourself! It's a matter of trying to make yourself – to put it very simply – a better human being, a more positive, creative human being – even simply a happier more contented human being. And yes, one could do that for merely selfish ends, merely to alleviate one's own suffering, merely for the selfish pleasure of enjoying more beautiful and blissful states of mind.

But for a Buddhist such a position is contrary to the basic act of Going for Refuge. If we go for Refuge to the Buddha we are put into contact (however dimly) with the Great Compassion that responds to the needs and suffering of all,

young and old, rich and poor, human and non-human. When Prince Siddhartha, meditating under the Bodhi tree, broke through all the confining and confounding mental conditionings and looked out and saw the world for what it truly was, then,

*Seeing this world, this hapless world,
With all its store of woes,
Compassion in the Buddha-Heart
Burst open like a rose. (Sangharakshita)*

In taking the Buddha as our great exemplar, we cannot really see our meditation practice as anything but part of our overall effort to develop into the kind of human being that is capable of responding to the cries of the world not with pity or horrified anxiety, but with the Compassion that springs from the profound Wisdom that understands the real nature of things. □

Kalyanaprabha

MEDITATION AND TRANSFORMATION

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CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE



Kulaprabha

CATALYSTS make things happen. They make things happen under circumstances in which they would not normally happen. Catalysts speed things up.

Scientists know about chemical catalysts. They know that a good catalyst will help compounds react at lower temperatures and at lower pressures – in other words, under conditions which are easier to set up and maintain. Chemists also know that the catalyst itself is not changed in this process. It promotes change but is not itself changed. It retains its purity.

Alchemists also knew about catalysts. Alchemists and their theories and experiments were the forebears of modern chemistry, but unlike modern chemists, alchemists practised their art in the belief that the state of mind of the alchemist affected the outcome of the catalytic experiments. Both the substances and the experimenter needed to be as pure as possible if the best outcome was to be obtained. Their catalyst par excellence was the fabled Philosopher's Stone which would turn base metal into gold. To work with the Stone, the alchemist needed to have a pure mind. Without such a mind, nothing could be produced that would not itself be tainted with imperfection. Since gold was the perfect substance, whatever the imperfect alchemist produced would not be gold but only a flawed imitation of the real thing.

From a 20th century perspective, the ideas of the alchemist may seem ridiculous. Certainly much of it is chemically impossible – at least outside of nuclear reactors or the solar atmosphere. Modern chemists probably don't think

there is any scientific need to purify their own minds beyond the level of not falsifying results. Nevertheless there is still something fascinating about the alchemists and the task they set themselves. In the perfected Alchemist the spell-binding figure of the magician combines with the purity and renunciation of the hermit to create a powerful symbol – a perfected being who has solved the mystery of how to create the perfected substance.

Meditation is also a catalyst – it too promotes change and can do so under circumstances and conditions in which change has not yet begun. Just as chemical catalysts allow chemists to transform physical material of one sort into another sort, so meditation can catalyze our mind and change it from what it is now into an altogether more refined, clearer and more deeply responsive kind of consciousness.

Chemical catalysts can help create altogether new types of material – never observed till the completion of that particular experiment. Imagine the

chemist's excitement and exhilaration in watching the process unfold ... knowing that no-one has ever before seen what you are seeing, or done what you are doing! With meditation what is being created is new to us but not, of course, new to mankind since it lets us retrace a process of change already mapped out by earlier generations of practitioners.

So – can meditation be as exciting as chemistry? Are we as dedicated to changing ourselves as a medieval alchemist in pursuit of perfection? I think we should be even more excited and more dedicated. Of course perhaps you have never thought that chemistry could be exciting



Bruegel: The Alchemist

...We need
better options
with which
to deal with
pleasant and
unpleasant
feeling. They
are waiting for
us in the Brahma
Viharas...

anyway. How strange! Keep reading!

Chemical catalysts operate within the physical and biological realms. Meditation achieves its ends within the realm of our mind – throwing light on old patterns and half-glimpsed ideas and views; rooting out what hinders, freeing us from the poisons of greed, hatred and delusion, eventually allowing a completely new purified consciousness to emerge. Chemistry is limited. Meditation is not. (Limited though they are, chemistry and science are not in any basic conflict with the Dharma. It's just that the Dharma has the greater perspective. It's the catalyst par excellence.)

THE FOUR GREAT CATALYSTS OF BEING

These reflections apply to meditation generally, but there is one set of meditation practices to which they are particularly pertinent. These are the practices for developing the four Brahma Viharas or Sublime Abodes of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The Brahma Viharas are also known as the four great catalysts of being! Let's look at the Dharmic catalytic process that they offer us.

It's not very difficult to wish to eradicate hatred or greed or ignorance from our mind. It is difficult to maintain that wish strongly over a long time. It's not that difficult to recognise those states in their more extreme forms, particularly when we are seeing them in other people. It's a lot harder to identify them in their more cunning, plausible, even mesmerising appearances, particularly within ourselves. Why is this? To answer this question we'll need to move one step back to what we experience just before greed or hatred appear.

In a way it's very straightforward. Just before one of those great impurities of mind appears, we experience a feeling (Pali: *vedanā*) which is either pleasant or unpleasant or somewhere between the two. If it's pleasant we want to keep on feeling it and if it's unpleasant we want it to stop. Out of that simple process emerge all the emotions that humankind is prey to. Being prey to something is to be hunted and chased, perhaps being caught and killed. Being prey to these emotions we are at their mercy. But they are not merciful! These emotions lead us round and round an unending cycle of feeling and our reaction to it.

Continuity of purpose is one of the faculties which we are exhorted to develop if we want to practise the Dharma. Maybe it would be helpful for us to realize that we already experience continuity: we show great constancy in letting ourselves be a host for these mental impurities. What we need to do is show some constancy in getting rid of them!

Each time we react with craving or illwill we reinforce old poisonous patterns. We create ever stronger tendencies in our minds. We give them

more life. This is how we create the volitional activity (Pali: *sankhāras*, more commonly known in their Sanskrit form, *samskāras*) which become the emotional skeleton for our future, the framework around which the rest of ourselves will crystallize.

Rather than getting downhearted faced with this sort of home truth, maybe it's more useful to let it become fuel for our future attempts to change. Let's just acknowledge that maybe it's going to be tougher than we expected and will need more determination on our part. To put it into chemical terms – we need a more effective catalyst to cope with our present conditions. This is where meditation comes into its own. Meditation gives us the opportunity to create a new set of samskaras for ourselves, a set that will allow us to spiral up into a more refined, steadfast and skilfully directed kind of consciousness, which is eventually able to experience things as they Really Are.

Let's go back to **pleasant and unpleasant feeling**. The present fact is that we tend to respond to pleasure with craving: we want more. We need a better response than that. In the midst of painful feeling we tend to respond with aversion. We want to push it away. We need a better option than that, too. In neutral feeling what happens? Well, I usually get bored and want something more exciting – craving sets in! There are two aspects to changing all this. First of all we've got to want to change it; and secondly we need the means to do so.

Again, it's not that difficult to understand that our present tendencies merely reinforce old patterns. The crucial element in bringing change about is that our present volitions must become painful to us. They even have to become consistently painful not just occasionally painful! Feeling, *vedana*, must take on an aspect of unsatisfactoriness (Pali: *dukkha*) so that even strongly pleasant feeling has just enough of a sharp tang to it that we stop and realize how careful we need to be in choosing our next move. And note the word 'choose'. Unsatisfactoriness brings choice in its wake and with choice we are no longer so much the prey of those three great poisons. But to begin with we can just pay some attention to the impermanence of even our most pleasant experiences; and maybe have some awareness of the pain brought about by repetitive unskilful behaviour.

Having managed to bring some measure of **awareness of unsatisfactoriness** into our mind, let's congratulate ourselves! It means that we have begun the dharmic version of the purifying process to which those alchemists aspired. It means that the first Noble Truth has begun to trickle into our consciousness. And to take that on board, the Truth that in all experience there is an element of unsatisfactoriness, is no easy thing – perhaps today more than ever. In



Kulaprabha works for the Glasgow Buddhist Centre. Previously she spent a number of years doing research work in chemistry.

western society we are prey to a view that we deserve to be happy. The pursuit of happiness as an inalienable right is even enshrined in the Constitution of the United States! Unfortunately that happiness is not envisaged as being outside ordinary existence. Instead people are left pursuing happiness where it can never be found – a position just as ridiculous as the search for an actual Philosopher's Stone. Influenced by this wrong view, we can feel we ought to be happy, and that to acknowledge painfulness must be wrong in itself or even unhealthy. However, the Dharma says that to acknowledge dukkha is the starting point of spiritual life. The first Noble Truth is not illustrative of a pessimistic Buddhist world view as some have claimed. It simply acknowledges the facts of human experience: the experience of unsatisfactoriness born of impermanence, and its accompanying wish for meaning in our lives. If we face up to it, this experience can galvanize us into action in pursuit of something beyond our current existence.

So – at length – we come to the means of achieving that greater meaning. We need better options with which to deal with pleasant and unpleasant feeling. They are waiting for us in the Brahma Viharas. To pleasant feeling we could respond with **sympathetic joy** and to unpleasant feeling we could respond with **compassion**. A simple formula to understand but difficult to embody. The Brahma Viharas also include **loving kindness**, which is the foundation of compassion and sympathetic joy; and **equanimity**, which gives us a further means for deepening our understanding of the other three great catalysts. If compassion is the antidote to aversion and sympathetic joy the antidote to craving, then equanimity is the counterpart to the ignorance underlying those poisons; and loving kindness is the foundation to them all. It is, therefore, to loving kindness that we first have to turn.

LOVING KINDNESS – METTA.

What I have had to acknowledge time and time again as I've tried to practise the Brahma Viharas is that if I cannot feel loving kindness (Pali: *mettā*) for myself then I am unlikely to feel much loving kindness for anyone else either, much less can I develop the other Brahma Viharas.

One of the most crucial elements of metta is that it brings confidence. Just that – confidence. There are many ways in which we can lack confidence. After we've evaporated off our more psychologically-based lack of confidence, we are left simply with the need to have confidence in ourselves as human beings who can practise the Dharma. When the Buddha was dealing with doubts in himself just before he gained Enlightenment, he called to mind all his previous

practice and the fact that it gave him the right, as it were, to dare set himself the highest purpose of attaining the completely pure Enlightened state. That calling to mind of previous effort and commitment is symbolised in the earth-touching 'mudra' or hand gesture. Next time you are meditating and an inner voice asks who you are to be doing this, try the earth-



touching mudra!

My reference to evaporating off our more psychologically-based doubts is not meant to disown or underestimate those. However, we find that one of the great properties of metta is that it lets us step aside from our psychology. It gives us some objectivity about ourselves and helps put our efforts into developing faculties that go beyond our psychological problems and difficulties. Just as the Dharma shows up the limitations of chemistry, it also shows up the limitations of psychology.

All the Brahma Viharas have this catalyzing property. It's the way that something new can come into being: our sense-based faculties can gradually change into spiritual faculties. The Buddha described the first such faculty as **faith** (Pali: *saddhā*) which is also translated as confidence-faith. The metta-bhavana meditation practice for the development of loving kindness is a means for developing this first spiritual faculty. By repeating the practice over and over again we gradually give ourselves the inner space to simply feel without our minds immediately leaping on to either craving or aversion. The more we do that, the greater the choice we have and the more we are living our life instead

of it living us. That choice brings a sense of empowerment and responsibility and, if we are honest with ourselves, it will also increase our faith in the Dharma as we see it transforming us in the way it promised.

I've already mentioned that we need to transform our continuity from continuity of greed, hatred and delusion to continuity of another kind. Continuity of purpose is part of what is required. It is usually described in terms of time – we need to be able to recollect actions in our past and their consequences, and apply that knowledge to our present actions in order to be able to create the future which we want. In this sense continuity of purpose is connected with stopping ourselves falling prey to unskilful habits.

Continuity can also be thought about in another way: we need **continuity of metta**. We need to be able to respond with loving kindness over the whole spectrum of feeling. The Brahma Viharas are unconditional in that they admit of no exceptions – no person or situation is omitted. Over the whole spectrum, whether we meet the blissful, the addictive, the horrifying, the contented, the fearful, the entangling, the boring or the appalling – all these can become the occasion for the arising of metta if we apply the effort.

Perhaps we think that therefore this metta must be a great blazing fire of an emotion. Well, sometimes it is. But sometimes it is just a steady flame that refuses to go out despite the best efforts of our old inclinations. It is important to recognise the potential of that steadiness. It doesn't matter if it's a small flame if it is a constant, persistent flame. And it is constancy that can give us confidence in ourselves – our own experience of touching the ground of our practice.

COMPASSION – KARUNA.

Compassion arises when metta encounters suffering. We don't need to do anything special to feel compassion beyond bringing together two conditions – the inner experience of metta and the recognition of somebody's suffering. It is not easy to bring these conditions together and keep them aligned with one another, but if we can do that we have created the conditions for karuna to arise. Establishing metta for ourselves and others is the first step in the karuna-bhavana practice. Metta is the foundation for all the Brahma Viharas. The second step is the bringing to mind of an actual suffering person and letting the metta we feel be touched by and respond to that person's suffering.

The suffering person could be ill or experiencing other unfortunate circumstances. They could be someone whose past actions are causing them suffering now. From there we

extend the spectrum of situations in which we respond with compassion to include our friends, people we hardly know, people we dislike and finally to all sentient beings everywhere we can imagine them.

It is not difficult to think of places and events around the world which deserve a compassionate response from us. Global communications give us first hand accounts of wars and famines as they are happening. Natural and man-made disasters appear in our living-rooms only hours after they have brought sudden misery and sorrow into people's lives.

It's not hard to feel sympathy for all that – yet we don't always do so. The very speed and frequency with which these pictures appear sometimes makes us want to just turn the TV off. It's all too much. Or maybe we have become immune to their impact and don't feel anything much at all. It's just another image flickering before our eyes.

This sort of non-response is an example of karuna slipping away into one or other of its '**near enemies**'. All the Brahma Viharas have their own particular near enemies – emotions which resemble the pure form but are actually contaminated by either craving or aversion. In the case of compassion, the tendency when we ask ourselves to face suffering is that we slip into aversion. When this happens, compassion turns into either **horrified anxiety** or the suffering overwhelms our metta and we are left feeling paralysed and impotent, wanting nothing more than to be rid of this very unpleasant experience. **Sentimental pity** is a well-known near enemy of compassion. It may get us to engage in doing all sorts of 'good works' but we are too much aware of ourselves, too aware of our own comparative good fortune. As we know, it is not a pleasant experience to be on the receiving end of this.

The best way to work with these enemies is to go back to individual real people again and, with the help of self-metta, try just to stay in touch with one person's suffering at a time. As we practice this over and over again, gradually a new experience transpires – suffering becomes something we can meet face to face. Facing suffering and infusing the experience with metta creates another new experience – fearlessness. Fearlessness gives us confidence and lets us mobilize more energy and determination behind our practice. The catalytic transformation continues.

SYMPATHETIC JOY – MUDITA

Just as compassion arises naturally when metta meets suffering, sympathetic joy arises when metta meets joy. It's only necessary to bring the two together and joy can be the occasion for more joy! It's wonderful! It really works! Who would have thought it? As for the other Brahma

Viharas, we begin with metta for ourselves. If we feel metta for ourselves, we won't feel jealous of others' good fortune. Instead we will simply feel joy! Admittedly, it is easier to say than to do and a few other basic materials are needed to let this catalyst really work well. One is confident that

actions really do have consequences and that our own skilful actions will lead to pleasant consequences in the future.

The practice proceeds in much the same way as the karuna-bhavana, except that instead of bringing to mind a suffering person, we recollect a fortunate person, someone who is generally happy or who is enjoying happy circumstances in their life, and we rejoice in their happiness and talents.

Mudita's near enemy arises when we begin to slip into craving the joy for ourselves. **Vicarious**

satisfaction arises. It's a counterfeit emotion which masquerades as mudita and it can be quite difficult to recognise. Perhaps it's best recognised by the characteristic of dependency it embodies. In the grip of this impurity we are no longer living our own life but have become dependent on someone else for our emotional experience. Like a parasite we steal their emotional lifeblood to give us sustenance. Again it's by going back into the individual stages of the mudita-bhavana that we can best work with this kind of stealthy craving.

By practising mudita-bhavana, we'll notice changes for the better. In a very down to earth sense, experiencing mudita is like having a clear conscience. For the moment at least, with no barriers or defences between us and other people, we can just appreciate and rejoice with them. It opens the door to delighting in people individually and in humanity as a whole with all its achievements and aspirations. It's wonderful!

EQUANIMITY – UPEKKHA.

To recap: in transforming our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant feeling, we find compassion is the antidote to aversion; mudita the antidote to craving; and metta is the foundation for both. So what is equanimity?

In the upekkha-bhavana, it is neutral feeling which gives rise to equanimity. After a first stage of developing metta, the practice proceeds by bringing to mind a neutral person. The absence of any strong positive or negative feeling towards this person enables us to enter a more reflective state where we can, as it were, watch

the passing of both good and bad fortune in this person's life. We can reflect that they will no doubt experience both success and failure, love and grief, gain and loss as their life proceeds. When these sorts of reflections are imbued with metta a sort of kindly patience arises. Hardly knowing this neutral person, our reflections will be very general and this gives them an added power to catalyze our state of mind: everything we are thinking about this neutral person applies also to ourselves and to everyone else we can imagine. Whatever change they are subject to, we will also undergo that change be it old age, families being born and growing up, unexpected illness, friendships growing and passing. This is very much a reflection about impermanence.

Sometimes these sorts of reflections arise spontaneously. As I was driving in the city one day, I found myself sitting at red lights. I watched two young men cross the road in front of me. They were in their twenties, looked fit and healthy, and were completely engrossed in their conversation. They walked on confidently together. A few hundred yards further on I stopped at another set of lights and suddenly realized the two men were in front of me again - still talking, still friends, but now old, slow, bent, and hesitant of foot. Of course it wasn't the same men. But to me the two scenes coalesced into one experience: impermanence.

Upekkha develops out of reflections like these. It requires the ability to hold compassion and mudita together at the same time. Not an easy task. Gradually it opens up other trains of thought and realizations about **the interconnectedness of joy and suffering** and the futility of trying to chase after the one or avoid the other. They are really like two links of a chain. To chase after or avoid those links is only to deform and distort the linkage, never to separate the links. Love and death are like this. We want one and shun the other. With upekkha we hold them together and move into a new way of looking at both.

Of course it is difficult to maintain this kind of awareness. All too easily our mind becomes tainted with aversion and equanimity slips over into **cold indifference**. Here there is still the perspective of impermanence, but the human empathy is lost. The way to work with this enemy is again by persisting with the practice itself but also by very deliberately bringing in metta.

One last word about the Brahma Viharas which so far I have omitted. They bring beauty into one's life. It's a beauty which is permeated more and more with awareness and acknowledgement of impermanence. The harmony which comes of holding beauty and impermanence together is one measure of the great transforming power of these four great catalysts of being. □



Leonardo da Vinci:
Profiles of age
and youth

In the Dragonfly's Eye: *Beyond Consumerism*



VIJAYASHRI

AT THE BEGINNING of the 1990's, articles appeared in the Sunday colour supplements predicting the likely characteristics of the new decade. In one article, illustrated by fashion models dressed in pure, unbleached cotton, we read that the Nineties would see a return to a caring society, to real values. We'd had the grasping, materialist Eighties, and we'd had enough of them. We were ready to become better people.

The decade is half gone now. Enough time has elapsed to take stock and see what has become of these optimistic forecasts. They were probably more an expression of weariness with what had been rather than any real intuition of what was to come. Because unfortunately there is little to suggest much has come of those forecasts. Even the clothes didn't catch on! The Nineties seem hardly less materialistic than the Eighties – except that there seems to be less material to go round. It seems fair to say that life in our times is characterized by a profusion of materialism.

But (it might be argued) surely human beings are naturally concerned with the material world and always have been in their struggle for survival. Of course this is true. But today's materialistic outlook is unparalleled in its entire negation of the possibility of experience that is beyond the material world, beyond the world recognized by the senses; beyond the world explored and charted by science. This view that there is nothing beyond the material level of existence is, according to Buddhism, a Wrong View, and as such prevents us from experiencing things as they really are.

I am reminded of a story recounted by Sangharakshita. One day he was sitting meditating when he saw the disembodied head of an old man, yellow, wrinkled and sneering, who said, 'You're wasting your time. There's nothing in the universe but matter! Nothing but matter!' Sangharakshita's response was prompt and to the point: 'There is something higher than matter. I know because I am experiencing it

now'¹ Sangharakshita identified this apparition as a manifestation of Mara, the embodiment of all that is inimical to spiritual growth. This Mara holds sway in our modern world, and his view has become an orthodoxy.

If we hold to the materialistic view of life, we find all sorts of things follow on. In the first place, if there is nothing but matter and all we can know is what we experience of the material world through the five senses, it follows that the only important values are material values, and gratifying the senses becomes the whole aim of life. That this view in fact dominates modern life is born out by the ubiquitous use of one of the terms currently used to refer to a human being: 'the consumer' i.e. one who eats, drinks, and uses things up; someone defined entirely by his appetite. The consumer is a predictable being, easily gulled by advertisers into consuming ever more of the endlessly produced consumable items. (Apparently the four words which are most successful in selling a product are 'new', 'free', 'sex', and 'chocolate'!) Politicians unashamedly appeal to the consumerist appetite, touting tax cuts to buy votes whenever an election looms – a sadly effective tactic.

There is so much to consume. The variety of goods in a supermarket compared to even ten years ago, has proliferated hugely. In doing a little research at my local supermarket, I counted no less than 179 different varieties of biscuits! Electrical stores are piled high with the most sophisticated technology: wall-sized TV screens, stereos, videos, computers, all the products of human skill and ingenuity, but so often used for no other purpose than to keep the consumer from being bored, to shorten the gap between a desire and its gratification.

The trouble with all these consumables, however, is that they fail to deliver what is promised. No matter how much variety to suit every taste, no matter how loudly we can play the music, no matter how instant the gratification, the senses are appeased only temporarily. They



**Vijayashri works
for the Croydon
Buddhist Centre,
UK. She is also
a homeopath.**

are never completely satisfied. Nothing really satisfies. Not even chocolate.

There is another meaning to the word 'consume', one that carries with it quite a shock. As well as meaning 'to eat or drink', it can mean 'to destroy by burning'. Immediately the words of the Buddha come to mind as he stood on the Vulture's Peak surveying the world. 'Bhikkhus, the world is burning', he proclaimed.² He went on to elaborate that all the five senses are burning. They burn with the fires of greed,

that sight impressions do not disturb us. And we learn to sit so that the body does not experience strain. We are both physically alert and at ease. By these means the physical senses, since they are not being stimulated by extremes of pleasure or of pain, quieten down and become less the centre of attention. Instead attention begins to focus on the inner sense, that of the mind itself.

Probably the first thing we notice as we give more direct attention to the mind is how overstimulated this sense is. (In Buddhism the ordinary mind of sense impressions is denoted a sixth sense.) Deprived of the usual distractions from input through the physical senses, the mind races from thought to thought, takes refuge in sleepiness or pleasant fantasies. Meditation is not an exercise in emptying the mind. Rather it is a practice of becoming absorbed in one simple object, such as the breath, or developing metta, the emotion of warmth, friendliness and expansiveness.

With regular practice we learn to become less prone to the mind's strategies of avoidance, more readily absorbed in the object of the practice. We begin to enter what are known as the dhyanas – states in which discursiveness falls away and inspiration wells up from deeper sources than the conscious mind, accompanied by sensations of rapture and bliss.

According to the Buddhist view, inner experience is said to have an objective counterpart so that by entering different levels of consciousness, we are also entering different worlds. There are said to be three planes of existence. The first is the *kamaloka*, the material world or 'plane of sensuous desire'. Then there is the *rupaloka* or world of pure form, characterized by visionary experience and emotional expansiveness; and finally there is the *arupaloka* or formless world, where the subject/object distinction becomes increasingly attenuated.

According to Buddhist teaching, when we enter the dhyanas we actually begin to exist in a different world, one in which the physical senses are no longer the medium of functioning. The realms of the *rupaloka* and *arupaloka* are experienced directly through the mind itself.

INSIGHT

Meditation is a means to enter into these realms. However, experience of these planes of existence is not the ultimate aim of spiritual practice. Ultimately our goal is to gain Insight into how things Really Are. Entering into higher states of consciousness prepares us for the gaining of Insight. But how does it do so? In particular it is the refining effect those experiences have on us, for instance, increasing our capacity to appreciate beauty. If our experience in meditation has a visionary quality, we



hatred and ignorance. According to the Buddha, the whole material world, the world of the senses is on fire. While we consume, we are being consumed.

This is the diagnosis, but what about the treatment? What does the Buddha's teaching have to offer in this present day for beings 'mesmerised by the sheer variety of perceptions'³ Mesmerised by the very fires that are consuming them?

Firstly, the Buddha makes clear, the treatment is not following the path of some religious ascetics: it is not through the mortification of the senses, through wearing either the literal of metaphorical hair-shirt! The Buddha tried out this path himself before his Enlightenment, taking it to such an extreme he came to the very point of death. He pronounced this approach to be 'painful, ignoble and harmful.'⁴ But if this is not the answer to our current malaise of over-identification with the sense world, then what is? How can we loosen our ferociously tight grip on the materialistic outlook? One way is through the practice of meditation.

MEDITATION

In meditation the attitude to the senses is neither to stimulate nor deny them. In order to meditate we seek out somewhere quiet to reduce input through the ear. We close our eyes, or, keeping them half open gaze at the floor so

begin to respond to the material world more poetically, seeing it as myth and symbol, seeing correspondences on a lower level to what we experience on a higher one.

The Japanese Haiku poets exemplify this - their poems call up simple images, but ones that reverberate with potent meaning:

*Reflected
in the dragonfly's eye
mountains.⁵*

An experience of my own illustrates this.

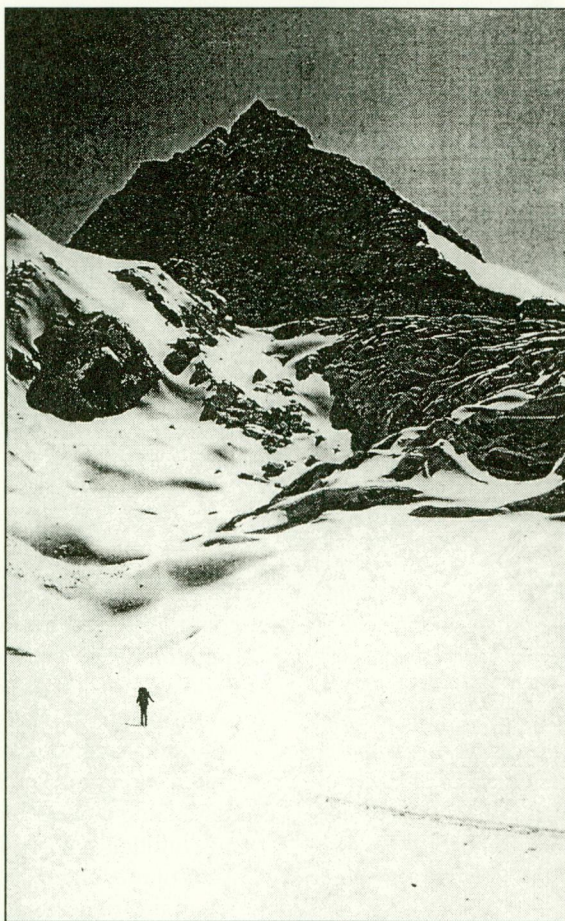
I have often glimpsed during meditation a palace of exquisite beauty. One holiday I chanced to visit the Alhambra Palace in Granada - and it was as if my inner world had taken form. I felt literally transported to another realm, not just because it was beautiful but because it corresponded so closely to the inner vision. This kind of experience, which is not uncommon to meditators, leads to our approaching the material world in a different way, less graspingly, more through aesthetic appreciation.

What usually prevents us from seeing things as they Really Are is the way we want to see them. Our perceptions are at the mercy of our desires - if we do not like something, often we will not see it, and if we are deeply attracted to something or somebody, we are blind to their shortcomings. But if we can approach the world with aesthetic appreciation, less of our energy is involved in trying to get something out of it.

We will want to see and understand its real nature. That real nature is impermanence, which comes as a danger and peril to the part of ourselves that clings to the material world. But to the faculty that can appreciate beauty, impermanence does not diminish the beauty we perceive, rather it enhances it, as we understand the poignancy of its fleeting nature:

*As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,
A mock show, dewdrops or a bubble,
A dream, a lightening flash or cloud;
So should we view what is conditioned.⁶*

So meditation provides a route away from the cloying grip of materialism, a path that goes



beyond the pleasures and pains of the senses, that passes beyond the turbulent waves of the ordinary mind. It stimulates and refines our appreciation of beauty, and gives the mind stability and flexibility. All this prepares us to see more clearly the real nature of things, the impermanence which actually confronts us at every moment, whether we like it or not. Through practising meditation we become increasingly able to meet that truth.

Sangharakshita has said that Insight consists in the ability to live continually in full awareness of impermanence. This may be simple to understand, but to

live it requires great dedication and steady practice. May each of us develop such dedication, and experience the freedom conferred by Insight. ☐

1. Sangharakshita, *Facing Mount Kanchenjunga*, Windhorse 1991, p322
2. Nanamoli, *Life of the Buddha*, Buddhist Publication Society 1984, P64
3. *Prayer for the Generation of the Bodhicitta*, Source unknown.
4. Nanamoli, *op. cit.*, p42
5. Issa, *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry*, Penguin 1981, p112
6. Trans. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books, The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra*, Unwin Hyman 1988.

What do YOU think?

The next issue of *LOTUS REALM* will include a LETTERS page We would like to hear from our readers their points of view on the issues raised in the pages of the magazine.

Do you agree? Disagree? Are there issues for Buddhist women that you think need addressing? Write with your views to the Editors at:

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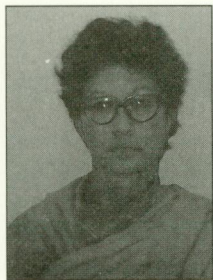
Letters may be subject to editing

Meditation *in Action*



Varadakini

MEDITATION, MEDITATION...*is it the sound of your beloved voice I hear, rebounding from the red walls of the cavern of my heart? Meditation...you are my most passionate adventure, taking me across vast, undiscovered continents. Meditation...lover, teacher, guide, revealer of the truth, giver of bliss more restful than sleep, more nourishing than food. Faithful, best of friends, how wonderful to know our lives will be intertwined for ever more, until I can no longer be distinguished from the dazzling peace of your transforming fire!*



Varadakini grew up in France. She worked for many years running health and fitness clinics. She now works for Windhorse Trading in Cambridge.

It is now ten years since I was introduced to meditation. Ten years since I fell in love. It has been a steady, untroubled love, but it has a depth and passion to which I am only beginning to awaken.

I used to think my meditations could go quite deep. I knew they could make my knees tremble with fear, but I did not think them great. I am the grounded sort, I thought, no bliss for me. Yet no-one and nothing else has ever gladdened my heart like meditation and, though my senses still foolishly seek their pleasures away from meditation's realm and the inexpressible pleasures of the Brahma world, the deeper currents of my life drive me more and more consistently towards them. Meditation is, therefore, central to my spiritual life. To be with my love more constantly, I spent two years living in a little house in the country, withdrawing from the world and spending much of my time in silence, meditating, studying, reflecting, and frequently going on retreats at

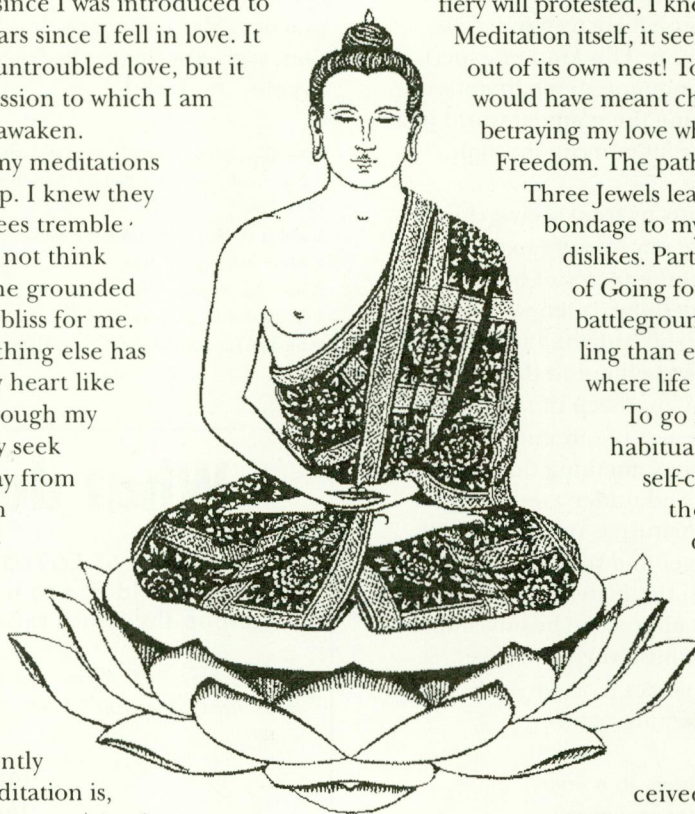
nearby Taraloka Retreat Centre. My life was like a continuous retreat which my friends would sometimes join. I was happy. I did what I liked best to do and what I was good at. It was a deeply nourishing time. Through the practice of the Mindfulness of Breathing, I became more integrated and clear. The Metta Bhavana practice for developing universal loving kindness deepened my confidence and softened my heart. Steadily the fruits of meditation ripened in unexpected ways. When my friends suggested it was time to meet the world again, though my heart groaned and my

fiery will protested, I knew it was time to go. Meditation itself, it seemed, was kicking me out of its own nest! To have remained would have meant choosing bondage, betraying my love whose message is Freedom. The path I tread towards the

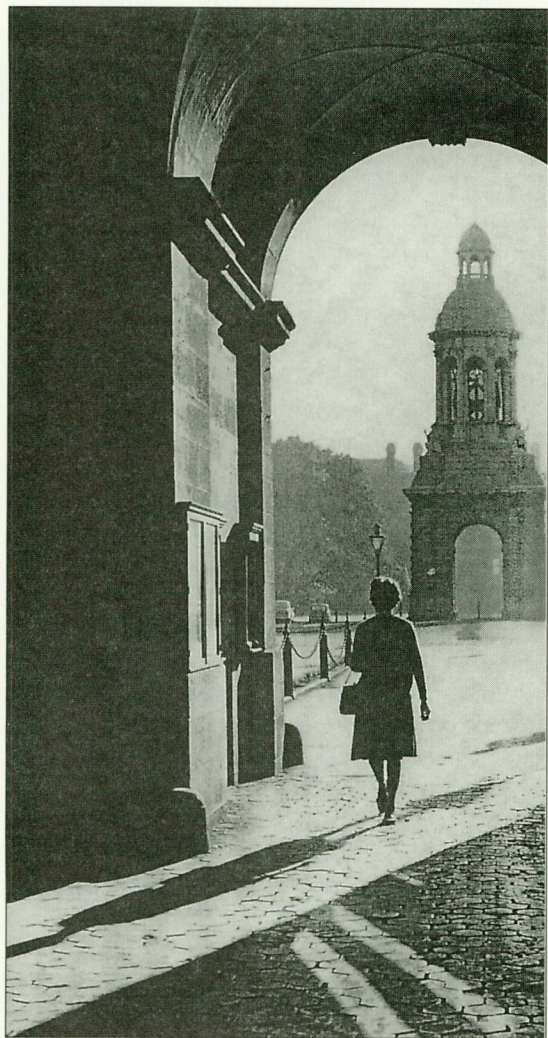
Three Jewels leads me away from bondage to my own likes and dislikes. Participating in the drama of Going for Refuge, with all its battlegrounds, is more compelling than easy god-like worlds where life is song and dance.

To go forth from the habitual ways of pride and self-centredness, to ease the fatal illness of duality, to appease the raging battles between the spiritual and mundane, I needed to reconcile myself with what I perceived mostly as repulsive and alien: the world, other people.

Strong diseases need strong medicine. Mine was: live with people, work with people, in a city full of people! For a whole year I experienced almost relentless pain outside of meditation. My years of solitude had made me sensitive, refined.



I found the sights, smells and sounds of the city harsh and painful. Painful, too, was my almost constant contact with people. I suffered because they suffered, or because I found them gross, or simply because they were different. I lived in a world dominated by revulsion. There was nothing around me that attracted me, nothing I liked. Selling gifts at the Evolution shop where I worked as part of a Right Livelihood venture,



meeting customers, and making my way between home and work were all I could take of the outside world. I spent most of my lunch-breaks sleeping and recovering! What was I doing here, I would ask myself, when cars, movies, shops – even museums with their more refined creations, held no attraction for me. I was there to achieve self-transcendence, to awaken to the experience of non-duality, to create conditions for the arising of the Bodhichitta. I kept on reminding myself of my purpose. I continued my practice of ethics, meditation, Dharma study, friendship. I was determined not to leave. My friends and my own insights had brought me here and my faith in them prevented me from running away. In any case, I knew quite well, there was nowhere else I could go.

Then, one day, I resolved I would make myself happy, come what may. After all, so far I had not broken through. I was suffering, and it was crippling me. This was not the way to gaining Insight, I thought. I resolved to let myself be. To let the meditator within me be, even if that meant leaving Cambridge. I began to treat myself to periods of silence, I took up yoga, I would sit quietly by the river after work. In this way the cause of my suffering was revealed: the culprit was a view that I could not be true to my love of meditation and live and work in the city. And there was the view that I did not belong, that I was a sore thumb or a misfit.

There I was with the two worlds: on the one hand meditation, reflection, study, silence, my inner world. On the other hand, the outside world, communication, work, people and activity. I found I no longer perceived them as irreconcilable. The two could meet, indeed, had to meet, since I could let go of neither. Because of my temperament and my present level of spiritual development, I need both meditation and other people; I need to both withdraw from and engage with the world with equal passion and wholeheartedness if Insight is ever to arise.

I have come to realise this intuitively, and with reason and then emotionally too. My faith has been fed by experience, and my endeavours have been rewarded by joy, spiritual progress and the appreciation of my friends.

So now I start the day with two meditations. I lead Practice Nights at the Buddhist Centre. I teach meditation to others. I treat myself to all-night Sutra readings. I have still, silent days off work, staying quietly in my room. I practice mindfulness of speech, mindfulness of thoughts, confessions of ethical breaches, I work vigorously with my mental states, both in and outside of meditation.

I also work with people, live with people, befriend people, I take the people I meet into my visualization practice, seeing them all under the loving gaze of the Buddha Amitabha.

My efforts to lock in a passionate embrace with what Hakuin calls 'the life of activity' and 'the life of calm' have led me to certain conclusions.

Idle, unnecessary speech is a great enemy of meditation. It quickly leads to unmindfulness and therefore to grosser unskillful actions; and it drains energy away with uncontrollable strength and speed. Idle speech – all the more dangerous because it is conventionally considered enjoyable and harmless – is really the activity of unskillful states of mind, in particular states of either intoxication or fear. Whenever I have found myself at work in a meditative state of mind, a dhyana state, I have kept silent.

Trying to do two tasks at the same time is not conducive to meditation! If my life of activity is so crowded it no longer supports my life of calm,

**...I need to both
withdraw from
and engage with
the world with
equal passion
and wholeheartedness if Insight
is ever to arise...**

then I should make all the adjustments I can, or reassess whether I really need to engage with a particular activity. Although I can sing of victories in my struggle, I need to strengthen still more the armies of Mindfulness and Metta, I need to arouse faith and vigour. Insight is not yet won. The battle still rages. It is still sometimes painful for me to leave the meditative realm. I feel lost and raw as I return to the world of 'normality' which does not seem to make sense. At the same time I still sometimes find it impossible to stop my



activity, even to just stop moving, though I feel within me an ever shriller and stronger cry: 'STOP! Drop what you are doing! You are walking all over infinite beauty, blindfolding yourself to Insight!' The reasonable response answers back, 'But I must...' I affirm Sangharakshita's comment that, as invariably in the spiritual life, "the good is very often the enemy of the best."¹ or again and again I still fall prey to pride and folly, ignoring the ways of the Buddha. I want my work to be like my meditation, without wanting to create the conditions in which it can become so. I experience the lot common to those

who tread the spiritual path: before we find the Middle Way of non-duality between two extremes of behaviour, we, alas, swing between the two. But with increasing awareness, noticing the limitations, the error of both poles, and experiencing the freedom of less conflicting ways, we find two apparent enemies begin to look at one another, join hands and eventually fall in love, giving birth to something new.

Last year I filled my life with people more than ever before. As a result 'they' have entered my life and become part of 'me'. I have given up trying to get rid of, or ignore 'them'. I no longer, even, yearn for caves and mountain peaks. Ahead of me I see ever increasing levels of engagement with the world and others. I am full: I must give, I must act! Yet I am still a yogini, a renunciant, a cave and forest dweller at heart. Meditation is my natural habitat. I must bring this into my life of activity.

The challenge ahead of me is to include in my life more stillness, 'just sitting' meditations, contemplation, more times of 'uselessness', and rest, in a life which is also becoming fuller and more active as I take on more responsibilities. The tension between the life of activity and the life of calm is increasing. I see that both must win, or lose, to become one. I tremble, groan and sigh, but I am resolute.

This is my path to Insight, to Freedom. This is no time for childish sulks or tantrums. I bring to mind Amitabha, Buddha of meditation, his left hand resting in his lap in the meditation gesture; Buddha of love, his right hand is lifted, active, holding aloft the red lotus, challenging me to be like him, like all the Victorious Ones, perfectly poised, perfectly active.

*So I will worship thee with constant meditation,
Vouchsafe to bless me in mine efforts
That good may come to every sentient being,
Not one movement will I give to any worldly purpose
But body, speech and heart I dedicate to winning
Buddhahood.*² □

1. Sangharakshita, *Peace is a Fire*, Windhorse 1995, p87

2. ed. Evans Wentz, *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa*, OUP 1969

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Song of Egolessness

the Yogini Machig Lapdron

VARACHITTA

BORN IN 1055 in Tibet, Machig Lapdron was a contemporary of Milarepa. Like the great yogi, Machig practised in the wild places of Tibet, associating with lepers and outcasts, meditating where corpses lay and often practising alone. She is famous as the founder and promulgator of the spiritual practice called 'Chod'. This vivid and challenging practice calls up all aspects of one's being – body, speech and mind – to a meeting with the death of one's ego. The Chod is generally practised alone and in a fearful place, for example a cemetery.

The lifestyle of Chod practitioners was feared by ordinary society. However, far from being a practice of self-flagellation or self-denial, the Chod is ultimately a song of egolessness, a song of mind set free from the cage of the ego. It embodies the Bodhisattva Ideal, the ideal of practising for the benefit of all sentient beings: during the practice one offers oneself to all sentient beings without exception. The foundations of the Chod practice lie deep in the heart of the Dharma in the Prajnaparamita teachings on the perfection of Wisdom. These teachings point to the ignorance of our egocentric mind which separates us from Reality.

The stories of her life tell us that there were many auspicious sights and sounds when Machig Lapdron was born. She had three eyes and other unusual marks on her body. For this reason she was hidden by her parents for the early years of her life. By ten years old she had read the entire Prajnaparamita literature. She spent five years reading the Sutras aloud with her mother and sister. She became renowned for her phenomenal reading ability! The Prajnaparamita became the bedrock of her life, her teachings and the Chod practice she developed.

Machig had a number of spiritual teachers from whom she received initiations and teachings. One of these was Padampa Sangye who is said to have inspired her development of the Chod practice. He advised her:

Confess all your hidden faults!

Approach that which you find repulsive!

Whoever you think you cannot help, help them!

Anything you are attached to, let go of it!

Go to places that scare you, like cemeteries!

*Sentient beings are as limitless as the sky,
Be aware!*

Find the Buddha inside yourself!¹

At the age of 23, she met and married Topabhadra. They practised together and exchanged teachings. Their marriage caused a lot of gossip and disapproval. People thought Machig had 'fallen' from being a 'good nun'. Machig had three children, and the family's lifestyle was one of constant wandering. At 34 she became 'tired of samsara' and left the family to visit her teachers before going off to practice alone. Soon people heard about her and came for teachings and guidance. Some came to challenge Machig's knowledge through debate, but none could defeat her. The Chod spread to India. Three Indian pandits came to debate with Machig, believing her to be a demoness, but they, too, were defeated by her, and invited her to teach the Chod in India. Machig refused, saying she was destined to help the Tibetans. However, she gave her most important teachings to the pandits to take back with them to India.

Machig was a wanderer, living independent of a monastic situation and often practising alone. Today there are still practitioners of Chod, men and women practising in fearful places with their thigh-bone trumpets, damarus (hand-held drums) and songs. The development of egolessness implicit in the Chod means the overcoming of fear, but, more importantly, the realization of our intimate connection with all sentient beings. □

Machig Lapdron



1. Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wisdom*, RKP 1984, p160

Further Reading:

George N. Roerich, *Blue Annals*,

Varachitta is an artist and meditation teacher in London. She has a special interest in women practitioners of Tibet.

ASPIRING TO NIRVANA

the story of Sahle Aui

Sue Moss

SAHLE AUI was sixteen when she met Milarepa. We are told that she was a pretty girl, well dressed and well adorned. Milarepa was begging for alms near her home. Taking him for a beggar, she refused to help Milarepa. But that night she had an auspicious dream and as a result realized that the beggar might be the famous teacher of whom she had heard.

The following day Sahle Aui took some food to the beggar who confirmed that he was, indeed, Milarepa. When she heard this there arose within Sahle Aui 'a faith that was strong enough to dissolve her entire body and her hair stood on end.'

When she next visited Milarepa, Sahle Aui brought him gold as a gift and requested he teach her the Dharma, saying that she was disillusioned with her worldly life. To test her strength of purpose, Milarepa tried to persuade the young woman to return home, saying that as she was young and rich, she should not renounce the world completely. But Sahle Aui was not to be dissuaded and Milarepa, convinced of her sincerity, ordained her and set her to meditate.

This she did, making good progress and the great teacher, pleased with her faith and perseverance, instructed her to go into the mountains and meditate by herself. Sometime later, Milarepa set out to find his

pupil. On the way he met some monks who told him that Sahle Aui was still meditating in the same cave to which she had first gone. They told him that she never spoke or moved her body but sat as still as a corpse the whole time.

Sahle Aui, aware of her teacher's arrival, came to meet him. In answer to his enquiries, she told him of her realizations. She was full of gratitude to him.

*Like food,
my conceit and*

*wrong ideas are swallowed;
Thus my long, leaden slumber has been shortened.
I have now renounced all men,
And given myself to meditation...
I am a woman aspiring to Nirvana,
Who, from Voidness and Compassion would n'er depart.*

Sahle Aui's response to Milarepa, when she realises who he is, was one of unmitigated faith and devotion so strong that it altered the whole course of her life and propelled her into Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Thinking back to my own response when I first came across the Dharma – I can't say that my body was in danger of dissolving, but shraddha or faith certainly arose in my heart that was strong enough to see me through my initial doubts, fears, struggles and useless attempts to run away.

Sahle Aui was not attached to her youth, riches or security. She gave them all up immediately to practise the Dharma. I see the same process in my own life – rather more slowly I, too, am giving up those things which are not conducive to Dharma practice, loosening each clinging finger one by one. How can one not be inspired by Sahle Aui's single-mindedness and determination? To meditate alone in a cave and to stay there until her teacher visited! Not even curious to discover whether the next cave might be a little more comfortable! No craving for the comforts of her old life!

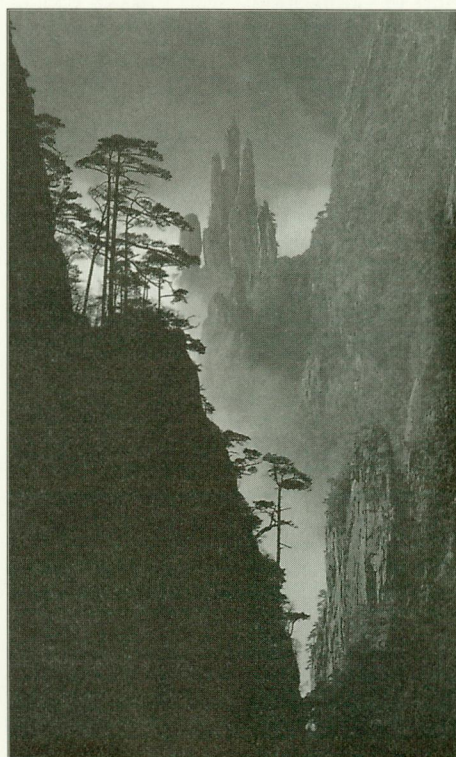
My 'cave' is certainly cosier and my life has many distractions, but I too have a measure of single-mindedness and determination. In meditation I hang on to thin threads of awareness when surrounded by fog or fear. I, too, exult when my explorations teach me something new about myself or when I've battled to overcome a hindrance and won! When the efficacious practice meets my willingness to try, to listen to what my inner world is saying, to experiment in response, new possibilities emerge. I thrive in the growing clarity, energy, positivity and expansion. I, too, have begun to 'give myself to meditation'. I know it works.

Sahle Aui sings of herself as 'a woman aspiring to Nirvana.' She aims high and succeeds! If my vision has not yet soared to such heights, Sahle Aui reminds me that it is possible to succeed in spiritual life wherever there is faith, clarity, renunciation, singlemindedness, determination and vision. □

Further Reading:

'Sahle Aui and her Understanding' in *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* vol. II, transl. Garma C. C. Chang, Shambhala 1989

Sue is a Mitra who helps to run the Lancashire Buddhist Centre. She also works as a speech therapist.



Kulanandi

HEARTS SET FREE

The Enlightened Elder Sisters

THE THERIGATHA was written down in Pali in the first century BCE and is part of the Pali canon or Tipitaka. It is a collection of short biographies and inspired utterances of the Theris or Elder nuns, women disciples of the Buddha – women who came from all walks of life and social classes. In these verses we read descriptions of the life and times of women on the spiritual path. We read of their struggles with despair, fear and self-doubt, and also their vision, gratitude and dedication, their perseverance, and, finally, their attainment of freedom. Turning to a selection of these stories and verses, we can enjoy fresh glimpses of what it means to follow the path of meditation that leads to Enlightenment.

Dantika, an early follower of the Buddha, had one day left her resting place on Vulture's Peak when she saw an elephant on the riverbank. The elephant had just taken its bath. She watched as a man – presumably its tamer – approached the elephant and called on the great beast to give him its foot. Seeing the elephant comply, the following reflection arose in her mind:

*Seeing what was wild before
gone tame under human hands,
I went into the forest
and concentrated my mind.*

Self-doubt is an undercurrent that assails all those who meditate and practise to a greater or lesser degree. Vaddhesi practised for 25 years without any noticeable success. All her meditations were full of distraction. Not surprisingly, she felt a failure! So she went to her teacher, another nun, to ask for help.

*I held out my arms and cried out
as I entered the monastery.
I went up to a nun
I thought I could trust.*

*She taught me the Dharma...
I heard her words
and sat down beside her.*

Guided by her teacher's helpful words, Vaddhesi is able to gain Enlightenment and freedom from all her sorrows.

This touching description of kalyana mitrata or spiritual friendship is a reminder that spiritual friendship is an indispensable part of spiritual life. When all else seems to fail, we can turn to our friends for help, guidance and inspiration.

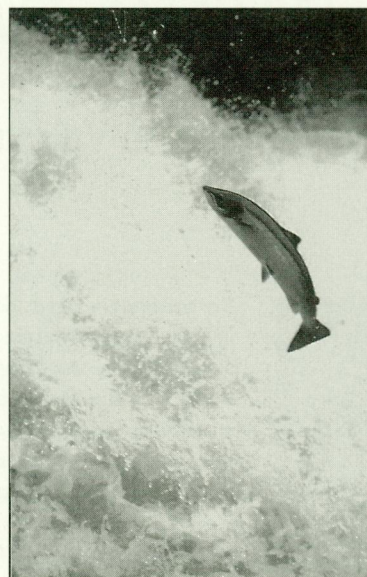
Patacara had lost her child before turning to the Dharma for Refuge. In the verses attributed to her, she expresses her gratitude for the friendship and help of her teacher:

*She pulled out the arrow
hidden in my heart,
that grief for my son.
I was helpless with grief.
She has thrust it away.
Today it is gone;
I am free and want nothing.*

Insight that 'sets us free' does not always occur at the time of meditation. Sometimes it is after the effort of working on the mind during formal sitting practice, when the effort is relaxed, that Insight dawns. This seems to have been the case for the great teacher, another Patacara:

*I concentrated my mind
the way you train a good horse.
Then I took a lamp
and went into my cell,
checked the bed,
and sat down on it.
I took a needle
and pushed the wick down.
When the lamp went out
my mind was freed.*

Again and again in the Therigatha



we find the experience of Insight or Enlightenment described as 'freedom'. Let Mittakali (who was reputed to have been rather a difficult woman to live with!) have the last word. Does it strike a chord?

*Although I left home for no home
and wandered, full of faith,
I was still greedy
for possessions and praise.
I lost my way.
My passions used me,
and I forgot the real point
of my wandering life.
Then as I sat in my little cell,
there was only terror.
I thought – this is the wrong way,
a fever of longing controls me.
Life is short.
Age and sickness gnaw away.
I have no time for carelessness
before this body breaks.
And as I watched the elements of
mind and body
rise and fall away
I saw them as they really are.
I stood up.
My mind was completely free.
The Buddha's teaching has been done.*

Source:

Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women, Translations and Commentary on the Therigatha*, Parallax 1991

Kulanandi lives in Germany where she works for the Essen Buddhist Centre. Previously she lived and worked at Taraloka Women's Retreat Centre where she was one of its founding members.

Moving on with Meditation

Karunamaya talks to Vajrapushpa about meditation, work and the simple life



Karunamaya, aged 42, leads a busy and varied life, dividing her time not only between working as an osteopath, teaching Buddhism and meditation at the London Buddhist Centre and leading meditation retreats, but also between England and India. She has made a couple of extended visits to India in recent years and will be spending three months there later this year to consider further, and more seriously, the possibility of more Dharma-teaching amongst the Buddhist women.

In London she works at the Bodywise Complementary Health Centre and lives in a community with five other women who also work at Bodywise. She was ordained into the Western Buddhist Order in 1988.

Karunamaya comes across as a sensitive and straight-forward person. She is also very modest. Underpinning her life is her strong, quiet commitment to her meditation practice. She delights in and draws strength from it. She approaches meditation with enthusiasm, and with a touch of realism. She has always believed that meditation could change her, could transform her, but she has also come up against difficulties in herself for which meditation has not offered a magical or an immediate solution. *I have always been drawn to meditation, but I wouldn't say I found it easy initially. It just felt like an important part of my practice as a Buddhist. I know now that some of my motivation for following the spiritual path was to do with not being at ease with myself, wanting to be something different and not really taking into account who I was. I was therefore quite willful in my meditation practice!*

For Karunamaya the central image of Buddhism has always been the Buddha meditating beneath the Bodhi tree; and the life of the Buddha has been an important influence in her life. An earlier influence came from her Christian background:

Actually I had a very positive experience of Christianity. It's just that I didn't believe the doctrine! At one point during my teenage years I visited a Christian monastery and the lifestyle there made a strong impression on me.

She thinks that some of the 'unfavourable conditionings' during her childhood and adolescence have perhaps made her progress on

the spiritual path slow initially.

I had to work with a poor self-view and lack of confidence. I always had a heart response to the Dharma, but I didn't seem able to actualize it, and even though I always had a strong feeling for practising meditation, it didn't always seem to be helping me. At times it was as if I was up against a brick wall. What helped was having some psychotherapy. That helped me to shift things along. And I have definitely been helped to become a more rounded human being by living and working with other people: that has been invaluable in terms of getting to know myself better and then being able to take that into my meditation practice.

Learning how to meditate is, for Karunamaya, an on-going process, and a process of making meditation her own.

In the early days of the FWBO, which is when I first learnt to meditate, we didn't really talk much about meditation and there wasn't much guidance either, not about the nuts and bolts of how to meditate. Meditation is like peeling an onion or taking apart a Russian doll. You find a layer and think this is what meditation is about...and then you peel off another



layer...

Karunamaya appreciates the efforts of the team at Vajraloka, the men's meditation centre in North Wales, in communicating their experience, expertise and enthusiasm in the area of meditation. For her, one of the important keys to improving her meditation practice has been

learning to acknowledge whatever her experience is initially, and using that as a basis on which to work with the hindrances to bring about more and more concentrated meditative states. Karunamaya describes her experience of dhyanic states (although she admits she feels rather self-conscious talking about meditation in such personal detail) as *being very present, very calm and joyful. There is a feeling of effortlessness, of energy; a sense that I could stay there for quite a long time. I have found that meditation can be natural and easy; for me it has been a process of changing gear from making an effort to experiencing meditation as something much more natural and easy, in a sense.*

In her everyday life in London, Karunamaya meditates with her community members in the morning. She usually meditates again on her own in the evening, which for her is a more 'natural' time to meditate. She has been consciously – and successfully – trying to bring together the two parts of her life: her meditation practice and her work 'in the world' which involves, whether she is working as an osteopath or a meditation teacher, interacting and communicating with people.

For Karunamaya, Green Tara has become an integrating and inspiring image.

Part of the reason why she became so important is because of the way she sits: her left leg is drawn up in meditation posture, and the right one is stepping down into the world. That image has been important in helping me to balance my life, I have long been strongly drawn to meditation, but I have also been drawn to working with people. I'm having to balance the two, although it hasn't always been straightforward.

She finds her life less compartmentalized these days. This she attributes to keeping up a sense of continuity of purpose through her different activities and weaving the thread of reflection into her everyday life. Going for a walk – which she tries to do every day – is an opportunity to think about things – all sorts of things – and also to reflect on a teaching like the Nidana Chain (a formulation of the principle of conditioned co-production describing the cyclic nature of unenlightened human existence.)

On the Insight Retreats, and Meditation and Reflection Retreats which Karunamaya has been attending or leading regularly, retreatants are given plenty of space in which to explore and to develop their meditation practice. There is unstructured time within a structure. Reflecting on the nature of human existence on a retreat is an elusive experience when it comes to putting it into words.

I find it difficult not to trot out all the things everybody knows...the textbook formulations. But I do think reflecting on life and death while you are on retreat allows you to begin to understand the meaning of those words more deeply. An exposure to deeper

reflection can help you to bring that perspective into your everyday life. When you are on retreat, there is a shift in perspective. Insight, I suppose, is an even bigger shift in perspective, an irreversible shift. That's what draws me to it. Insight is, in a sense, a death to who I have been up to now. Meditating and reflecting on the Dharma is for me part of the preparation for death, both for physical death and for spiritual death, which means letting go of the 'me', and of things in my life that I no longer need to be attached to. Perhaps without meditation my life would be very flat. Perhaps I would begin to wonder what I was doing. It's difficult to put it into words without sounding as if I was talking about God, but I think meditation as a source of inspiration connects 'me', this rather limited ego, with a sense of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the possibility of becoming much more than this limited 'me'.

The wish to deepen her experience of meditation is an important reason why Karunamaya chose to become an 'anagarika', that is, to take up a life of chastity and simplicity. The simple life is what increasingly attracts her: letting go of possessions, a sexual relationship, having a career, (even though I work as an osteopath, I'm not a career osteopath). There is more time to practise meditation, more time for friendships; fewer emotional entanglements.

Engaging in sex made me want to have more, and that led to a feeling of dissatisfaction, instead of the contentment which I feel now. It's as if I'm more 'full' just in myself.

In the long term she sees herself living in a meditation and retreat centre. But for now she chooses to be active in the world, firmly and contentedly balanced between the 'inner' and the 'outer' spheres. The life of a full-time meditator may not

become a reality until she is quite a bit older. She maintains a broader view: a view that strives to break down compartmentalization and create a whole out of the different elements of her experience. Her life as a dedicated meditator goes on regardless of lifestyle.

Meditation has been for Karunamaya a process she has been able to trust. It has revealed, as well as healed, willfulness and unhappiness. Moreover, it has become closely linked to what she sees as being essential to Buddhist practice: knowing your own experience and moving on from there. □



Outside the shrine room at Tiratanaloka

'CLOSING' COMMUNITIES

Changes afoot in FWBO Women's Communities

Viryaprabha interviews **Padmashuri** from Samayamudra Community in Cambridge, England. Padmashuri lives and works with women involved in Windhorse Trading Right Livelihood businesses. Apart from the seven years she spent working in India, she has lived in women's communities since her ordination in 1980.

One of the – to modern sensibilities – surprising features of the FWBO is the preponderance of situations, whether retreats or living and working situations, that are for men or women only.

The 'single sex principle' evolved during the early days of the Movement, and is based on the understanding that, *'for those who wish to develop as individuals, and to progress on the path to Enlightenment, meditation and all kinds of single sex situations are, in the absence of transcendental insight, absolutely indispensable.'*¹

People have experimented with different modes of living together. Some set up 'closed' communities to which members of the opposite sex were not invited. These communities gave those who lived in them (and their guests) the opportunity to be together without the tensions, the projections and the 'watering down' of communication which the presence of members of the opposite sex so often brings.

As community living became established, it was noticeable that men were often happiest living in 'closed' communities; whereas women seemed rather reluctant to live in communities, and still more to live in 'closed' ones – even though they might agree in principle with the positive benefits of single sex situations. This has provoked some interesting discussion and debate!

For various reasons, it seems, women find it difficult to forego inviting men into their living space. Is it the nesting instinct that doesn't feel 'complete' or 'secure' unless there's a man around from time to time? Is it

even (as has been suggested) that women can find one another's company rather boring and look to men for intellectual stimulation? If



such suggestions bear some grains of truth, perhaps it is all the more reason that women take the plunge, close their communities and find ways of developing their own individuality that is not dependent on men (just as men in communities have to find ways of developing the caring and nurturant qualities that are usually provided by women.)

Over the past year a number of women's communities in the UK and abroad have been discussing these issues and some have decided on reflection that they would prefer to become 'closed'. One such community is Samayamudra. Padmashuri talks about her experience:

Could you define a 'closed community'?

People have different ideas of what a closed community is. In our community we take it to mean no men coming into the house apart from service men.

What about close male relations, like fathers and brothers?

There might be occasions when fathers or brothers would come in, but we would tell the others beforehand. I have an elderly father living nearby. If he turned up, I certainly wouldn't leave him standing on the doorstep.

The word 'closed' can have rather a negative connotation. Would it be better to use a different word?

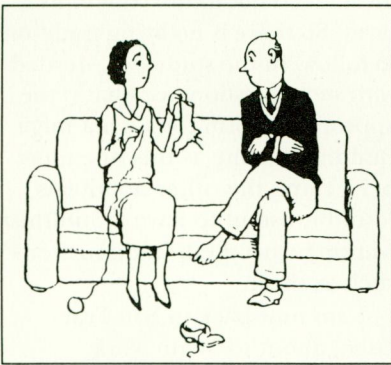
Personally I don't like the word 'closed'. It can easily give the impression that things are rather rigid, or shut off from the world in an unhelpful way. It would be good if we found a word that had a more spiritual meaning to it. Likewise I don't like the word 'open' to describe communities. It covers such a range – from people seeing their boyfriends two or three times a week and having them hang out in the community kitchen, to our 'open' community which in fact felt much more like a closed one since men so rarely visited.

Being a closed community doesn't automatically make you a better community. It depends why you close it and whether you are able to benefit from that more intensive situation. I have lived in a strictly closed community which was, frankly, one of the least friendly communities I have been in. I've also lived in open communities, such as the Bodywise community in London where

boyfriends did come in a bit, and that was one of the friendliest and happiest communities I lived in before I came here.

Do you think living in single sex communities does help women to develop those qualities they usually project onto men?

I think all single sex activities can help in this. But your home life is particularly important – perhaps especially for women. If men are invited into that space women, if they're not that developed as individuals, easily fall prey to various unhelpful habits, like playing hostess to men to gain



their approval; or in other ways playing the traditional feminine role to feel secure – and men likewise getting security from being looked after by women. This doesn't help members of either sex to develop greater individuality and independence. Sometimes women seem to find it 'cosier' if there's a man around – but communities are not about creating that kind of cosiness. Living in a closed community, or being involved in other single sex situations gives women (and men) a break from that kind of sexual polarization.

Have you found it a challenge, working and living in single sex situations?

Over the years I've been involved in a number of projects with women. I helped set up the Cherry Orchard restaurant in East London, which is a women's right livelihood business; and in India, when I was doing Dharma work, all my activities were with other women. Yes, I found that a

challenge at first. In England I didn't always respect women very much. I thought men were a bit easier to work with, that many men were better able to meet my energy. Perhaps there is a certain truth in that. But I think there was polarization and unhelpful reliance on men in my attitude towards them. For instance, there is the way in which you can value the praise of a man more than the praise of another woman, just because he's a man!

Living and working with women, I've had to develop some more masculine qualities myself. For instance, I've had to learn to take more initiative. I'm good at that in some ways, for instance when there's a task to be done. But speaking out, speaking my mind to help others to grow and develop, has been something I've had to learn. I've had to change in order to be able to do that.

How do women learn from one another when they live together?

In our case we are both living and working together. I think that makes quite a difference – you are very much thrown back on your own resources. I think women take more initiative when they are working together. It's difficult at first if they haven't been used to taking initiative. And you still get projections, of a more negative kind, perhaps: jealousies – the weak projecting onto the strong. But somehow it's different to cross-gender projections. For instance, if someone is a bit insecure, they don't know themselves very well, and they're projecting onto a woman who is more experienced, well that woman can be quite effective in encouraging her. She can say, 'Come on, you can do it too. We're both women. We've got the same make up.'

If the difficulty is between a man and a woman, there's a limitation to the man being able to effectively encourage

her because the woman may feel she can never be like the man. So I think women can be exemplars for one another.

I think working with women only, there could be a danger of trying to do things like men, be like men, imitating men in a not very healthy way. But in fact it should be about finding out who one is without the usual polarizations. In the absence of the opposite sex, you've got the opportunity of discovering and developing both the feminine and masculine sides of yourself, of experiencing yourself just as a human being. That is really the value of single sex situations.

Do you think women are reluctant to live in closed communities because they fear being excluded from the world of men or men being excluded from their world?

I think that can happen. I know in some places it works the other way – men seem to fear being excluded from the world of women! I think people are reassured when they actually see us enjoying living together in communities where men are not around. They see that we like living together, it's quite healthy, we enjoy our life – and we can have good friendships with men too, if we want. It's not that we're cutting ourselves off from men in an unhealthy sort of way. Life in a community is actually a lot of fun.

Would you like to see more women living in communities?

Yes, I'd like to see at least one women's community in every city where there is an FWBO Centre. I think they are an important aspect of our movement. I also think it would be good for women who already live in open communities to occasionally re-evaluate their situation and to consider becoming closed. One thing about living in an open community: you chose to live with those women, but you didn't choose to live with their boyfriends! □

1. Sangharakshita, *The Ten Pillars of Buddhism*, Windhorse 1989, p73

BUDDHIST ARCHITECT IN INDIA

Susan Michael, a Mitra from San Francisco, recently spent over two months in India where she had the rare opportunity of working in her profession as Architect on a large Buddhist project.

FIVE YEARS AGO I was told about an architecture studio in India run by an American, Christopher Benninger. Since then it has been my dream to work as an architect

about the possibilities of work, and sending him my credentials. He put me in contact with Christopher whose studio has undertaken a commission from TBMSG to design a large building project in Nagpur. I received an invitation to spend three weeks in the studio working on the Nagarjuna Institute Master Plan. There are only five architects in the

studio. I was the first woman to work there.

Nagpur is of particular significance to Indian Buddhists: it is there that the mass conversion of the ex-untouchables took place on 14 October 1956 under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar. Every year hundreds of

thousands of people gather to mark the anniversary of this event. The Nagarjuna Institute will serve as a beacon to these

pilgrims. One of its main features will be to provide accommodation for large numbers of people. However, it will be much more than that. It will also comprise a Dhamma training centre, a large shrine building, boys' and girls' hostels, and office buildings. There will be a beautiful garden with fountains and a Bodhi Tree planted by the Taiwanese benefactors who made the project possible.

Developments in Indian Buddhist architecture came to a halt around 800 years ago when Buddhism died out in the land of its birth. So there is no living tradition to follow. In the studio we wrestled with such questions as, what is the appropriate form for such a huge Buddhist shrine as this one must be? I think the other architects found it useful to have a Buddhist working with them in discussions such as these.

I am now back in San Francisco, about to begin work renovating our Centre here – but I hope to return and work on site as the Nagarjuna Institute begins to take shape. □



Susan Michael (centre) with friends and colleagues in India

there. When I knew I would be visiting India, I contacted Lokamitra at TBMSG (as the FWBO is known there) asking

BEYOND PRIVATE INCOME

Creating a Common Purse

Bodywise is a Health Centre providing complementary therapies and yoga classes in the East End of London. The Centre is run by a team of six women including a yoga teacher, shiatsu practitioner, osteopath, Alexander Technique teacher, finance worker and practice manager.

Over the years the Bodywise workers have looked for ways of living out their Buddhist ideals more wholeheartedly within the working situation. Pooling financial resources has been a goal towards which the team has been moving for some time. Dharanashri reports.

When I first joined the Bodywise team seven years ago I was surprised

to find I wasn't going to receive a fixed wage that would be the same for anybody depending on numbers of hours worked. Instead I was asked to present a written summary of my financial needs to the team. I had to make a list of everything that I spent on food, books, bills, clothing and so on. Sharing this information with others caused me some anxiety! One is not usually so explicit about one's financial habits! At a meeting at which everyone presented a similar list, we looked over each other's requirements and, after questions and clarifications, agreed on each person's level of support

based on what they actually needed. This process helped us become clearer about one of the principles of right livelihood: to give what you can, and take what you need. It brought greater strength and unity to the team.

Over the years the team has sought ways to function more collectively. Three and a half years ago we chose to live together, thus sharing our home lives as well as our working ones. Sharing our finances seemed a natural extension of this.

Moving towards a common purse has been a slow and interesting process. We looked at our attitudes to money: how much we

News from the Ordination Team

thought we needed; our doubts and fears about becoming part of something more collective; resistance to talking about our personal finances with others. Last year we presented to the team our personal financial histories, looking at family attitudes to money, views we hold about money and our spending patterns. We studied together around the themes of Right Livelihood, the New society and Buddhist Economics. This gave us a clearer understanding and a wider perspective on what we were engaged in as members of a right livelihood team.

Our discussions led us to the idea of instituting a common purse. This means that all our incomes are pooled. We all take the same amount of spending money each week. Bills, rent, retreat or holiday allowances are paid for out of the common fund. Deciding on the weekly spending allowance revealed some interesting differences in attitudes towards needs and wants, essentials and luxuries! We have not yet explored the area of personal savings but this may be a topic for future discussion and change!

The common purse arrangement has now been in operation for some months. Money is saved with this simplified arrangement (although initially it cost something to set it up). This has meant we can give more money away to support projects in the FWBO (dana, or generosity being another principle of right livelihood) and see our money benefiting others. We have found the new arrangement has meant we feel more connected as a team. we experience in a concrete way how each person's work affects the business and how interconnected we really are. Taking such a radical approach to how we organized our finances has changed our attitudes, challenged old habits and broken down some of the barriers between ourselves and others – in fact we have found that creating a common purse has deepened our experience of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. □

The Ordination Team comprises four senior women Order members who live and work together at the women's Ordination Retreat Centre, Tiratanaloka in Wales, as well as Public Preceptors Sanghadevi, Shrimala and Ratnashuri. The team is responsible for preparing women for ordination into the Western Buddhist Order.

POST-ORDINATION RETREAT

At the end of last year we held a post-ordination retreat for those women who were ordained in June 1995. Our mornings were meditative; the evenings devoted to pujas dedicated to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas the new Order members had been initiated into at the time of their ordination. The afternoons were given over to discussion of various topics raised by the new Dharmacharinis as they emerged from the first six months of life in the Order.

During the ordination retreat there is an Order Induction which covers a number of areas pertaining both to personal spiritual practice and life in the Order. Due to the shortness of these retreats we have been unable to cover all the ground and one noticeable lack is that we do not go into the area of the Order's work in the world. It was, therefore, a significant step forward that on this recent post-ordination retreat we spent a couple of sessions on this topic.

Samata gave a talk on the nature of the Order and the Bodhisattva spirit. Sanghadevi took everyone on a world tour visiting each centre of the FWBO worldwide and drawing attention to pioneering Dharmacharis and Dharmacharinis in far flung places. She pointed out the need for more Dharmacharinis in the UK to move to FWBO Centres where there are no Dharmacharinis or a lone Dharmacharini. Everyone was inspired by these sessions. We hope that making this a regular feature of our post-ordination retreats will,

over time, alter the face of the FWBO and that we will see Dharmacharinis becoming more adventurous sooner rather than later in their Order life.

NEW RETREAT CENTRE FOR WOMEN

The women Preceptors have been considering for some time the need to extend the length of our ordination retreats for women, and to run them in a more secluded and remote venue.

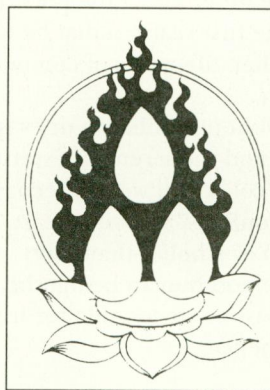
Last spring, Sangharakshita visited Tiratanaloka and raised the matter with the team, suggesting

we needed to start making a move in this direction. He encouraged us to look into a location outside the UK so that women had a more substantial experience of Going Forth at the time of their ordination and also a stronger experience of the mythic dimension of ordination. He suggested we could begin by hiring a venue as the men did for

some years prior to establishing their own ordination Retreat Centre, Guhyaloka in Spain.

Since that conversation took place we have asked someone to investigate this possibility. A Portugese man Mitra has offered to help us buy a plot of land in Portugal to set up our own equivalent of Guhyaloka. Even with this generous offer, we would still need to find in the region of £90,000 ourselves towards the purchase price of a 300 acre plot. (Further funds would be needed to renovate buildings etc.) Although we're not in a position to get a whole new retreat centre up and running immediately, if the money were available we could consider securing some land for future development.

If you think you would be able to help by way of a cash donation or loan, please contact Vajradevi, c/o London Buddhist Centre, 51 Roman Road, Bethnal Green, London E2 0HU, UK □



Passion and Dispassion

the Poems of Sangharakshita

Sangharakshita: Complete Poems 1941-1994

Windhorse 1995 pp522, £17.99 hardback

Review by Vidyadevi

IN HIS WRITINGS on Buddhism, Sangharakshita is a scholar, a teacher, a thinker. In his memoirs he is a shrewd and reflective observer. His poems reveal him as a lover. Lyrical in his love of nature, tender in his love of people and animals, ardent in his love of the Buddha and the life he has chosen, his heart sings in delight and cries out in sorrow in a collection of poetry remarkable in its range of subjects and styles, a collection which traces the inner life of the poet from the age of sixteen, when he first realized that he was a Buddhist, through more than fifty years of commitment to the Buddhist path.

These poems express without inhibition or evasion the elation, the struggles, and the serenity of spiritual practice. Throughout the collection we can recognize our own aspirations and conflicts, and take heart. The poet expresses himself not as a holier-than-thou ascetic but as a flesh and blood human being who is not afraid to express his passionate longing for truth and beauty, for real experience:

*I want to break through
Shatter time and space,
Cut up the Void with a knife,
Pitch the stars from their place,
Nor shrink back when, lidded with darkness, the Eye
Of Reality opens and blinds me, blue as the sky.*

In the poems of his youth he unashamedly proclaims his devotion for the Buddha and his determination to become a Bodhisattva. He also lays bare the painful struggles of being in love, especially in the long poem, 'The Veil of Stars', a slow unfolding of growth beyond romantic love where, for one pursuing the life spiritual,

*Desire for anyone flowers into love for someone
And at last bears fruit as compassion for everyone.*

There are poems about friendship, poems about the anguish of misunderstanding and rejection, sensual poems, sad poems. In writing about buffaloes being driven to market, about a Tibetan refugee woman dazed by the long journey across the mountains, about an innocent white calf discovered in a shed in a rainstorm, Sangharakshita shows a tender concern and love. But his love is not sentimental or blind. When I first read his memoirs, I was naively disconcerted by his sharp-eyed observations, thinking them somehow 'unmonkly', as though one committed to the spiritual life should gaze unseeing, unjudging, through the seamier side of life. But the awareness of beauty which leads him to write about bamboos and lotuses and snowy mountains makes Sangharakshita

all the more sensitive to ugliness, and this sensitivity finds forthright and sometimes witty expression in poetic caricatures: the 'sleek, unctuous and smiling' politician; women who could be beautiful but are 'puffy and piggy' and 'walk on black trotters'; the priest in threadbare, greasy cassock.

Poetry is one of the enduring loves of Sangharakshita's life. 'Supreme Poetry, no less than the higher kind of Religion, possesses the capacity to lift us out of the littleness of our individual being into an infinitely deeper, richer, and wider kind of life.' In his own poems we can hear this love, the cadences and rhythms of many poetic voices, from Milton, Longfellow and Tagore to Hardy, Betjeman and the Liverpool poets. He uses many poetic forms, from sonnets and tetrameters to haiku, free verse, and even alexandrines.

Many poems show his pleasure in the poetic vocation. Declaring, 'The best but live what once the poet dreamed', he joins all those poets who have asserted poetry's unique value. But in other poems he expresses the frustration felt by all those who love words: that even poetry cannot fathom experience. The depth of his insights, the strength of his feelings, burst out of poems which cannot contain them:

*I do not care at all
About writing any more poems
Enough if I can say
How the heart bleeds and bleeds.*

As Sangharakshita is the first to point out – in his introduction to this book and elsewhere – not all these poems 'are necessarily worth preserving as poetry'. Sometimes his penchant for archaic language produces odd, angular phrases which demand your close attention, like striving to comprehend a strong accent.

The new volume – published to mark the poet's seventieth birthday – is beautifully designed, graced by a lovely typeface and a dark-blue cover with gold stars. It contains many old favourites, including all the poems previously published as 'The Enchanted Heart' as well as a number of poems and translations never published before.

All lovers of poetry may find this volume a worthwhile addition to their collection. But especially for the Buddhist the poems collected in this volume are very – to use a prosaic word – usable. The force and inspiration of a well-lived life urges itself through them, cries out that 'Buddhism's in the life and in the heart.' They are best read aloud, dwelled upon: they grow on you, become part of you, change you. □

THE FRAGRANCE OF A PERFECT LIFE

Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of the Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to the Sixth Centuries

Translated by Kathryn Ann Tsai

University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1994 pp187, £19.50

Review by Vajrapushpa

HOW WOULD A READER of twentieth century biographies, with their obsession with revealing the contradictions and dark secrets in a person's life, respond to these 65 mini biographies of Chinese nuns who are represented as nothing less than images of perfection, as paragons of ardent moral endeavour and spiritual aspiration? Hardly the stuff that a modern critical biography is made of! In his Preface, Shih Pao'ch'ang, who compiled the biographies ca. 516 CE, poses his own question: *'Is it not fundamental, as regards pure mind, lofty purpose, unusual virtue, and extraordinary integrity, that these qualities do not come simply through natural means but are encouraged by respect for noble character?'*

Amongst the 65 nuns are famous Buddhist teachers, capable of intellectual acrobatics and addressing large audiences; fearless ascetics and meditators; as well as a few who were more involved with the secular world, giving advice to emperors and government officials. Pao ch'ang's collection is unique not only because it is devoted to women (there were several similar collections devoted to monks) but also because it covers the period of the establishment of the Buddhist monastic order for women in China. The first Chinese Buddhist nun was a true pioneer, a woman of insight and determination. As a young widow, still in her twenties, Ching-chien wanted to follow the life of a bhikshuni or nun. There being no female monastic instructor, or even a Chinese translation of a monastic code for women (the Vinaya texts were translated much later than Buddhist Sutras and their commentaries), she simply decided to throw away her secular clothes and to follow the ten precepts. When a Chinese monk brought back from Central Asia a rule book for nuns of the Mahasanghika sect, Chin-chien, by now in her sixties and a well known Buddhist teacher, and the women who had gathered around her at Bamboo Grove convent, received their full ordination.

Establishing a proper lineage of ordination for Chinese nuns was a matter of great concern: an important issue to the women personally but also, presumably, part of the process of Buddhism proving its credentials in a society already steeped in tradition and respect for authority. When Sri Lankan nuns started arriving in China in the sixth century, many Chinese nuns chose to be ordained for the second time, happy in the knowledge that they were finally complying with all the requirements of the vinaya.

In her introduction, Tsai explains that women might have entered a convent to find a refuge from an unwanted marriage, from war or from homelessness, or to give themselves a better education. In these biographies there is, however, relatively little evidence of such 'mixed

motives.' In fact it is striking – and maybe puzzling to a modern reader – that many of the women already had 'pure faith' and were determined to follow the Buddhist path when still young children.

Hagiographical exaggeration; the need to convince the Confucians of the moral uprightness and respectability of Buddhist practitioners (even though they rejected the Confucian model of filial respectability); and the need to impress the Taoists with the efficacy of Buddhist meditation practices may have shaped these biographies. Even taking that into account, the courage and determination of these women shines forth. Men may have made the treacherous journeys to India and Central Asia to bring Buddhist teachings back to China, but these women are portrayed as being no less heroic. It might seem to us that they made their commitment to spiritual life without encountering too many conflicts, doubts or distractions, but if we look again we see just how continuous and strenuous was the effort they made throughout their lives. Kang-ching, for instance, practised meditation undistractedly for fifteen years eating only pine resin. Tao-Shou chanted the White Lotus Sutra 3000 times. Ching-hsiu, an accomplished meditator, took part in the construction of a new convent, carrying mud and tiles in her hempen robes. Hui-yu travelled throughout the country preaching and converting people and, adapting to whatever circumstances she found herself in, *'she did not flinch from either cold or heat.'*

The close relationship that monks and nuns had with the intellectual elite of the time and with the royal household comes out in many of the biographies.

Tsai gives a clear and concise account of the early history of Buddhism and monasticism in China, but the slim-line introduction doesn't really provide enough of a social and cultural context to these lives.

A close reading of the biographies will reveal no hidden faults or secrets in the lives of these women. Instead it will offer fascinating and unexpected glimpses into their physical, psychical and spiritual reality – within which tigers and other wild animals, visions of Amitabha, Kuan-yin and rainbow coloured lights sit easily alongside the carefully recorded facts of their life's work and accomplishments. (In one particular convent, the nun Chin-ch'eng was followed everywhere by a tiger who would get very angry if one of the nuns didn't make a prompt confession of any transgression!)

Spiritual aspiration is a powerful and mysterious force indeed, cutting through obstacles and conditions and, in the form of this book, reaching us and inspiring us a millennium and a half later, like 'a stream of fragrance' – just as, in fact, Pao-ch'ang so confidently predicted in his Preface. □

Getting Started in Meditation

with Kamalashila

Dharmachakra Tapes £12.95

Review by Vimalachitta

I HAVE TO ADMIT that when I first heard about tapes for teaching meditation, I was somewhat sceptical! Nothing can replace a real, live teaching situation, surely.

I discovered my misapprehensions to be quite unfounded. Having listened to the tapes and sat through the led meditations, I am a convert!

This taped introduction to meditation practice comes in a boxed set with two tapes, one teaching the Mindfulness of Breathing, which develops clarity and focus, the other the Metta Bhavana, or development of universal loving-kindness or friendliness. A helpful booklet accompanies the tapes, which briefly explains the principles of the meditations and how to set up a personal practice. There is also a full guide to meditation posture. The voice leading through the practices is that of Kamalashila.

Kamalashila is a senior member of the Western Buddhist Order who established the Vajraloka Meditation Centre in North Wales. He has spent many years practising and teaching the art; and is the author of a popular book on meditation, *Meditation: The Buddhist Way to Tranquillity and Insight*.¹

Tape One begins with Kamalashila explaining what meditation is. He does this succinctly, but manages to give meditation the flavour of adventure:

'...you could be about to make some discoveries about your own mind...'

The adventure, however, does not seem too daunting – we are aiming, he says, at a *'gentle transformation'*. He next describes the quality of mindfulness using good everyday examples to show how our state of mind can so often be scattered or elsewhere in our communications and activities.

He helpfully draws attention to the kind of concentration called for in meditation and the dangers of forcing oneself to concentrate. He could, perhaps, have included an example of mindfulness that would be readily recognizable to newcomers to put across the pleasure of concentration. He does, however, go on to describe meditative absorption more evocatively:

'a uniquely enjoyable and satisfying experience'. I particularly enjoyed his exploration of why we use the breath as an object of concentration. Because it is *'interesting'*, a sensuous and aesthetic experience, it connects us with life, *'the flow of life'*, and our breath reflects our

state of mind so it connects us with ourselves.

On the second tape, Kamalashila gives a few helpful suggestions on taking up meditation, setting up good conditions for establishing a regular practice, and encourages the learner to try it for a month, a good, workable goal, and then, if they want to continue, to find a class. He emphasises the importance of not only having a teacher but also the support of other meditators.

The tape then goes on to introduce the Metta Bhavana, the meditation which develops emotional positivity. I am not sure if I would have been convinced by some of Kamalashila's reasons for developing metta if I was not a Buddhist already. If I was totally new to meditation and Buddhism I would, I'm afraid, want to know more about what was in it for me, how was it going to change my experience of life for the better, and I don't think he goes into that quite enough.

However, when he comes to describe the stages of the practice itself, the meditation comes to life. His emphasis in the first stage is on feeling *'what's there'* (and even feeling blank is a feeling) and at the same time generating metta or friendly feeling towards oneself. This seemed to me a particularly helpful way to start the practice. I often notice when I'm teaching that as soon as I mention *'feelings'*, people assume they should be feeling something in particular and very often completely ignore the actual experience they are having because they think it is not the *'right feeling'*. Consequently they cannot even make a start with the practice. Kamalashila carefully guides you into the practice. His obviously substantial experience as a meditator comes across clearly in his approach.

These tapes could prove invaluable as an introduction to meditation for those unable or unwilling to learn in a class setting. For those attending introductory meditation courses, it can be difficult at first meditating at home without the guiding voice and support of a teacher. For these people too, the tapes would be useful.

I would even go further and say that the tapes could be used for developing even an established meditator's practice, especially, perhaps, for anyone who felt they had got *'stuck'* with their practice. I shall be recommending them to my own pupils! □

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