A Supra-Personal Force
Dharmachari Subhuti

This article, in Sangharakshita's phrase, 'rounds off the cycle of teachings' that began with Revering and Relying upon the Dharma*, proceeding then to* Re-imagining the Buddha*, and* Initiation into a New Life. *Each of these attempts to follow through the implications of Sangharakshita's statement, in* What is the Western Buddhist Order?,[1] *that the Order is the community of his disciples and disciples of his disciples, practising according to his 'particular presentation of the Dharma'. Like them, this paper emerges out of my conversations with him, exploring especially his understanding of the five* niyāmas*, and is published with Sangharakshita's approval. This present paper explores the Dharma* niyāma *at work in Sangharakshita's own life and experience and thereby shaping the institutions of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community.*

Whilst it seems that this cycle may now be complete, the conversations continue....

A Supra-Personal Force:
The Triratna Buddhist Community and the Stream of the Dharma

The crux of the Dharma life is the transition from the mundane to the transcendental path – from the *laukika* to the *lokottara mārga.* Before that transition takes place, one is a *pṛthagjana*, 'a common worldling', dominated by the illusion that one has an independent and ultimately substantial self-identity. On the basis of this identity, one craves whatever appears to provide greater happiness and security and one hates whatever threatens or causes pain. Whatever experiences tend to reveal the impermanence even of that self-identity are ignored or controverted.

Once one enters upon the transcendental path, one becomes an *ārya*, one in whom this illusion of an ultimately real selfhood has been broken, if not yet entirely eradicated. Although the self-oriented motivations of greed, hatred, and delusion continue to arise, they can no longer dominate one's actions and are progressively eradicated as the path is traversed.

The transition from *pṛthagjana* to *ārya* is then, most essentially, a movement from a consciousness dominated by the illusion of an ultimately real self to one that has no such illusion – or at least increasingly less of one. This marks a difference in the motive force or power that fuels progress on the path of the Dharma. As a *pṛthagjana*, following the mundane path, the most important factor is the power of karma. One consciously subordinates one's ego identity to ethical and spiritual principles,

1 www.Sangharakshita.org.

recognising them as serving one's own best interests. In effect, one uses self-interest to slowly transcend selfishness, in accordance with karmic conditionality. On the basis of skilful action, mental states arise in which the element of self-clinging is progressively attenuated, eventually enabling one to see through its illusory and painful character.[2]

With that realisation, one enters upon the transcendental path, thereby becoming an *ārya*, in whom selfish motivations have ceased to be the chief drivers of action. Instead of self-interested desires, however positive, a stream of non-egoic volitions now arise. This flow of selfless impulses is no longer fuelled by the karmic kind of conditionality, but by processes arising under the heading of the *Dharma-niyāma*.

So much are our minds dominated by self-interest that it is quite difficult to imagine what that truly selfless mind might be like. Nonetheless, this is the Dharma's central claim: that it is possible to act, and act consistently, from a basis other than selfishness. This is what we are trying to achieve through our Dharma practice.

Urgyen Sangharakshita himself describes, very beautifully and simply, an experience that seems to be of this kind. Writing to his friend Dinoo Dubash, on 15 December 1956, he tells of his visit to Nagpur in Central India a few days earlier, which had coincided with the tragic news of the death of Dr Ambedkar, the great Indian leader who just seven weeks before had led hundreds of thousands of his followers out of Untouchability into Buddhism in that very city. Once the shocking tidings had become known, waves of grief and despair had rolled through the multitudes of new Buddhists and it had fallen especially to Sangharakshita to try to rally them through meeting after meeting, talk after talk, often continuing late into the night. That story is relatively well known. However, what is of note here is the very unassuming, almost understated, account he gives of his own inner experience in his letter to his friend, written just a week later:

> My own spiritual experience during this period was most peculiar. I felt that I was not a person but an impersonal force. At one stage I was working quite literally without any thought, just as one is in *samādhi*. Also I felt hardly any tiredness – certainly not at all what one would have expected from such a tremendous strain. When I left Nagpur I felt quite refreshed and rested.[3]

'An impersonal force'! It is safe to assume that what he means by this is that he was not motivated by self at all. No 'personal' interest drove him, but he nonetheless acted, and acted very effectively, giving people just what they needed.

2 This paper assumes an acquaintance with three previous papers written by me on the basis of conversations with Sangharakshita: *Revering and Relying on the Dharma*, *Re-imagining the Buddha*, and *Initiation into a New Life*. Two other papers also touch on material implied here: *The Dharma Revolution and the New Society* and *A Buddhist Manifesto*. All can be found on www.subhuti.info.

3 Sangharakshita, *Dear Dinoo: Letters to a Friend*,, Ibis Publications, 2012

Bodhisattvas and Arhats

The crucial transition in Dharma life is, then, a movement from a self-oriented to a selfless motivation. 'Selfless', of course, does not mean merely lacking in self: a kind of blank automaton. Selflessness has its own positive character, although not in terms easy for us to grasp. It seems that to the degree that one is selfless one responds spontaneously to the needs of whatever situation one finds oneself in, in a way that for the *pṛthagjana* may seem quite mysterious. We might describe the motive for such action as compassion, but that could be rather misleading. If it is compassion at all, it is quite different from the kindly concerns that we ourselves might feel. It has little or no trace of sentiment or pity: indeed, it is not truly an emotion at all. It is not even the positive extension of our own self-concern to include others, which is what we are cultivating in the mundane practice of *maitrī*- or *karuṇā-bhāvanā*.[4] It is rather a function of a fully mature awareness: a need is seen and responded to in the most appropriate way without any personal interest, simply as one might, without a moment's premeditation, pick up for someone something dropped from their pocket, spontaneously responding to what is objectively needed.

The early tradition, especially as found in the Pali Nikayas, speaks of this transition in terms of Stream Entry. It does not, however, stress its compassionate character, rather dwelling on the breaking of the illusion of a permanent self and the freedom and ease that that brings. The life of the Buddha himself is clearly one of compassionate action and there is much incidental material that stresses the importance, for instance, of *maitrī*.[5] Later traditions, which eventually found expression in what is loosely characterised as the 'Mahayana', did wish to emphasise the compassionate nature of the Buddha, but did so by setting him apart from his own historical disciples and positing a separate path for those who chose to take him as their ideal. Such bodhisattvas were said to be motivated to become buddhas themselves for the benefit of all beings by the power of bodhicitta, which indeed is a term for a motivating force that is selfless – albeit, short of bodhi itself, still admixed with decreasing traces of self-clinging.

It appeared then to these later traditions that there were at least two kinds of Dharma goal: Arhatship, liberation attained for self alone without compassion, and Buddhahood, full and perfect enlightenment gained by means of the compassionate path of the bodhisattva. This however creates a problem. If this were indeed a valid distinction, it would require a selflessness that was not compassionate: the Stream Entrant would be someone who had decisively broken self-attachment but had no other motivations to replace egoistic desire: a blank automaton indeed.

4 As opposed to their transcendental practice, when *maitrī* and *karuṇā* are without self-reference.

5 See *Majjhīma Nikāya*, Suttas 56 & 58, for examples of the Buddha's identification of his buddhahood with compassion. See also *Vinaya, I.21*, in which the Buddha enjoins his first disciples to go forth to teach the Dharma 'out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the profit, the bliss of devas and mankind'. Above all, there is the *Karaniyametta sutta*, *Sutta Nipāta, v. 143*.

In my recent conversations with Urgyen Sangharakshita, he has stressed again that he does not consider that there are two separate paths and goals. He suggests that we can discard the traditional Mahayana distinction as erroneous and see Entering the Stream of the Dharma as essentially the same as the Arising of Bodhicitta – even if this is not the way it is understood traditionally. When you Enter the Stream, the selfless motivations of bodhicitta arise. On this basis we can appreciate that the Arising of Bodhicitta and Entering the Stream are simply Real Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels considered under the aspects of altruism and of inner transformation.

We can then see the relationship between various key terms. The **Dharma** is, in its most important meaning, the way things truly are as a dynamic cosmic principle; the ***Dharma-niyāma*** is the kind of conditionality that comes into play when one sees the Dharma directly for oneself, especially by breaking free of the illusion of a separate selfhood; the **Stream of the Dharma** is that flow of Dharmic conditionality conceived as a spontaneous non-egoic force that carries one who has decisively broken the self illusion further and further into selflessness; the person who enters that stream is a **Stream Entrant**; **Bodhicitta** refers to the flow of ever-increasingly selfless mental states that arise in dependence on the Dharmic kind of conditionality; the **Bodhisattva** is one in whom bodhicitta has become the dominant force and who therefore responds selflessly to the deepest needs of others. **Insight** or *vipaśyanā* marks entry into the Stream of the Dharma and also, in this revised schema, bodhicitta becoming **Irreversible** – although, of course, the way this and other terms from the bodhisattva path are used here does not correspond in some important respects to their usages in developed Mahayana since the different systems of thought have evolved in different circumstances and cannot be correlated in an entirely satisfactory or consistent way.[6]

It should be noted here that the term 'bodhicitta' – particularly when referred to as 'The Bodhicitta' – is a metaphor that is easily reified to imply an enduring metaphysical entity, existing independently of the individual within whom it arises, and thus similar to the '*ātman*' of Brahminical thought that the Buddha so explicitly and centrally denied. Indeed one often hears the term 'The Bodhicitta' used naively in that way by Buddhists, even within the Triratna Community. However, used carefully and correctly, it implies a dynamic process, referring to the stream of selfless mental states that arise on the basis of the Dharmic kind of conditionality, and is thus far from being an eternal metaphysical entity. It is now so widely used and carries such deep Dharmic significance for so many that it can hardly be eschewed. Its usefulness can be found in its emphasis on the altruistic character of those selfless states and on their 'non-personal' character: on their having nothing to do with egoistic volition. It does nonetheless need to be used with considerable care, with full consciousness of the dangers of metaphysical reification. I would suggest it should never be employed

6 c.f. Sangharakshita, *Going for Refuge*, also *The History of My Going for Refuge*, and *The Bodhisattva: Evolution and Self-transcendence.*

without close juxtaposition to more dynamic language that explicitly connects it with the principle of dependent arising.

Sangharakshita, then, does not accept the traditional Mahayana distinction between the two paths. But how did it ever gain currency? In line with more recent scholarly research, he considers that it arose gradually over the centuries, in response to a variety of factors. Whatever the historical forces that led to the distinction, Sangharakshita considers that its effect was to correct the one-sided emphasis of dominant currents in the early tradition, currents that especially dwelt upon the final ending of personal suffering and release from the cycles of rebirth that enlightenment brought. Risking an oversimplification of a complex and still rather obscure history, he argues that outside those dominant currents there persisted a sense that the Buddha himself exemplified something more than personal escape and that the Dharma-life was as much about developing selfless compassion as gaining the wisdom that liberates from suffering.

The dominant story was, however, sufficiently established and found such substantial justification in the commonly acknowledged oral tradition that it had to be accepted on its own terms. To assert a broader picture then required the formulation of a new story that there was an additional – and higher – goal: the attainment of *samyaksambodhi* for the benefit of all beings, rather than self alone, that is, by gaining enlightenment at a time and place where all knowledge of the Dharma was absent: by becoming a buddha. This was the path followed by the bodhisattva.

The Buddha Shakyamuni himself came then to be refashioned in terms of this distinction. His immediate disciples, as found in the Pali and other such texts, were reinterpreted as followers of the Arhat path, seeking personal release from the round of suffering. The Buddha himself was said to have reached the culmination of the bodhisattva path, to which he had committed himself countless lifetimes ago. The story emerged that he took the bodhisattva vow in the presence of the Buddha Dipankara and then, in life after life, systematically pursued the *pāramitās*, moving through the *bhūmis*, the stages of the bodhisattva path, until he had reached the tenth and final one. He was then ready to fulfil his mission of so many lifetimes, taking his last rebirth at a time when all trace of the Dharma had been lost: thus appearing as a scion of the Shakya clan in North India, two-thousand-five-hundred years ago, and there making the final step to *samyaksambodhi*. In other words, when he was reborn for the last time, he was all but enlightened.

Sangharakshita considers this to be more or less a 'just so' story, albeit a beautiful and inspiring one. Closer examination reveals many problems, both historical and in terms of the realities of the Dharma life. First of all, there is little or nothing in the Pali canon or other equivalent sources to support such a position.[7] Since those sources

7 See Bhikkhu Analayo, *The Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal,* Hamburg University Press, 2010.

are the most historically reliable accounts we have of what the Buddha actually said and did, to go beyond their evidence is to stray into fiction.

Later traditions justified themselves with further 'just so' stories, arguing that the Buddha of the early texts had preached a lesser goal for people of more limited ability and that for those of finer spiritual quality he had revealed further teachings that are found in other sources, the Mahayana sutras. Many of these are, however, clearly of later composition, though they may contain older inspiration.[8] It is important to stress that this does not mean that they are to be entirely dismissed, for many of them are of great spiritual loftiness and are consistent with the Buddha's message and they are thereby of considerable value. However, they are, strictly speaking, fictions. Of course, many a great novel contains more truth than much written history, nonetheless, their story about themselves cannot be taken seriously from an historical point of view and they need recontextualising in the light of the sort of critique that Sangharakshita is making.

The Buddha-to-be of the Pali canon is clearly an exceptional individual by any standards, showing perspicacity, intelligence, fortitude, and determination far beyond the ordinary. However, he presents himself as having had to search for several years for the way to enlightenment and as having had to conquer fear and discouragement and other mental defilements.[9] He appears as very definitely human like us, albeit of unique quality. Moreover, he is never presented as showing, before his enlightenment, any concern to reach liberation out of compassion for others. All this was later explained away as a sort of act or show, as a kind of teaching device. This no longer carries much persuasion.

Besides the problems of evidence, Sangharakshita considers that the Mahayana version of the Buddha's career, if taken literally, invites a kind of fantasy spiritual life. It seems to suggest that one can consciously commit oneself to being reborn after many future lives, at a time and in a place where there is no Dharma, and then to rediscovering it and teaching it to others: to becoming a buddha. For Sangharakshita this presents a quite false picture of how buddhahood arises, encouraging the unwary to suppose that it happens, basically, by an act of egoistic volition. Nothing could be further from the case. Buddhas emerge within the dependently arising progression of conditions at the level of the *Dharma-niyāma*. These *Dharma-niyāma* processes become decisive precisely when ego-clinging is transcended. One is carried, so to speak, to buddhahood by what may be felt as an 'impersonal force', something like that which Sangharakshita experienced in Nagpur. As one lets go of self-clinging more and more fully, that 'force' carries one further and further – and where it carries one is not something one can decide by egoistic will or even with which one need

8 For a representative example, see the exploration of the textual history of the *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā-sūtra*, an important early Mahayana Sutra, in Daniel Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna*, Univeristy of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

9 See, for instance, *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta*, MN19.

concern oneself. It is 'a spirit that bloweth where it listeth' and we must simply let it blow.

The final problem with the traditional Mahayana story is that it seems to posit a path from Stream Entry that is devoid of compassion – an ego-transcendence that is devoid of selflessness. It should already be clear that this is a contradiction in terms.

We are left then with a picture that brings together the material found in the Pali and other early canons with the spiritual riches of the Mahayana perspective. The Dharma life does indeed liberate one *from* the tyranny of self, with all its suffering. But one is liberated *to* an increasingly rich and subtle awareness from which compassionate activity spontaneously flows. The Buddha's motivation was no different from that of his enlightened disciples, although clearly his human genius went far beyond theirs. Indeed, the preoccupation with the Buddha's special 'cosmic' function seems to have emerged somewhat after his time. Critical study of the Pali canon suggests that the early focus of the Buddha's teaching was simply on moving into the flow of the Dharma, that progression of non-egoic states proceeding according to the Dharmic kind of conditionality.

It is in this sense that we can speak of bodhisattvas and bodhicitta in the same breath as Arhats and Stream Entry; although we will need to be aware that we are combining these terms in a different way from that found in tradition – otherwise, we can appear to be rather simplistically conflating two different universes of discourse. This can especially cause complications when we are reading traditional texts or find ourselves in dialogue with Buddhists from traditional schools.

No doubt we are best advised to avoid getting caught up in this historical complexity as much as possible, especially by referring to the two key *niyāmas* for the Dharma life: the karmic and the Dharmic. In the end, we must come down to the practicality of transforming ourselves through skilful karma so that we can decisively break through the illusion of a fixed self and let the spontaneous 'impersonal force' of the Dharma motivate us to respond to the objective needs around us. We need not concern ourselves with where that will lead us, for that is not a matter under the control of egoic volition. In other words, we simply need to get on with working with the karmic and Dharmic levels of conditionality. Of course, this is to be done through steadily working in a balanced way on integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth.

Who founded the Order?

Entering the Stream of the Dharma is the purpose of the Dharma life. So far we have learned that this takes place in dependence on the karmic kind of conditionality and that the Stream of the Dharma is itself a flow of dependently arising states, this time operating in accordance with the *Dharma-niyāma*. Those processes can operate temporarily upon us before we fully enter the Stream and are experienced then as the pull of *śraddhā* or faith, as moments of insight or of intense inspiration, or as spontaneous acts of selfless generosity. They start to flow decisively and irreversibly once one has seen through the illusion of a separate self and are characterised by an increasing selflessness, which can be referred to as 'compassionate', so long as this is not interpreted in narrowly emotional terms.

It is more difficult to say anything further about these processes, insofar as they transcend our normal experience. Since our own minds are usually dominated, however subtly and benignly, by self-interest, we inevitably interpret anything that is said about states arising under the *Dharma-niyāma* in terms of our own self-based experience, which cannot but miss their essential character. There is therefore something ineluctably mysterious about them.

It seems that such states may even have about them a touch of what we might think of as 'the paranormal'. Sangharakshita speaks of something of this kind in connection with the visit to Nagpur already mentioned, during which he felt 'as if I was an impersonal force'. Prior to that visit, he had been in Bombay, staying with a friend who was strongly urging him to stay on with him over the next few weeks for a meditation retreat. Sangharakshita says it would have suited him to do so, in some ways, and there was no immediate practical necessity for him to go. He could easily have accepted the invitation – but he *knew* he had to go.

> *How* I knew this I was unable to say, any more than I was able to say *why* it was essential for me to be on my way. I did not hear an inner voice, neither did I have a sudden intuition. It was simply that I knew, clearly and certainly, that *I had to be on my way*, and accordingly fixed my departure for 5 December.

Having departed for Nagpur, he says he felt

> some satisfaction, even relief, that at last I was acting on the knowledge that it was essential for me to be on my way... though why it was essential I did not yet know.

That, of course, became fully apparent soon after his arrival, when the news was broken to him of Dr Ambedkar's death, late the previous night.[10]

It is difficult to know what to make of this, and perhaps one should resist trying. The most one could venture to say is that it seems that these Dharmic processes follow connections and laws that are not normally discernible. And it seems also that they have a creative momentum of their own, independent of the will of the one in whom

10 Sangharakshita, *In the Sign of the Golden Wheel*, pp. 336 ─ 9. For more on Dr Mehta, the friend mentioned, and his connection with Sangharakshita, see Kalyanaprabha's excellent notes in Sangharakshita, *Dear Dinoo*, pp. 119ff.

they manifest. Something of this kind seems to be indicated in a letter Sangharakshita dictated for me, on 14 October 2011, in which he reflected upon his experience around the time he was establishing the movement. The letter contains the following deeply significant lines:

> I may also say that in recent years, on looking back over the history of the FWBO/Triratna, I have been amazed at what has been accomplished. At the same time, I have felt, or rather seen very clearly, that it has not been accomplished just by me. It was as though a supra-personal energy or force was working through me, an energy or force for which, in a way, I was not responsible. I have given expression to this feeling, or realisation, in my poem 'The Wind', which I quote for your benefit.
>
> > The Wind
> >
> > A wind was in my sails. It blew
> > Stronger and fiercer hour by hour.
> > I did not know from whence it came,
> > Or why. I only knew its power.
> >
> > Sometimes it dashed me on the rocks,
> > Sometimes it spun me round and round.
> > Sometimes I laughed aloud for joy,
> > Sometimes I felt a peace profound.
> >
> > It drove me on, that manic wind,
> > When I was young. It drives me still
> > Now I am old. It lives in me,
> > Its breath my breath, its will my will.[11]

This remarkable statement, and the poem that so aptly illustrates it, suggests that the Triratna Community, in Sangharakshita's own estimation, has not emerged from any egoistic or self-interested motives. It embodies the Dharma, it would seem, rather than any personal desire.

I want to consider all this much more closely, because for me it has always been of the greatest importance that the movement with which I am involved emerges out of and is animated by something more than noble ideals or the words of a dead master. I have given my life to this work, as have many others, because I have sensed that there is something more at its heart. I want to examine what that means more closely,

11 Sangharakshita tells me that this poem 'wrote itself', coming unbidden and complete in a way that few of his other verses have done. He thought of the first line only, and the rest of the poem followed without any conscious thought. He says it was something of a surprise to him, on checking it after he had written it down, to find that the metre and rhyme were all in order.

basing myself on my recent conversations with Sangharakshita and his various writings and teachings. I believe that thereby I can better understand this deepest factor in my own life and, perhaps, better communicate with others about it – and I want to do that because it seems to me that a clearer understanding of what we are involved with in these terms can help all Sangharakshita's disciples work more effectively together – and it may be useful to other Buddhists too. However, I am immediately aware of a gap – a gap, one might say, of credibility.

This gap has two aspects to it: one is to do with the nature of what is being discussed and the language that is used to discuss it and the other concerns the relationship of the writer and reader of this article to Sangharakshita. Let me deal with the last aspect first. I write as a loyal disciple of Sangharakshita of more than forty years. As is more or less inevitable, I have had my own difficulties with discipleship at times and have not always had a smooth relationship with him, for reasons mainly to do with my own processes. However, I am now, and always have been, quite confident of his integrity, especially as regards his own Dharmic experience. Indeed, at times he seems to speak of very profound moments of insight in such an open, almost inconclusive way, as if he feels no need to categorise or theorise them, that they invite conviction. Often they are spoken of in passing, simply as part of the story he is telling, as with his account of his visit to Nagpur in 1956. I therefore do not feel the slightest need to question that he has experienced what he says he has experienced. What I shall say from here on is based upon this confidence. However, I am well aware that others may not share it – and I cannot expect them to. I wonder what they will make of what follows, but I hope something useful will emerge for them, too.

The gap of credibility connected with the nature of the experiences and the language used to communicate them is more difficult to negotiate. Up till this point in this article, I have largely used language that could be described as 'philosophical': the language of conditionality, especially in its karmic and Dharmic forms. I have even suggested the need for quite a bit of caution in the use of the term 'bodhicitta', given its quasi-metaphysical resonance. However, in speaking of a 'force' or 'energy', we move into a different kind of discourse. In the cases quoted, Sangharakshita reports his own experience in quite careful terms, saying in 1956: 'I felt that I was not a person but an impersonal force', and in 2011: 'It was as though a supra-personal energy or force was working through me'. He 'felt' and it was 'as though': in other words, we are neither in the world of everyday fact nor in the realm of metaphysics. Sangharakshita is trying to convey in metaphorical, even poetic terms, one might say, what the experience was like.

This transition from the philosophical to the metaphorical is inevitable if we are to get any closer to the nature of experience that transcends self-clinging. The Dharma is, the Buddha says, 'unattainable by mere reasoning'.[12] What is beyond the reach of

12 'It is enough to cause you bewilderment, Vaccha, enough to cause you confusion. For this Dhamma, Vaccha, is

reason can, he says, only be directly experienced by the wise, those who are capable of viewing things from a Dharmic perspective. But even if we are not wise, in this sense, we can still gain some glimpse of what that experience is like, by means of a faith-filled imagination. As I have discussed in previous papers, according to Sangharakshita, this is what prefigures wisdom on the part of the *pṛthagjana*. It is to this faculty of imagination that Sangharakshita is appealing in speaking of his experience here. Only with that faculty alive will we be able to jump the gap of credibility. And having that faculty alive requires suspension of the literal mind, whether in its dismissive mode or its more credulous, both of which assign a limited factual meaning to metaphors and symbols that point to deeper truths, albeit to different effect.

Some might argue that it is best to avoid all such metaphorical language and stick to the safe ground of *pratītya-samutpāda*. I personally have some sympathy with that point of view, because anything else offers hostages to eternalistic misunderstanding, which certainly grates on my own sensibilities. However, failing to offer more itself invites a nihilistic interpretation. Sangharakshita says that we need a 'transcendental object' towards which we can orient our lives. We need that because our most basic way of perceiving and understanding the world is in terms of subjects and objects – however relative and constructed the Dharma may have taught us to know them to be. We cannot but think of, and more importantly feel, the Dharma in terms of the most basic building blocks of our experience – until we are able directly to see their relative character for ourselves. In order to slip through the gap between eternalism and nihilism, we need both a willingness to think critically about what we say, so that we avoid taking it literally, and a preparedness to imagine a 'transcendental object'.[13]

In speaking as he does of a force or energy that transcends the person, Sangharakshita is getting at the way a Dharmic motivation feels and especially the difference in the experience from our normal sense of willing and wanting. Most of the time we have a clear sense of agency: that we ourselves perform our actions – even if sometimes we might feel that we only did what we did because other people or our circumstances gave us 'no choice'. From a more critical perspective, we might actually cast some doubt on how much control 'we' do really exercise over our actions – even on who 'we' are. Nonetheless, for ordinary purposes that is certainly how we speak of and understand what is happening: 'I did that'.

We do of course have our irrational moments, when we 'don't know what came over us' or we get 'carried away' and repressed energies leak or burst out, quite against our conscious volition. We may experience moods and untimely thoughts, that don't fit the idea we have of ourselves. Taken to an extreme, all this may be considered

---

profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.' *Aggi-vacchagotta-sutta*, MN72.18.

13 For a much fuller exploration of this theme, see Subhuti, *Three Myths of Spiritual Life*, www.subhuti.info.

pathological, especially if it leads to problematic behaviour from a social, even legal, point of view.

We have then the impression of being in control and that of being out of control: in or out of the control of our assumed ego-identity. But there is a third kind of experience, and this is the one that Sangharakshita is pointing to. There is then no element of selfish desire in our motivation and yet there is no sense of 'losing control'. It is as if we, as ego-identities, willingly allow ourselves to be moved by concerns that have nothing to do with our own personal, ego-based interests. Here we can best refer to the *Dharma-niyāma* kind of conditionality: volitions arising within the person but not personal in reference.

This kind of experience is, perhaps, analogous to poetic or artistic inspiration. The true artist sets aside the literal mind and opens up to the dimensions of imagination, exercising that 'negative capability' Keats considered crucial to poetic imagination – something like the spiritual receptivity we have seen in Sangharakshita's system of practice. Words, images, sounds, appear unbidden within the imagination and will not be manipulated by the ordinary will.[14] The artist learns to open up to these forces and to allow them to express themselves independent of his or her wishes. The *śamatha* meditator too exercises this suspension of the ordinary '*kama-loka*'-based perception so that *rupa-* and *arupa-loka* experiences can unfold, as one journeys in the realms of dhyana. One may then feel one is communicating with visionary figures that emerge in the midst of meditation, from which one may draw inspiration.

Aesthetic or meditative inspiration is, however, but an analogy, or at least a mundane variety of what Sangharakshita seems to be reporting. The artist's imagination, generally speaking, manifests within the karmic kind of conditionality – although the greatest may touch on something more. Feeling that one is not a person but an impersonal force or it being as if a supra-personal force or energy is working through one is surely something more than inspiration, however exalted. One is willingly subordinating oneself to motivations that do not have their origin in self at all.

It seems to me of the greatest significance for his disciples that Sangharakshita considers that the Order and movement were not founded by him alone but by non-egoic forces, functioning according to the Dharmic kind of conditionality. However, there is plenty of room for misunderstanding. If one takes the metaphor too literally one thinks of some divine being or cosmic energy 'channelled', so to speak, by Sangharakshita and others: the energy being one thing, Sangharakshita another. But this does not at all do justice to what is being communicated and we must look further at what Sangharakshita himself has had to say about his experience in this respect.

14 See note 11 above (page 9).

He has often reflected that he does not consider he was the best person to found the Order – indeed, he recently told me, with a wry smile, that he had come to realise more and more how unsuited by character he was to the task. Again he has often commented that, in a sense, he did not especially want to start something new: it would, he says, have suited him temperamentally to have lived out his life in a traditional monastery, fulfilling a traditional monk's tasks. But he saw a need and 'something in him' responded, something that was not personal or self-interested.

Sangharakshita himself has tended to think of what in the passages quoted he has likened to a supra-personal force or energy as more like a consciousness beyond his own. He stresses that the language of a force or energy, especially one that is spoken of as 'impersonal', can lead one to think of a cold or mechanical process. Of course, to speak of a consciousness greater than one's own can suggest possession by a god or spirit. But he believes that the experience of transcending self-attachment is more adequately expressed in that way: as he has said, to think of something as 'impersonal' is to think of it as 'sub-personal', whereas what we are referring to is something 'supra-personal' – and we get closer to what that might mean when we speak metaphorically of a larger consciousness working through our own more limited, personal one.

Speaking in terms of a supra-personal consciousness also mitigates the strong tendency to appropriate even Dharmic experience to egoistic ends. As we have noticed even in our own circles, there can be an inappropriate over-concern with calibrating one's attainments and pronouncing claims to Stream Entry or the like. Sangharakshita goes so far as to say that it is not helpful, or even strictly correct, to speak of oneself as a bodhisattva: better to think of 'participating' in 'the Bodhisattva' or allowing what appears as that supra-personal force or energy to work through one. Even what has been said here about Sangharakshita's own experience of himself as an impersonal force or reflection that it was as though the Order and movement have been founded through him should not lead us to speculate about where to place him on this or that spiritual scale. He is simply giving a kind of poetic expression to his impression of what had happened to him. He felt it was *as if* a consciousness greater than his own was working through him.

From this perspective, we can better and more deeply understand the meaning of the so-called 'archetypal' buddhas and bodhisattvas. They are a way we can imagine and experience processes arising on the basis of the Dharmic kind of conditionality, beyond the personal, yet appearing as personified. It is these mysterious processes that have, according to Sangharakshita, been the major inspiration in the founding of the Order. And that sheds light on what Sangharakshita means when he likens the Order to, even identifies it with, the eleven-headed and thousand-armed Avalokitesvara. He says of that identification that it is 'Not just a manner of speaking,

it’s not just a figure of speech. We should take it very seriously, even take it literally'.[15]

It should go without saying that, in discussing these experiences, Sangharakshita is not at all making antinomian claims, either for himself or for the Order. Indeed, the very reverse. One senses that Sangharakshita says these things in all humility, as a disclaimer rather than a claim. The fact that it was as though the Order was founded through him by forces that transcend him as a mere person does not imply that he is perfect and that all his actions are by definition beyond appraisal. Far less does it suggest that Order members are always motivated by trans-egoic inspiration or that the Order collectively is always necessarily a bodhisattva Sangha. All too obviously, that is not the case. However, it is of the greatest significance that it was founded, in Sangharakshita's own estimation, by what he can best describe as something like a supra-personal energy or force or even consciousness working through him, however much its members may fail to live up to that initial momentum. It was founded, in other words, by processes conditioned according to the *Dharma-niyāma,* by 'bodhicitta' – indeed, therefore, by the Dharma.

Not only could we say that those forces gave the Order birth, their cultivation and service is its meaning and purpose. Individual Order members can work on themselves by their participation in the Order, so that they enter the Stream of the Dharma, thereby unleashing non-egoic motivations, arising according to the Dharmic kind of conditionality – motivations that may to them appear as if they are a supra-personal force or energy working through them – even a supra-personal consciousness or bodhisattva. In the service of that creative energy and under its guidance, they can then, each and every one, together allow the Dharma to transform the world. This is why the Order exists.

Processes arising according to the Dharmic kind of conditionality founded the Order, so Sangharakshita in effect says, and the Order's meaning and purpose is to enable those processes to transform the world by the efforts we make, individually and yet collectively, to enter the Stream of the Dharma. For all our many failings, I am myself completely confident that the Order does embody, to a greater or lesser extent, those processes. There are among us enough who do genuinely try to serve the Dharma as a living force by letting it work through them, and individuals and institutions in general are sufficiently attuned through kalyana mitrata to such sufficiently inspired and consistent individuals, for the Triratna Community as a whole to embody to some degree the spirit of the eleven-headed and thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara – and to embody it quite literally.

15 *Looking Ahead A Little Way*, talk to the International Convention of the Western Buddhist Order, 1999: http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=194

The conditions for bodhicitta

How could that Dharmic force or energy come to work through an individual? Even more to the point, how could it come to work through a community of individuals, a Sangha such as the Triratna Buddhist Order? If we can understand this better then we can shape our own lives more effectively to that end, and we can see better how to develop our own collective life: our institutions and common culture. That would enable the Order and movement to continue to embody the Stream of the Dharma even after Sangharakshita, the one through whom it first manifested, has gone from our midst.

Let us start by looking at Sangharakshita's own experience. Perhaps his feeling that he was 'an impersonal force', as he put it after his visit to Nagpur in 1956, was not unprecedented in his own life. However, he does say in his letter to Dinoo Dubash, 'My own spiritual experience during this period was most peculiar' – in other words, it was strange or unusual, even very special. What were the conditions in dependence upon which that special experience arose?

We must start with the most obvious condition: his many years of deep study and practice of the Dharma and his penetration into its true meaning. He had, in his own words, 'realised I was a Buddhist and always had been one', at the age of sixteen, fifteen years previously, in a flash of *samyag-dṛṣṭi* awakened upon reading the *Diamond Sutra*.[16] Since then, the Dharma had been his central and deepening preoccupation. He had studied assiduously what Buddhist texts were available to him in English and had reflected constantly upon the Buddha's teachings. His study and reflection had borne fruit in many articles and poems, but especially in *A Survey of Buddhism*, a work of magisterial depth and comprehensiveness, that was even then making its way through the press.

He not only studied the Dharma, he had actively tried to realise it. He had practised meditation regularly and systematically for twelve or more years, with considerable success, and it is noteworthy that within a few months he was to start a particular kind of meditation practice, one he would now place under the heading of 'spiritual rebirth', after receiving initiation into the *sādhana* of Aryatara from the great Tibetan guru, Chetul Sangye Dorje. Indeed, he had arrived in Nagpur from Bombay, where he had been staying with his eccentric friend, Dr Dinshaw Mehta, whose contact he had valued partly because of the emphasis he gave to receiving 'guidance' from sources beyond the ego – although Sangharakshita did not accept that Dr Mehta's own guidance was necessarily of such a kind. Nonetheless, his own meditation and spiritual experience had benefited from the connection.

Of course, meditation was part of a general practice of mindfulness and of ethics, on

16 Sangharakshita, *The Rainbow Road*, Ch. 8.

both of which he had placed much emphasis. In addition, he had regularly engaged in devotional practices, keeping a shrine and reciting puja, giving expression to and developing his strong feelings of gratitude to the Buddha, faith in his Dharma, and commitment to his path. All the while, he had cultivated his aesthetic sensibility, especially through reading and writing poetry, as well as by such engagement with literature and the arts as was possible to him, living as he did in the foothills of the Himalayas. Summing up, one could say that he had gone for Refuge to the Three Jewels more and more effectively, in terms of direct efforts to transform himself through conscious Dharma practice. This then could be spoken of as the first cluster of conditions in dependence upon which that experience of self-transcendence had arisen in Nagpur.

Another set of conditions can be discerned that is the natural extension of the first. The thirty-one-year-old Sangharakshita who arrived in Nagpur on that fateful morning had been serving the Dharma ardently for the past six years, since his teacher, Ven. Jagdish Kashyap, had left him in Kalimpong with the injunction to 'Stay here and work for the good of Buddhism'. Overcoming many obstacles, principally put in his way by fellow Buddhists, he had established a Dharma centre, the Triyana Vardhana Vihara. In addition, he had engaged in much literary work in the service of the Dharma, including the editing of an occasional magazine, *Stepping-Stones,* and the *Maha Bodhi* Journal, to both of which he contributed many articles and other material. And he had begun his preaching tours among the Dalit followers of Dr Ambedkar, principally in Maharashtra State. Above all, his memoirs reveal him as befriending many people and gathering together as many as he could to practise the Dharma, performing what Acharya Asanga, in the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, calls a bodhisattva's 'Act of Gathering' – *gana parigrha*.[17] He had started to create a network of contacts that was the germ of a Sangha of disciples – the precursor to the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community.

A third factor supported his intensive personal Dharmic practice and his service of the Dharma. He had, for many years, been living a highly disciplined Dharma lifestyle, based on renunciation. As soon as he could leave the British Army (indeed, slightly before he was officially discharged), he went in quest of circumstances that would express his commitment to the Dharma. He lived for a while as an Anagarika, a homeless wanderer, and in 1947 he took ordination as a shramanera and then, in 1950, as a bhikshu. So far as he could, he kept the essential principles of the monastic life, even to begin with going on the traditional alms-round, to the astonishment and delight of the Buddhists of Kalimpong, the small Himalayan town where he lived at that time. He gradually built for himself a way of life that enabled him to practise the Dharma as fully as possible. It was, above all, a lifestyle based on renunciation and he dwelt very simply with a minimum of possessions, sometimes with barely enough money to pay his rent.

17 Trans. Mark Tatz, *Asangha's Chapter on Ethics*, p.56, Edwin Mellen Press, 1986.

These three sets of conditions were present when he arrived in Nagpur: his intensive Dharma practice, his service of the Dharma, especially through his active engagement with people, and his renunciant Dharma lifestyle. Shortly after he stepped down from the train, he learned that Dr Ambedkar had died during the previous night and at once realised the enormity of his people's tragedy, especially in that city, where the conversion had taken place so recently with so much inspiration and hope. The intensity of the need of so many thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people, simply pulled him beyond himself. One could say that his own resources were quite inadequate to the task of rallying people in their hour of crisis. But something else came through and he became the vehicle for an 'impersonal force' – or as he later, and better, puts it, 'a supra-personal force or energy' that worked through him.

These three major elements have continued to characterise his life and work, indeed have been more fully and clearly expressed as time has gone on. And thereby the Triratna Buddhist Order has been founded 'through' Sangharakshita and has grown and flourished with this inspiration.

The bonds of self

How do these three sets of conditioning factors of Dharma practice, Dharma service, and Dharma lifestyle contribute to *Dharma-niyāma* processes coming to work through individuals? To understand this more clearly, we need to examine further what it is that must be transcended, for one might say that the major issue is not getting those processes to work through us – it is getting out of their way. What prevents the Dharma from expressing itself through us is our own self-attachment and it is the initial purpose of Dharma practice to go beyond that by recognising the relative nature of our selfhood.

The basic structure of ordinary consciousness is focused on self. It is not merely focused on self, but driven by the self's needs to survive, thrive, and be perpetuated. The notion of self is, however, a construction. It appears to us to refer to a stable and enduring reality that 'owns' our perceptions and actions, yet it corresponds to no discoverable referent. It is simply the most dominant of the workable abstractions or generalisations that our mental processes form out of the chaos of our experience.

This reduction to order is actually very necessary from the point of view of our survival. Without this facility for interpretive simplification of experience, it would be impossible to process what we perceive and we could never come to any effective response to it. However, having reduced perceptual chaos to order, we assume at a preconscious level that these abstractions have a reality independent of the perceiving situation and we build our lives upon that assumption. In particular, we unthinkingly act upon our sense that there is a real and enduring self, existing 'from its own side', that is the owner of our experience and actions. For most everyday purposes, this

assumption is unproblematic. However, according to the Buddha, it is the ultimate source of our ordinary suffering and of our more fundamental lack of fulfilment.

Buddhist tradition attributes this fundamental self-orientation to habits carried over from previous lives – indeed, it is clinging to self that is said to drive the process of rebirth. This, of course, offers no explanation of how that self-attachment came into being in the first place. One could, however, venture an evolutionary explanation. As species evolved through natural selection, an awareness that could include a sense of a distinct self had definite advantages in terms of an organism's adapting to its environment. From that ability to identify self, or simultaneous with it, emerged a sense of time and therefore the ability to learn and to plan – all in the interests of that organism's own survival. The storing up of knowledge that self-awareness made possible and the collective sharing of such knowledge through culture greatly increased the adaptability of *Homo sapiens*, the only species we know of whose members are capable of true reflexive consciousness.

From this point of view, our self-consciousness has evolved as a tool of the organism's survival because it has allowed human beings to adapt to a very wide range of environments and to mould their circumstances to that end. The assumption of a self is inextricably bound up with the organism's deepest and most primitive instincts to survive and thrive. It emerges out of those instincts and it exists to serve them.

In the final analysis, it doesn't much matter how we account for it: Buddhists are enjoined by the Buddha not to concern themselves excessively with origins, lest that distracts from the main issue, which is the resolution of our deepest problems. Whatever its aetiology, the fact is that we do have a strong sense of a separate and enduring selfhood to which we are deeply and primitively attached. And that self-attachment sooner or later becomes a problem. It is a problem because it brings us into conflict with reality itself, which is constantly thwarting, threatening, and ultimately destroying self-identity – and of course it is this self-attachment that is the fundamental basis for all social discord and violence. This inherent conflict with reality breeds a deep sense of insecurity and even fear, which can become overwhelming when the true nature of our existential position becomes unavoidable. This whole existence can seem a futile persistence in suffering that inevitably ends only in extinction. It is as if the more self-awareness develops the more pointless and painful does it all become.

The Buddhist perspective is that, not merely is this self-attachment the basis of our pain on every level, but it holds us back from a quite different kind of consciousness, one that is not based on self-clinging, embracing wholeheartedly the principle of conditioned arising. This different kind of consciousness is intimated at first by moments of rising above division and conflict through the experience of friendship,

beauty, moral nobility, understanding, or of spontaneous 'mystical' transcendence over self-clinging. In these 'intimations of immortality', we realise the inadequacy and essential falsity – the *dukkha* – of our routine consciousness.

Easy as it is to say, perhaps even to see, that self-clinging limits us, it is not at all easy for us to break free of it. This is because its roots lie below the threshold of awareness. The value of the evolutionary perspective on the origins of self-consciousness is that it emphasises its instinctive character, which can easily be masked in ordinary life. A psychologically well-adjusted person who is reasonably positive emotionally hardly experiences themselves as essentially self-oriented, especially if they live in economically comfortable and politically stable circumstances. A healthy person accommodates self-interest to the interests of others so that there is little or no discordance. Under these circumstances, one can then enjoy a decent and peaceful life without encountering in any striking way one's own fundamental selfishness. One can be generous and convivial with friends and neighbours, care lovingly for one's family, and contribute responsibly to society though one's work and even one's charitable activity – and yet, at root, deep and strong self-attachment may still dominate, becoming obvious only when there is a serious threat to pleasure and security.

We can more easily recognise that fundamental self-clinging when it manifests in painful mental states or in socially disruptive forms of behaviour, such as violence of word or deed towards others or misappropriation of others' resources. Greed and hatred in all their forms, however crude or refined, are the primary categories of overtly egoistic response, according to basic Buddhist teaching, together with ignorance, in the sense of turning awareness away from whatever threatens identity.

So deep is our self-centredness that it is structured into the very way in which we organise our experience. We quite literally see the world as arranged around us, interpreted from our own point of view. I am writing now from my point of view: you are reading from yours. The transcendence of this entirely instinctive, even natural, self-orientation is the task of the Dharma life.

Unfastening the bonds

We return then to the way Dharma practice, Dharma service, and Dharma lifestyle provide the conditions that will break through this deep instinctive habit. On this basis we can see what Sangharakshita's present recommendations are to his disciples under each heading.

Unfastening the bonds by Dharma practice

Formal Dharma practice, in all its diverse forms, involves making systematic and conscious efforts to change the current of one's volitions and their expression in words and deeds. Under a variety of headings, in a number of aspects of life, and through a range of techniques and teachings, one cultivates more skilful motivations and clearer awareness. Mental states then emerge, in accordance with the karmic kind of conditionality, within which self-attachment has been loosened. Such states are progressively more pliable, more able to take in a fuller picture and to respond to needs beyond those of self. Such a mind is less and less reactive and more and more spontaneously fills with love, compassion, and sympathetic joy. One is moved increasingly by powerful feelings of faith in what transcends self. This phase of practice, working with the karmic kind of conditionality, comes under the heading of the cultivation of *śamatha*.

Despite this growing refinement and positivity on the basis of karmic conditionality, however, the essential underlying structure of self-clinging remains. Something more is needed if that is to be undone so that *Dharma-niyāma* processes can be unleashed. We need consciously to cultivate *vipaśyanā*, insight into the unreality of our sense of self and the *dukkha* that inevitably accompanies our clinging to it. At the same time, we need to attune ourselves to what then arises, so that we can joyfully allow the Dharma to work through us.

What Dharma practice does, in effect, is reverse the process whereby self-clinging expresses itself in our mental activity and behaviour. There is a causal chain that begins with that instinctive complex of self-attachment, buried deep as the mind's fundamental structure. That then shapes our mind's functioning, forming every state that arises in service to its own interests. Those mental states themselves then drive our actions. Thus there is a movement from the root structure of ignorant self-attachment, known in basic Buddhism variously, for instance, as *avidyā*, *āsrava*, or *anuśaya*, to mental activity based upon it, and then to verbal and bodily behaviour that gives it expression.

Our Dharma practice takes us in the opposite direction, by way sequentially of *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*. First we apply *śīla* to our behaviour, trying to bring it into conformity with the precepts. This then modifies, under the karmic kind of conditionality, the way our mental states emerge, so that they are clearer to us and more integrated and therefore more amenable to our conscious influence. We can then more successfully practise *samādhi*, directly cultivating skilful attitudes of mind, and thereby bringing about new mental states, by means of karma, that are far more finely spun, much more nearly attuned to the way things truly are. On this basis, we can successfully practise *prajñā*, so that we can decisively see through the underlying tendency of self-clinging, recognising it as essentially a relative construct that has no

necessary reality. We can then gradually eliminate every vestige of its expression in our lives.

How does Sangharakshita recommend that we put this into effect in our Order and Community? I have myself set out in recent papers his current thoughts on the subject of Dharma practice within the Triratna Community, drawing on my conversations with him, and there is little need here for further exploration.[18] Perhaps it is only necessary to call to mind his system of spiritual life, bringing together as it does, horizontally and vertically, the five factors of integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth.

Through this system, our Dharma practice will take us progressively beyond self-clinging, allowing that 'supra-personal force or energy' to work through us too. We simply need to make sure this schema is widely and well understood and to encourage all who involve themselves with the Triratna Community to put it into direct and systematic effect. Especially we need to make sure that those being ordained are practising it effectively, in particular that they are committed to working on the dimensions of spiritual death and rebirth that mark the transition from the karmic to the Dharmic kind of conditionality.

Unfastening the bonds by serving the Dharma

One might think that Dharma practice was enough to break the bonds of self – and indeed it may be, if it is understood sufficiently deeply and practised with sufficient intensity. The problem is that one's practice of the Dharma can simply become the subtle expression of the underlying pattern of self-clinging. One can create for oneself a kind of private world, perhaps one of great loftiness, beauty, and purity, filled even with a degree of understanding. Yet the boundaries of that world may be quite restricted, insofar as it expresses a refined self-identity, not one transcended. Unfortunately, 'spiritual' types who live in such a world are many people's ideal of what a religious life should be like, even of a Dharma life.

Formal Dharma practice is certainly a necessary condition for breaking through the self-based structuring of consciousness, but not a sufficient one. That structure is, after all, inherently defensive: its very function is its self-perpetuation. As soon as a breach occurs in its protective enclosure, a fresh line is fortified. It is, indeed, remarkable how quickly and effectively the mechanism operates: sometimes all too obvious to an observer, but not at all easy for the person concerned to recognise. A factor is needed, then, that arrests that instinctive defensive mechanism, a mechanism that can even be at work in our formal spiritual practice.

We need to engage with something that orients us beyond ourselves to what

18 See footnote 2 on page 2.

transcends our self-clinging. This of course should be a component of formal Dharma practice. In Sangharakshita's system, spiritual rebirth is the heading under which this kind of practice is to be found: the recollection of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and the contemplation of their qualities. However, few are able to connect with that trans-egoic dimension by this means with an intensity sufficient to wrench them truly out of themselves. Such contemplation by itself very easily becomes a form of aesthetic indulgence, or at worst a kind of superstitious escapism.

One needs to give up one's self-clinging in a very practical and concrete way. The activities of each day need to embody the giving up of self to something more. Everything one does must have a larger meaning and serve a greater end. One needs to serve the Dharma.

What then does it mean, to serve the Dharma? It means engaging in activity that contributes to the arising within the world of that supra-personal force or energy of bodhicitta, bringing the possibility of the final resolution of all suffering. One is serving not merely an idea, but the highest potentiality within life. Whatever one does, whether it be directly teaching the Dharma, earning money for Dharma work or in other ways providing the practical basis for it, or alleviating suffering in more conventional, 'charitable' ways, one will be striving through that work to bring *Dharma-niyāma* processes into effect.

We should not interpret service of the Dharma in too abstract a way. Serving the Dharma always means serving other people, for there is no Dharma apart from people. The Dharma stream that begins to flow once we die spiritually and are reborn consists of a dependently arising, spiral chain of selfless mental states that encompass and respond to the needs of living beings. The Dharma is inherently compassionate.

While all service of the Dharma is ultimately service of other people, not all service of other people is service of the Dharma. This is a difficult point to clarify, because the same set of actions could express or not express Dharma service: it is, in other words, a question of attitude and perspective. For instance, good parents will sacrifice their own immediate interests to the needs of their children – in India, I have known parents who deprived themselves of food so that their children could eat well and get a good education. By any standards, such behaviour is highly laudable. It may actually represent something of genuine self-transcendence, but most usually it is, in all honesty, a kind of self-interest, because one has included one's own offspring in one's identity – no such sacrifice would likely be made for others' children.

Much charitable activity emerges from an imaginative identification with the sufferings of others, putting oneself in their place. From the Dharmic point of view, this kind of positive extension of one's sympathy to others is very much to be encouraged, both for the direct effect it has on those in need and for the karmic effect

it has on the doer. Indeed, this is what the 'mundane' practice of *metta-bhāvanā* is about. When one sincerely works to help others, one is performing a skilful act that will modify the way in which one's own mind unfolds in accordance with the karmic kind of conditionality. Highly meritorious as this is however, it is not, in itself, service of the Dharma.

We serve the Dharma to the extent that we understand the Dharma's full significance as the truth about the way things are and as the dynamic principle that is ultimately the only way that suffering can be relieved. In other words, we can only truly serve the Dharma to the extent that we have realised it. It follows then that when we meditate, study, and reflect upon the Dharma, we serve the Dharma. On the basis of our understanding we do whatever we can to bring that dynamic principle into effect in the world, whether it be by teaching the Dharma to others, working within the institutions of the Sangha, or helping people with their most immediate sufferings – or sacrificing ourselves so that our children get a good schooling.

Sangharakshita offers a note of caution on this topic. Relieving material sufferings, such as hunger, disease, or social exclusion, is highly meritorious in terms of the karmic kind of conditionality, and may be a means of bringing the force of the *Dharma-niyāma* into play and therefore of serving the Dharma. Nonetheless, there is a very great need for spreading the Dharma, in the most direct sense, and for building the institutions of the Sangha, so that many people may have the circumstances that will enable them to practise the Dharma. After all, there are many people of good will who can do charitable work, but there are relatively few committed Buddhists to serve the Dharma – and even fewer members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, who are fortunate to have such a clear and effective presentation of the Dharma to offer.

It is the Dharma that transforms charitable work so that it becomes the means of connecting with the real solution to suffering. For this reason, Sangharakshita has always stressed that he would like the major efforts of as many Order members and mitras as possible to go into service of the Dharma in this sense.

Unfastening the bonds through a Dharma Lifestyle

Once more, one might think that active Dharma practice and service of the Dharma together are enough and that there is no need to address separately the question of a Dharma lifestyle. However, even these two combined can easily become forms of more or less subtle egotism, simply tacked on to an otherwise 'private' life. We have already seen the way in which formal Dharma practice can simply mean the increasing refinement of ego-clinging. In a similar way, Dharma service, shallowly interpreted, can be a form of egotism, contaminated with a degree of pride.

It is not enough merely to be working effectively to spread Buddhism, without doing

so in the right spirit. It is all too possible to 'serve the Dharma' in a way that is, in the end, self-oriented. One can be very effectively organising Buddhist activities and institutions and teaching the Dharma, leading retreats and the like – and yet, subtly or not so subtly – be feeding one's own pride. This is a danger to which many a highly effective Buddhist has fallen prey, both outside and within our own circles, as I know to my own cost. One has seen a number of such people: they meditate regularly and apparently effectively and devote much of their lives to propagating Buddhism – and yet at bottom, they are very obviously serving themselves to some degree. We still need an additional factor that is likely to transform formal Dharma practice and service of the Dharma into real self-transcendence – into the arising of bodhicitta.

Sangharakshita teaches that it is the circumstances of one's life and the activities one engages in that help to transform both formal Dharma practice and service of the Dharma so that they truly do break through self-clinging and allow the Stream of the Dharma to flow through one. One needs to practise and serve the Dharma in the context of a Dharma lifestyle.

Supportive conditions

But what is a Dharma lifestyle: is it, in the end, living as a monk or nun, as many branches of the Buddhist tradition might aver, whether explicitly or not? Much as Sangharakshita encourages his disciples to live a 'sutra-style' monastic life if they can, he has not founded a monastic order.[19] He has generally preferred, given both the prevalence of monastic formalism and the complex variety of modern social life, to clarify the principles that underlie a Dharma lifestyle and to encourage the evolution of ways of life that embody them.

The first and most obvious principle for a Dharma lifestyle is that it supports Dharma practice and Dharma service. This is fairly obvious and well-worn ground so I will only briefly rehearse the major elements of what it means. The first such element is that one's lifestyle, and especially one's means of gaining a livelihood, should be ethical, in accordance particularly with the principles laid down by the Buddha himself in discussing *samyak ājīva*. This could be taken to include matters that are not so commonly considered, such as good citizenship both local and global, environmentalism, and a more radical avoidance of activity that involves the suffering of other living beings – such as, it would seem, takes place in the dairy industry, for instance. Although not all will choose to consider their lifestyle in such detail, a deep concern with the consequences of one's way of life for others, human and non-human, as well as oneself is surely an indispensable basis for breaking free from self-attachment.

19 See Sangharakshita, *Forty-Three Years Ago: Reflections on my Bhikkhu Ordination*, pp. 42─9.

Support for Dharma practice and service will also be drawn from the guidance, encouragement, and companionship of other Dharma-practitioners and Dharma-servants. One needs to learn the Dharma from those more experienced than oneself, especially from those able to give genuine kalyana mitrata – a friendship that by its nature deepens one's experience of the Dharma. A Dharma lifestyle that does not contain a significant degree of friendship based on the Dharma will be a lonely and difficult one – for most, one might say, almost impossible.

A final supporting factor important to mention is the aesthetic and psychological atmosphere, even culture, within which one's life is lived. The more brutal and harsh one's physical and social surroundings are, the more difficult it is truly to practise the Dharma – unless one has already attained a high degree of inspiration and insight. Many in the world today are simply weighed down by want or by the ugliness of their surroundings, the discordant tone of their social situation, and the general shallowness and meaninglessness of much that they are forced to do in order to survive and to fulfil their responsibilities towards their families. Poverty, ill health, political and social instability, and overwhelming pressures to conform make a Dharma life almost unthinkable for all but the most determined. I have seen the effects of such unfavourable circumstances at first hand in India, among our dedicated Buddhist brothers and sisters, and this is the condition of probably the great majority of human beings today.

Amongst those living a more middle-class life, especially in the 'developed' world, more are free from the most egregious pressures of this kind. Here the chief issue is the prevailing materialism of the atmosphere, which induces a kind of existential numbness, animated only by an individualistic drive to consume the latest products of our remarkably efficient economic system – efficient at least in stimulating and feeding our desires.

One needs then to find or create conditions that are ethical, give plentiful opportunities for kalyana mitrata, and are psychologically, culturally, and aesthetically supportive of one's Dharmic efforts. Exceptional individuals, as the Buddha himself appears to have been, make progress no matter what their circumstances – or rather they take active steps to mould their environment to support their efforts. Most others, sincerely inspired as they may be, find it very hard indeed to make much headway against countervailing circumstances.

But there is another, deeper issue behind the question of lifestyle and this requires a further examination of the dynamics of self-clinging.

Attachment and renunciation

We have spoken of ego-clinging as the deep structure of our consciousness, underlying our mental states and our behaviour. But that instinct is constantly forming and shaping the world around us through our words and actions. We solidify ourselves in our environments, patterning them to our own shape – although, oddly, our self-attachment may crystallise in worlds that give us a lot of pain and that we ourselves may rail against. We identify elements of our experience as 'mine' – and others as 'not mine': we include people, objects, situations, ideas, and experiences in our own identity – and we specifically exclude others. Our deep sense of existential security may become bound up in our situation in this way, calling forth strong passions when what we have identified with is threatened or what we have identified ourselves against threatens us. Our way of life coagulates, hardening into a carapace of self, which makes yet more intractable the essential problem that the Dharma is intended to overcome.

A truly Dharma lifestyle will be one that resists this kind of solidification, leaving one free to deal more and more directly with the underlying substructure of self-illusion and clinging and to open up to transcending inspirations. This has traditionally been understood and practised as a life of renunciation, gradually giving up anything that deepens and hardens the problem and avoiding its further accumulation. Of course, it is at least possible to live in the midst of possessions and people and position with complete freedom from attachment, just as the Bodhisattva Vimalakirti is presented as doing, since the issue finally is within the mind. However, the less one renounces the more one will have to work to overcome one's attachments whilst immersed in their objects – which is not at all easy to do. Unless one has more or less decisively broken that self-attachment, anything but a life of progressive renunciation will simply tend to deepen it.

In discussing renunciation, it is important to stress that it should not be taken to mean an unhealthy psychological repression. A renunciative lifestyle that has any value cannot be devoid of pleasure, whether of a physical or mental kind: indeed, Sangharakshita has said that one should not attempt to give up the 'lower' pleasures of life until one has a definite experience of the 'higher' – the consequences otherwise are likely to be psychological distortion of one kind or another, or else hypocrisy . All this is necessary to stress because of the Western cultural habit of identifying 'the flesh and the devil', of seeing bodily pleasures as inherently sinful. Buddhism makes no such equation, stressing rather that pleasures of the flesh are relatively superficial and fleeting and cannot resolve deeper and more abiding disquiet – and easily distract us from doing so. The issue is not avoiding pleasure but avoiding addiction, in the sense of identifying one's happiness with any particular objects and craving constant resort to them – making them part of one's self-identity. And it is difficult to avoid addiction while continuing to take the drug.

Lifestyle in our movement

What then of Dharma lifestyle within the Triratna Community today? Over the first years of the movement's existence, in the West, there was a strong normative assumption about what a desirable lifestyle should be. Broadly speaking, it was understood that the best arrangement was 'semi-monastic' or even monastic: living in a single-sex community, working in a team-based Right Livelihood business, helping out at a Dharma centre, living on support not wages, not accumulating family responsibilities if one did not already have them, and not allowing one's sexual activity to become central to one's way of life. For quite a few years, the majority of Order members did live more or less in this way, with varying degrees of enthusiasm or discomfort. Gradually the balance shifted, as more people came into the Order who did not live in this way and quite a number of those who did stopped doing so.

The normative lifestyle of the past has for many years been a minority observance, although nonetheless a significant and highly influential one. It is clear that many good and faithful Order members and mitras are practising the Dharma effectively without participating in all or even any of what might once have been considered essential institutions for a true Dharma lifestyle. This is actively acknowledged and accepted in the ordination of many men and women into the Order who, for instance, are married with families – indeed, in India, most Order members are married, with very few exceptions. The overall emphasis is, rightly, on how effectively individuals Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels, rather than whether or not they live in a community.

The maturing of the movement in the West has meant that there is now little or no group pressure to conform to a normative lifestyle and generally people feel freer to live the way that seems to suit them best – whether or not in practice they make choices that really support their commitment to the Dharma. This is to some extent a positive development, insofar as it may make it easier for people to choose their lifestyles as individuals, so that what participation there is in communities, Right Livelihood teams, and so forth may be more conscious and wholehearted. The general atmosphere of the Order and movement has thereby become less polarised around this issue and there is a greater mutual respect.

It is important to mention that in India, in contrast, there has always been and still is strong normative pressure, not only from the wider social group but even within the Order itself - pressure to get married. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is no socially acceptable ground between marriage and chastity among Indian Buddhists. Such single-sex residential communities as there have been have largely acted as temporary staging posts for unmarried youth, albeit often to very positive effect. Although all the same ideas for forming a community-based Dharma lifestyle are known in India and efforts have been made to explore them in practice, culture and

circumstances at present make this very difficult.

Since the movement's norms are less clear cut today, certainly in the West, individuals must make more conscious choices. In thinking about the kind of life to lead, taking for granted that nothing should be involved that is morally unskilful, the Dharma practitioner needs to keep in mind the principles previously mentioned: being as free as possible from excessive material worry and insecurity, having sufficient time and energy for formal Dharma practice, and getting active support, guidance, and encouragement, as well as avoiding mind-numbing distraction.

And then there is that more fundamental issue of renunciation, one that is not always easy to resolve in practice, given especially the efficiency and pervasiveness of the modern consumer economy and the freedom of liberal democracies. One will need to pay attention to how much the choices one makes tend to solidify ego-identity, building around one in relationships, possessions, status, and attitudes an manifestation of one's inner self-attachment. This of course is a natural propensity of the *pṛthagjana* and we are all subject to it, whatever our way of life. Nonetheless, some lifestyles will more readily feed that tendency and therefore make it far harder to see through one's identifications and break free of them so that *Dharma-niyāma* processes can unfold.

A supportive environment is not enough

However ethical, positive, and filled with friendship our way of life may be, it will not of itself bring about entry into the Stream of the Dharma. We need to be able to engage with the Dharma with a high degree of intensity. All our energies need to be involved in such a way that we reach the limits of our present self-construction.

The central issue of the Dharma life is, as we have seen again and again, the final undermining of the fundamental structure of self-clinging, so that *Dharma-niyāma* processes can unfold. Dharma practice, Dharma service, and a Dharma lifestyle in the terms so far defined are indispensable, but they are rarely enough to break through that deep instinctive habit.

Our Dharma practice, in the sense of systematic application of formal training to our minds, establishes the indispensable ground. It gradually prepares us, by way of karmic conditionality, so that we are sufficiently integrated and uplifted to absorb the impress of the truth. It engages us with the Dharma's highest insights so that they are more and more integrated into our responses to the things that happen to us. It opens us up to that 'force' that transcends our self-attachment, so we are increasingly accessible to it, ready to welcome it with joy. But yet some extra spark will usually be needed to turn readiness into reality.

Serving the Dharma helps us to open up to what lies beyond our own self-clinging, enabling us to give ourselves. Yet it easily itself becomes a source of mere business, self-importance, or distraction. Something needs to transform it into a real giving up of self.

Similarly, a basic positive Dharma lifestyle cannot be dispensed with: the weaker our discipline and determination, the more necessary are favourable circumstances. We need an undistracting and supportive environment, with friends and teachers readily at hand to encourage and guide us, otherwise most of us cannot sustain our efforts to practise the Dharma. But a Dharma lifestyle alone is not enough, as is all too obvious in many a monastery or moribund single-sex community. Even as the basis for deep practice of meditation and study of the Dharma, it is frequently not enough.

This requires yet further exploration of the dynamics of breaking down self-clinging.

Real spiritual death and rebirth

What we are seeking here is real spiritual death and real spiritual rebirth. Our practice, supported by our disciplined lifestyle and in the context of our service of the Dharma, concentrates and uplifts our energies and makes Dharma reflection second nature to us. We are able, then, to address life wholeheartedly and will find our thoughts turning more and more spontaneously to the Dharma's deep truths as life flows on around us. Then the moment will come, in the midst of life itself, when we can see, beyond thought, those truths reflected in every instant of experience. We will realise that what we thought of as 'me' is simply a bundle of habits: as a friend put it to me, we will see that it is not that I *have* reactions, but that I *am* reactions. We will have begun to die spiritually, reaching the point at which those defensive reactions can no longer sustain the walls of self, because we have recognised decisively and directly their complete artificiality.

Our Dharma practice, service, and disciplined lifestyle will also attune us to the Buddha, as we open ourselves to the Dharma that he embodied and served. We will, in one way or another, have been meditating on his qualities and developing a deepening receptivity to the reality they express. In that moment of letting go of those egoic defences, we may experience motivations arising within us, a force or energy, that has nothing to do with our personal interests – that is, in a phrase, supra-personal. And we will gladly give ourselves up to it. In Sangharakshita's words, after commencing practice of *sādhana*, from then on we will be 'guided from that dimension'.

Whether or not we are to experience a 'moment' of death and rebirth or simply a gradual and perhaps imperceptible shift in the emphasis of our being, Sangharakshita says that, for this to happen, the indispensable condition, beyond what has already

been considered, is intensity. Our lives need to become centred more and more wholeheartedly on the Dharma. Whatever we do, wherever we are, whatever are our goals, all need to become more and more imbued with the spirit of the Dharma**.** Our energies, our motivations, our ambitions, our dreams even, must become focused in the Dharma. Sooner or later, the sheer intensity of our engagement will bring us up against our underlying self-clinging in a way that we cannot avoid.

The inherent contradiction between that deep, instinctive sub-structure and our Dharmic aspiration and understanding will create a tension that, at times, could seem unbearable. Things will go wrong, our plans will fail, people will let us down or turn against us, those we love will not return our special feelings, or else figures central to our psychic landscape will be wrenched from us by death. And against all our training – hours of *metta-bhāvanā*, reflection on impermanence, contemplation of the buddhas and bodhisattvas – and in spite of all we ourselves have said – the consoling words of kalyana mitrata we have spoken, the inspired lectures we have given, the insightful articles we have written – we may find ourselves reacting: despair, rage, jealousy might surge uncontrollably through us. We will, in the words of the *Diamond Sutra,* be 'well humbled', well humbled will we be, indeed.[20]

The intensity of our own efforts and the intensity of the situation have brought on this intense humiliation. And that intensity holds us to our humbling. We cannot stop reacting, at least inwardly, but we cannot justify our reaction to ourselves, with blame or other kinds of rationalisation. Our commitment to the Dharma is too intense to let us off so lightly. We have to stare down into the depths of our own emotions, down into our reactions, down to their source, the self-clinging that has now been forced out into the open. We can then see it for what it really is, an artificial construction that is the cause of all our pain and the unskilful action that flows from it. And we can realise that it has no value for us at all and that we do not need to carry on sustaining it. Then we can cry with the Buddha, 'O housebuilder, now you are seen!' And if we cannot yet declare, 'Never again shall you build me a house [of self]', we know that we can quickly dismantle that house whenever it is reconstructed and in time will give the final victory cry, 'Your rafters are all broken, your ridgepole shattered. The [conditioned] mind too has gone to destruction: one has attained to the cessation of craving.'[21] All our energies will then flow effortlessly into that service of the Dharma that has been the focus of our intensified lives.

The workings of that intensity can be seen from a different point of view – perhaps this depends upon temperament: maybe 'hate-' and 'greed-types' vary in how they will feel it. We may find that it is the intensity of the need around us that simply snaps our self-infatuation, jolting us out of ourselves. Sangharakshita describes his experience

20 Trans. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra*, p.56. See Sangharakshita's illuminating remarks on this passage in Sangharakshita, *Wisdom Beyond Words*, p.157.

21 Trans. Sangharakshita, *Dhammapada: The Way of Truth*, 154. These words are traditionally said to have been spoken by the Buddha immediately after his Awakening.

of feeling that he was 'an impersonal force' in Nagpur in 1956. What seems to have happened is that the overwhelming need for consolation and guidance of those hundreds of thousands of new Buddhists simply made him forget himself. He already had a vivid sense of the significance of the Dharma for humanity and had dedicated himself to its service, especially since being left by his teacher in Kalimpong to 'stay here and work for Buddhism'. But by his own account, though the need was great everywhere, it was not felt very strongly by many with whom he had come into contact. Now there was a huge multitude who, having committed themselves to Buddhism as the solution to their most immediate problems, were desperately in need of help from the Dharma, right now. It was enough to bring something more out of him, something that went beyond him as a person.

The Third Order of Consciousness

Sangharakshita teaches that this kind of intensity is most likely to come about in a team of committed Dharma practitioners, living a simple shared Dharmic way of life, closely and intensively cooperating together in serving the Dharma. These conditions offer the greatest opportunity to enter the Stream of the Dharma. Within such a Dharma community, will be found the best basis for bodhicitta to arise. This is a key understanding underlying Sangharakshita's founding of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community.

When people come together who deeply share a common vision and purpose, their efforts combine in a momentum that draws them all onward, beyond themselves. This is Sangha. If they are able to join in real harmony, with openness and mutual trust, then the weaknesses of each are obviated and their strengths contributed selflessly to their shared Dharma service. Between them they set up a powerful current, by which they are all simultaneously carried along. If all the conditions of Dharma practice and lifestyle are in place, then an intensity of combination is created out of which something more than the sum of the individuals comes into play – bodhicitta arises, *Dharma-niyāma* processes begin to flow. Sangharakshita stresses that in this kind of situation one does not think of this as happening to any one person in particular – that is not how it is felt. Beyond the personal consciousness of each, arises out of the quality of combination of all, a consciousness or energy that is supra-personal. He has referred to this as a 'third order of consciousness':

> This consciousness is not the sum total of the individual consciousnesses concerned, nor even a kind of collective consciousness, but a consciousness of an entirely different order for which we have no word in the English language but to which the Russian word *sobornost* perhaps gives a clue.[22]

22 Sangharakshita, *The History of My Going for Refuge*, p. 93.

The Order and the Third Order of Consciousness

For members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, the Order itself is the primary setting for this kind of experience. When they receive ordination, Order members are in effect committing themselves to help bring it about. Actually, it is not even that it needs bringing about: for it is already there. The Order was founded, as we have seen, by what Sangharakshita could only describe as that supra-personal force or energy, initially working through him, now through others too. At ordination, rather, one offers oneself as a vehicle for that force or energy that already is active within the Order. One commits oneself to participating in it. One undertakes to establish in one's life the conditions by which this may happen: wholehearted Dharma practice, work with others to serve the Dharma, and a renouncing lifestyle. And to the extent that we all do that, then the Order will continue 'literally' to be the thousand-armed, eleven-headed Avalokitesvara.

For some this talk of a 'supra-personal force' or 'third order of consciousness' is mere rhetoric or even wishful thinking. They can point to all the problems in the Order: the disharmony, the unskilfulness, the confusion, even the spiritual limpness. And that is there for the seeing, it cannot be denied – although there is much else to be witnessed, even of ordinary virtue and good sense. Some, whether Order members or not, may not experience anything of a self-transcending kind within the Order. One cannot insist that they do when they do not, nor can one prove its existence to them by rational argument. But many of us do experience something of this kind and most of us have come to the Order because of it.

One can, for instance, often experience an atmosphere, hovering in and out of focus, at Order gatherings, especially at Order Conventions, or on certain retreats or the like. Suddenly it seems that everyone is lifted beyond themselves and participates in a shared consciousness that denies the individuality of none yet is more than each: that 'third order of consciousness' of which Sangharakshita speaks, beyond both individual and collective consciousness.

That force is a potentiality that may come into play when Order members and others come together with sufficient intensity and depth to serve the Dharma. Generally speaking, the more they are in direct contact with other members of the Order, the more likely it is that the spark will flash. However, this should not be taken to mean that they must necessarily be in face-to-face contact all the time. The experience of solitude, even prolonged, is a very important ingredient. Solitude, on the basis of Dharma practice, intensifies one's sense of existential aloneness, which is the only basis for a real connection with others.

When one allows oneself to feel that aloneness fully, then even solitude will be experienced in the context of connection with others. Sangharakshita, for instance,

has described his experience on a long secluded retreat in the very early days of the Order. He had had no contact with other Order members for some weeks, yet he said he could sense them as though seated all around him, even at specific locations in a great circle. If one's contact with people is sufficiently vivid, being physically apart from them does not break the connection. Similarly, Sangharakshita has said that, once he had left India, he did not feel the need to maintain a correspondence with his teacher, Dhardo Rimpoche, because he never felt separated from him.

The Order itself is then Order members' primary setting for collective service of the Dharma and it is, in my own experience, effective as such, generally speaking. That can especially be felt when Order members gather together in large numbers – which is why such gathering is so important. Those are, however, rare occasions, bringing together a special set of circumstances that cannot, for practical reasons, usually be sustained for more than a few days. If we truly want to let what feels like a supra-personal force work through us to transform the world, we need to bring conditions of that kind together in daily life. We need to find ways of engaging effectively with Order members and others to serve the Dharma on the basis of Dharma practice and lifestyle. What then emerges is a living culture or atmosphere that immediately strikes others who come in contact with it. At its best, this kind of culture carries something more than the sum of what each individual brings to it – something even of the thousand-armed Avalokitesvara.

Most Order members surely do their best to bring into their everyday lives all the factors that will enable them to contribute to the Order as Avalokitesvara – although no doubt we could all do much more. Different individuals have different resources, circumstances, temperaments, capacities, and inclinations – all of which leads to a variety of different ways of practising, of serving the Dharma, and of living. Valuable as this diversity may be, it has a diffusing effect, especially with the Order's geographical spread and growth in numbers, making it more difficult for all to retain a sense of collective service of the Dharma. Some, no doubt, are so thoroughly steeped in the Order that they never cease to sense their participation in it, whether or not they gather often with other Order members. Most however will need regular direct contact with others who share their aspiration if they are to retain a living sense of shared Dharma service.

This is why the Order needs channels of regular contact between groups of Order members – and from time to time between all Order members, or at least as many as can or will make the effort to gather. We come together to reinforce our collective sense of serving the Dharma – so that we can allow the possibility of Avalokitesvara becoming embodied in the Order more and more fully. This is the critical importance of the Order's basic structure of chapter meetings, Order days and weekends, retreats, and conventions. This is the purpose of the Order and chapter convenors, locally, regionally, and internationally: to keep this structure alive and healthy. Their regular

meetings with each other play an important part in maintaining that sense of harmony in a common purpose.

Despite this framework of cohesion, it would still be very difficult to keep alive and to deepen the spirit of collective service without other factors. The more separate the daily lives of Order members are from those of their brothers and sisters, the more superficial is their sense of serving the Dharma together likely to be, even though they may forgather from time to time. Of course, this depends on individual character and circumstances, and also on depth of commitment and understanding. Some, indeed, can be physically distant from others, yet feel themselves in the midst of the Order; many, however, perhaps most, cannot.

The difficulties that follow when most Order members do not frequently overlap with others is very evident in India, where almost all are married with families and in regular employment in very demanding conditions. Despite their impressive sincerity and devotion, it is a struggle for most to keep alive in their everyday experience a sense that they are participating in a spiritual community with a shared service of the Dharma – notwithstanding their unquestionable faith in their teacher and the Order. No doubt this will be true for many Order members in the West, too, although conditions are generally far more favourable to them doing so, should they choose to take advantage of them.

Something else is needed. The entire body of the Order is able, it would seem, to sustain a sense of collective service if there are sufficient members who do overlap on a daily basis, sharing lives and work. Where Order members come together on the right basis in communities, common projects, and personal interactions of various kinds, an intensity can be built that affects the whole Order. Those living collective Dharma lifestyles benefit themselves, but they also contribute to the larger whole. They generate through their interaction a social field or culture that communicates itself to other Order members – and indeed more widely.

It is for this reason that Sangharakshita continues strongly to recommend the same lifestyle as he has always done: living in a single-sex community, working in a team-based Right Livelihood business, helping out at a Dharma centre, living on support not wages, not accumulating family responsibilities if one does not already have them, and not allowing one's sexual activity to become central to one's way of life.

Of course he makes this recommendation recognising that it is possible to practise the Dharma effectively without involving oneself with all or any of the 'semi-monastic' institutions. It is also worth stating that it is not enough merely, for instance, to live in a single-sex community. At times it seems that some have identified the simple fact of living in that way with Dharma practice and service. Quite a number of communities have persisted more or less as shared accommodation, rather like a student flat –

although sometimes occupied by rather ageing students! There is little deep and effective engagement with each other and little wider contribution to the Dharma – while some with heavy family duties and responsible jobs to hold down are making vigorous efforts in their Dharma practice, actively working for the Dharma, and participating fully in the life of the Order. Lifestyle choices can provide opportunities – but opportunities must be taken.

However, taking into account all possible exceptions, he still considers that the semi-monastic lifestyle offers the best balance of freedoms and opportunities for most people to make real progress in the Dharma. Furthermore, he teaches that the Community as a whole needs sufficient people living and working together in that intensive way so as to sustain that field or culture imbued with the spirit of the Dharma.

New society

At its best, such a field or culture may be filled with an atmosphere, even a force, that is more than the sum of the individuals concerned. From time to time, this has happened, in my experience, in various situations over the years - indeed, not so infrequently. Often there has been insufficient maturity among leaders and others for that delicate combination to endure for more than a few months or weeks, even days or minutes – but for a while it was there, like the coming down to earth of that 'beautiful iridescent ball' Sangharakshita metaphorically saw hovering in the air when he was initiating his very first Dharma work.[23] In such cases, after some time that delicate balance is lost and either the institutions fail or transmute into something less ideal, for the time being.

There are, however, some situations in the movement that have matured and are able to sustain the delicate combination over time so that the sense of something greater than the individuals concerned is never too far away. I am myself aware of a number of such in the UK and in India from my own direct experience – and no doubt there are others elsewhere of which I am unaware.

There is quite a range of factors that can be discerned in all these situations, such as a degree of stability and collective experience, sound organisation and effective financial management, and a leadership that is able to maintain a Dharmic direction whilst facilitating a wide participation. One of the most striking elements in them is that there is a core of people who are in very active and regular deep contact with each other – and contact here means face to face, daily contact. Almost always that core of people will be working together on a project that serves the Dharma, the more directly the better. Very often, most of those key people will be living together in communities, whether all in the same one or in a number of communities that have a

23 Sangharakshita, *Facing Mount Kanchenjunga*, 1991, p. 38.

lot of interaction between their members.

Once that kind of atmosphere exists, others who are not so closely involved can readily participate in it and contribute to it. It may even be possible for those who have little direct contact to feel themselves part of it, too, whether their connection is mediated by letters or social networks or by imaginative means. However, for that to be possible, there needs to be a core of people who live and work together in a strong and effective way.

It is this culture, gathering round a group of Order members intensively sharing their lives and work, that Sangharakshita has called the 'New Society'. Although the term 'New Society' is not much in favour these days, it would seem, the idea behind it is as important as ever, if we are truly to fulfil our aspirations. It is not so much a collection of institutions, although these will be essential, but an intensive atmosphere generated from collective efforts that can carry the spark of what transcends us as individuals. The New Society is, as it were, a force-field generated by collective service of the Dharma. It is something that can be directly felt and is powerfully attractive to many who come in contact with it, giving a direct glimpse of what they are seeking. The New Society is, one could say, the concrete expression of what it was that founded the Order and movement – what seemed to Sangharakshita to have been like 'a supra-personal force or energy' that worked through him. And the New Society is one of the principal means whereby that force or energy is sustained and reaches out to touch many others.

Envoi

In this article, as in previous ones published recently, I have tried to draw together threads emerging from my conversations with Sangharakshita over the last three years. Some of what I have here discussed I have taken directly from what he talked about with me and some has emerged later out of our talks. As usual, I have shown him what I have written and he confirms that I do not misrepresent him and that my enlargements upon what he has said are consistent with his own understanding.

I have here tried to convey, in my own way, what I have got from my communication with him, which has been exceptionally important for me personally. In a sense, however, nothing new has arisen in our talks: I can trace most of what we have touched on to much earlier sources in his writings and talks and especially his seminars – although I believe he has expressed the principles he stands upon far more clearly and unequivocally than ever before. But I have felt a new and far deeper unity to my own understanding of the Dharma, coming not merely from Sangharakshita's words but from the mind those words express. And it is this that I have been doing what I can to communicate.

On this occasion, I have done my best to convey the unity of Sangharakshita's vision in relation to the practical manifestation of the Order and movement. There is a direct correspondence between his own life, the nature of experience that transcends the personal, his understanding of the Dharma in terms of karmic and Dharmic conditionality, the best way to practise and live the Dharma, and the culture and institutions of our movement. Only if we can fully appreciate that unity will we, I believe, live in such a way that the processes of the *Dharma-niyāma* can arise.

The threads that I have been following with Sangharakshita have been connected with a deepening experience of my own. I have become more vividly aware, from time to time, of the highly personal, not to say egocentric, manifesting in parallel with what transcends the personal – the two appearing side by side, absolutely simultaneously. I have, for instance, sat enduring a friend's display of those self-centred reactions to which we are all prone and at the same time been conscious, I don't know how, of something far greater, something vast, even infinite, that seemed present particularly in him – like the blinding light of the sun glowing piercingly through the cracks in a badly built wall. I can only say that it is as if it is the nature of that something infinite, having been invoked, to burst through and express itself, but the nature of our petty personalities is to resist what we ourselves have invited.

Naturally, I have also sensed this experience of polarity even more cogently within myself: sometimes in meditation, sometimes sitting quietly, doing nothing, sometimes in the midst of giving a Dharma-talk before a large Indian crowd, sometimes in the thick of upset, confusion, or despair – it seems to come unbidden in any circumstance. At such times, this strange bundle of 'subhutine' personal habits and reactions seems quite insignificant, even laughable, to be viewed as the remarkable Hungarian novelist, Antal Szerb, puts it, 'In terms of protective tenderness and gentle irony'.[24] This gives me more and more confidence in the Buddha and his Dharma, and in my teacher and his presentation of it. My Dharma practice is, it would seem, on the side of the supra-personal.

But the most important point here is that I have increasingly felt this polarity in those situations in the Order and movement of which I have had experience in the last few years – which means, in my case, principally in India and the UK. One can easily pick out so many defects and problems in each one – and it is certainly our duty to acknowledge these and to resolve them. However, something else does shine through, I have felt, and shine through with increasing intensity, in many places and on many occasions.

This is my experience, but it does not seem to be shared by everyone. One can find oneself in conversation with someone who points to this that is done wrong and that that is not done right – and one can only agree. And yet, all the time, one can oneself

24 Antal Szerb, *The Pendragon Legend,* Pushkin Press, 2007.

feel, and even feel very intensely, that something else is also present. It is as if you are both looking out over a landscape of industrial devastation while the sun is setting and, while he talks of the ugliness and bleakness of it all, you can see the dying light transforming every shape into a gilded mystery, all over-arched by a sky of fire. One cannot point, one cannot shake him from his gloomy contemplation. If one tries, one is merely dismissed as another of those who refuse to face the nastiness of things. So one can only gaze in wonder at what your eyes alone can see.

Fortunately, there are other eyes to see. There are many others in our Order and movement who do sense that something more than our egoistic desires is at work. In short, I am convinced that the Order does, at least to some extent, embody the thousand-armed, eleven-headed Avalokitesvara as Sangharakshita teaches that it can. I believe, from my own experience, that bodhicitta, to call it that, is working among us and that the movement is, to a degree, its manifestation. It was founded through Sangharakshita by what seemed to him as though it was a supra-personal force or energy and it continues at work through the Order and movement that was thereby founded. It is of the greatest importance that we allow ourselves to be aware of this. And it is of even greater importance that we work together to keep those *Dharma-niyāma* processes flowing among us.

This should, I suggest, be the way we talk about our chief goal and endeavour. I regard it as quite unhelpful to dwell on the personal attainment of Stream Entry, whether one's own or that of anyone else, so easily does that become a source of conceit, often rather delusional – and I have witnessed this at first hand. It is far better for us to think, individually and collectively, of trying to keep the conditions alive in dependence on which that something that seems like a supra-personal consciousness can continue to work in the world through our Order. Thinking in that way is itself one of the conditions in dependence on which that will happen.

We have seen, from Sangharakshita's own life and teaching, that three broad sets of conditions can be discerned underlying the arising of what goes beyond the merely personal: intensive Dharma practice, inspired service of the Dharma in close company with others, and a lifestyle wholeheartedly dedicated to the Dharma. I have wanted, here, above all to point to the collective dimension. Our collective institutions, systems, and activities are not merely about personal practice. If we view them in that way, then we can easily discard them if they do not immediately suit us. They are not however so easily set aside, for they are part of our practice, insofar as they help to strengthen our collective sense of serving the Dharma together – my attendance at an Order weekend may strengthen that sense in others, whatever it does for me. We need to take them on in this spirit and participate actively in them if the Order is to continue to embody what the thousand-armed Avalokitesvara represents.

We need also to consider lifestyle from this point of view. It is not a question of

simply choosing a lifestyle that suits one, rather as one might choose this breakfast cereal rather than that from the shelves of a supermarket – although no doubt personal preference must play a part. One needs to recognise that the way one lives can contribute to a greater or lesser extent to the life of the Order and therefore to the continued working through the Order of that supra-personal force or energy that Sangharakshita felt worked through him to found it. Unless a good many of us share our lives and work with other Order members on a daily basis it will be very hard to keep alive that sense of collective service of the Dharma. Besides the personal benefit that their participants may gain from living in communities or working together in projects that serve the Dharma, they will also be making a vital contribution to sustaining the conditions necessary for the whole Order to remain a channel for the power of the Dharma – assuming, of course, that such communities and projects are truly based on Dharma practice and service.

I hope that it is clear that what I have written is not a plea for a return to normative assumptions to which people feel pressured to conform. Individuals must be judged by their own efforts, not by their lifestyle. Each of us has to work with our own circumstances, outer and inner, and do our best to Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels from that starting point. What I have tried to show is that we will best achieve our Dharma goal, which cannot but be the transcendence of our self-clinging, if we serve the Dharma together – and that means making a conscious effort to mould our living so that we can spend substantial portions of our lives in as much contact with each other as possible. Then we will share a deep sense of serving the Dharma, side by side. Then we will be able to do what needs to be done, for our own and the world's well being, because that supra-personal force or energy will work through the Order more vigorously than ever.

A PERSONAL APPENDIX

The urge to write is the most compelling I experience, the ordinary impulses of the body aside. Yet when I sit before the blank screen, fingers poised over the keyboard, I start to day-dream or fiddle, idly busy at tidying my desk and rearranging my files. Once words do start to arrange themselves and form some coherent line of thought, my eye keeps going to the clock: it must, surely, be time for tea! There seems an awful responsibility in squeezing one's soul into the solid and enduring shapes of words: responsibility to truth, to time, to my readers, to myself – and, in this case, to my teacher, whose thoughts I am presenting and enlarging upon. It all seems such a tangle and every shaft of clarity entails a 'but...'. And I know there are those who will find their nerves set on edge by what I am saying, the way I say it, the very terms I use. I know that every word is a hostage to fortune. And yet I would write.

For me, every act of writing has its own distinct struggles. In this case, there have been two in particular. The first is a familiar one to me, not merely in writing but in most aspects of life, experienced here however with unusual intensity: the struggle to translate intuition into expression. Over the course of my various conversations with Bhante, a very deep and compelling intuition has grown in me, planted by his words – but more truly by who he is. The intuition itself is formless, yet nonetheless potent, a disturbing spirit in the background, haunting me for release. It demands to be expressed, seeking form that is reasoned and persuasive, yet one that strikes an existential chord in readers – or at least in some of them. For months, even a year or two, coagulated thoughts have been peeling off in fragments under the surface of my mind, sometimes turbid and half formed, sometimes vivid and coherent – but all bound up with a painful sense of inadequacy to the overwhelming significance of the underlying intuition. And it is painful, like one of those dreams in which there is something that you must do, but you don't quite remember what it is and every twist and turn of the action keeps taking you away from your purpose.

And then finally one has done it, brought that embryonic intuition to birth: and of course what has come cannot be at all adequate to the infinite implication of its insemination. After mountainous labours – a mouse. But there it is: it has been done; and I have slept the deep sleep of contented fulfilment and feel at ease with all around me, where before everything had jangled and jarred accusingly. Even the sun is shining today, after days and days of rain.

My second struggle in relation to this article has been with what my theme says to me, myself. As much as anyone else, especially every member of the Order, this is written for me – in a sense about me. It puts me to the question, as much, if not more, than anyone else. Am I living up to the exhortation the intuition has wrung from me? Am I practising the Dharma ardently enough? Am I living a lifestyle that truly supports my practice and my participation in the Order? Am I serving the Dharma

with a sufficiently cooperative wholeheartedness? The answer can only be, no, not enough – never enough!

I do not here want to descant on my many shortcomings in all these respects. That would be tiresomely self-indulgent and itself express a major shortcoming. But I believe I do owe those who know about me and my life an explanation of an obvious anomaly. I pass on in this article Sangharakshita's strong recommendation of the semi-monastic lifestyle and yet I do not live like that myself, in one important respect. I do not live in a community, but my base, my 'home', where I spend a third of my time, is in a property that I own and share with Dharmacharini Srimala.

Let me start by giving the facts of where I came from, where I am now, and how I got here: a brief history of my lifestyle since ordination. In 1972, shortly before I was ordained, I moved into a small men's community in London. For the next thirty or more years, I continued to live in men's communities: from 1974 I lived for one year in what was the first single-sex community (established before I moved there), the famous No. 5, Balmore Street, in Archway, North London; then, for five years, in the Sukhavati community, which consisted of the men who transformed the Old Fire Station in Bethnal Green into the London Buddhist Centre; then, for twelve years, at the Padmaloka Retreat Centre in Norfolk; and finally, after three years living on my own at Guhyaloka, for twelve years in the Madhyamaloka community in Birmingham. Although all these communities had their ups and downs, I was myself an enthusiastic member, deeply inspired by the ideal that such communities attempted to embody and often thoroughly enjoying our life together.

Throughout this period, my life and work was wholly centred on helping to build the institutions of our movement and working to spread the Dharma. And of course it was very much a life of collective endeavour, serving the Dharma together. A high point for me was especially my time at Padmaloka, helping to establish the men's ordination process with a remarkable team of friends. The Madhyamaloka community was a more complex and puzzling experience, perhaps because we all had to spend so much of our time away, on retreat and visiting centres, especially outside the UK. But nonetheless I found that my stay in the community was mostly a very satisfying and engaging experience.

Even before ordination, I felt strongly attracted to the monastic life and would have liked to have been a monk – in a sense, I felt that was what I was meant to be. For a number of years I had no sexual relations and had deliberately chosen to spend most of my time with men, as a definite aspect of Dharma discipline. But I could not healthily transcend sex and romance and knew that a forced abstinence was not real *brahmacharya.* And so, after much hesitation and misgiving, in 1982, I began seeing Srimala, who lived then with her two small daughters, in Norwich, the town nearest

to Padmaloka.[25] From the outset, our relationship was a very positive and loving one, with a great deal of mutual consideration and respect. I think I can say that, from that day to this, we have hardly had a cross word and have never had a serious misunderstanding. My connection with her became one of the principal constant threads in my life.

She too is a dedicated member of the Order and we both aspired to *brahmacharya*, off and on practising chastity for long periods. For twelve years, I was an Anagarika, and, once her daughters were independent, she too wore the yellow *kesa* for several years. Even though we lived separately, we met regularly (and chastely) whenever we were not travelling, as I very often was.

By the turn of the century, it would appear that I was at my peak. My life seemed to be going exceptionally well. I had many responsibilities that I carried with enthusiasm – I was International Order Convenor and, in August 2000, Bhante had appointed me the first Chairman of the College of Public Preceptors, those to whom he had handed on his responsibilities as head of the Order. I felt intensely engaged and deeply fulfilled. And right at that time, in the midst of it all, things began to come unstuck.

Quite a number of external factors conspired together to create a crisis: Bhante entered his horrible period of sleeplessness; Yashomitra's letter was published; there was an explosion of criticism of Bhante and, if anything, more vehemently of me; a close colleague let us all down very badly; and in 2003 my mother died – all brewed together with many other incidents, major and minor. Yet, to me it seems that what happened was not to do with these incidents, or rather they were merely the trigger for something waiting to happen inside me.

I would like one day to write up those processes in detail: mainly so that I myself can understand them better. For the time being, let me briefly say that it seems I reached the end of a particular construction of my self. The idea I had of who I was and what I should be doing could no longer contain all the forces within me. I broke down – or rather broke up, in the sense of fragmenting. My involvement with everything I had been so engaged with gradually wound down – although I made two or three determined efforts to pull myself together, each failing for lack of willing energy, sometimes, I am sorry to say, meaning I let people down. I did not offer myself for re-election as Chairman of the College and I let many other responsibilities lapse. It was a very painful and bewildering time and I felt I had no clear direction at all – very difficult for one so accustomed to knowing exactly where he was going. I was not able to express to anyone else what was happening – I could not even express it to myself. All that I believed in simply fell away. The only truly solid element in my life at that time was Srimala. I hardly discussed with her what I was feeling, for I had no

25 She tells her own story in, Srimala, *Breaking Free*.

words for it, but her common sense, loving sympathy, and undemanding support were completely reliable and I am deeply grateful to her for it.

I let myself drift. It seemed that my will could no longer direct me and I determined, more or less consciously, simply to see what happened. One day, on a walking tour in Snowdonia with Srimala, I glanced in an estate agent's window and the sale notice for a ruined cottage somewhere in the mountains drew my attention. This seemed to offer a good excuse for exploring the countryside and, without really considering the possible implications of what we were doing, we drove up into the Berwyn mountains.

The deserted cottage proved a gloomy, dank place, beside a road on the dark side of the hill. But the agent had given us a leaflet for another, similar ruin in which she thought we might be interested and off we went to find it, in the same mood of idle interest. As we drove out of the small granite town of Bala, we saw ahead of us the long bulk of Arenig Fawr. Snow capped the mountain, radiant now in brilliant sunshine. We followed the directions on the agent's leaflet and, to our astonishment and delight, found the commanding presence of that high ridge drawing us nearer and nearer to it. Immediately before us as we approached, steep crags fell sharply from the summit, standing out darkly against the glowing white. The road led straight toward the mountain and went no further.

Half a mile from the mountain, we saw a gate marked, 'Maes Gwyn', the name of the property we had come to investigate. We left the car and walked along the grass covered track, down a gentle slope through the sheep runs. There gradually came into view, completely isolated below the road, a small cluster of farm buildings, built in ageless style of roughly dressed granite boulders, roofed with sagging corrugated iron, red and rusting. Three great beech trees and a line of sycamores stood around the site, like sentinels. A small brook rustled through, its unceasing murmur the only sound in the immense stillness. All around was space. Standing in the yard beside the barns and cottage, in every direction one could see mountains etched against the skyline, for the place was at the centre of a great circle of high hills, the eastern outliers of the Snowdon range, showing sharp and clear in the crisp winter light. We were both now completely in the spell of this magical spot.

Although we had not set out with any intention, as it seemed, of buying a property, things quickly began to move in that direction. My mother had recently left me a substantial legacy, which I quickly realised was enough for the purchase. However, the buildings were in very poor repair, being little more than ordered piles of stones. The cottage was the most obvious place to make habitable but, since it could not have been lived in for more than fifty years, would require more or less rebuilding. I could buy it, but I couldn't do much with it. As we later clambered up the rocky peak of Cnicht, deeper in Snowdonia, Srimala rather hesitantly volunteered that she had some

money from the sale of her house in Norwich. She herself would like to live a more solitary life, in the midst of the countryside. And that was it. Everything followed from those spontaneous musings that unfolded in the midst of that mountain grandeur.

The plan was that we would renovate two parts of the property, at opposite ends of the range of buildings, each occupying its own world. Srimala would live in the old cottage and I would use the other from time to time, as a retreat, keeping my main residence in Birmingham. Srimala moved there in 2005, once the renovation had been half achieved, and, in the event, I moved out of Madhyamaloka in 2006, and based myself fully at Maes Gwyn. I was now doing exactly what I had often recommended to others that they should avoid.

I know that some people have been affected by my purchase of the property and living there more or less with Srimala. Some have felt betrayed by it or undermined or discouraged. Some have been angry that I was failing to practise what I had preached, whether they agreed with that sermon or not. In many ways, I share those feelings. I regret that I have not continued to exemplify a way of life that I have never ceased to value very highly and I feel sad that this may have made it more difficult for someone to keep their inspiration for community life or put anyone off adopting that lifestyle – although, in the end people must live in community because they themselves want to, not because someone else does. But, above all, I feel great shame at the whole half-conscious process, unfolding in an inner atmosphere of disillusionment and despair. I didn't discuss it with anyone, I didn't even really think about it. An opportunity arose that my heart leapt at and I followed that impulse. I think that, given a bit more pause on my part and a situation more favourable than the one I was in had become, I could as well have weathered the storm while living in a community.

All that acknowledged, living at Maes Gwyn has turned out very well indeed for me and, on the whole, I am very happy with the life I now lead and I have no thought, at present, of changing it. I allowed myself simply to drift into this situation, but having been wafted here, I was very fortunate to find that I had the circumstances that I needed. Maes Gwyn enabled me to withdraw into the 'cave of the heart' so that something new could emerge, like the caterpillar's chrysalis, from which it can arise with the exquisite wings of a butterfly. I needed space and silence and simplicity. I needed to be as far away from my old life as possible and from all that could evoke my naturally outgoing, active energy, always ready to engage and to do. I needed to listen to what was going on below the surface and learn to live in a deeper and more rounded way.

Maes Gwyn in Welsh means 'White Place or Land'. I asked Robin Evans, the neighbour from whom we bought it, why it was called that and he said, 'Must be

because it is very pure!' and indeed 'gwyn' can mean 'pure', 'holy', or 'blessed'. And for me it has indeed been a Pure Land. Srimala's presence too has been a blessing. She has, with her concrete wisdom and simplicity of heart, been both a very great support and an inspiring example. I can tell immediately, from the look on her face, when I have escaped from what actually is into a mere fantasy of what could be. And she herself wants to be alone much of the time, leaving me to get on with what I need to do.

In 2008, we closed the gate and withdrew into Maes Gwyn for eight months with no outside contact – apart from leaning over the fence, once in a while, for a chat with Robin about the sheep and the weather. During that time I never stepped into a car or walked further than a few fields beyond the houses. Anantamani very generously drove over every three weeks with the supplies we needed, leaving them at the top of the track. For the first two months, Srimala and I would meet up from time to time, Srimala's mother having quite recently died, but then we spent five months each immured in our quite separate parts of the property.

My time of solitude was, to begin with, extremely painful. I seemed to have lost all sense of direction and felt strongly disillusioned with so much that had previously sustained me – and mostly with myself. I felt a lot of remorse – and not a little self-pity! And I felt alone, deeply alone. Had I completely wasted my life? What was I to do now? Without a clear idea of what I was doing, I didn't know who I was. And, as an external manifestation of my state, the weather was at its most Welsh: a constant pall of dark clouds weighing down upon me, unceasing rain, and days of wind that unsettled my soul. I felt I had to face the full force of my previous karma, going back forty or fifty years or more, even seeming to come from beyond my birth.

In retrospect, it appears to me that the very energy with which I had pursued my life till then had led me to this point. With whatever understanding I had, of myself, of the Dharma, I had thrown myself into Dharma practice, a Dharma lifestyle, and service of the Dharma. I have never been anything but wholehearted. I had used my will to drive myself onward. On the whole, I had been of good service – although my limitations had also led me to do some foolish things and to cause harm to some people. But now I could not go on in that way. The sheer energy of my engagement generated my own humiliation: I was well humbled indeed!

As I allowed the winds of the past to blow themselves out, something new began to emerge, as though a shape through the mist. I realised that I had not lost all faith at all. Below the level of thought and feeling, I recognised that I had unshakable confidence in the Buddha. I knew that he had attained bodhi – I knew it from my own experience, however distant I was from the Buddha right now. There was, I could feel, something in the nature of consciousness itself that made it certain that the Buddha had achieved Liberation. I could taste what that meant and I could rest

myself completely upon it. Gradually all the pieces began to settle. I knew that it was Bhante who had enabled me to know the Buddha and I felt deep gratitude and confidence in him, for this and so much else. I saw that the Order and movement he had founded are the means for many others to connect with the Buddha's realisation. I did not know specifically what I would do, from now on, but whatever it was it would be in service to the Dharma through the Order and movement as a disciple of Sangharakshita. Everything was back where it had been – and yet, everything was quite different.

Gradually my life has fallen into a new pattern, although with many of the old features. I spend two periods of three months in India each year, where I have had to step into Suvajra's shoes to lead the men's Ordination process team – Suvajra, very reluctantly, had to withdraw for health reasons. I do no ordinations myself but function as a kalyana mitra to the team members and work closely with the other Preceptors, Public and Private. Besides this, I lead many retreats, lead study, and give talks. I follow a very full programme, while I am there, trying to do as much as I can in the time available to me.

Back in Britain, I visit the LBC, of which I am President, for two periods each year of a week or ten days, and I attend the biannual meetings of the Preceptors College, again for a week or so at a time. I visit Hungary twice a year, where I am keeping contact with a group of Gypsy Mitras who run a number of secondary schools for Gypsy youngsters who have not been able to work within the state school system. And I spend as much time as I can at Maes Gwyn, leading a far more reflective and solitary kind of life, especially trying to keep up a flow of writing. All in all, I am usually able to keep about four months each year free to be at Maes Gwyn and I have maintained a steady flow of articles, mostly based on my recent conversations with Bhante. And, of course, I visit Bhante from time to time to continue those discussions.

In sum, I feel I am living my life very effectively and that I am coming to understand the Dharma more and more deeply. And I feel that I am serving the Dharma in close company with a wide range of friends. I regret the way I handled my departure from community life and view it as having been by no means inevitable. But something had to change in me and the circumstances at Maes Gwyn have enabled that to happen, at least to some extent. I believe now that I have an excellent basis for practising and serving the Dharma and have no thought at present of changing the conditions of my life – although I am ready for whatever may come.

I know that in owning a property and living alongside Srimala I have, in my phrase in the article, to an extent 'solidified my ego-identity'. I may, no doubt, have to pay some price for that, for attachment does have its price. But at present I do not feel I am held back much by these circumstances. Indeed, I feel they support my Dharma life very

well – although I am aware that that is the kind of hubristic statement that could well come back to haunt me!

I want to emphasise one last point. I have described, very briefly and superficially, a sort of 'spiritual crisis' that I passed through in the last ten years. This was a very painful and puzzling episode in my life, but I do not now regard it as something that went wrong – although no doubt it could have happened in a smoother and less disruptive way. The Dharma life is, from one point of view, a constant breaking down of ego-clinging so that one can open up to those supra-personal forces. This happens again and again on many levels. One breaks down one structure of self, but it is replaced by another that is more subtle and benign, if one is working skilfully. That too must be broken down ... and so on until the structure becomes so loose and subtle that it never gains sufficient solidity to obstruct the flow of Dharmically conditioned states.

In some of us, those breakdowns and reassemblies are almost imperceptible and in some they are dramatic, even catastrophic – and perhaps in some, they are imperceptible sometimes and sometimes dramatic. However they manifest, they will happen – they must happen if we are to make progress in the Dharma. Indeed, Dharma life generates these breakdowns – or, better, breakthroughs. One practises the Dharma, one lives a Dharma lifestyle, one serves the Dharma, all as intensively as possible to the best of one's understanding and ability at that time – and a tension builds up. Inner contradictions are exposed, unresolved feelings defy suppression, superficial understandings cease to fit experience, doubts and confusions rise to the surface. Everything one has left behind, 'bypassed' as the expression has it, refuses any longer to be ignored. Often a good chat with a friend resolves things for the time being, or a spell on retreat. But sometimes in some people the build-up of tension under the surface leads to a quaking to the foundations. That, I believe, is what happened to me.

How this sort of change from one level to another happens will depend substantially on one's character, the circumstances around one, and the intensity of one's Dharma life. I believe that for me a major conditioning factor was the fact that, since my ordination at the age of 25, I have been in a leading position in the Order and movement. I have taken on my responsibilities with as much energy, intelligence, and faithfulness as I was capable of – and the tension gradually built up and finally burst. In looking back at it all, I can see that it was bound to happen like that, given my character and situation. I regret very much whatever harm I have done in my ignorance. However, fundamentally, I do not at all regret the process that I have gone through – although I sincerely hope, and even expect, that I will not have to go through it again, at least not in that way.

This particular process has then arrived at its conclusion, like a complex musical

progression, beginning with ordered harmonies that slowly appear to dissolve into chaotic dissonance, until all the discordant themes are gathered together and resolved in a new and richer pattern, leaving one with a deep sense of peace. For me, symbolic completion came in a delightful visit that Bhante made to Maes Gwyn, with Vidyaruchi, in September 2011. He had been mentioning for some months the possibility of coming down to see us, however I purposely had not pressed him, thinking the long drive across the hills tiring for an old man. But down he and Vidyaruchi came, taking the high pass over the Berwyn mountains and across the windswept moor dotted with sheep.

It was clear he had come out of pure goodwill, simply to be with us for a while and savour the place where we lived, which of course he could not truly see. Nothing much happened: tea was drunk, lunch was eaten, Bhante saw into our respective houses, and sat and chatted with each of us. As I supported him across the slippery yard to my house, he delicately, almost lovingly, stroked the grey, uneven surface of the granite wall as we passed. We meditated with him for a little while in our shrine room, in front of the large blue ceramic Buddha he had bought many years before in Italy and had given to us 'on indefinite loan'. He recited the blessings, a few photographs were taken, and then Vidyaruci drove him up the grassy track and away, before the light began to fade.

In June 2012, we invited a few of our Welsh-speaking neighbours, including our builders, to help us dedicate the shrine room in the language of this beautiful land.[26] Anantamani gave a short introduction in Welsh to what we were about to do and then led with great feeling the Dedication Ceremony, which she had translated: and they all joined in quite unselfconsciously, everyone of them born a Calvinist Methodist – if somewhat nominally so now, in some cases. Afterwards, we unveiled two slate plaques with Welsh inscriptions, one commemorating the work of the builders for having 'given these old stones new life' and the other in memory of Bhante's visit:

Bendithiwyd y Neuadd Fwdha hon
gan ein Hathro,
Urgyen Sangharakshita,
18 Medi 2011[27]

26 Moksapriya made a short film of this event, which can be found on www.subhuti.info.
27 "This Buddha Hall was blessed by our Teacher, Urgyen Sangharakshita, on 18th September 2011."