

## **A message from Urgyen Sangharakshita to all members of the Triratna Buddhist Order:**

I am very pleased once again to introduce to you an article written by Subhuti, on the basis of conversations I have had with him. Each successive article has enabled me to communicate to you all my present thinking on an important topic that I believe has major implications for the future of the Triratna Buddhist Community, and therefore of Buddhism in the modern world. In this paper, too, Subhuti has very faithfully expressed my point of view on the subject of our Ordination Ceremony. I have particularly appreciated the way he has conveyed the integrity of my teaching and the key position that ordination has within it. It does all hang together, even if all the connections are not always easy to discern.

I ask all Order members to study this article very deeply. And I ask Private Preceptors, especially, to cooperate closely with the Public Preceptors in putting it into effect. This will demand a great deal of work on the part of all Preceptors: first of all, to make sure that they truly understand what is being presented, then to consider carefully how to apply it to their own disciples, and finally to put it fully into practice. This really does mean a *retraining*, as Subhuti expresses it, and I ask you all to take this very seriously.

As this paper shows, ordination is the crux of our whole system of spiritual life and practice. From the moment of a person's first contact with our movement, he or she should be able to discover a comprehensive and balanced approach that is appropriate to them, which leads them at the appropriate time to enter the Order. I ask all Dharmacharis and Dharmacharinis to look carefully at everything that is taught in the Triratna Community to make sure it does indeed contribute fully to this system of practice – and I am very pleased indeed that the International Council of the Triratna Buddhist Community has initiated a movement-wide exercise of this kind.

And of course I urge you all to apply this system fully and deeply to yourselves: the Karmic work of integration and developing positive emotion, and more especially the explicitly Dharmic work of spiritual receptivity, death, and rebirth. If each of us does work diligently on ourselves in this way, then everything else will follow.

Sd. Sangharakshita,

Madhyamaloka,  
25<sup>th</sup> November 2011

## **INITIATION INTO A NEW LIFE:**

### **The Ordination ceremony in Sangharakshita's System of Spiritual Practice**

*Revised with Bhante's approval: 27/1/12*

The ceremony by which one becomes a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order is the crux of Ugyen Sangharakshita's entire teaching. In that ordination, with its two parts, public and private, all the elements of his presentation of the Dharma are distilled and ritually enacted. The individual undergoing ordination is usually profoundly affected by the symbolic resonance of all that happens and will sense the tying together of many threads of meaning and purpose. They will usually feel that their whole experience within the Triratna Buddhist Community has been a training for this moment: and one who has been ordained will spend the rest of their life as Sangharakshita's disciple, working out the full implications of what was germinal in that ceremony.

Over the more than forty years since the Order was founded, the nature of the ordination ceremony and the way in which it is understood has undergone a slow evolution as Sangharakshita's own particular presentation of the Buddha's teaching has become clearer and more consistent. I recall more than forty years ago my first visit to the Three Jewels Centre in Central London, then the only 'FWBO' centre. Entering shyly into the cramped and crowded reception room, I took refuge in the assiduous study of the noticeboard, on which was a document setting forth the ordinations available in the Western Buddhist Sangha, as it was then still called. There were four in all: Upāsika/īka ('male/female lay-disciple'), Maha-upāsika/īka ('senior lay-disciple'), Bodhisattva, and Bhikṣu/ṇī (monk or nun). Some three years later, Sangharakshita did indeed ordain one Maha-upāsika, for which ceremony I myself was present, and one Maha-upāsaka, who also took the Bodhisattva ordination.<sup>1</sup>

By the early 'eighties, Sangharakshita had made explicit that Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is the central and definitive act of the Buddhist life, repeated at every stage of one's spiritual journey and in every aspect of one's endeavour. Indeed, Going for Refuge can be seen as the application by the individual of a principle at work within the universe as a whole, an omnipresent evolutionary impulse that becomes self-aware in humanity. Ordination, in the Buddhist context, is the conscious and wholehearted embracing of this evolutionary momentum – an act of Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha that is effective because one has sufficient psychological integration to put one's full energies behind it.

There is then, Sangharakshita says, no need for different ordination ceremonies – the various kinds of ordination found in Buddhist tradition often representing a progressive loss of understanding of the full significance of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Having declared one's commitment and had that witnessed by one's teachers, one needs no more. One simply needs to work that out more and more fully

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<sup>1</sup> All who received these 'higher' ordinations have since left the Order.

at every stage and in every aspect of one's life. All this Sangharakshita first made clear in a talk, *Going for Refuge*, given in India in 1981, and later and more fully in *The History of My Going for Refuge*, published in 1988, showing his gradual development of the meaning of Going for Refuge and its relation to ordination. This he saw as embodied in the new Buddhist Order he had founded – then the Western Buddhist Order/Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, known today as the Triratna Buddhist Order. All four ordinations as set out in that notice I saw in 1969 are now condensed in one Dharmachari/ni ordination, that ordination embodying a lifelong and effective commitment to a Dharma 'career'.

This is the foundation of our present understanding of ordination in the Triratna Buddhist Order and therefore of the ceremony within which ordination is given. However, Sangharakshita considers that there is still some tidying up to be done, so that the ceremony is made fully consistent with his presentation of the Dharma and any ambiguities about its relation to other traditional rituals are removed. In a series of discussions I had with him over the last year or more, he explained how he understands the ceremony now and how he wants us to conduct it, and this is the subject of my present paper. He has seen what I have written and affirms that it does represent his thinking and his wishes, albeit in my words, not his. Although no major changes are called for in the theory and practice of the ordination ceremony, he considers that these subtle points are important and asks that they are fully digested and gradually implemented, under the direction of the Public Preceptors' College.

## **The Wider Context**

We need to start our exploration by placing ordination in the broadest possible context, recapitulating in brief key elements of Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma.

The Dharma life is lived to attain *bodhi*, the liberation from all suffering first achieved in our era by the Buddha Shakyamuni. It is carried out within the overall context of *pratītya-samutpāda*, the flow of dependently arising events that makes up reality in its entirety. Liberation is possible because there are currents within the flow that lead in the direction of Enlightenment, regularities or laws that, taken advantage of, lead to the attainment of what the Buddha attained. The Dharma life essentially consists in active cooperation with those currents that lead to *bodhi*. The regularities or laws that make Buddhahood possible can be grouped into two kinds, under the heading of the Karma Niyama and the Dharma Niyama.

Working with Karma Niyama processes involves recognising oneself as a moral agent and intentionally cultivating ever more skilful actions of body, speech, and mind, so that progressively more satisfying, subtle, flexible, and open states of consciousness emerge as their fruit. Such states will be more and more free from subjective or self-oriented bias and colouring, and thus more in tune with the way things are. This phase of the spiritual path culminates when one's karmic efforts have

conditioned the emergence of a consciousness that it is capable of absorbing fully the true nature of reality.

Dharma Niyama processes are first felt as a pull to self-transcendence or a glimpse of life beyond self-clinging – a first hint of *samyag-dr̥ṣṭi* or 'Perfect Vision', which often initiates the spiritual quest. They begin to unfold in a decisive way at Stream-entry, when the sense of separate agency is seen as an illusory construct, however essential it may be in the Karmic phase of the Path. There then emerges a spontaneous flow of increasingly non-egoistic volitions that unfailingly result in skilful activity. Before Stream-Entry, one works with Dharma Niyama processes by developing receptivity to the pull of that current within one's own consciousness, systematically cultivating devotion to whatever embodies that stream of non-egoistic willing, especially in the form of the Buddha and of his teaching. Above all, one makes a continuous effort to undermine one's own ego-clinging by seeing through the illusions that sustain it.

### **Stages of Commitment**

The Dharma life requires active cooperation with these Karma and Dharma Niyama conditioned processes that are ever present potentialities of reality. It requires a conscious and explicit reorientation of all aspects of life so as to build up the successive conditions for these processes to unfold. This conscious and explicit reorientation attains its fullest and clearest expression in the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, in which one commits oneself to becoming like the Buddha by cooperating with the forces of Karma and Dharma in inspired connection with the Arya-Sangha – which itself is a Refuge because it consists of those in whom the Dharma Niyama processes have become dominant: who have fully 'Entered the Stream of the Dharma'.

Commitment is gradual, engaging more and more of one's energies as one aligns oneself more and more fully with Karma and Dharma processes. Sangharakshita distinguishes five stages in this growing commitment: five levels of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. The **Cultural** level is not truly a commitment at all, because there is as yet no integrated moral individuality. It consists in a sense of allegiance to Buddhism and its values because it is part of one's culture and of the social group to which one belongs by birth and education. Through this identification one will be influenced to act in a morally positive way and that may eventually lead to the development of genuine moral self-consciousness. **Provisional** Going for Refuge arises in moments of temporary inspiration or insight, perhaps some glimpse of Perfect Vision, but this does not have enough weight behind it to be sustained. Nonetheless, one will from time to time make some effort to work with the Karmic and Dharmic kinds of conditionality and that sooner or later may enable one to commit oneself more effectively.

**Effective** Going for Refuge takes place on the basis of a compelling glimpse of what lies beyond self-clinging and of a sufficient integration of one's energies to constitute

a more or less consistent moral agency. One is then in a position to cultivate both Karma and Dharma Niyama processes in an effective and continuous way. However, progress is entirely dependent on a constant application of willed effort. When Going for Refuge is **Real**, Dharma Niyama processes are dominant, unfolding spontaneously through the individual who cooperates fully with them, overcoming successively more subtle depths of self-clinging. **Absolute** Going for Refuge is the point of Enlightenment itself, at which there is nothing but a flow of Dharma Niyama processes - of pure non-egoistic volition.

In this schema, it is Effective Going for Refuge that is critical. One might say that it is the real battle ground of spiritual life. Before this, at the Provisional stage, no systematic progress is made because there is no consistent and sustained commitment and therefore no consistent and sustained effort to cultivate the necessary Karmic and Dharmic conditions upon which progress depends. At the later stage of Real Going for Refuge, progress is spontaneous and further effort can only speed up a process that is already self-sustaining. To move from the Provisional to the Real stage requires the conscious commitment of Effective Going for Refuge. It is this stage of commitment that is declared and witnessed at ordination, because it is the stage at which one truly becomes committed to the spiritual path.

### **Stages of spiritual practice and progress**

Commitment to working with Karma and Dharma kinds of conditionality so as to achieve Enlightenment is expressed in the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. But how is that commitment to be put into effect? Of course, Sangharakshita draws on the basic teachings of Buddhism to expound his theoretical and practical perspective on spiritual life. However, the basis of his central presentation can be found in a lecture given in 1978, 'The System of Meditation'. Here he distinguished four stages of deepening practice: Integration, Positive Emotion, Spiritual Death, and Spiritual Rebirth. These four stages were his own reworking of Mahayana teaching, derived from Sarvastivadin sources, the 'Five Chief Paths', to which he attached new labels and a slightly different interpretation. Although in that lecture he cast them as stages of *meditation*, they are clearly to be applied more broadly as stages in spiritual life itself, to be worked at in all aspects of practice.

Each successive stage engages more deeply with the progressive trends in conditionality, activating the Karma Niyama processes first and then those of the Dharma Niyama. Each can only develop to its highest degree once the preceding stage has been made firm – this is a 'Path of Regular Steps'. The succeeding stage does not however leave the preceding behind but, so to speak, incorporates it and further fulfils it.

The **Stage of Integration** is concerned with cultivating a full experience of and responsibility for oneself as a moral agent, capable of working with the forces of Karma to develop a progressively fitter consciousness, in accordance with Karma

Niyama processes. This is achieved especially through the practice of mindfulness, beginning with mindfulness of the body and its activity – and in meditation particularly by means of the Mindfulness of Breathing. However, the social context in which one lives, as well as one's work and way of life, certainly early in one's spiritual efforts, all have a powerful, often decisive, effect on whether or not one develops integration, and thereby the succeeding stages.

The **Stage of Positive Emotion** consists in the systematic cultivation of skilful intentions and actions that bring the karmic fruit of a more finely tuned mind. This is the ethical stage and is fostered by applying the Precepts to one's activity and by cultivating skilful intentions through meditations like the Mettabhavana. In this stage one will be working more deeply at integration, working not only at what Sangharakshita calls 'horizontal integration' but also at the vertical kind, wherein one deliberately develops higher states of consciousness, such as the *dhyānas*. These purify and refine the mind by freeing it temporarily from the compelling fixity of the sense world, rendering it more and more fit to absorb the impact of reality.

In these two stages, one works more and more broadly and deeply with the Karmic trend in reality, creating the basis for recognising the truth of things and allowing Dharma Niyama processes to guide one's life. Integration and Positive Emotion are, one might say, ploughing, fertilising, and watering the soil so that sowing may take place and the crop may grow.

The next stage, that of **Spiritual Death**, is directly concerned with the cultivation of those Dharmic processes – the actual sowing of seeds. Its focus is on seeing through our misunderstandings about the nature of reality itself, especially about who and what we ourselves are. Spiritual Death means seeing through our habitual delusions, our automatic misreadings of our experience: seeing the impermanent as enduring; seeing the insubstantial as having essence; blindly believing that what in truth can only bring suffering if we cling to it is a source of real and abiding happiness; and finding attractive and desirable what is from the highest perspective repellent – being caught up with the *viparyāsas*, the 'topsy-turvy' views. These views prevent us from seeing the reality of our situation: that everything is, in fact, impermanent and insubstantial, and that true happiness cannot lie in any particular arrangement of conditioned phenomena – recognising the *lakṣaṇas*. Whilst we are misreading reality and acting, communicating, and thinking on the basis of that misreading, the conditions do not exist for the Dharma Niyama processes to unfold. As soon as we cease to be caught up in those delusions to any extent, then the Stream of the Dharma begins to flow.

Above all, Spiritual Death means dying, in the sense of loosening our illusions about ourselves and giving up our self-oriented clinging – recognising that such clinging is psychologically counter-productive, ethically compromised, and, most fundamentally, existentially deluded. This stage is primarily practised through reflection on the true nature of reality, especially by considering the *lakṣaṇas*, and through selfless activity

that breaks down the fixity of self-attachment.

Once clinging to the illusion of a separate and enduring self lessens, then the non-egoistic motivations of the Dharma Niyama begin arising and it is the function of the **Stage of Spiritual Rebirth** to allow and encourage these to flourish. One does this by imaginatively connecting more and more deeply with Dharma Niyama processes, especially as embodied by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, learning to rely upon the promptings of the Dharma as a living reality rather than on one's own narrow self-interest.

In the Mahayana exposition of the Five Chief Paths, the fifth and final Path is spoken of variously as the stage of '**No More Learning/Effort/Practice**' or of '**Spontaneous Compassionate Activity**'. In his 'System of Meditation', Sangharakshita offers no corresponding stage, however he does speak of the meditation practice of Just Sitting, which clearly relates on lower levels to this highest stage. In his system, Just Sitting is a balance to each of the practices connected with each of the four stages. Such practices involve conscious, active effort, but that must be balanced by the cultivation of a receptive attitude, and this is the function of Just Sitting. It is nonetheless possible to see Just Sitting, at its highest pitch, as implying a culmination of Sangharakshita's system too, representing the 'Fifth Path', that followed by the Buddhas themselves – although it is, of course, a 'Pathless Path'.

In the schema of the Five Chief Paths, this final step is described in negative terms as the stage of 'No More Learning, Effort or Practice'. One who Goes for Refuge Effectively must make a continuous karmic effort otherwise they will fall back from any progress they have made, perhaps even losing connection with the Path altogether. A Stream Entrant, however, does not strictly speaking need to make an effort, because the force of their insight into the nature of things will itself inexorably carry them to Enlightenment, traditionally within seven lifetimes. However, if they do continue to make an active karmic effort to act beneficially, cultivate skilful mental states, and deepen understanding they may traverse the remaining steps of the path more or less quickly, even within one lifetime. But once the stage of No More Practice is reached at Buddhahood itself karmic effort is unnecessary, because from now on the Stream of the Dharma will unfold unfettered by any karmic residues.

It is not merely that karmic effort is not necessary at this stage, it is impossible, because the conditions that create Karma are no longer present: there is no sense of self-agency – one might say that the question of effort or of non-effort no longer arises. There is now no sense of a separate, permanent self at all, only pure unfolding processes on the level of the Dharma Niyama. Thus this stage is also spoken of in positive terms as the stage of Spontaneous Compassionate Activity. There is volition but that willing contains not the slightest trace of self-clinging. It arises naturally as a creative response to the needs of the situation. This is *bodhicitta*, not in the sense of a consciousness that is motivated by *bodhi*, but here a consciousness that *is bodhi*.

We can now begin to see how ordination fits into the overall schema. When one Goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels Effectively one is committing oneself to gaining Enlightenment by working with Karma and Dharma Niyama processes – and it is important to stress that it is a commitment to working with *both* sets of processes. This is what distinguishes Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels from goodness and humanity in general – highly desirable and worthy as these undoubtedly are. All ethically good people work with the forces of Karma, whether from habit, upbringing, or conscious moral conviction. The best in religion or in psychotherapy is concerned with helping people to become skilful moral agents. When culture is healthy and education systems are functioning well, they strengthen a sense of moral responsibility, especially by enlarging human sympathy. A good and just society is one that functions in accordance with the moral principles embodied in Karma.

All of this is very important and needs to be strongly supported and applauded. People in general need to be encouraged to develop a sense of themselves as moral agents within a universe where actions have proportional consequences for agent and others. People need to know that their own happiness and satisfaction lies in acting skilfully. They need, in other words, to be encouraged to practise the stages of Integration and of Positive Emotion. But this will not amount to Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels – or at best reflects Cultural Going for Refuge: influenced by but not committed to the Dharma.

Provisional Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels arises when there is at least a glimpse of Dharma Niyama processes – one sees for a while that there is a current within reality that will carry one beyond self-clinging towards Enlightenment. When one is *convinced* that there is such a current and has the psychological integrity to place one's energies more and more fully at its service, then one will Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels and that commitment will be effective, insofar as one will steadily move forward on the path. One will still need to complete the process of integration and will need to continue developing positive emotion – or, perhaps better, skilful mental states. However, what distinctively marks this as Effective Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is one's commitment to and active work on the stages of Spiritual Death and Rebirth.

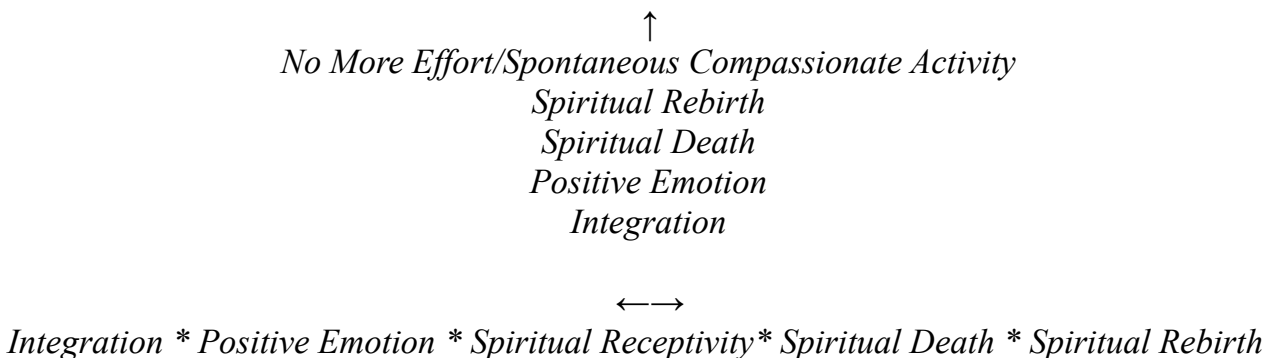
All this is crucial to the ordination ceremony itself. Its essence is the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels through the recitation of the Refuge formula and the witnessing of that act by one's Preceptor, thus ritually embodying one's spiritual commitment. But what is distinctive about this commitment is its implicit taking up of the practice of Spiritual Death and Spiritual Rebirth in an effective way. We will see later how Sangharakshita wishes to see this explicitly embodied in the ceremony through certain refinements to the way the ritual is understood and carried out. But first we must explore one more key perspective to prepare us for a full exposition of the ceremony as Sangharakshita now sees it. We must look at the horizontal dimension of Sangharakshita's System of Spiritual Life, because that too must be incorporated into the understanding and practice of ordination.



## The System of Spiritual Life

So far we have looked at ordination in the context of the system of hierarchical stages, first expounded as 'The System of Meditation', but here understood as including all aspects of spiritual practice, both in meditation and outside it.

Sangharakshita sees the elements of the system not only arranged hierarchically and sequentially, but also as present equally and simultaneously – not only vertically but horizontally. They can be seen as the principal elements of the Dharma life at all stages, from the stage of Integration through to that of Spiritual Rebirth - in the practice of a beginner as well as in the activity of a Buddha. Indeed, if they are not practised at lower levels it is impossible to engage with them with full success at higher. One must therefore at every step in Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels – whether Provisional, Effective, or Real – be practising integration, positive emotion, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. To these must be added a fifth element, the correlate on the horizontal axis of the final stage of the vertical. The vertical Stage of No More Effort or Spontaneous Compassionate Activity corresponds to the horizontal aspect of Spiritual Receptivity, as Sangharakshita discusses it in the context of Just Sitting.



**Fig. 1: The System of Spiritual Life, Vertical ↑ and Horizontal ←→**

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Our practice at every level and in all activities of our lives must include each of these five: integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. Inevitably the character of practice of each aspect will be different at each level: the higher levels will carry them deeper – one might even say that one only truly begins to practise them when Going for Refuge is Real and the Dharma Niyama conditionality has become dominant.

Each of these horizontal aspects achieves a new dimension of significance at ordination and a deeper commitment to their practice is implicit in the ceremony – and this needs to be made explicit in preparation for ordination and, once ordination has taken place, should be a major element in the connection between Preceptor and the one they have ordained. We need then to see briefly what each of these aspects

means and how it relates to Effective Going for Refuge and the ordination itself.

*Integration* as an aspect of spiritual life is primarily a matter of mindfulness and recollection – of deepening exploration of the four dimensions of awareness, described in Sangharakshita's presentation of *samyak smṛti*: mindfulness of self (body, feelings, thoughts), of others, of nature, and of reality. Initially, integration is predominantly a psychological and ethical matter: fully acknowledging one's own inner processes and outer action and taking responsibility for the effect one has on one's own mind and on the world around. At this stage one is primarily concerned with recognising and working with the Karmic kind of conditionality on the basis of a growing sense of oneself as a responsible moral agent.

Once one Goes for Refuge Effectively one will be practising mindfulness more deeply, striving to remain consistently aware of the true nature of whatever one's attention is directed to: seeing it as impermanent, insubstantial, and incapable of providing permanent satisfaction. One needs especially to recognise that whatever arises is, 'Not me, not mine, not my self'. This of course should not be an alienated awareness – a dissociation from one's self-experience for unwholesome reasons: one's awareness should have become sufficiently integrated before one ventures too far into this kind of reflection. This represents developing integration at the level of Spiritual Death.

Integration is practised at the level of Spiritual Rebirth by remaining consistently aware of the larger context of the Dharma, both as transcending self-clinging and as a force or current moving through reality towards Buddhahood. If one is Going for Refuge Effectively, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha will never be too far away from one's awareness and will be increasingly integrated into it.

If one has not been practising Integration in its earlier, psychological and ethical, phases, one will not be able to develop it in the later stages of Spiritual Death and Rebirth. An effective presentation of the Dharma will introduce beginners to the theory and practice of integration and, from then on, it should be possible for each individual to deepen their experience of it in accordance with their own needs, interests, and opportunities under the guidance of Kalyana Mitras and other teachers. A key factor in success at this stage will be putting oneself in circumstances that support one's efforts, especially in terms of one's social environment, and engaging in activity that is in tune with one's aspirations.

The aspect of *Positive Emotion* consists in the cultivation of skilful mental states and the actions that flow on from them. In the early stages it is practised by learning about the principles of ethics, summed up in the Five Precepts, and discovering how to apply them in practice. This requires one also to be fostering the wholesome mental states that underlie skilful action, especially *maitrī* and the other *brahmavihāras*, as well as faith in and devotion to the Three Jewels. The development of spiritual friendship and participation in Sangha are key aspects of this stage, especially

through involving oneself, as much as possible, in the institutions and activities of the Spiritual Community.

Once the individual Goes for Refuge Effectively, Positive Emotion takes on a new dimension. *Maitrī* becomes a matter of striving for self-transcendence, first seeing one's own self as equal with others and then subordinating self to *maitrī* as a transpersonal force. One begins, in other words, to cultivate *bodhicitta*. The practical consequence is that one increasingly feels oneself to be serving something that infinitely transcends oneself, often as embodied in work to spread the Dharma – for many Order members this takes the form of work for the collective project that is the Triratna Buddhist Community. One will cultivate a sense of a duty to the Dharma, which will be felt as more compelling than one's own personal likes and dislikes.

*Spiritual Receptivity* is perhaps the aspect among these five that requires most exposition, since it has not been explicitly explored before in these terms. It essentially consists in an openness to the progressive trend in conditionality, whether arising in oneself or in the world around. One who is spiritually receptive responds to ethical virtue, to purer and more refined mental states, and to insights and experiences that come from beyond self-clinging. Whatever individuals, symbols, images, or teachings embody or exemplify the progressive trend will evoke an answering appreciation, devotion, and emulation – something within oneself will resonate with the ideals encountered without.

Similarly, when impulses and experiences emerge within one that are the fruits of progressive conditionality, one will value and cherish them, without attachment. For instance, skilful actions will give one a sense of satisfaction and self-confidence and one may notice a certain smoothing of one's way in life. This karmic *punya* or 'merit' is to be accepted for what it is and noted as a spur to further ethical efforts. Similarly, when one experiences any degree of *dhyāna* or other *samāpatti* or positive experience in meditation, one recognises it as a fruit of one's efforts and as a confirmation of the progressive trend in conditionality. Finally, experiences of genuine self-transcendence, the fruit of Dharma Niyama processes, will be embraced wholeheartedly and one will give oneself up to that progressive current more and more fully.

Here what we need to work on is our *capacity* to respond. Spiritual receptivity needs to be consciously developed because we are often unaware that we even have a natural capacity for responsiveness to what is truly valuable as an innate possibility of our being. Usually it is our instincts and emotions, our likes and dislikes, albeit sometimes tempered by reason, that seem the only motivating force within us, but we have another and more integral faculty that responds to *qualities* rather than to the quantities that are the coinage of ordinary life. We experience this faculty at work in our communication and friendships, in our response to beauty in nature or art, and in the effect that noble or inspiring example has upon us. As I have discussed in my paper, *Re-imagining the Buddha*, this faculty for responding to value, whether in

terms of Beauty, Truth, or Goodness, can be identified as 'Imagination' or the 'Imaginal Faculty'. It is this faculty that one is learning to identify and bring into play when working on spiritual receptivity.

In his talk on *The System of Meditation*, Sangharakshita speaks of the meditation practice known as 'Just Sitting' as a balance to each of the practices that typify each stage of the system.

*And in all of these other meditations conscious effort is required. But, one must be careful that this conscious effort does not become too willed, even too will-full, and in order to counteract this tendency, in order to guard against this possibility, we can practise Just Sitting.*

He speaks of conscious effort being counterbalanced by 'passivity, receptivity'. Just Sitting is allowing a space to open up in which all effort is suspended and from which can emerge something new and even unforeseen, for the progressive trend in conditionality always gives rise to something more and higher than that from which it proceeds and is, in that sense, necessarily unexpected. Sitting silently without expectation, simply watching what is happening and accepting it without either grasping or rejection, this is the essence of the practice and it is the basic exercise in spiritual receptivity. It may be done in the context of formal meditation or it may be practised when sitting relaxing in an armchair, doing nothing. Sangharakshita even speaks of the value of boredom, since simply accepting one's lack of engagement and waiting, is the basis for deeper processes to unfold.

By the time someone is ordained, this natural capacity for responding to the progressive trend in conditionality should be a consistent element of their experience, identified as the vehicle of spiritual life. It should be given plenty of importance amidst daily activity and indeed should have become the principal guiding factor, present in all the other aspects of the system of practice, each of which, in its own sphere, also cultivates spiritual receptivity.

*Spiritual Death* as a stage in the hierarchical schema marks the point of transition from Effective to Real Going for Refuge, because it is on the basis of seeing through the illusion of a permanent and independent self that one enters the Stream of the Dharma, as Dharma Niyama processes become the dominant motivating power within one. However, one cannot generally make that transition unless one has done a great deal of work on this dimension of spiritual practice from the very outset.

From first engaging with the Dharma one needs to be learning its perspective on the nature of reality, especially in terms of *pratītya-samutpāda* in its reactive and creative modes, together with how it is played out in terms of each of the Five Niyamas, and of the Three *lakṣaṇas*. But one also needs to be reflecting on how these apply to one's own life. In many cases this will be a spontaneous and natural engagement with issues that deeply affect one's very existence, but it will also be beneficial, gradually and carefully, to introduce more systematic reflection on such themes. A very good place to start is the Buddha's own teaching of the 'five facts everyone should often

reflect upon', as recorded in the Upajjhatthana Sutta in Anguttara Nikaya, V.57:

*Whether one is a woman or a man, lay or monastic, there are five facts one should often reflect on:*

- 1. 'I am subject to ageing: I will grow old.'*
- 2. 'I am subject to illness: I will get sick.'*
- 3. 'I am subject to death, I will die.'*
- 4. 'I must be parted from whatever I love and is dear to me.'*
- 5. 'I am the owner of my actions (karma), heir to my actions, actions are the womb from which I have sprung, actions are my companions, and actions are my protection. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, of that I will be heir'.*

Practising in this way one will be increasingly convinced that one must commit oneself to the Dharma and it will be easier to recognise what ordination means – Effective Going for Refuge – and one will deeply feel that one must be ordained in order to make further progress.

At ordination, one is fully committing oneself to working with Karma and Dharma Niyama processes. All one's practice should include an aspect of Spiritual Death. One's daily meditation practice, to which one should be committed as a principal focus of one's endeavours, should especially include a strong dose of Spiritual Death. The Contemplation of the Six Elements, Recollection of the Nidana Chain, and Reflection on the Six Bardos are all practices recommended by Sangharakshita to deepen the experience of Spiritual Death and these, especially the former, should be engaged with from time to time on more intensive retreats. However, in principle, any practice can have this dimension and it is the duty of the Private Preceptor to work out with the person being ordained how specifically they are going to incorporate it in their regular meditation – as well as in other areas of life.

*Spiritual Rebirth* is the counterpart of Spiritual Death – with the latter one dies to the illusory self and with the former one is reborn to the emerging flow of Dharma Niyama processes, leading ultimately to Buddhahood. At ordination one begins to cultivate this stage very directly – and, of course, effectively, insofar as it becomes a living part of one's daily meditation and other practice. However, one cannot do so without considerable preparation and once more this aspect too should be represented at the earliest stage of involvement with the Dharma.

Connection with something that transcends our normal experience of ourselves is especially important because of the nihilistic emphasis of so much modern culture, from the perspective of which the idea of spiritual death can only seem like annihilation. If we do not have such a connection, our spiritual efforts are, at best, but the refinement of our own self-clinging. Yet such a connection should not be presented in a way that suggests some eternal god or other abiding essence. We need a connection with something that is numinous without being seen as 'noumenal' – mysterious, awe-inspiring, and supremely desirable, but not an unchanging

metaphysical existent. The Buddha himself, together with the ideal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that represent his Enlightened experience, is the commonest and, for many, the most effective embodiment of what lies beyond our self-based understanding. We can understand him insofar as he was human and historical, and we can acknowledge that he passes our understanding. The easiest entry for most to an appreciation of the Dharma Niyama processes is through the Buddha. Some however will have a felt sense of ultimate values, beyond form and concept, with which they are able to connect as living realities. These are however still related to the Buddha, for they embody aspects of the Buddha's own Enlightened experience and are known to us through his life and teaching.

Beginners need to be introduced to the Buddha, to learn his history and incidents in his life, to hear of the special qualities that make him a Buddha, to hear of his teaching, and to identify him through representations of him in statues and pictures. They need to learn to allow themselves to feel and express reverence and devotion to the Buddha and the archetypes that embody aspects of his *bodhi*. They need to experience a culture in the Triratna Buddhist Community in which such expressions of feeling are acceptable and even considered desirable, and are given appropriate form – again, this is especially important given the nihilistic and cynical cultural climate with which many will have grown up.

As people develop an imaginative connection with the Buddha and realise more and more deeply who he really is, they will Go for Refuge to him, taking him and what he represents as the focus and goal of their own lives. When this becomes effective, they can be ordained. At ordination they will take the practice of Spiritual Rebirth to a new level of depth and regularity, devoting themselves effectively to self-transcendence through openness to the Buddha and his Enlightenment. Their Private Preceptor will help them to do so systematically in their daily meditation in a way that is appropriate to them and, after ordination, will remain in continuing dialogue with them about how to progress further in this aspect.

### **Revising the Ordination ceremony**

We can now examine the principal elements of the Ordination ceremony in the light of the wider context and of the vertical and horizontal axes of the system of spiritual life. We can thereby see how Sangharakshita now wishes us to understand the ritual and to carry it out. I will examine each of the elements in the Private Ceremony, rather than the Public, since it is these that require some rethinking. Naturally, whatever is said of those elements of the Private Ceremony that are also found in the Public can be applied to it. All other aspects of the Public Ceremony require no specific revision.

**1. Training:** The ordination ceremony is the culmination of a training that begins from the moment of contact with the Triratna Buddhist Community – if it cannot be said to go back even further to impulses and urges that brought one to that contact.

From taking up practice within the Community, the individual will be working on all five aspects of the pattern of spiritual training: integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. He or she will have been given the basic tools of understanding and practice to deepen experience of each aspect. Teachers, Kalyana Mitras, and friends will be encouraging them to see how each is best developed in the light of individual character, interest, and aptitude.

Once an individual asks for ordination, they enter the ordination training, under the guidance of Public Preceptors and the relevant ordination team. This training focuses on educating them in the essence of the Dharma as presented by Sangharakshita and in the principles and practice of the Triratna Buddhist Order. At the same time, the ordination team, together with their teachers, Kalyana Mitras, and friends, will help them work with the five aspects of the system of training in a way that is appropriate to them. When those Order members who know them best consider that they are Going for Refuge Effectively, they will recommend their ordination to the Public Preceptors, who then make the final decision. By the time someone is accepted for ordination, they will have formed a special connection with one of their Kalyana Mitras, who will play a leading part in the final stages of their preparation, especially as regards the five aspects, and who will act as their Private Preceptor.

**2. Preparation for the Ceremony:** Once someone has been accepted for ordination, a new phase begins. In the months and weeks before the ceremony, the Private Preceptor will be discussing more closely than ever with the candidate the way in which he or she is practising each of the five aspects of the system of spiritual training, helping them to clarify their understanding and apply themselves more effectively. The effect of the relationship should be to give practice in all areas of life a sharper focus and a finer cutting-edge. There should gradually emerge a broad agreement between them about how the Mitra will be practising once they are ordained.

Of course, this should come about through sensitive dialogue in which special care is taken not to cramp or confine, taking fully into account the realities of personality and circumstance. Such an agreement should have plenty of room for growth as the individual discovers more about themselves and as practice unfolds and circumstances change. The two will continue in close dialogue about all this for the first few years of ordination, five years being the rough and ready guideline for the *nissāya*<sup>2</sup> period, during which the new Order member remains spiritually 'supported' by their Preceptors. During this time at least, all substantial changes to the pattern of practice should be made only after consultation with the Private Preceptor.

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2 *Nissāya*, 'reliance' or 'support'. In the monastic tradition, the newly ordained monk remains economically and spiritually dependent on their Teacher for five years, unless *nissāya* is formally renounced, as Sangharakshita was asked to do at his *śrāmaṇera* ordination. Within the TBO, there is an understanding that for the first five years after ordination, a new Dharmachari/ni should keep in regular and close contact with their Private Preceptor, consulting them on all major decisions before they take them and especially keeping in touch concerning the progress of spiritual practice, obtaining their Preceptor's consent before making significant changes to the pattern.

A major topic of discussion during this preparatory period will be how the Mitra is to practise Spiritual Death and Rebirth effectively, since ordination represents decisive engagement with these stages of spiritual life. Besides the application of these aspects to the details of daily life, the Preceptor and candidate will be trying to see how they can be practised in daily meditation. What emerges from these discussions will be the practice that the Preceptor will ritually introduce to the ordinand during the ceremony, and that, by undergoing the ritual, they will implicitly undertake to do every day. That meditation practice will contain a strong and explicit engagement with spiritual death and rebirth.

It is not especially important that it is something altogether new or that it is encountered for the first time in the Private Ordination. It may be that these preparatory discussions simply confirm or sharpen a practice that is already being done on a daily basis, perhaps giving it a new focus. In some cases, however, the ordinand may encounter their practice for the first time during the ceremony itself, although its basis will already have been fully discussed beforehand. What is important is that daily meditation after ordination is firmly connected to the ordination ceremony and contains an explicit element of Spiritual Death and Rebirth – and that it is maintained on a daily basis.

**3. Spiritual Receptivity:** The Private Ordination Ceremony usually takes place within the context of a retreat, whether short or long, which creates the right mood and atmosphere, often in a highly effective way. At some point in the retreat the Mitra who is to be ordained finds him or herself alone in the Ordination shrine-room with their Private Preceptor.

The ceremony opens with the making by the ordinand of the three traditional offerings of flower, candle, and incense, setting the mood of receptivity and reverence. Some verses of purification follow, further deepening this attitude, since true receptivity requires purity of body, speech, and mind. Negative karmic residues close one off from the progressive trend in reality.<sup>3</sup>

The ordinand then requests ordination of their preceptor, once more expressing receptivity, especially in the sense of acceptance of discipleship, both in relation to the Preceptor and to his or her Preceptors, going back to the founder of the Order, Ugyen Sangharakshita, and ultimately to the Buddha himself.<sup>4</sup> The formula is a traditional Pali one, again emphasising the ordinand's place as the recipient of a tradition. The exchanges that follow further reinforces the mood of receptivity, as does the continuing relative position of Preceptor to ordinand throughout the

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3 In these verses there is reference to 'the Sacred Mantras'. This requires clarifying insofar as some may not take a mantra at ordination. Here 'mantra', in the first place, does refer to those of the various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. However, Sangharakshita also considers that the term could be applied to the recitation of the Three Refuges and the like that serve the same function of connecting one with the Buddha and his Enlightenment.

4 Ordinands refer throughout the ceremony to their Preceptor as 'Bhante' (m.) and 'Ayye' (f.). Whilst these are the traditional forms of address used by junior to senior bhikkhu or bhikkhuni, by all bhikkhunis to all bhikkhus, and by lay people to all monks and nuns, the term is simply an honorific, more or less equivalent to 'sir' or 'madam' and has no necessary monastic connotation.



ceremony, the one very definitely leading and the other following: one giving, one receiving.

**4. Going for Refuge:** The recitation by the ordinand of the triple formula of Going for Refuge is the true heart of the ceremony. In a sense everything else could be dispensed with, since this in itself signifies the decisive transition from a Going for Refuge that is Provisional to one that is Effective – and seeking to become Real. This is the point, ritually speaking, at which the will of the individual is effectively aligned with the progressive trend within reality.

Going for Refuge has been fully explored elsewhere so it requires no further examination here – lack of words, however, in no way represents lack of significance.

**5. Undertaking the Ten Ordination Vows:** The Ten Precepts – in the ceremony termed vows to emphasise the weightiness of undertaking them at this point – are the extension of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels into every area of life. They are, it might be said, what Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels implies.

The Precepts themselves are another way of viewing the totality of the Dharma life. They thus correspond to the five aspects of the system of practice: integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. In taking on the Precepts one is implicitly taking on the pattern of practice.

**6. Witnessing and Confirming:** The Preceptor witnesses the taking of the Refuges by leading their recitation. He or she checks that the the ordinand has truly Gone for Refuge and in effect confirms that they have in a final exhortation, based on the Buddha's last words, *appamadena sampadetha* – 'with mindfulness, strive.'

This too is well-worn ground: the witnessing by the Preceptor of the ordinand Going for Refuge is what makes it possible. Again, lack of explanation here should not be taken as minimising the importance of this aspect of the ceremony.

**7. Commitment to a meditation practice:** At this point in the ceremony, almost invariably till now a mantra has been 'given', whereby the ordinand has been symbolically introduced to the practice of a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva. Whilst it may still be the case that many will take on such a practice, it will not always, perhaps even mainly, be so. What is to be 'given' is a practice that is appropriate to the individual, emerging in relation to their own spiritual experience, and explicitly worked out in terms of Spiritual Death and Rebirth – for it is these aspects of spiritual life and practice that Effective Going for Refuge distinctively engages with.

We have already seen that training in the Triratna Buddhist Community, starting at the moment of first contact, should offer the individual the tools and guidance they need to develop in accordance with their own nature and necessitates each of the five aspects of spiritual practice: integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity,

spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. In the months and weeks before ordination they will have been working with their Private Preceptor to focus their practice under each of these headings, both in meditation and out of it. By the time of the ceremony itself, it will be clear what their daily meditation practice will be, at least in outline, and how that is to be related to Spiritual Death and Rebirth – whether or not the final pieces have been put together before the ceremony or not. This should be a form of practice that they realistically can maintain in the circumstances of their life and that is closely connected to the direction of their own experience and aspiration.

Some people will, in the course of their training and preparation, have developed a strong connection with the Buddha or with one of the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that embody the qualities of *bodhi* – that embody the progressive trend in conditionality beyond all self-clinging or, to put it another way, the processes of the Dharma Niyama, functioning completely freely and spontaneously. If such a natural and mature attraction does genuinely exist then it may be appropriate for the ordinand to take up regular contemplation of that figure. However, if the figure is not the Buddha of history himself, it should be clear that whoever is being meditated upon is an aspect or embodiment of the Buddha's own experience. It should be deeply understood and felt that what is being contemplated is not really different from the Buddha Shakyamuni.

It should also be clear that contemplation does not necessarily mean *visualising* in the sense of seeing something with one's mind's eye – although for many it may. The accent should be on experiencing the presence of the Buddha or Bodhisattva, through whatever imaginative medium, and entering into a communication in which devotion and gratitude flow upwards and blessings and teachings flow down. This could be done using one of the *sādhana* texts authorised by Sangharakshita, or by means of traditional *Buddhānusmṛi* practices, or could emerge more directly from the meditator's own experience. The Preceptor and ordinand need to work this out between them and keep it under discussion. In many cases, the Preceptor may suggest that the ordinand speaks to another Order member who has relevant experience of that way of meditating.

The contemplation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva is, very clearly, a practice of spiritual rebirth, which itself implies spiritual death. However that latter dimension needs to be more explicitly drawn out and reflected on within the context of the practice, whether through a stress on the *śūnya* nature of the imagined presence or any other application of the *lakṣaṇas* to the experience. This too the Preceptor will need to bring into focus.

In this kind of practice a mantra may or may not be used – the mantra being, of course, the sound equivalent of the presence of the Buddha or Bodhisattva. The mantra may or may not be a traditional one – it should be a set of sounds that genuinely and deeply invoke the relevant qualities of Enlightenment for that individual. All this needs to be worked out between the Preceptor and ordinand before the ceremony.

Some people do not easily relate to a *figure*, yet do have a genuine sense of a transcendent quality, whether it be complete purity, wisdom, compassion, or simply total freedom from the *kleśas* or from the unwholesome roots. So long as that sense is clearly related to the Buddha, through whom we have access to those qualities, these too can be valid means of contemplation, implying both spiritual death and rebirth. Indeed, for some, a very simple contemplation of the ending of greed, hatred, and delusion may be enough.

All the practices commonly used within the Triratna Buddhist Community are capable of exploration in terms of spiritual death and rebirth. Mindfulness of Breathing can be carried out by means of the 16 stages of the *Anāpānasati Sutta*, thus drawing out the element of spiritual death. And the practice can be closely related to the Buddha, since he himself taught it – and it leads to the experience of *bodhi* that he realised. Similarly, the Mettabhavana involves giving up self-clinging, especially in the 'equalisation' part of the fifth stage, and the final expansion of Metta evokes the non-egoistic volition that arises when the Stream of the Dharma is entered. Explicit reflection on these elements will draw out spiritual death and rebirth. The same principles can be applied to other practices.

All of this will have been worked out before the ceremony so that Private Preceptor can finally decide what practice to give the ordinand. In the ceremony itself at this point, the Preceptor will lead a brief epitomised version of the practice, drawing out very explicitly the elements of spiritual death and rebirth. The ordinand simply silently follows the instructions, doing their best to put them into practice there and then. There is no need for the ordinand to repeat the mantra aloud after the Preceptor, since this is not itself an initiation. By virtue of undergoing this part of the ceremony the ordinand commits themselves to practising this meditation every day from thenceforth.

The practice taken on at this point in the ceremony has in the past usually been referred to thereafter as that person's 'visualisation practice' or their *sādhana*. Since many do not 'see' anything at all, even if they do undertake the contemplation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, 'visualisation' is plainly often not the appropriate term. *Sādhana* has usually been understood within the Triratna Buddhist Community in rather narrow and specific terms as referring to the kind of Buddha or Bodhisattva contemplation that has till now been undertaken at ordination. The Sanskrit word however has, among its meanings, a broader application to any form of effective spiritual practice ('leads straight to the goal'). We can thus extend our own usage of this term to include whatever practice is committed to at ordination for daily meditation, whether or not it involves the form of a Buddha or Bodhisattva.

**8. Initiation:** Effective Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels as marked in the ritual of Ordination is the first step in a new life. One is effectively 'born again' as one who has shifted the emphasis of their life from the *saṃsāric* round to the progressive trend

in reality, however far there may yet be to travel. This is not merely an inner change, but a change in public identity – which is of course more fully recognised in the Public Ordination Ceremony. This is truly a new beginning – entry into 'the family of the Buddha'. The whole ceremony then is an initiation – one might say, *the* initiation, there being no need for more since everything is implicit in it.

One has Gone for Refuge and that has been witnessed by someone who recognises what one is doing because they have done it themselves. That Going for Refuge has been worked out in the detail of life in terms of the Precepts, with their implication of the entire pattern of practice, and in terms of the specific daily meditation practice to which one is committing oneself. This is the basis for one's new life. The initiatory character of the ceremony is symbolised specifically by the giving of a new name that expresses one's new identity. The new name itself will have a definite Dharma meaning – and it does not matter whether or not it relates to one's own character: it is not a 'personal' name, but one that signifies one's entry into a life that leads beyond the merely personal.

The unity of the Order lies in all its members having undergone and remained faithful to this initiation, understood in the particular way that our teacher, Urgyen Sangharakshita has taught us, as set out here.

**9. Blessings:** The ceremony concludes with the chanting of the well-known Pali blessings. In chanting these, the Preceptor expresses his or her strong approbation of what has happened and desire for the future well-being of the ordinand – and this is a final acknowledgement of the effectiveness of their new disciple's Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. It is also a reminder of the karmic consequences of the highly skilful act of committing oneself in this way: as one spiritually dies more and more genuinely, so the beneficial forces of the universe will support and protect one, because one is aligning oneself with the progressive trend in reality.

### **Making the change**

Although all that has been discussed above amounts to no more than a clarification of what has gone before, it should nonetheless make a major difference. To a greater or lesser extent, depending on individuals and circumstances, there should be a shift, gradual and subtle, in the way ordinations are understood and carried out and the way Preceptors work with those they ordain, along the lines indicated in this paper. The process of absorbing what this means must start with the Preceptors, both Public and Private. In effect all will have to retrain in what it means to be a Preceptor, in as much as far more will now be expected of them. Many will have to learn how to work much more closely with those they ordain, both before and after the ceremony. They will need to help them understand more clearly how to apply the principles of the Dharma to their experience and to work more effectively with the processes that are unfolding within them.

If we can put what Sangharakshita is suggesting into practice more fully, new Order members will get much more support and training than they have done in the past and that will surely make the Order much stronger. Perhaps even more significantly, senior Order members who act as Preceptors will themselves need to train more fully and deeply so that they can face the spiritual challenge that is implied. They too will have to die spiritually far more deeply and really, so that they may experience themselves reborn in that stream of non-egoistic willing that is the *bodhicitta* – ultimately the only reliable basis for carrying out the responsibilities of a Preceptor.

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