

SANGHARAKSHITA IN SEMINAR

1991 Combined Convention Questions and Answers with Dharmacharinis

Held at: Sibford School, Banbury, Oxfordshire

Date: 10th August 1991

Those Present: The Venerable Sangharakshita and Dharmacharinis of the Western Buddhist Order

Sangharakshita: When I first suggested that I should meet together with you all this afternoon it wasn't that I had anything in particular to say. I just thought it would be a good idea if I could just take a good look at you all together [Laughter] because I don't think it has happened before that - well it definitely hasn't happened before - that we've had so many Dharmacharinis in one spot. You might have had more on the Women's Convention, I don't know. But certainly this is the first time **I've** seen so many Dharmacharinis together so while it is good to meet you from time to time individually it's also good I think to see you from time to time collectively, just as it's nice just to have one flower in a little glass of water but it's also nice to see a whole flower-bed! [Laughter] Dozens and dozens of flowers all blooming side by side. So as I say it wasn't that I had anything in particular to say but just to see

you all together. But I did also suggest that if there were any questions arising out of, or left over from, the Dharmacharinis' Convention well we might talk about those.

So Dhammadinnā has in fact handed me quite a few questions, though it wasn't specifically my intention to have a sort of question and answer meeting, if you see what I mean. But I will deal with a few of these questions. I have just had time to look through them and there are one or two that I do in fact find quite interesting - I think probably for quite subjective reasons [Laughter] - but you probably won't mind a little subjectivity anyway! [Laughter] I'm not going to be able to get through them all. You see there's quite a stack, but some of them, yes, are quite interesting to me personally, so I think I'll at least talk about some of them

but please don't get the impression that here is Bhante giving the answer to each question and thereby putting a stop to any discussion that might otherwise have taken place.

I'll take up some nice easy ones first. There's a question here:

"Did you ever meet Madam Alexandra David-Neel, and if so what were your impressions?"

Well I never actually met her but I did correspond with her. I started corresponding with her in 1950, and if you've ever had access to back numbers of '*Stepping Stones*', you would have noticed that there's a contribution from her there which she sent me. I can't remember what it was called. It is a long time ago, but yes she sent this article and later on when I was editing '*The Maha-Bodhi Journal*' I asked her for contributions. She had in fact many many years earlier contributed to '*The Maha-Bodhi Journal*', and we were in correspondence. I had a number of letters from her. I'm afraid those letters disappeared from my files in Kalimpong - I think it was during a landslide while I was in England so I don't have that correspondence, but she was a very very old lady when she wrote to me. She was probably in her nineties. But she did write a very clear, firm hand and one certainly wouldn't have thought from her letters that she was so old. I do believe that she died in her hundredth or hundred and first year retaining all her faculties to the end. She settled in the French Alps at a place called - I'm not sure how you pronounce it - Digne. She settled there, at first with her adopted lama son, and then of course she remained there for many many years after his death until her own death.

So I did have some kind of contact with her. So the impression I got from

her letters, and also from her writings, was of a very strong minded determined sort of lady - no doubt about that - but I can't really say very much more than that. So so much for Alexandra David-Neel. There has been a biography of her recently published, hasn't there. Some of you may have seen that. I did see reviews of it but some of reviewers seemed to think it didn't quite do justice to the more Buddhistic side of her life.

Anyway so much for that. Now another fairly easy one.

"Do you think the native American Indian traditions have anything to contribute to our practice as true individuals e.g. considering the consequences of a major decision down seven generations; seeing the environment as a living entity etc."

I think I'll deal with these two more specific questions in reverse order. Seeing the environment as a living entity. I think this is quite important and of course it means mainly, I imagine, the living environment in the sense of other living things, both vegetable and animal. Being more aware of the natural world, and while I'm not quite sure what the different American Indian traditions have to say about this there's no doubt that in Buddhism itself, especially say in the Pali Buddhist literature, one does find a very definite, a very strong, awareness of the natural world, of the environment. Sometimes of course expressed in what we would regard as a mythological form. In the Pali scriptures you don't just meet the Buddha and his disciples. You don't just meet men and women, don't even just meet human beings and animals. You meet all sorts of spirits. You meet especially all sorts of tree spirits and flower spirits and so on. So you are made very much aware of trees and flowers as really living things. They are living in a quasi-human sort of way, and I think this sort of

consciousness is diffused very strongly all through the Pali scriptures. And when you get a selection from Pali texts, that element, that aspect, is usually edited out. You just get the Buddha's teaching, but you don't get much of the context within which the Buddha gave that teaching. Occasionally it's touched upon as when we're told well the Buddha was born in the open air, and while his mother was holding onto the branch of a tree. That the Buddha gained Enlightenment in the open air sitting under a tree. And also passed away between the twin sala trees.

So we can see just from this simple example that the Buddha himself was in close contact with nature, and we mustn't forget that he and his disciples were wandering for eight or nine months of the year. They weren't wandering through city streets, they were wandering from one village to another through the jungles in much the same way that I described in my little story *'The Cave'*, in the much the same way that I described Sumana wandering during his wandering period, and of course I myself had something of that experience during my own wandering days.

So in the Buddha's day his disciples were always wandering along these forest paths, and you get a very strong impression of this especially in the Theri and Theragathas, the songs of the elder monks and elder nuns, the Theras and Theris, that they are listening to the birds and hearing the rustle of the leaves. It was a much more common sound so far as they were concerned than the sound of traffic or human voices; and there's a very beautiful poem - I forget whether it's by a Thera or a Theri, where the monk or nun, whoever it is, is just watching the flight of white cranes, I think it was, across in front of a dark blue cloud and noticing the contrast of the colours. The pure white and the deep, dark blue. You get little touches of that sort.

So in the Pali scriptures you are very much aware of the natural background, and it's not inert nature, it is alive nature, it is animated nature. So I think that this element is there in the Buddhist tradition. We need it very badly today as everybody knows, and if it can be reinforced by recourse to native American Indian traditions, well so much the better. I know some people do find those particular traditions quite attractive.

All right what about, *'anything to contribute to our practice as true individuals, e.g. considering the consequences of a major decision down seven generations.'* But that's not so easy. [Laughter] I mean the general principle is clear. It really means just realise that actions have consequences. What you do now will affect not only your own future life, it'll affect the lives of future generations, even down to seven generations. But can you really plan for that? I mean some of you have got children, have you even been really able to plan their lives? Did you even know you were going to have them?! [Laughter] What to speak of other factors. So I think there's a bit of hyperbole here, a bit of sort of meaningful exaggeration, that when coming to any conclusion or deciding on any course of action it's very difficult I think to take into account what might be the situation in the world or the situation with your own personal descendants, in seven generations time. It's very difficult to see even one generation ahead. But nonetheless it's perhaps a picturesque way of emphasising that general principle, that you must try as far as you can to think ahead and try to reflect what will be the consequences, for instance one might say the environmental consequences, of one's actions, of one's behaviour, here and now, in this life, in the present.

All right then. One question I particularly wanted to deal with for reasons that may become obvious. Dhammadinnā's very kindly categorised the

questions and I can't quite find it now!

"The question is about how to deal with ageing, getting old. I notice that apart from the body changing, also the mind is affected. It gets more difficult to learn texts by heart or to remember names and things like that. Is it good to go with it, to let go of it, or is it better to try to keep the edge, to keep it all together as much as one can? Does giving into it speed up the process of ageing? The question is in the area of letting go and holding on."

Well I think there's no doubt that as one does get older there are not only bodily changes, there are also mental changes, and one of those mental changes is - I've certainly found this myself - that your memory isn't quite as good as it used to be. It's not as bad as sometimes people think. [Laughter] I remember in this connection there's a little incident from the life of Doctor Johnson, or rather a little saying. He observed once that *'If a young man happens to forget his hat, no one says anything, but if an old man forgets his hat they say "Aha, his memory is going!"'* [Laughter]. So we can all be forgetful, young or old. So if an older person is forgetful it is not necessarily just because they are getting older, but nonetheless I think one's memory as one gets older does deteriorate to some extent - in a way. What I personally find is I can remember very vividly things that happened ten, fifteen, twenty, forty, fifty years ago, but things that happened last year I have difficulty in remembering in detail. I have difficulty in remembering in what sequence they happened, but in a way that is natural because when you are young impressions are new, impressions are fresh, so they are imprinted all the more firmly and deeply on your mind, but by the time you are fifty, sixty, seventy, you've received hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of impressions of various kinds, so

they don't all stand out so clearly or so distinctly, and a new experience has to be a very powerful experience to affect you very much after all.

Let's take a common example. Suppose you fall in love when you are seventeen. Well I suppose those of you who have fallen in love at seventeen - I'm sure some of you have - remember it very vividly, but supposing you fall in love say, well I won't say at seventy [Laughter] though that's not impossible, but say when you are forty-five, well it probably hasn't got that sort of - I was going to say traumatic - effect, and it's the same with other experiences like books. You read perhaps a Shakespeare play or you read a novel or you read some poetry in your teens. It has a tremendous effect on you, it leaves a very deep impression and you remember that occasion when you read that book, read that poem years and years afterwards. But a book you read last week and which you enjoyed, you may not remember its title even this week. Because that's how it is. It's not just that memory as a sort of independent faculty is weaker, but your whole life experience has become much more rich, much more complex, and individual items and experiences stand out therefore much less distinctly. And I think one must accept this. Well one has no alternative so it's better to accept it. [Laughter]. There's not much point in struggling against it.

But I think the whole process or the whole development is meaningful also in a much deeper sense. Human life is after all quite short, and especially nowadays there's quite a lot of experiences befall all of us, good bad and indifferent. Life can be very rich. So it's not enough just to have experiences. You've got to reflect on those experiences. I'm talking about ordinary life experiences as well as say spiritual experiences. You've got to reflect on those experiences. You've got to ponder their meaning.

You've got to assimilate them. You've got to try to see some sort of pattern, some sort of order in your life as a whole. And you can't do that very easily if all the time, even when you are old, fresh impressions are coming and being registered just as clearly as impressions were registered when you were young. You need a bit of a respite, and the natural process of old age gives you that. You're not so much bothered by what is happening to you this year or what has happened say during the last ten years, but you look back over your whole life. You see trends, you see patterns, you try to make sense of it all as a whole, you try to understand it - without having to deal with vivid, current impressions all the time. As I say you have a rest, you have a respite from all that, and in a way you could say that that's nature's way of enabling you to get on with that sifting out and assimilating and well more philosophic process of understanding your life as a whole. It wouldn't be exactly dreadful but it would be rather difficult if your whole life through you were experiencing things as vividly and intensely as you experienced them when you were an adolescent.

So I think when you are past fifty, certainly when you pass sixty, that sort of process of trying to estimate and evaluate your life as a whole and understand your life as a whole should really be allowed to begin, and you shouldn't be distracting yourself with new impressions and new experiences of the same kind that you were having much earlier on in life.

Anybody got any comment or any contribution of her own on this score? Even if you're under fifty you can speak up! [Laughter]

Sinhadevi: Do you think it's a good idea to decide that you're going to take a break from the experience and reflect more anyway without it being

Sangharakshita: I think what normally happens is current experiences naturally cease being so important as they were when one is young, but I think what one must try not to do is not to try to as it were flog oneself into the same sort of state that you were when you were young. Thinking that well if you're not experiencing things so intensely now, now that you're sixty, as you did when you were sixteen, there's something wrong with you, you've got to get rejuvenated. That's what you've not got to do. And just grow old gracefully, not only gracefully but thoughtfully, and reflectively, and that can obviously be a very rich period of your life. Not perhaps so exciting in a more superficial sense in the same way that life was exciting when you were in your teens and your twenties or even your thirties, or even your forties, but more reflective, more calm, maybe more satisfying in a deeper sense. So I think it's not so much deliberately entering on that process, but not doing anything to hinder it which is what very often we do. On a superficial level trying to keep young. Well it's OK to keep healthy but you shouldn't be trying to keep young in the sense of trying to force yourself to do the same things that very much younger people do. That's ridiculous, whether it's on the physical level or the mental level. If you can't remember a whole string of telephone numbers any longer well don't bother [Laughter], just write them down instead. Don't sort of force yourself to try to commit them to memory.

Mallika: Sometimes Bhante, you can't remember where you put the book with the telephone numbers! [Laughter]

S: Well that really is progress! [Laughter] Sometimes you can't even remember if you've got a telephone book. [Laughter] And when you forget whether you've got a telephone or not, well you're almost in nirvana then. [Laughter]

_____ : I find I'm forgetting who I made a date with when and I have to ask people to remind me.

S: Assuming that they're younger than you, or just keep a notebook. You can't remember, you can't carry everything in your memory like one used to just because well there are so many more things there now than there were say half a century ago. [Laughter] Well yes one can speak in terms of half a century ago.

_____ : It is a more tranquil period.

S: It is, yes.

_____ : Agonizing.

S: So I think one should embrace old age gratefully with its advantages and its disadvantages. There are disadvantages, we know. But not regret lost youth and past opportunities and not be sorry any more that you can't stay up all night dancing and all that sort of thing.

_____ : It follows on because it's like if that's a natural process not to as you're getting older trying to (unclear) and think you should do the things that you could do. Looking at that the other way when we were younger we'd got our physical energy, we'd got the capacity and we should actually make full use of that rather than maybe our reflection is a different quality. We reflect. In a way we've got more energy too so we can (*unclear due to outside noises*).....

S: It's not that a young person shouldn't ever reflect obviously, but yes,

when you are young you need to make adequate provision for your youthful energies. Otherwise they'll sort of turn sour on you. Whether in the form of physical exercise or whatever it may be.

_____ : I was thinking of the way in the West the trend is to try to look young, especially for women. Things like dying hair and clothes and..... I know it's superficial but it's a way of a woman looking at the principle of impermanence. If you don't actually practise on that sort of level and it would affect how we actually.....

S: Well you could say - well let me coin a little sort of apothecum - when you are young, in the case of a woman make-up is unnecessary. When you are old, it's useless! [Loud Laughter] So just be your natural selves. Nowadays there are cosmetics for men. They are trying to make cosmetics for men more popular. Why? Because someone, somewhere has a financial interest in it. That's all. And while I'm on the subject everybody knows that the cheap cosmetics are very bad for the complexion anyway. [Laughter] The best thing is just water, not even soap and water, just water, rainwater if you like, but that's all you really need! [Laughter] A good brush [Laughter] Why all this paint and powder and making billions of dollars, or pounds as the case may be, for someone who's really just exploiting you.

Any further point about this? I was going to say we all have to face it one day - I mean old age - but some of us of course are facing it already.

_____ : I'm not sure if this is too simplistic a way of looking at it but I was just thinking in terms of, well as we get older we're not so affected perhaps by impressions, but that could be quite an aid to our practice, that

you're not so swayed by things happening unless they're actually quite meaningful, and so perhaps if something, an experience of insight perhaps occurred, you'd be more able to experience it.

S: Yes because you'd have a more stable personality. You'd be emotionally more stable. One does know that as one gets older one is affected much less than one would have been when one was young. Supposing you suddenly lose your house or you have to move unexpectedly, well when you are young this can quite throw you, but as you get older well you accept these things. You accept painful experiences more easily because you see well it's going to pass. You've gone through it before perhaps, and you know it'll pass, so you sit looser to it. It still may be a quite painful experience but it doesn't throw you very often in quite the same way. So I think if your development has been proper human development, leaving aside even the spiritual question, an older person is more stable, has more equilibrium, has more poise. It is quite unfortunate that in our own society very often that isn't the case because the person's whole previous course of development hasn't been very healthy. But if we've got the reinforcement, as it were, of the Dharma, then there's no reason why we shouldn't have very happy and worthwhile and productive old ages.

_____ : Bhante, before old age we should try and develop (a good memory?)

S: I don't really know. I'm not sure if you can develop a good memory. I think normally people do have good memories. I think also, you remember what you're interested in. Well you all know this from your experience at school. If you weren't interested in something, you didn't

learn it, you didn't remember. So I don't really think it's a question of developing memory but developing interest. If you can't develop interest I don't think you will be able to remember anything very easily. When you are quite young, if you've got a strong interest in something you learn very quickly and can remember. You can even remember whole pages of poetry without much effort. So just cultivate interest or develop interest and I think memory will follow. Though there are of course various tricks of association that you can learn just to help you remember. I don't know if anyone has any sort of experience of those kind of things, any of the educationists? Techniques of.....

_____ : I think that's something which people start doing from the age of twenty-two. That's when the memory starts to drop off. From measurements that have been done, so we all of us develop strategies throughout our lives I think for remembering things, and as we get older we need more strategies.

S: [Laughs] Well look how quickly a small child, a baby learns a language. We couldn't learn a language as quickly as that.

_____ : If you did used to be able to remember something like where a particular quote came from and you find you can't on a particular occasion, should you make a note to try and look it up, to refresh your memory? I think you do that.

S: Yes, I personally do that. I sometimes ask people who are with me 'what was the name of that?' or 'when did that happen?' and since they're much younger than me they usually remember straight away. Yes one can do that, or sometimes what I do is I just go over in my mind all the

associated circumstances until I get back to that name or that passage in a book and usually, nine cases out of ten, if I spend enough time on it, I can in the end remember. You try to remember all the associated circumstances, all that kind of thing. Supposing I'm trying to remember the title of a book, I think well how long ago was it, where did I see that book, did I buy it, did someone give it to me, what colour cover did it have?; and you remember all these things and then suddenly the title flashes back into your mind. This is something you can do if you're a bit sleepless at night [Laughter]. Something to help pass the time. But yes you can do this. You can dig back into one's memory. There are now these little tricks of association, sometimes just by a play upon words - I can't think of any examples at the moment, but usually if you try and associate what you want to remember with something striking. Some writers suggest even something horrible, which will have a more powerful hold on your attention which you are less likely to forget.

For instance supposing you want to remember someone's name. Supposing for instance their name is Holyfield. I had a friend called Holyfield once [Laughter]. So field, field, country. I associate this person with country. So you can remember but then you're thinking what was his name, what was his name, something to do with country, yes meadow, grass, field - yes Holyfield. You can get at it in that way. There's a book by Frances Yates isn't there, the '*Theatre of Memory*', which deals with all these sort of techniques as they were developed, especially during the Renaissance period. I think it's called the '*Theatre of Memory*' [Laughter] or is it the '*Art of Memory*', no it's the '*Art of Memory*', but there is a '*Theatre of Memory*' but I think the title of the book is the '*Art of Memory*', but anyway it's by Frances Yates who is a very well known writer on Renaissance topics generally.

Yes it did occur to me when I was thinking about this question that I don't think I've talked about old age before, have I? Perhaps because I wasn't really qualified [Laughter]. I think it's very difficult for young people to know or to understand what it's like to be old. I think if you're very old you shouldn't expect young people to understand. Sometimes they may not be able to understand why you can't walk faster than you do. They get quite impatient and even irritated, and even if you say well look I'm so much older than you, I can't walk as fast as you, they'll admit the point but five seconds later they're just racing away ahead of you. They've forgotten. They can't really always put themselves in your shoes. And I think you shouldn't expect them to. Just make provision accordingly. Of course similarly old people have know what it's like to be young but they do forget! [Laughter] So you have to make allowances of that too and not think that young people are just behaving in a very eccentric and unreasonable way because the chances are you behaved in that way.

I remember one Order member. She might even be present, I can't see her, but if she is present she mustn't mind my telling this little story which she told me once. Apparently she was quite worried about I think it was her son, or might have been her daughter, going off on the back of motorbikes at a very early age and always worrying about it. Then she realised, she told herself, well when I was that age I was doing that all the time! [Laughter] So you can forget. So I think old people have to make allowances for young people and young people similarly have to make allowances for old people. There has to be that mutual tolerance and sympathy, and there as to be a sort of recognition, especially on the part of the old person, that it's not easy to put yourself in the shoes of someone who is much older or much younger than you.

_____ : When I sent my mother on holiday in the Spring it was a real practice to try and walk at a different pace so we were walking side by side, and as we talked about it I remembered that at one point in my life I used to say to my mother, 'Can you slow down!' [Laughter] The roles were now reversed and I found it really difficult - she's quite arthritic - going at her pace. It was a practice for me and I did find myself striding out ahead.

S: Because it involves mindfulness, consideration, imagination, patience. [Pause] Shakespeare has a little song. He says '*youth and crabbed age cannot live together*'. I forget the rest of it but he elaborates that.

_____ : I've also noticed. My father's eighty nine now but I remember when I was a child that I used to relate to the very old people when you're very very young and you see these sort of hassled mothers too busy and my father goes and sort of talks to this little toddler or this little baby and in a way they are in the same time span because I think when you're very very young you've got a different time span again haven't you?

S: Yes. It's often been noticed that grandparents and grandchildren get on well together very often.

So have I answered the question? Sort of haven't I. At least we've ventilated it. Perhaps we'll grow older a bit more gracefully and thoughtfully.

What else did we have? Yes something a bit different.

"If one Order member is blocking consensus consistently in an FWBO Council, is there a point at which that person should be

overruled so that the total situation can move forwards positively?"

As a provisional answer I would say well yes sometimes unfortunately that has to happen. Otherwise one person just holds up everything. But consensus is definitely best and consensus must definitely be aimed for where all important decisions are concerned. But then the question says '*One Order member is blocking consensus consistently*'. If that happens then it's not just a question of overruling that person on one particular occasion, much wider issues are involved. How is it that that one particular Order member - I'm just taking the question as it's been given - is consistently blocking? If that happened you can't help suspecting that that particular Order member is out of tune or out of harmony with all the other Council members, and then the question arises well why is that, how is that? Is it that that person is the only one in step as they say? Are all the others out of step? That is always a possibility! But then again different people have different ways of doing things and looking at things, and I would say that if one Order member, whether right or wrong, consistently blocks consensus in a Council meeting, then it should be seriously considered whether that particular Order member shouldn't leave that Council and work with other more like minded people. It's not necessarily that that one person is wrong. They may be right. Of course they may be wrong also, but they may be right. But even if they're right, well it isn't a very positive situation if they are continually, or consistently as the questioner says, blocking consensus.

So I think this should then be put to that particular person, that look maybe you have got good ideas, maybe your suggestions are OK but they're not in line with what the rest of us think. Maybe you should find like minded Order members and work with them, or even if you want to work on your

own. Do you see what I mean?. It also depends upon how important the issues are in connection with which the consensus is being consistently..... if they're important issues then clearly there are important differences between the rest of the Council members and that one person. Perhaps one can be patient for a few months but you can't really hold up the whole running of an FWBO indefinitely because one person is consistently blocking a consensus, blocking decisions. If that person was always right and everybody else was always wrong, well once they do leave it'll be obvious, or it'll be obvious that yes it was just a question of different ways of doing things, different approaches, and the persons concerned are better functioning independently.

Any comments on this. I don't know how many of you have had experience of this sort of thing. Maybe it happens in most Councils occasionally but that can obviously be accepted.

_____ : To what extent can we (extend?) that to Order situations and Chapter situations?

S: In what way?

_____ : We had a Chapter Convenors' meeting yesterday and we were talking about the possibility in the future of Chapter Convenors making more decisions on behalf of their Chapters. That wouldn't always necessarily be a decision made with the actual considered consensus of everyone in the Chapter.

S: I must say I haven't really thought about this before. One thing that does occur to me is that Chapters as such are not called upon to make

organisational decisions in the way that Council meetings are. Because we have had - you may not know this, it may have happened before you were ordained - but there have been quite extensive discussions throughout the Order within Chapters on two or three issues where it was just not possible to come to an agreement, and we just dropped the matter. Because well it could be dropped. It wasn't as it were an organisational matter. One particular matter I remember being discussed in Chapters was this question of robes. Whether Order members should have robes. Well fifty percent of Order members were in favour and well I think fifty percent weren't with maybe just a few perhaps not bothering much either way. So it was just dropped. But when a practical question arises in a Council meeting you can't do that. If for instance if in a Council meeting shall we celebrate Wesak on the Sunday or shall we celebrate it on the Saturday? Well you've got to decide to celebrate it on one day or the other. If you just go on talking and talking well Wesak doesn't get celebrated! [Laughter] But when it is a question more of matters of principle, the sort of matters that are more likely to arise within a Chapter, well yes you can go on discussing them and discussing them if that's what you want to do, because no immediate action is called for necessarily. In fact you may agree about practice but you may differ about interpretations of the principles involved, and you can go on talking and discussing about those things.

So I would say [**end of side one side two**] that the situation within Chapters is rather different from the situation within Councils, but you did mention this question of Chapter Convenors representing? Does that have any bearing on the matter?

_____ : Taking decisions. I suppose actually that is more of an organisational nature possibly. I mean like for instance planning say

conventions, that sort of thing.

S: I suppose there there would have to be a consensus achieved before a certain date, because if the discussion was about when to have the convention well I suppose you couldn't really do on discussing indefinitely, because then you might not have a convention that year. On the other hand it's quite open to you to decide that well yes even in this issue it's more important to have a consensus than to have a convention - it's up to you! But if you decide that it's more important to have a convention than to have a consensus well then you will have to overrule the minority, and the minority presumably will have to gracefully accept that in a democratic spirit because that's how democracy works, not that a spiritual group or organisation needs to be democratic, but I suppose it's the best solution in those sort of circumstances. If you can't have unanimity well at least have democracy and the rule, if that is the right term, of the majority.

_____ : What about in a situation when you are discussing mitra requests? I mean that would be a situation where consensus was necessary.

S: Broadly yes, yes indeed because supposing you were considering someone's readiness for ordination and assuming that you all - everybody in the chapter - knew that person equally well but disagreed as to whether they were ready, you really would have to reach a consensus and that is a quite difficult situation. Because otherwise supposing there's a substantial minority against that person being ordained, well you can hardly carry it by majority vote because then perhaps that person on being ordained would be received into a chapter, let's say, a substantial part of which thought that that person hadn't really been ready for ordination anyway. So that is a rather more ticklish business.

_____ : I mean even if there's just one person - and it's all very relative too - is how well that person knows the person being discussed.

S: That's why I said assuming that they all know the mitra equally. Then again you have to give weight to different factors. For instance well yes this person knows the mitra better, has known the mitra longer, but that other Order member is well known to be more experienced and with quite a lot of perception and insight, so how do you weigh the one against the other. This is a question that arises all the time. I think very often what people do is to say well I'm not too sure about that person's readiness but I trust the judgement of such and such Order members who are not only experienced but also know that mitra well and I'm prepared to go along with that in a positive spirit, even though I have certain reservations. Of course any reservations, when they are specified, need to be gone into, and if they are soundly based well those matters have to be taken up with the mitra. But if they are not soundly based well by discussion they are dissipated hopefully. But it isn't a very easy area, especially when you get quite a number of Order members involved with varying degrees of contact with that particular mitra. That particular mitra may be a quite complex person showing different sides of his or her personality to different Order members!

_____ : In a sense that also requires then the preceptors or the people who are making the final decision would have to know the Order members very well.

S: Well they'd either have to know the Order members very well or have definite confidence in other Order members who knew those particular mitras well and could, as it were, vouch for them. But it's best of course

obviously if the preceptors themselves know that the mitra is ready from their personal knowledge and experience.

There's a general question as to whether I'd like to comment on any part of the pre-ordination course retreats for women but I don't think I do. From what I know of the way in which the pre-ordination retreats and all that are being handled, well it seems that they are being handled quite well, and I can't suggest any specific improvement except just a general upgrading which one obviously suggests with regard to everything that happens within the FWBO. [Laughter]

[Let's see] if I can find something a bit different.

Here's something a bit tantric. Here's a nice easy question.

"Could Bhante comment on the fact that wisdom is feminine, i.e. in the Perfection of Wisdom there is a hymn in which Sariputra says, 'I pay homage to the Perfection of Wisdom. She is worthy of homage.' In that section also it says, 'She protects the unprotected with the help of the four grounds of self confidence. What are the four grounds of self confidence?'"

Well I've dealt with these in *The Survey* so I'll just refer you to those. I think also in one of my lectures. But the fact that wisdom is feminine? Is there some mystery about this or isn't it obvious why wisdom is feminine? I suppose it started because the word Prajna is grammatically feminine, so it was quite easy to think of wisdom itself as being iconographically speaking feminine, and I suppose at the time that the Mahayana was developing people seemed to feel the need for some feminine as well as

masculine, as regards form, embodiments of the various perfections and of Enlightenment itself.

But yes, like the White Tara and the Green Tara, iconographically the Prajnaparamita is definitely feminine. There's this very famous statue of Prajnaparamita in Leiden which quite a few of you have seen and some of you might have seen the picture postcard. It was on the front cover of the jacket of the original hardback edition of Doctor Conze's "Buddhist Texts Through the Ages". It's a very well known piece of Buddhist art and obviously very beautiful.

So,

"Why is the figure of Ksitigarbha included specifically in the refuge tree of Sakyamuni? The other four Bodhisattva figures on that lotus are commonly practised sadhanas in the Order. What is the significance of his presence?"

As far as I remember I wanted to have four bodhisattvas on one side and four bodhisattvas on the other, because traditionally there is a set of eight bodhisattvas, but they're not all equally familiar within the FWBO. But Ksitigarbha is historically a very important bodhisattva and there is one particular feature of his activity which I thought we ought to take note of, and that is Ksitigarbha descends into hell. He descends into the hell realms, and I think that's one of the things we have to do in the course of our spiritual life. Whether the hells are within ourselves, descending into our own, as it were negative, depths. I'm not saying that all our depths are negative but we do have things deep down in us which aren't very positive, aren't very skilful, even very painful. We have to go down into those. But

also we have to go down into hell realms in the world. That is to say we often have to work in difficult situations where people are suffering a lot of pain. You may feel this or you may have experienced this if you work say as a mental nurse or psychiatric nurse, I think it's called. Or you could I think feel it sometimes if you were working among the ex-Untouchables. Not that they're not a happy and cheerful people but they live in very difficult circumstances, they suffer, they are persecuted, sometimes they're raped and murdered. This happens even now. It's probably happening this very week in some remote village in India. These people do suffer, and if one wants to work among them one descends into that particular hell which is a hell not made up of these people but a hell in which these people themselves are living as best they can, and into which one descends, so to speak, in order to help them, and also I must say to help oneself, because working in that way with people of that sort is of great benefit to one's own self as well as to them. It's definitely mutual.

So I wanted to emphasise this particular aspect of the spiritual life - the descending into hell, and Ksitigarbha is very prominently associated with that aspect in far eastern, that is to say Chinese and Japanese, Buddhism, and I'd like to see more people taking up the practice or sadhana of Ksitigarbha. I don't know where we're going to get it from because I've not come across it myself. Where there is a sutra isn't there, and one could make a start with that. I'm afraid I can't remember what it's called [Laughter]. Well I would if I thought, but it might take me half an hour. It's mentioned in the "*Eternal Legacy*". You can just look up the index.

-----: What sort of qualities are associated?

S: Well compassion obviously, and determination, but I think one can

look at the figure of Ksitigarbha. There are two popular forms. One is a seated Buddha-like form, and he's got I think it's a peach or maybe a myrobalan in one hand, and the other is I think more popular, in Japan especially - he's represented as a shaven headed Sarvastivadin monk with one of these staffs, the Kakara, not the same as Padmasambhava's staff - it's the ringed staff, it goes *chink, chink, chink* as you walk along the jungle paths. And he's represented with a very compassionate expression, sort of slowly descending into the hell realms - very calmly and deliberately, not in an excited way, but very calmly, very deliberately and he gives that sort of impression of great peacefulness as he descends. Because clearly if you're going to descend into hell realms you need a lot of, well emotional stability and more than that, you need to be very centred.

Karunamaya: I read that he's also associated with pregnancy and children as well.

S: Well they say hell is other people [Laughter] but sometimes hell is children! Recently I was reading a review of the letters of Queen Victoria to her favourite daughter, Louise, and Louise for one reason or another who was very different from Queen Victoria, didn't give birth to any children, and Queen Victoria was writing to her and the letter was quoted saying, 'well dear, it's nothing really to worry about. Children are always a disappointment!' [Laughter] She'd had a dozen of them. Yes, so I don't know what is this particular association of Ksitigarbha with children, but maybe mother sometimes feels she's living in a bit of a hell realm, especially if she has half a dozen children or more.

Vajramala: One's enough to make you feel like that!

S: One's enough. They are sometimes little demons, aren't they.

-----: Is there significance that he's portrayed as a Sarvastivadin monk?

S: No I think it's simply that in the Mahayana it is the Sarvastivadin monastic vinaya tradition that is continued. It's simply for that. But he's a very impressive figure and I think it's good just to say contemplate a painting of him, especially a Japanese one, just to get some impression of the qualities he represents, because they're very effectively conveyed.

Vajragita: There are some beautiful ones in Amsterdam.

Ratnadharani: Could you say something more about what you mean about descending into the hell realms in the course of your spiritual life?

S: Well of course sometimes it's not that you descend into the hell realm but sometimes the hell realm sort of bubbles up and hits you in the face, especially perhaps when you're on solitary retreat, but descending into the hell realm I suppose one could say is both subjective and objective. Subjectively you deliberately explore and try to illuminate the darker aspects, the depths, of one's own personality, with a view to breaking through into something beyond, and objectively it's when you descend into, as it were, an objectively very difficult situation within which you have to work. You might even sometimes feel that working in a co-op is like working in a hell realm, especially maybe on a Monday morning and no one's in a very good mood. You might feel a bit like that. Or it can be a situation that is socially and politically difficult, even economically difficult as we find is the case often in India when we're working there. Did you have anything else in mind?

Ratnadharani: I was thinking particular about comments made by Subhuti recently in terms of not getting too bogged down in psychological states and concentrating more on the power of positive action. Do you think there is some value in exploring the dark?

S: I suppose you could say that descending into the hell realm is a positive action, but of course it's a bodhisattva that descends. It's not just you descending, so it suggests, in the case of this subjective descent, that you have already developed a certain spiritual stability, a sort of spiritual personality, by means of which or through which you can explore the murkier aspects of your self, such as may be still remaining, without actually getting bogged down in them. You should be like a prison visitor, but you don't want to be a prison visitor who ends up actually being imprisoned himself or herself. I think that's the big danger. Otherwise you're like the monkey that tries to help the other monkey out of the pitch, pitch in the sense of tar, and just gets embroiled himself, or herself as the case may be. [Pause]

Rather a different tack.

"You have said that racism is inimical to the spiritual life. There have been articles in "Shabda" about the implications and interpretation of racial cum ethnic differences which may have a bearing on the teaching of the Higher Evolution. Do you believe there is a hierarchy of cultures? If so what are the criteria for assessing this in a way that avoids using the standpoint of white western culture against which other different cultures are seen as inferior."

So the central question is do you believe there is a hierarchy of cultures? I think that in principle there is, but there are several big buts here. I think if one looks at the major cultures of the world one finds that they're very complex phenomena and they exist on a number of different levels. Just to give examples, we have got western culture, but then one might say there's Indian culture, which is a whole world in itself. There's Chinese culture, there's Islamic culture. I think in principle, yes, one could arrange all these cultures hierarchically but it's not easy because they've all got their heights and they've all got their depths. If one looks at say a culture with which I'm familiar, say Indian culture, well it's got its heights, it's got its philosophies, it's got its wonderful art, it's got its literature, but it's also got untouchability. So how do you make your overall assessment? So I think it isn't easy to arrange cultures in a hierarchical order or scale if one is especially thinking in terms of these very large scale, as it were, complete cultures. Again take Islam. Yes, you've got wonderful philosophies, you've got Sufism, you've got beautiful art, you've got Persian miniature painting, but you've got also other undesirable features. You've got slavery for instance. In some Islamic countries slavery died out well within our lifetimes. So it isn't easy to as it were strike a balance and decide where any of these big complex cultures as a whole come in any hierarchy of cultures.

But I think there is something that one can do. I think that within every culture there are certain high points, and I think one can isolate these high points fairly easily. For instance there's the Golden Age of Greece, fifth century BC: Athens, where you have Socrates and Plato and Aristotle, the great dramatist and so on, though of course there are some dark spots there because after all they executed Socrates didn't they. But yes that's generally considered one of the high peaks of civilisation. And then you've

got Renaissance Italy with the very intensive culture of the city states. You've got the arts and literature blooming then, and music rather later. If you turn to the Islamic world well you've got I think it's ninth and tenth century Baghdad. You turn to China you've got the culture of the T'ang Dynasty which is generally considered to represent the peak of Chinese culture and civilisation.

So I think what you can do within these different cultures, even civilisations, is to isolate their various peaks, and you do get these peaks rising above the surrounding mountains as it were. In the case of say England, well in the case of literature there's the Elizabethan Age. I think it's generally agreed that so far as poetry and the drama are concerned well the Elizabethan age surpassed all the others. So I don't think one can do very much more than that and I think also it's important that one tries to appreciate the culture of these peaks, regardless of where the peaks exist or regardless rather of within which particular culture the peaks happen to arise. Nowadays we can do that because we do have access to all sorts of material that wasn't available before. As regards literature we have translations. So any comment on this? [Pause]

I think I relate it in my "*Learning to Walk*", that as you may remember that when I was in my early teens I was very interested in literature and poetry and, well English literature, English poetry, and then one day it struck me, and I think I've said it struck me almost with the force of a thunderbolt, that why should I confine myself to English literature, let me read Chinese literature, Persian literature, and I did in translation, and I enjoyed it I think hardly less than I enjoyed English literature. So I think we do have to develop that as it were more cosmopolitan attitude and appreciate and enjoy culture of different kinds. And also on different levels. As far as we

can enjoying culture at its best, the best paintings, the best music, the best dance, the best literature, wherever it comes from. In a place like London you can do that very easily, especially as regards drama and dance. You get dance and drama from every part of the world, every continent.

Maybe I'll just have one more question. Some of the questions I've actually answered more or less before like

"How important is it to do one's sadhana practice every day" -
Well it is very important. Perhaps I don't need to go into that. Just leave it at that.

Ah yes there's something about Padmasambhava's advice to the fortunate women. I think I've more than one question about Padmasambhava. Anyway. No I think I've really answered that one before.

Yes I'll deal with a simple factual one and then maybe with a more controversial one.

"Do the four levels of awareness as enumerated in your lecture on Perfect Mindfulness come from a traditional source?"

Yes and no. The individual items all come from traditional sources but they've been put together as four levels of awareness, as enumerated in the lecture, by me. So the material is traditional. The organisation in that way into those four levels is my own.

All right. Now a rather controversial question about which there may have been some misunderstanding as a result of some of the things I may have

said [Laughter] or may not have said in the past. [Laughter] And it's something that concerns I think nearly everybody, except probably the over sixties. So the over sixties can just sit back and listen.

"I have heard that you have been more encouraging of non-monogamous promiscuous sexual relationships than monogamous ones if one is to be involved in sexual activity. If this is accurate and you did say this, could you please comment on how you see the practice of the third precept in its positive form, particularly with stillness, simplicity and contentment I purify my body, being mindfully undertaken."

One of the things I've said is I don't really like this word 'promiscuous'. It's got all sorts of connotations. If you say, 'Oh she's very promiscuous', it's not exactly a value free description is it? For some reason or another we don't usually say, 'He's very promiscuous' as far as I know. I'm not sure why that is. [Laughter] So I would say it's not that I've been so much encouraging, if that even is the word, non-monogamous cum promiscuous sexual relationships. What I have been discouraging, at least what I intended to try to discourage, because it isn't easy to discourage it, is exclusiveness. In the course of the last two or three years especially, I've become very aware, I must say at second hand, hearing various things from various people, I've become very aware how very exclusive sexual relationships, especially monogamous ones, can become, in the sense of giving rise to very extreme attachment, clinging, possessiveness, which can eventually be a source of great pain and suffering for both parties, if not for others as well. So it's that that I would like to discourage. It's not so much that I'm in favour of promiscuous relationships and not in favour of monogamy. What I'm not in favour of and which I would like people to

try to grow out of, is this extreme exclusivity in sexual relationships, and extreme possessiveness. I'm sure everybody knows what I'm talking about. I think that is the great danger, as it were, in monogamous sexual relationships. It seems that it's less likely to arise when there are, as it were, non-monogamous relationships, though of course obviously there there may be other difficulties. But it's this question of exclusivity and possessiveness that I'm mainly concerned with.

_____ : (unclear)

S: Yes, where someone's sort of emotional well-being, in fact well-being generally is totally, as it seems, tied up with the exclusivity of their sexual relationship with the other person. If the other person has a sexual relationship with someone else, or even becomes seriously interested in someone else short of a sexual relationship, well the first person can sometimes be completely devastated, and that is not a very happy state of affairs, and it's that that I would like to discourage.

Vajramala: Presumably the answer, Bhante, is friendship as an antidote.

S: I won't say that friendship is a complete answer but I think certainly friendship is very important in its own right, and if you've got strong non-sexual friendships you are much less likely I'm sure to be thrown if anything goes wrong, or if there are difficulties in your sexual relationships whether monogamous or non-monogamous. I think friendships are a great safety net in this respect. Well they've other functions too. They've got their own value, but they're also a great safety net in the case of emotional cum sexual difficulties or problems. I think quite a lot of people will know that from their own experience.

_____ : Does this connect with what Subhuti was saying you've said in his talk that sex is never neutral so you might have friendships but.....

S: I'm afraid as far as I've seen and heard there's always an element of exclusivity, but it can be quite minor or quite moderate. At least you might experience a twinge and not be totally devastated, but I think you can't help feeling a twinge, and you probably just have to accept that and think yourself lucky if it's no more than a twinge [Laughter].

-----: So do you feel then it would be more skilful to deal with that by forming friendships rather than going off and being promiscuous?

S: It might. It depends very much on the individual. I think exclusivity is less likely to arise if you're non-monogamous but there's no guarantee, and obviously there are some arguments in favour of monogamy these days, for reasons that you will be well aware of, but certainly in any case whether you're monogamous or non monogamous, friendships must be an important integral part of your spiritual life, and they have the additional advantage of providing you with what I've called a safety net, in the case of any sexual cum emotional catastrophe [Laughter]. Or perhaps I should say if you happen to fall off that sexual cum emotional tightrope, which is what it very often is [Laughter].

-----: Bhante, do you think we have to guard against exclusivity in friendships or is this of a different order?

S: It is of a different order if you mean a non-sexual relationship but on the other hand you can be emotionally attached and exclusive even in that area too, and I think yes you do need to watch that, yes. I mean exclusivity

and possessiveness are not by any means associated simply with the sexual relationship, certainly not. There can be unhealthily exclusive friendships and even blood relationships.

So any further comment on that?

-----: It's just come into my mind whether it's actually possible to practise the third precept and have a sexual relationship at all. They seem to be mutually exclusive!

S: Well it depends what one means by practise. Well look at the first precept. Who practises that perfectly? Nobody does, but we're aiming, because even if you step on an ant as you go out across the grass in ten minutes time, well in a sense you've broken that first precept but it's almost impossible to keep it perfect, and I think that really applies to all the precepts. I think the only one it doesn't apply to probably is the one that we don't actually officially take, and that's the one of abstaining from alcohol, because you can practise that perfectly in the sense of totally abstaining, even abstaining from sherry trifle, if you see what I mean. So you can practise that one but I think the others, I'd be very dubious if anyone assured me that they were practising any one precept absolutely one hundred percent perfectly, so I don't think we really practise any precept perfectly, but we have to make the effort all the time, and I think it applies to this. This is why I've emphasised, or at least I hope I have, that in connection with this particular precept, it's not a question of celibacy or non-celibacy, brahmacharya or non-brahmacharya - you can't say that anybody is totally celibate or totally non-celibate. There are degrees and you just try to move up the scale all the time, and that's really all that can be expected of you. In fact it's a great deal that day by day,

week by week, you become more non-violent, you become less possessive, you become more content within your sexual relationship or lack of sexual relationship. You become more truthful and harmonious in your speech and so on. I think that's what we ought to be thinking in terms of, just practising more and more perfectly all the time.

It may be that in the case of sexuality that you do conclude well skilful sex is really a contradiction in terms, and you look forward to the day when you can rise above it, but you can't just sort of hoist yourself above it by artificial means obviously. You just have to try to be as positive as you can within that particular relationship and as skilful as you can, until such time as you feel ready for brahmacharya or blessed old age overtakes you [Laughter] and carries away all those feelings. The great Greek dramatist Sophocles was once asked in his old age what it was like - maybe someone felt sorry for him - what it was like now he no longer experienced sexual desire. So he said I feel as though I've been released from the clutches of a terrible wild beast! [Laughter]. Yes he felt free, light, happy. But young people don't believe this [Laughter]. They don't believe it! They can't imagine it. I can't blame them! [Laughter] Every stage of life, every age has its own virtues, its own advantages, its own disadvantages, and we just accept them and work with them.

Anyway I think I'd better call a halt there for this time. It's nice to have seen you all and heard you all or at least heard some of you.

-----: Thank you Bhante.

S: Righto.

END OF SESSION