**Kamalashila:**

**my dharma life so far**

**from teens to old age**

For a teenager like me in the late 60s seeking insight, the best option was probably Orange Sunshine.  In a wild way, acid completely revealed the truths of emptiness and compassion. My heart opened with love and my world became radically impermanent: any attempt to mentally construct it melted immediately.  It was a union of form, emptiness and bodhicitta and I knew it without knowing those words.  I know them now.  These days, I advise people to try meditation first.  I did that myself after that, following the Beatles, but TM and the Maharishi didn’t work for me.

In 1971 I eventually came to Buddhism. I wanted to understand what lay within that first insight experience.  Not only understand, but do what Buddhism did, for I knew it was about living a life based on what insight revealed.  I’m glad to say that a portion of that has actually come about, but back then many things ‘didn't work’ and I was a frustrated youth.  Distressing my parents, I left school early, voiding my chance of university.  Instead I did drama and went to art school.  I read Paul Reps, The Three Pillars of Zen, and The Life of Milarepa.  I came from a background common in my generation, of harsh rejection of social and religious norms. I valued friendship above all, had a wide social circle and as young people do, I  savoured deep conversations.  People I knew frequently rejected Christianity and experimented with all kinds of drugs and experiences.  For me the visionary quality of tripping was the convincing thing: for eight hours or more it became blindlingly true that one was aware, had been born and would die.  It was so much more real than the moralistic blandness of Christianity.

At that time no one knew what to do with the acid revelation.  I was convinced there must be a path of some kind there, but the only way I could see was to dabble in image making and theatre. With hindsight, the arts provided a good induction into life.  But it was not the spiritual path that, quite unknowingly it seems, was what I wanted.  Everything I read about Buddhism indicated that it offered exactly that, and since I was open, the dharma came into my life in various ways.  Having been deeply moved one evening in my room in Muswell Hill by reading Evans-Wentz’s Life of Milarepa, my good fortune was then to meet Sangharakshita a week later - a stone’s throw away in the next street.  We were neighbours.  He had even received teachings in Milarepa’s lineage, though I didn’t know it at the time.  I learned the meditation, read the whole of his ‘Survey’, became convinced that he knew what he was talking about, and was drawn into his movement, the ‘Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. ’

Bhante was amazing in those days.  As mentioned I had learned meditation previously through Transcendental Meditation.  It was clearly a way to calm the mind, but I would have to feel really bad to want to do that!  To me TM seemed an insipid response to the mystery of human existence.  I must have missed something important, but the way I was taught it didn’t address the issue of insight at all. Meditating with Sangharakshita was completely different: it was obvious that, to him, sitting practice connected to a path of insight and awakening. He had long experience of dharma practice that wasn’t from books but from living as an ascetic in India for twenty years.  Yet he was also a writer and scholar with an ability to clarify anything that might puzzle me. I was very happy with that.

So I can say with gratitude that the path began with The Venerable Maha Sthavira Sanghakshita. I started regularly practising the Mindfulness of breathing, the Metta bhavana and the Six-element practice, all of which I learned in the first few months of my involvement.  Bhante taught the elements practice every afternoon on a summer retreat I attended for a few days, thanks to a generously loaned tent from Lokamitra.  Being young, idealistic and still very much a hippy I refused to pay, since spiritual things should always be free!  Despite this folly I imbibed teachings on the elements which I practise to this day.

Out of the Six Elements practice the first ‘Buddhist’ insight arose, of anattā, non-self.  Lying back in the luminosity of my tent one afternoon after a session of meditation, I felt liberated.  I saw the truth simply by looking into the experience of earth and water and knowing that I could never be them, or own them.  It was so simple, so obvious. It was what I had seen on acid but could never have articulated. There was no need for a self; indeed, everything worked fine without, probably better.  All the meditation practices, metta and mindfulness of breathing as well as the rituals we did, all took part in this simplicity that was deep and endless.  The experience stayed with me and the more I thought about it, the more I felt confident that the Dharma really was true.

Something was confirmed from that point on.  I had always been drawn to insight, which I knew was what the Buddha taught, but I never saw it as disconnected from the rest of life.  So now I was happy to involve myself in the whole package offered by the Friends, as a way to gain the human skills I knew I lacked, amongst others who were also on the same path to awakening.  It was a huge relief not to have to do that in the socially approved ways of marriage and career.  I had resisted those, and there had been a cost, but I’d known intuitively that they would leach away the sensibilities I most valued.  So I felt deeply grateful for the training I received.  I suspect this is still how our movement works for many young people.

But to a lesser extent I also accepted the FWBO package of ordination, community and ‘right livelihood’ because of a general upsurge of interest in spirituality. Everywhere there were cultish groups springing up offering self-actualisation, mystical experience, divine illumination and whatever appealed to the spaced-out survivors of 60s bohemianism.  Cheap travel and increasingly globalised news media had widened everyone’s horizons. People in Afghanistan, India and Africa had cultures that seemed vastly less superficial than the post war conventionality satirised by David Frost, John Peel or Monty Python. The indiginous cultures seemed deeply poetic and religious to us.  We felt a deep need to move on from a drugs-and-fashion-induced spirituality.  The new movements seemed to offer a new kind of society that corrected the narrowness in western culture.

Sangharakshita himself was clearly also moved by the wish to create a corrective culture.  He called the FWBO ‘a new society.’ He avoided the pitfall of cultishness by ensuring that the movement of the time was not exclusively built around him, even though he was our inspiration.  Recently I have been learning that key ideas, that I always assumed must have been Sangharakshita’s, actually came from other individuals. ‘The Friends’ then, as it aspires to be now, was a co-creation, a community of individual people open to one another and free to approach things as they liked. There was little of the later sense of hierarchy.  Our view of spiritual practice was satisfyingly broad, ranging from friendship and work to insight meditation.

In 1978, and four years ordained, I spent a memorable summer alone in a derelict old farmhouse called Tyn-y-Ddol.  Camped amidst the ruins I lived on vegetables and read the Lankavatara Sutra.  It was deeply inspiring to read about Buddha Nature and other Mahayana unfoldings of the teaching of sunyata. The experience primed me to take, the following year, an opportunity to leave the centre I had started in West London and join the building project there in the Welsh hills that we later called Vajraloka.  I worked as a labourer under Atula’s direction and after the intial work phase was over, was appointed as its chair.

The place was initially conceived as the Order’s retreat centre, served by a residential semi-monastic community.  Individual members could join for periods.  I had various responsibilities but the situation gave me ample opportunity to meditate.  I usually did four sessions a day, deepening into the foundation yogas and some sadhana practices as well as all the other practices we learn in the Order.  I had all kinds of experiences as a result, some of which I’d call insight, with strong shifts in perception and perspective.  There were also many small visionary experiences, as well as a general happiness and joy in the practice.

In those days there was no language around insight at all apart from the theoretical doctrines, which we were not taught how to apply in experience in a sustained way.  The main understanding was that shamatha i.e. calm, seen in terms of the jhanas, needed always to precede vipassana i.e. insight.  We were led to believe that insight would not be genuine unless supported by shamatha.  Sangharakshita generally did not teach how insight was to be recognised or understood in experience, or about how to work with insight experience; so we did not miss or expect that.  However, since jhana was considered indispensible to insight, people tended to focus on achieving it, or on whatever hindrances prevented that.  And since jhana is hard to achieve outside retreat conditions, there eventually arose a widespread sense that practically speaking, a deliberate cultivation of insight was out of reach.  It was considered that there might be exceptions, and insight might also descend on its own, so there was still hope.

Despite the above, people did sometimes find insights arising, and occasionally we might discuss these personally with Sangharakshita.  One to one, his comments could often be somewhat positive: usually some kind of acknowledgement that the experience was in the territory of insight.  But his public comments about insight were usually that one should be wary of alienated awareness, ego-appropriations of insight, and false claims.  Of course we accepted these pronouncements.

Caution is always to be advised about sharing insights: if the other’s confidence is low, or they are anxious about status, or they view insight as so exalted as to be unobtainable in practice, there can be a strong reaction.  An atmosphere eventually came about in which it was considered bad taste to speak of insight experience at all, since it would involve making a ‘claim’ to having experienced actual insight—which, we understood, was likely to have been a production of their ego.  Within this scepticism was also a view that insight entails a claim to higher status.  So if someone (especially if they were not an Order member) dared to ‘make a claim’ to insight, Bhante’s comments would be used to disparage them with suggestions that actually they had been alienated from their feelings, or that their ego had made a false claim. While that could sometimes have been true, the motive for such behaviour could also seem egotistically defensive or dismissive.  It appealed to a particular group mentality within the Order, and the result was a stalemate wherein positive discussion of insight became almost impossible, since someone, somewhere, would first need to make a claim to it and run the gauntlet of disapproving comment.

I trusted Bhante’s wisdom, and my own practice seemed to be producing good fruits, so none of that bothered me.  I was much happier, I went on many solitary retreats and had all kinds of experiences, none of which I even expected to be able to talk about.  Everything I encountered about the Dharma through meditation made sense.  Buddhist teaching that for others appeared to be philosophy or theory to me was generally something I could connect to in my experience.  Otherwise I at least understood that it could only be appreciated in that way.   I received directly from meditation many inklings and openings to what the words *anatta*, *bodhicitta* and *sunyata* actually refer to.  Sometimes I would penetrate these in ways I’d not seen before or known about, and that was convincing.  All the practices contributed to this.  I did not have any large, life changing insights until much later, but there were many moments of seeing, for example, the reality of the emptiness of self-nature in things.  These were life changing in small ways, and certainly confirmed my confidence in what I was doing.

I had plenty of work to do on my emotions: again and again practising the Brahmaviharas, developing love and patience, empathy and equanimity.  I was—and am still, essentially, in my untransformed *samskaras—*an awkward, shy, sensitive and impatient person, probably neuro-atypical.  I was often given responsibility, and also wanted to take it, but I always had a difficult ride in relation to those who had to work with me.  I know with the hindsight of age that I can sometimes be hard to work with, and to relate to.

In a kind of refuge from the excesses of my teens I had been inspired by the path of *Brahmacarya* even before I joined ‘the Friends,’ so I maintained it from the very early years through to the end of my long retreat in 2004 (with a few lapses, including a year-long break).  I could only practice celibacy in my 20s and 30s because I clearly saw that sexual craving could cease if I persisted in not attending to it, and that it is possible to loosen the habit. The conviction to carry this out came from my practice.  I was young and healthy.  I had been sexually active since age 15 and there was plenty of temptation.  But meditation had shown me that temptation always wins if you have a view that you can’t resist it.  I could change that wrong view.  Of course it helped a bit when I moved to the male environment of Vajraloka permanently, but what also tended to undermine my resolve was most Order members' views in those days, fuelled by the 60’s ideal of ‘free love,’ and also their utter lack of empathy.  It is normal, natural and maybe even healthy to regard celibates as weird.  Seeing that, I was content to let it go.

Celibacy helped me to stay happy and motivated in practising meditation in the first half of life, and I feel grateful for Sangharakshita’s support of my practice of *Brahmacarya* over long years, during which practically no one (including Sangharakshita himself) seemed remotely interested.  It seems odd that Triratna has never set up real monasticism, and that Order members wait till old age before taking up *Brahmacarya*.  I have happily gone the other way: in the second half of life the inclusion of sexuality has afforded a different, more embodied kind of happiness and a felt connection to the rest of nature, which I know has enhanced my practice and my faith in the dharma.  It has also been similar to hatha yoga in helping bring alive an inner body awareness, which has been very helpful for that element in sadhana practice.  But I know from my own experience (and Sangharakshita had also been an example) that for younger people *Brahmacarya* is a real possibility.  It offers a powerful refuge from worldliness, and it also helps one appreciate far more directly the limitations of worldly life - the *dukkha* that the dharma is pointing to.  I think the lack of an organised monastic wing (and the deep practice and dharma realisation that is often nurtured in such situations by those who are drawn to them) has contributed to some of our problems and I hope that will one day someone will come along who is be able to inspire and sustain such a formative project.

Sangharakshita inaugurated the Vajraloka community as the next big project after Sukhavati.  It was a semi monastic situation with all members committed to *Brahmacarya*.  The centre was intended as a resource for the Order, and while a year of building work was going on, meditation was given extra attention, for example at the Order Convention at Vinehall School, in which Bhante led through many sadhana practices.  All Order members, that is the men (who in those days were in the great majority), were enjoined to use Vajraloka when they needed the refreshment of a few weeks of meditation.  The women were allowed to take over Vajraloka for a month each year and do likewise.  Naturally they chose dry, sunny August.

Thus for a while Vajraloka was placed at the centre of Order life.  However its centrality shifted as Order members began to discover what a few weeks of meditation (and the Brahmacarya precept which in those days everyone took there) could actually be like in the middle of their normally very busy lives. It gradually became acceptable not to take up Bhante’s injunction in a shift that eventually even came to apply to Sangharakshita himself.  At the beginning of Vajraloka’s existence he told us that he would be dropping in from time to time to give teachings on meditation.  But these never actually materialised, to my mild disappointment. I remember one much-anticipated visit when Bhante came as part of a tour, and chatted with us for an hour or so.  But he and Kovida left before lunch, excited by the prospect of—the coastal drive down from Colwyn Bay.  It was a pleasant, sunny day – how can I blame them?  I know that in reality, it can be hard to relate to people who spend all their time meditating, unless you are doing that yourself.  In those days I myself was hard to fathom, and definitely no conversationalist.  Still, I had poured myself life and soul into his project, and I rather wished that Bhante had wanted to spend real time with us. And he did, indeed, spend three months at the nearby cottage Tyddyn Rhydderch in retreat with his current companion.  But apart from allowing me to visit him one afternoon, during which we disagreed about whether Order members got enough dharma teaching for their needs, we never heard from Bhante.  So sadly it seems that he lost interest in Vajraloka and of course, that sent its own signal.

At the time none of this caused any bad feeling, it didn't occur to us even to think about it - I was happy to practice at Vajraloka over the fifteen years I was there.  Now, I think Bhante must have realised he didn’t have much to say to us. He always told me he was happy for us to get on with what we were doing, which was good of him.  But we really could have done with a steer in those early days, and we trusted him implicitly.  It never occurred to us for a moment that our expectations might exceed his ability to communicate insight.  Sangharakshita  clearly had his own experience of insight but it seems he couldn’t connect us to it.  This seems strange in someone so generally gifted in communication.  I am completely sure, forty years later, that our practice was mature enough.  In the end I think the reason may have been a sense of limited time, in combination with the needs of his own personality in relation to the rest of the movement.  To work with our specialised community he would have needed to stay a longer time.  But his change of heart seems mysterious. Could it be that he was not confident in this particular area?

Anyway, such questions never bothered us.  Our faith was unwavering.  Time rolled on.  I was invited in 1994 to Madhyamaloka, Sangharakshita’s community of ‘senior and responsible Order members’ in Birmingham.  That marked the end of my fifteen-year period of practice on retreat.  I was happy to leave the male, semi monastic world of Vajraloka and looked forward to a more outward-going lifestyle.  I had experience to offer, and in my new role I was privileged to be able to travel the world giving talks, teaching retreats and being a senior order member - in my mid-forties!

However, as I entered the world outside the monastery, what was actually building up was a heavy weight of doubt about the validity of the practice I had done. I didn’t seem to be that insightful for someone who had been ordained twenty years.  Of course, I see now, I simply had no way to recognise what I had developed.  And I was still reactive: occasionally I could be tortured by unintentional slights and slurs, occasionally even to the point of suicidal thoughts.  If I had any insight into the nature of existence surely such emotions would be impossible, according to what I had learned.  I was sure I had experienced big openings, moments of insight.  But the worrying thought that now came to me was: how would I even know those were real?  In practice I knew so little about what insight actually was and what its characteristics were.  Sangharakshita had taught the theory of insight well but said virtually nothing about it as an experience.  Whenever I tried to get him on that subject, he clearly did not want to dwell on it for long.  He even seemed bored by my questions.  He was usually far more interested in what I was doing to develop the movement.  Most other Order members (and we all knew one another then) weren’t able to help, or were in the same position as me.

It seemed very strange.  Bhante clearly regarded me then as one of his main disciples. I was on his list of twelve most trusted Order members who he had invited to this special community.  He had trusted me to do public ordinations in India in his name.  He knew I had been at Vajraloka all those years and was deeply involved in the movement’s meditation practices.  I had even written what was then the movement’s definitive book on the subject.  It might not be perfect (I got the impression he didn’t like it much), but it certainly showed a strong interest and familiarity with the subject.  So what on earth was the reason?  The most obvious one was that he could not communicate with me; given my quiet, introverted, perhaps rather unreadable, nature, no doubt that was it, I thought rather sadly.  It was nice to be so trusted, but to then be ignored was hard.  It never occurred to me that Bhante could not relate to my insight experiences, or might have his own communication difficulties.  I now think of course he did, since most of us do in one way or another.  I don’t think he could relate well to my type of character.  But these things never have to be a barrier and later, after my long retreat, we felt a lot more in common and got on very well for a while.  There is a lot that could be said about our relationship over the years that would take me off my main topic.  I feel deep gratitude to his introducing me to the vastness of the Bodhisttva Vow even though the insight aspect of that (which was ironically what attracted me) was something that ‘didn’t work’ that well in relation to him—but I think now that there was no reason why it had to.

As these doubts increased, Bhante had a visitor.  Shenpen Hookham was an old friend of his.  She visited more than once and sometimes would stay a couple of days.  Madhyamaloka wasn’t that huge, so you’d see her around and find yourself chatting in the conservatory now and again.  I found her remarkably easy to talk to about practice.  It was like being with another Order member – but her familiarity with Dharma was deeper than anything I’d encountered in our Sangha.  We talked about ‘Just Sitting.’  I felt it had great potential as an insight practice, but had been confused by Sangharakshita’s strictures about it.  I had been practising it since before ordination twenty years before and hence had many experiences and reflections around the practice, but there were very few people I could share those with now I had left Vajraloka, and it was unfortunately pointless talking to Sangharakshita about it.  So it was a revelation to speak with Shenpen.  She called her approach ‘formless meditation’ and, as I already knew, it was the main practice she taught as part of a Mahamudra approach.

When she left I was so taken by our easy communication that I wrote to her asking if she would teach me.  Her response was to invite me to Tyn-y-Gors, a small house in mid Wales owned by her husband Rigdzin Shikpo.  When I arrived Shenpen explained the plan: we’d do a four day retreat together, the two of us.  Four sessions daily of 2½ hours.  The practice would be just sitting with no instruction, and we’d discuss anything that came out of the practice after each session.  Goodness: I had never sat for so long in one session, apart from once or twice maybe, when I was very inspired—or was in dhyana.  I put my doubts to one side though: ‘If Shenpen thinks I can do that, probably I can.’  And it turned out that the sessions, and our conversations after those, were amazing.  I learned a lot in a short time, especially about having confidence in my own experience.

The ‘formless’ practice can be said to be fundamentally about resting in (effectively, establishing and re-establishing) the *śraddhā* that awakening is intrinsic to awareness.  If it were experienced fully as it is, heart opened and obstacles removed, our own mind would be known as of its nature awakened and already experiencing the way everything really is.  This immanence of awakening was what the acid tab had indicated as well, so rather unconsciously I had been drawn to engaging with this for a long time.  I am sure there had been some hint in the Lankavatara Sutra about this.   Anyway, some time in the mid-eighties I had discovered Khenpo Rinpoche’s little book ‘Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness;’ it totally fitted that idea. I think we studied the text at Vajrakuta, then the Order study centre.  I did a week long study retreat on it at Padmaloka, and Subhuti went through it at Guhyaloka with the early College.  The content was very advanced yet so simply explained and so practical.  It is a book of pointing-out instructions in a series of viewpoints on the truth of emptiness. The five stages begin with basic anatta as described in the Pali teachings, continue through emptiness as expounded by Nagarjuna and end up with the Shentong view of Buddha Nature, the fifth and final perspective. It is still one of the best dharma books available.  Shenpen had edited it, so of course I had become familiar with her ideas long before meeting her, and its perspectives were naturally in the background of our talks and meditations.  I was very interested in the fifth of the five views, Shentong Madhyamaka or Tathagatagarbha, because in teaching sadhana meditation I often came up against a negating view of sunyata.  Some people seemed to find it impossible not to see emptiness of self and substance as reducing or eradicating their existence.  I knew it was actually an intensely positive, liberating truth from my earlier experience, but explaining why was beyond my ability.  Being able to meditate on this with Shenpen in the Formless practice was so freeing.  I had begun to understand the Shentong Madhyamaka viewpoint as celebrating that ‘there is life beyond sunyata’ and that sunyata was definitely not nothingness.

As a result of these connections coming together so fortuitously, I became Shenpen’s and Rigdzin Shikpo’s student for the best part of a decade, learning about the approach of their teacher Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, the author of the booklet on emptiness.  He I also met and was on retreat with numerous times.  Later he supported my idea of going on a long retreat, which was guided by Shenpen via email and phone conversations.  Again, there is much that could be said about these relationships, but our topic is ‘what worked as insight practice.’  Formless meditation definitely worked; but for me it worked especially well because the context, emptiness, was well explained.  I was drawn to this element in a similar way as I had been by Bhante’s clarity 25 years before.  In Shenpen’s world the conceptual teaching around insight was clear and connected with the wider Buddhist tradition.  This for her comprised the Pali canon, the great Mahayana Sutras that Bhante had said so much about, and also the practice traditions of the Tantra which she was initiated into.

The important thing was that I could discuss it easily.  There was so much in FWBO teaching that wasn’t working for me at that time; so much in our approach that you couldn’t discuss actual penetration into.  Finding this was wonderful; it complemented everything I had already learned from Bhante (of course he did not agree unreservedly.)  My interest encouraged many other more experienced Order members to get to know Shenpen’s tradition.  Over the years a large number of friends sstarted exploring its riches.  At one point around 2005 Vessantara and I were organising an event at the Hermitage, Shenpen’s retreat centre near Criccieth, and we had a hundred Order names on our invitation list.  Though perhaps still frowned upon by some I think such ‘goings to other teachers’ (by seasoned Order members) often turn out to be an encouraging and clarifying influence in the Order—and it is notable that, nearly 20 years later, a majority on that list are still actively engaged in Order life.

I should say, before I press on, that Bhante never voiced any objection to my explorations.  He had generally been tolerant of them and in the past had suggested I explore certain vipassana retreats.  I knew he could have no persuasive objection to this, but I still perceived that he saw my learning from Shenpen and Rigdzin Shikpo as a bit disloyal.  It was unfair, for I was really a faithful follower.  But anyway his buttons were pressed, and he gave me a copy of the letter that Rigdzin Shikpo (i.e. Michael Hookham, a student of his) had sent him in India during the crisis precipitated by Bhante’s radical nonconformity at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara.  Bhante had already portrayed that letter as a personal betrayal, so I was sure that in getting his secretary to make me a copy, he wished to convey a negative impression of Rigdzin Shikpo’s character that would cause me to question my involvement with his teaching.  My impression of the letter was that it was far from disloyal.  A young man is warning that the atmosphere had turned so strongly against Bhante that he would be wise not to return.  It is written with full youthful earnestness and naivety.  What it conveys depends on one’s understanding of the value of ‘loyalty’ in a Dharma context.  It is true that Michael was in process of leaving Bhante for Chogyam Trungpa, but surely someone of that age should be free to choose.  My sense is that Sangharakshita was generally over sensitive about ‘loyalty', perhaps understandably in this case.  My more recent experience of Rigdzin Shikpo is of an intensely faithful person who retains great appreciation for Bhante and expresses it still, for example in the substantial letter he wrote to the Middle Way Magazine praising Sangharakshita when a close and mutual friend had died.

This new phase of practice with Shenpen, based much more on insight, began a long phase of rich associations beyond the Order that led up to and beyond my long retreat.  Some time later, along with Dhammarati, I began attending the European Buddhist Union teachers’ forum and became friends with Lama Lhundrup (now Tillmann).  Shenpen also went to those meetings.  I found it very illuminating to realise the issues other western Buddhist groups faced, and most of all, to discover what other teachers were like personally.  It was again like meeting experienced Order members: we could communicate about the Dharma!  I realised I and Dhammarati had been well raised by Sangharakshita, since we could speak from a good, basic, in-principle understanding of the Dharma.  These connections with experienced practitioners gave me a reassurance that in those days I could not get from my own Sangha, that I was on track with my view and experience in insight practice.

From meeting Shenpen onwards, I conceived the idea of doing a substantial retreat to counter my doubts and establish my practice on another level. I decided to give away all my possessions, abandon having a permanent home, and do a three year retreat.  Sangharakshita had some objections to this.  His reasoning was that someone responsible for the movement has to take the movement’s  needs into consideration, and shouldn’t merely follow their own personal needs.  He therefore thought I shouldn’t go away for more than eighteen months.  Fair enough, eighteen months seemed like a long time to me, so I didn’t argue or bother to think through the implications and principles of his idea.  ‘Giving away all my possessions’ was in fact a bit of a joke, as I wrote later to him.  It consisted in having a ‘sale’ in my room in which everything was free, and giving away lots of things whenever I could.  I kept all my books and I must have kept my laptop as well, and I still had money in my account.  Yet, though it was hardly a heroic act of dana, it lightened my heart: I felt more free.

The homelessness vow was more significant.  I was an Anagarika which (as well as the *Brahmacarya* vow) means ‘without a home’ and though it is the spirit rather than the letter that counts, I had always had a yearning for the homeless life.  The experience of being in nature that Buddhafield had introduced, and also the example of the author of Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness, Khenpo Tsultrim Rinpoche, who had for many years been a homeless practitioner inspired by my original Dharma hero Milarepa, strengthened that desire.  So for a couple of years - and I think given the conditions I can  include my years as a hermit - I finally left the security of a permanent home.  Over the millenial new year I did the last of my Bodhgaya teaching sessions with Lalitavajra on the roof of the Mahabodhi Society.  Then began a final year of teaching engagements, meetings etc., all the while preparing to leave the world.

Buddhafield to me was already otherworldly.  Its ethos of living lightly on the land spoke to my heart: there is nothing like sleeping on the naked earth far from any town beneath a glittering night sky.  Living close to the elements with wood fires and simple dwellings produces beautiful mind states, a sense of primordiality that I had not experienced since childhood.  The awareness induced by that simple life is direct and clear in a way that seems to take you close to insight.  Existential it then was, in the sense that I really felt the fact that I had once emerged from the darkness of a womb.  Life was so vast and so endlessly mysterious.  This was, indeed, a pagan spirituality that Sangharakshita, to me very impressively, also endorsed.  It was evoked outdoors in rituals and ordeals like the sweat lodge.  It seemed to me that this was an important condition for realising the Dharma, since the Buddha had actively chosen to live like that when as a well-born individual, he hadn’t had to: who would have thought less of his teaching had he lived in a more ‘civilised’ fashion?  But Sakyamuni wanted his Bhikkhu Sangha to live in the wild.  He was born, became awakened, and died, according to tradition, all sheltered by trees.

Pagan spirituality also tied in with the Six elements practice.  And Formless practice also became sitting ‘in nature’ for me.  It was sitting in the nature of the mind, which ultimately was Buddha Nature.  Maybe that sounds a bit philosophical, but in retreat I was very literally getting down to earth with that, and I soon received what were effectively dharma insights from nature.  It is hard to explain this unless the reader has experience of what is actually involved in living ‘off grid’ and on the land.  If you are used to normal home life with walls and a roof, heating, water and electricity, the difficulty and inconvenience of living in nature may at first be close to intolerable. Water needs to be found, fetched, stored, and the store itself looked after.  Each of these is a task requiring real time and energy - in contrast to turning a tap. Every kind of weather brings unique dangers.  The fire is crucial and needs an attentive eye, not to mention the difficult skill of fire-lighting, and firewood must somehow be found and kept dry.  Every job takes far, far more time than modern people are used to, and uses up far more energy.  These challenges can thus cause huge tension until one learns to let go a certain kind of ego-clinging and enjoy the conditions.  In more dharma-related  language, living in nature exposes one’s domesticated conditioning, ignorance of the way things are in nature, and clinging to particular, rather artificial, forms of comfort. Addressing these shortcomings can be hard; nature in its rawness can appear harsh, and the need for constant physical work seem dehumanising.  But if one has all the time in the world, as one does on retreat, one can discover a curiosity and gentle resilience in relation to the array of processes and natural forms, and this I have found to bring a blessing that eventually makes us feel more natural and free.  I feel with this an easy connection to our real nature as Vajrasattva.  The simplicity and directness of nature is, I find, an excellent condition for some, at least, of the agitated mental complexities of *avidya* to drop away.

Shenpen did not buy these ideas that much.  Intrigued perhaps by my enthusiasm for elemental nature, she once did a retreat under canvas at Spirit Horse, but the experiment wasn’t repeated.  As the Buddhafield team know, retreats in nature require such radical solutions that they won’t be practical for most organisations.  But she and Rigdzin Shikpo often spoke of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche’s interest in the land in mid Wales, and his love of the Grail legends linked to some of the landscape there.  Once Shenpen and I spent a day in the hills around Bwlch Mawr in resounding rituals  ‘claiming this land for the Dharma.’

And everything comes from nature of course, even Sangharakshita’s example of something no one would consider to be alive: stainless steel.  Me, I like animism, and Buddhist cultures are often animist, since it fits well with *anatta* and *pratityasamutpada*.  If nothing can be said to exist independently, and ‘self’ is just another construct, we can identify ‘other’ in things like mountains, rivers and atmospheres that we can experience as other beings.  Over years of practising formless meditation in nature along with people from the general Buddhafield community, I came to enjoy deep experiences of the truth that everything is sacred.  Nature is essentially everything, since nothing can happen outside its laws; and also ‘everything’ is an experience, as in the perspective of Yogacara.  The Buddha called it ‘The All.’  In those glimpses, when seen rightly, all experience is inherently awakened, beyond constructions like subject and object.  Natural surroundings are a condition that make this clear if you sit for a long enough time, with *śraddhā*, so that eventually the assumptions drop away and the mind emerges in its true nature.  I came to think that this must have been why the Buddha chose to live outdoors.

I have Devamitra to thank for the connection. Buddhafield had asked him to be their president, and we were neighbours on the top corridor of Madhyamaloka. So it was in his neat attic that the role was kindly transferred, as ‘rather more your cup of tea than mine Kamalashila.’ We had hardly heard of Buddhafield, but I soon fell head over heels in love with the lifestyle. I wrote and led retreats on the land, and lived in a caravan at Trevince House with the team who create land based festivals and retreats.  The parking area was crammed with dilapidated old vans and their occupants, and I was one of them.  In the house every free space held sprawling junk and equipment.  You quickly learned that the business of erecting tents, creating drainage, toilets, water supply, access, parking, food and cooking in the wild - and then taking it all down, sorting and storing it (if not sodding wet from a week of rain) is massively, unbelievably laborious.  I am by temperament rather careless and absent minded and was grateful to learn so much about real, practical things.  I began carrying a pocket-knife and a lighter; I still do.

So of course my 18-month retreat had to be on the land.  Lokabandhu kindly helped me by negotiating an agreement with the elders at Tipi Valley, a community of two hundred or so land-dwellers who in the late 60s bought up a patchwork of fields covering several square miles, near Talley in south-west Wales.  People still live there in tipis, yurts, African huts and every kind of handmade dwelling.  The original valley was reserved for traditional Tipis with some woodland at the top of the hill maybe a mile distant.  I was allowed to stay there on my own as a hermit with no one visiting or disturbing me.  It was an incredibly generous gesture, and such an experience it turned out to be that my heart still tears in gratitude, in particular to Rik ‘Vic’ Mayes, my main contact.  Those people know, of course, what a big step it is to move to such a way of life.

My retreat started on 21 December 2001, the solstice.  I soon settled into a ‘four session yoga’ of two hour meditations in the early morning, mid morning, afternoon and evening.  These I kept up, exploring sadhana and six element practice as well as some Chöd, but mostly I practiced formless meditation.  Shenpen gave me some guidance: we’d talk on the Nokia I brought, and corresponded via email, moving into Mahamudra practice.

Much happened in the four years I lived in my hermitage, especially during the solitary period.  Especially I clarified the nature of the practices themselves.  I had nothing to occupy my thoughts except Dharma, so I simply put into practice everything that I’d learned, things clarified that I had not known were unclear.  For example, I got to understand the Mahakarunika sadhana that I did most days far better through so much repetition and reflection.

Sadhana is a practice that works for me in relation to insight, not always so much as a direct initiator of insights but as a container for revisiting and reflecting on them.  Provided you avoid the westerner’s conditioning of seeing it as petitionary prayer, and take up the Mahayana view of Madhyamaka/Yogacara, the sadhana form provides a fine context for deepening wisdom once it has arisen.  The visualised forms work best, in my understanding, as devices that evoke Buddha Nature.  As Sangharakshita once said, the yidam is ‘you as you will be when you are enlightened,’ and that transforms the practice into a relationship with that Buddha nature in the context of Bodhicitta.  What didn’t work in the field of sadhana practice was the blunt injunction to ‘just do your practice every day and everything will be ok’ that in those days was rife amongst us.  Bhante himself explained the basics well, through several seminars, and gave us a good start.  He also had a huge wealth of stories about the teachers who initiated him into the sadhanas which gave inspiration and also some direction. There is so much in sadhana that relates not only to insight experience, but also the integration of insight experience into regular life.  However, it takes some work to understand how the sadhana form does this.  It is a topic I find myself talking about very often these days on retreats.

There were many times that I found myself in samadhi.  Life was smooth and gentle - at least inner life was.  Day to day existence, in contrast, could be extremely hair raising.  Remember, I was living in a tent on the side of a hill in Wales.  If there was a gale blowing for example, I had to watch out that it didn’t take the roof off, exposing all my posessions to the storm.  The wooden struts that held the geodesic shape were forever breaking or coming loose, a constant worry, and I was forever tying canvas down, digging trenches to divert water, and suchlike crisis management.  That was the outer world, but the inner world of practice was rich.  Without consulting the long diary I made, I remember the main insights came up out of the formless practice, which I spent at least four hours a day on.  With Shenpen’s mentoring, I spent some time studying  the Mahamudra Pranidhana, a text that defines the nature of the practice.

We were having an ongoing discussion of the way thoughts arise in the practice, when by ‘thought’ is meant any experience, including feelings and sensations.  The instruction was to watch thoughts arise, stay and go.  Then in an email Shenpen asked if in truth I could observe anything arise—or stay—or go.   Her instruction exactly coincided with a doubt that had emerged about the nature of what was arising, or whatever it was they did.  Because what was actually perceived, when observed closely, was never anything that persisted.  Any persistence, for even the shortest time, would have to entail arising staying and going, and there was none of that.  I am not describing my analysis that there must logically have been arising-staying-going, but my bafflement at the logical impossibility of what I was actually observing: that there was no arising, staying, going, at all.  It was a jaw drop moment. One assumes that events must take time, but this is not from observation—at least not from deep meditative observation of mental events. One of the issues is that our logical mind cannot accept that time is illusory.  Another is that we assume there is an observer.  For a while, my meditations entered a new phase in which there was a lot of wonder and some samadhi.  I realised that in actual experience, things cannot accurately be said to arise.  When you looked at them closely, it was clear that actually there is no place for such arising to happen.  Or for anyone to inhabit as the one for whom they supposedly happen. We have these assumptions about how it all happens but if you actually look, it isn’t like that.  The manner in which things arise is indeed inconceivable, just as the Mahayana sutras point out.

I also noticed how easy it is, having had that experience, to apply the idea that ‘arising is inconceivable’ without consideration of how that applies in a fresh instance. So it then becomes another habitual assumption: ‘oh yes, it’s inconceivable’.  This is how insights lose their effectiveness, and why the path of what Sangharakshita called spiritual rebirth entails the constant re-application of what we have realised.

Quite soon after this, I had a more radical insight experience of loss of identity in the arising of thoughts.  It came whenever I was in a state of immersion in the relaxed mind, maybe close to the dream state, when thoughts and images arise freely while the conscious mind is also present and mindful.  As I had been on retreat for five months at that point, I could be in this state in meditation, when actively doing things, going to sleep, getting up to pee during the night, or even in the dream state, since I was by then ‘awake and watchful’ a lot of the time.   I had to get my diary out for this:

‘I had a long period in the session where I didn’t know where my thoughts had come from, or where they are going, what they connected with or even what they were, what they meant.   They didn’t seem like my own thoughts.  I was having many many thoughts, and I couldn’t understand my own thoughts!  It was very unpleasant and unsettling – I was struggling for some kind of recognition of what was happening.  I’d recognise tail-ends of thoughts, then I’d think ‘I remember thinking that, but I don’t know what it means, and I don't know what it links up with’.  I’d remember bits of dreams and so on in the same way, not knowing its meaning or its connection, not knowing head or tail of it.  It was very disorienting and also terrifying as I struggled to find something to identify with.

These phenomena happened repeatedly.  In one example I was doing the mindfulness of breathing practice, and eventually it was as though everything just ‘thinned out’ and my thoughts ‘boiled over’ as it were, and trains of thought just undid themselves like snakes shedding skin—undid themselves beyond comprehension, completely outside my control—so intensely that I became terrified, and I fainted.  I passed out while I was sitting, it was impossible to contain the feeling of it—I rolled back and lay down until I came to.  What I could remember was snatches of dreams which didn’t add up to anything, they were just snatches, and I couldn’t remember what the context was.  This kind of experience happened again and again over a couple of weeks, and I became quite scared to meditate.  I even thought that something serious might be happening to me, that I might be dying, or losing my mind. But after a while I realised that these phenomena really were a result of the practice of looking at the arising of thoughts.  That was when I started to gain the confidence to enter into the ‘dissolving’ state with a softer mindfulness, so the fear lessened and I began to learn.  Then, of course, it stopped happening; something had been absorbed.

I have pondered and discussed this with numerous people since.  Shenpen gave a fairly technical assessment as ‘an incomplete insight experience,’ i.e. some kind of insight but not irreversible awakening.  Satyadhana and Vajracchedika at different times thought it might be in the territory of nirodha samapatti, the so called ‘ninth jhana’ when all experience ceases as a result of deep looking. That certainly describes what happened.  I have thought more recently that the experiences also appear to be similar to the ‘black light’ phase that at death, according to some traditions, accompanies the final dissolution of the thinking mind. This according to Shenpen in her book on death can be touched on in life as well.  Whatever. Who knows? Certainly the experiences, which I can’t imagine I’ll ever forget, showed me how thoughts have their own life and a merely nominal connection with meaning—a fact that without right view could be profoundly psychologically undermining, and is perhaps an unacknowledged factor in age related amnesia.  The reason why I could not work out their meaning was similar to the earlier insight where there was no room for things to arise in time. I was seeing my thought processes with a similar ‘timeless’ clarity within which meaning, identity and even thought itself was nakedly revealed as entirely attributed, fluid and empty.

No doubt some will find these descriptions incoherent or obscure. I have tried to record faithfully what happened but it may not be possible to do that adequately.  I was definitely changed by the experience. Some pride and conceit left me.  I was sobered and became clear that ‘this is for others, not just me.  May all beings find true happiness, I thought, even those I find most difficult.'

Many other experiences came to me on the retreat.  I will say only that certain fruits appeared, that to me indicated that the methods I had been taught by Sangharakshita and practised for so many years had definitely worked well, and that it did not matter that I had needed a mentor outside our system to give me the confidence to generate those fruits.   Many experiences were deeply unifying and in some ways virtually the opposite of the kind of dissolution I described just now.  I sometimes had an experience in meditation that ‘existence is in reality all of a piece and not divided into relations between subjects and objects.’ I noticed that once it became a little more absorbed, this perspective profoundly altered the space in which *sadhana* takes place.

Tipi Valley was a kind of paradise; it won’t be repeated. The overall experience was as difficult and awkward as I am.  Sometimes the loneliness was intense:

Mind uneasy, walking to and fro,

I chant the Tiratana just to keep my spirits up:

My voice keeps choking on ‘saranam gacchami’.

I was philosophical about it, though:

The blackbird knows it all.

He sits quite still and watches

As I and everything fall into pieces.

Life at ‘The Wind Element Hermitage,’ like timeless Eden or a clear meditation, eventually had to be emerged from, and I see via hindsight that much of my life since has been about embodying what happened there.  I could perhaps write about what has worked and what hasn’t in the realm of the absorption of insight, something like ‘What I didnt really learn—and what I still haven’t learned’.  But I need to draw to a conclusion.

I decided to remake my life outside mainstream Triratna.  I had given thirty years of my life to a central role furthering its institutions.  I wanted now to live more organically, deepening practice and friendship.  My father, I think, had kept going for me over the retreat, while we exchanged our monthly letters. I stayed with him until he died the following year.  It was then that, as described earlier, I joined the Buddhafield community in Devon, continued with Shenpen and Khenpo Rinpoche, met Yashobodhi and began our still lasting relationship.  I started an internet discussion group for the Order called Mahasangha and became part of the ecological group ‘The Redwoods.’ Moved partly by that spirit the two of us joined fellow Redwood Guhyapati at a new project in the Spanish Pyrenees: Ecodharma. Living in community on the land in combination with teaching dharma had been my heartfelt desire ever since leaving my retreat, and I hoped to service long retreats there as a teacher under Lhundrup’s guidance (he having indicated that was possible).  But I had made mistakes: I had not sufficiently taken into acount Yashobodhi’s lack of a role, and we had increasingly to swallow our incompatibility with the radical style of idealism in the community.  We lasted three years in our beautiful yurt; then ensued a dispiriting collapse of all I had hoped for.  The dream of living on the land and working with long retreatants that I had nurtured since Tipi Valley had to be abandoned.  We decamped and luckily found an affordable flat in West Hampstead in 2010 and spent the next decade helping, among other things, to manifest the beautiful West London Buddhist Centre.

Those were happy years on the whole—my sixties—and interesting ones, for there arose a new atmosphere around insight.  As I had found with Order discussion through Mahasangha, the instant global reach of the internet makes discussion around insight, and even direct teachings, far more accessable.  It also has the revolutionary capacity to circumvent authority.  Daniel Ingram wrote a book that highlighted the shadow side of insight practice and also said he was an Arahant, stirring fascinating controversies.   Liberation Unleashed created a technology whereby direct pointing to the nature of reality could be done by a mentor over email.  This was familiar to me, since with Shenpen I’d experienced a Mahamudra version of that, in my tent.  Nevertheless I ‘did L.U.’ at Vajralila’s suggestion, which returned me to that former experience and again I ‘saw the empty nature of self.’  There were considerable waves and eddies as practitioners and those with responsible roles in Triratna tried to absorb this new wave of insight experience.  At that point hundreds of us were at least thirty years ordained and wondering as I had at Madhyamaloka, if our years of practice had done anything to support insight practice.

While I was in Guhyaloka in 2013 Satyadhana contacted me about the Culla Sunnata Sutta.  Shortly afterwards we did some dialoguing around the later fetters, and the effect was huge. My resentment of those who sideline me or ignore what I say—a shame-inducing feature of my life that would sometimes rack me with anxiety—simply went.   It was a major psychological breakthrough for me, it took place because of seeing the empty nature of such emotions, and maybe there was some weakening of fetters 4 and 5.  But that was as far as I could get with the fetters.  I did another long session with him, and one with Maria, ex-Vajradakini, much more recently… it was always interesting but I’m not really sure that I have made even a dent in any fetters apart from the first three.  So the work continues!  It seems that I am still assimilating what opened up right at the beginning.