

On Discipleship

Summer 2019

Since Sangharakshita's death in December I have been thinking over my position as a member of the Order. I've not finished thinking yet, but it has involved looking back on my life in the Order, so I'm sorry if what follows seems self indulgent. It has been a useful, clarifying exercise and will very likely lead to some action! Any feedback is welcome — you know where I am.

I am in some ways typical of those of my generation who spent their best years creating institutions. It was all about spreading the dharma: in the first five years, I'd been chair of two London centres and was about to become chair at Vajraloka. In the first twenty-five my star continued rising in the sky through establishing meditation and study institutions, doing public ordinations, joining the original 'college,' touring and giving major talks around the movement. But the following decades, and I'm glad to say this, have been a fall back into the earth. Up in my large comfortable room at the top of Madhyamaloka, I had my Naropa moment. It was as though a dakini appeared at my window and showed me not only my lack of real insight, but that I simply wasn't on a path of insight.

The years since that moment have mostly been about relinquishing the urge to establish the movement, and instead pursuing realisation. I couldn't really regret what I did before, but it was as though I'd been told: Kamalashila, your time is up! It was a call from the beyond, and it was a blessing that I was able to hear it. This long phase of falling into earth has been more difficult: difficult in itself, but also often difficult because of not being understood, and not feeling as celebrated as I was before. 'The bubble, reputation' is a worldly wind: those feelings when it slips in others' eyes, or in your own imaginings! But everything must change; when your experience does not match others' expectation of you, there's a dissonance not easy to resolve.

Bhante encouraged my 'rise,' of course. He didn't seem to understand my need to 'fall to earth' so much. But still, over the 45 and more years we were friends I enjoyed much goodwill and trust from him. We always disagreed about minor things, and I know, because he told me, that I gave him a few sleepless nights when I was editing the 'Western Buddhist Review.' About important matters, though, we

always seemed to understand one another, apart from just one thing: vipassana, insight. I was always for making it more available and talking about it more. He was always wanting to make its practices exclusive to the Order, and was over-concerned, I always felt, that people would get arrogant, or alienated, or irresponsible. Well of course inevitably some would, but I always wanted not to avoid such interesting problems, but deal with them and learn from them.

I can remember a conversation walking along Chantry Road in Moseley, where we lived, about the stupa practice. Not so long before, it had been commonly introduced on regulars' weekend retreats as an alternative, more imagination based way of integrating the mind as I'm sure I remember him occasionally describing it. I was keen to see that preserved; but he had started thinking that it resonated too closely with the six element practice, and must be dropped. You were letting the elements dissolve; this was hardly different from letting them go as at death, he insisted, and insight practice should only be for Order members. I could never see why... but we were always like that. It's not that I'm stubborn; I can stand my ground, but I feel I am pretty open. I was just not persuaded by his arguments when they didn't make sense in lived experience. We disagreed when his reasoning seemed to me based only on theory, or some memory. So at such times we had to agree to disagree. But he never stood in my way even when (in my 'phase two') I started exploring teachings from Shenpen and Michael Hookham. For sure, he was not exactly delighted about that: he seemed still a little sore, too, around Michael leaving him in the 60s. And we clashed about the real meaning of Tathagatagarbha as well. But there was, and is still I feel, a loving and understanding atmosphere between us. I liked that he appreciated me as an individual with my own mind, and he opened up whenever I remembered to treat him similarly, rather than being beholden to him (a dynamic I also dislike in relationships). At one point he encouraged me to formulate my own Bodhisattva Vow, which I made in his presence.

So we were close at times; at other times our relationship was less easy. But that makes no difference to and is even an important part of the depth of his influence on me. As a young man I read everything he wrote, listened to all his lectures and studied all of it thoroughly to make my understanding independent, so I could then practice it. So in that sense, I'm certainly a disciple. And as I say on the page dedicated to him on kamalashila.co.uk, which has pictures of the old

community in St. James Lane, Muswell Hill: 'His thinking [became] knitted into my own in a way reminiscent of these sixties era pullovers.'

Bhante's sexual adventures did not affect me. I was pleased he was gay and I generally approved the sexual goings-on. That is, as a child of the 60s I approved the ideology: personally, I always kept a clear distance! I did not realise people having those kinds of sexual encounters could be damaged and I don't think anyone did then. It was common for spiritual teachers to be exploring such things; what we were doing seemed a sane and sensible version of the outlandish stuff that Osho, Trungpa and other gurus were getting into. Many people were exploring spiritual matters and in these circles it was a complete given that people were blocked and needed to break through taboos; it was considered politically correct. There was a sense that there should be no sexual morality. So such things may have moved full circle now, but I was a product of my time; we were all so very affected by all this. If you are of a later generation, or for some reason did not take part in what was happening, this takes a lot of imagination to understand, I fear too much. It is not that I excuse Bhante for his naivety and unskillfulness, because there were regrettable unexpected effects, but I do understand it, and so I can empathise. Empathy seems not even possible for many contemporary people. It's because so much has changed, and that's how things are with societies, it seems to me. I recently watched a BBC film about David Bowie and Ziggy Stardust. Though nowadays I find glam rock pretty hard to watch, it reminded me how prominent the notions of androgyny and bisexuality were then amongst young males in particular. Everyone needed to break these taboos. That video looks ridiculously extreme nowadays, but then it was a big part of youth culture, just like gangsters and knives are right now. Anyway... as I say, I studiously avoided all that stuff in the 70s. I was already traumatised by my experience in the 'swinging' 60s! I had started early, and by age 22 I was sick of love and even of relating sexually. What I longed for was a celibate, monastic life. And I got my way: all those years as an Anagarika really helped fuel my rocket-like ascent through the skies of punya!

To return to the topic of discipleship, I've been a disciple of other teachers too, in a small way. Bhante was resistant. Actually he started me off by asking me to check out a vipassana retreat; but I never felt he really disapproved. I saw no incompatibility myself,

because my training in his 'critical ecumenism' enabled me to discern what I need, like a bee finding honey in a flower. My basic allegiance was always to the Order, and I was clear to me the explorations would enhance things. Sangharakshita's training (and my note taking) had given me a strong start; it also turned out to be a fine basis for my 'phase two'. The reason practising with Shenpen Hookham turned out to be such a joy was that I could share from an articulate dharma understanding, along with some real experience from the six elements and sadhana practice I'd done. I don't agree with opinions I sometimes hear that Sangharakshita's teaching is ineffective as a basis for realisation. To me, it was a great preparation and I feel indebted to him. Having the language of dharma meant we could communicate in depth. I also met other teachers around the same time and found to my delight that what I understood and saw was similar to what they understood and saw. Shenpen's Lama, Khenpo Tsultrim Rinpoche, could see I was ready to do a long retreat and advised me to; which was not at all his recommendation for Shenpen's much less experienced students. I was inspired by Khenpo Tsultrim because of his connection with Milarepa and his homeless, carefree lifestyle.

Accordingly, I did eighteen months fully alone in my dome tent with Shenpen as my retreat guide, as an early example of 'virtual direct pointing': I got my instructions via email and occasional phone calls. I stayed on afterwards for another two-and-a-half years as the 'Hermit of Tipi Valley', or at least one of them! This retreat led to experiences that will probably seem strange or unbelievable. Some of them I mentioned in my 2004 convention talk 'Spiritual Rebirth', given while I was still living a hermit's life. They were strange enough. But still others I hesitated to mention since they could be even more misunderstood. For example the repeated experiences of passing out, so intense that I thought I must be dying, but which I gradually realised was a positive result of the practice. I was doing four sessions of two hours just sitting each day, looking into arising and passing away. The elements had opened me to that, and Shenpen's Mahamudra based methods got me looking more decidedly into the empty nature.

I'd explored the six elements practice intensively in the years running up to my long retreat, and had done it since long before I was ordained. It was, and I suppose is still, at least officially, 'our' main approach to insight. It was what I'd been taught, and it inspired me

in all kinds of ways. My way of doing it had of course evolved over 25 years since 1972, when Bhante introduced it on a retreat at 'Keffolds'. Then, as now, the approach was basically a reflection on death: you looked at the material of your body, recalled that it is no different from material in the outside world, remembered that it will have to be given up some time, and tried to give it up then and there — opening to that reality, mentally and emotionally. I did that for years, but once I got to Vajraloka and had so much meditation time, and also got into solitary retreats much more, the 'opening to that reality' part had become the main exploration in each individual element. In each stage of the practice, I was able not only to reflect on my non-ownership of (say) earth, but to let go into the felt experience, the direct experience of the element. The two aspects in combination — the sensate earth-experience and the vague emotional sense of a me that increasingly clearly, could not possibly 'own' that, since the me, if it existed at all, certainly consisted in exactly the same way as a sense experience (mind and body).. as a mere changing series of sensations. I would just allow myself to soak in these incompatible yet tangible truths, like a bath, knowing that ownership is impossible, not knowing where this was going, yet with faith that it was going somewhere.

When I started coupling this with the Mahamudra methods. all this became a different kind of experience. The letting go was far more profound, because I was getting a clearer sense of the nature, if I can put it like that, of sunyata. I was doing the Mahakarunika sadhana each morning, so I felt fully tuned into Bodhicitta: that sense of motive gave me a very strong confidence in the practices I was doing. There was no doubt. In those two hour sessions, I was just sitting, and it was elemental. I attempted to practise continual mindfulness and that, if you know your Satipatthana sutta, prominently entails awareness of the four elements. For a while my instruction from my retreat guide was to observe thoughts arising, staying, and going... if that is what they do. But wait, that is an expectation! - and as I noticed the dukkha entailed in that expectation, and so was motivated to look more closely, I realised that actually, what happens is inconceivable.

As I became vividly aware of the empty nature of thought, thoughts manifested like snakes eating their own tails and disappearing, on an inconceivably vast scale. This vastness was gut churning, like looking overboard an ocean liner on a heaving sea and seeing the waters all the way to the ocean bottom, moving in all directions infinitely. It

became an experience of collapse so unsettling, at least at first, that in my tent, a dot on a green hillside with no one around apart from high summer brackens and birch saplings, I would yell in fear and just pass out. Such was my clinging to the self view and samsara. It took me a couple of weeks of getting used to this happening at all times of day and night, during dreams and when I got up to urinate, before I realised that it was a fruit of practice. Oh, it wasn't something medical and I probably wasn't going to die! Such was my ignorance — such the power of assumption! After that I began to be able to relax and absorb the insight aspect of it, realise what it was, why I was having that particular experience — and indeed appreciate exactly how this was a profound thing, something to be learned from. As it turned out, that learning was not going to be straightforward, but it was a good moment. It happened in the first half of my eighteen months of solitude, and I had ample time to absorb it.

When I returned to the movement around 2005, I was changed. I knew myself in a new way. And I was very aware that the context even for talking about such an experience, let alone learning from and taking it deeper, was very limited within Triratna. The theory was not totally missing, but there had been little actual experience of insight in the Order, and what there had been was without a context that was shared, in which one could go further. Nothing had been developed, collectively, to support insight. So I realised that was what was needed. My contact with Shenpen, and some others over my life, had shown me how well articulated and practical the context for insight can be in more traditional Buddhist circles. I didn't feel I must leave and join a more traditional group, because I knew we had to create that for ourselves in Triratna. So ... there my former urge to develop the movement snuck in again! Since then, I have engaged in many discussions seeking just to create that context, and done many things always with that aim in the background. And now, after many years of developments, ups, downs, confusions and controversies, it seems we may finally be getting somewhere. I am certainly happy to know it. I feel exhausted now though, and also now have MS, with the power to disable my body and mind quite radically if it wants, so we will see.

What I want now is to concentrate on practice again for a while. I will continue in the College for now health permitting, mainly to connect with the new generation there. I will do a few retreats, and a little teaching, just enough to stay in touch with everyone. I want to revive the Order Sundays in London (and they'll be open to the Order

generally, as before) and there are a set of dates awaiting confirmation at the West London centre for this year and next. I have some plans to start a simple retreats facility where I could live for part of each year. That would be a nice place to end my days, if life could only be so simple... still, it hasn't quite come to that yet!

Post Script

I see that what I have written, and done in my life, in some ways plays out a conflicted inner relationship between merit (punya) and wisdom (jnana). And perhaps the needs of the institution and the individual. Generally our institutions tend to promote the path of merit rather than wisdom, and tend to be wary of both individual needs and of the need for prajna. In terms of the eightfold path, the emphasis is less on the Transcendental, more on the Mundane eightfold path. And I think there are many reasons for these. Some have to do with our history, the way the movement developed and the people it developed out of; others are more to do with culture. From a teaching point of view it's generally a lot easier to promote the idea of the great woman or man, the person who lives life to the full, who is kind and strong, than the wise woman or wise man, who sees the way things really are... in a sense such a person feels separate. Becoming 'a better person' is often what people need first, and for most people, it's more attractive. It's easier to teach and easier to understand. But the Buddha has insight, he's not just a great person, and insight is a lot more tricky: it is in the first place inherently ungraspable because reality itself is... but it's also hard to grasp for most teachers too, so it's easily mis-described. You have to have it to teach it, like everything else, and this is problematic as well. But the problems just need understanding and application. So I would like to see the conflicted relations between these aspects of the path resolved as we move into the future and I hope my story shows the need to move to more of a balance. The Great Man is not a Bodhisattva and there is no Bodhisattva without wisdom. As Bhante once put it, there are no 'holy fools' in Buddhism.

