

SANGHARAKSHITA IN SEMINAR

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS AFTER WATCHING CHANNEL 4 TELEVISION INTERVIEW

HELD ON THE PADMALOKA WINTER RETREAT 1985

Sangharakshita: I don't know if anybody timed that - I think it was about twenty minutes, wasn't it?

_____ : Twenty-five.

S: Twenty-five? I remember the original interview took about fifty-five minutes. So that means quite a bit has been cut. And this is perhaps partly the reason at least why some of the things that I have to say ended as it were rather abruptly. I just think that's where the cutting came in and they were in rather a hurry perhaps to move on to the next question. The lady did seem rather anxious to cover as much ground as possible. I was under the impression that they were going to use all fifty-five minutes. Whether they themselves were under that impression at the time but subsequently had to cut I don't know. But I just mentioned this to forestall any question as to why I didn't say more on any particular point. I was aware at the time of course that they wanted to cover quite a lot of ground but I think they have cut quite a lot of what I actually did say on some of the topics that were raised. I just wanted to make that point before, before some of you started asking questions. Questions arising out of this little interview itself.

First before you do that I should mention that the lady who was interviewing me, who was a quite kindly and sympathetic person, was an ex-nun. She'd been a Catholic nun for a number of years and she lost her faith. I don't know how she managed to do that. (Laughter) Quite an accident! But she had written two books. In fact I heard that one of the books, I think I saw the reviews, a book explaining or describing how she ceased to be a nun. I think it was called something like 'Over the Wall' or 'Over the Convent Wall' or something like that. But it was quite well reviewed, I think four or five years ago. She has written another book since and now she seems to be getting into television and especially into religious programmes.

But of course as you saw the title of the series was borrowed from William James, 'Varieties of Religious Experience', I think, the emphasis was very much on religious experience. I wasn't very happy with that. I went along with it because that was what they wanted. I tried to make a few points of my own during the course of the programme. But anyway if there is any sort of problem or question that one would like to ask on any of those points,

well, please fire away and Order Members please don't all speak at once. (Laughter) (Pause)

_____ : Karen Armstrong said that Buddhism denies the existence of God. Is Buddhism atheistic or merely agnostic?

S: Well, agnosticism is usually understood to mean that one doesn't know, one way or the other. But the Buddha certainly didn't say that he didn't know one way or the other whether a god existed or a god did not exist. I mean God, a God, God with a capital G, God in the full theistic sense. God includes the existing records. He did say quite categorically that there was no such being. There were gods but not God. No creator of the world. No creator of the universe. So I think there is no doubt that Buddhism is non-theistic. I think it's better to say non-theistic than atheistic because atheism in the West is usually associated with materialism perhaps quite wrongly. Quite recently even during the last few days no less a person than the Pope does have quite a bit to say about atheism and he clearly associates atheism and materialism and he attributes such things as violence and war and so on, to people's lack of religion, in fact to their atheism.

Whereas of course, if one looks at history one can find that plenty of people who fervently believe in God have in fact been responsible for a very great deal of destruction and human suffering. Whereas people who have no belief in God very often do not bring destruction or that sort of destruction and human suffering at all. So I think it is really quite unfair to think of atheism or non-atheism in those sort of terms as representing something materialistic, unspiritual, evil and irreligious and immoral and all the rest of it. We're thinking of sending a letter to the Pope. (Laughter) I think this is one of the fundamental lessons taught by a study of comparative religion. That ethical life is not a monopoly of theistic faiths. It's far from being a monopoly of theistic faiths. (Pause)

_____ : Have you given any more thought to the quotation in St. John of the Cross about visions being possibly insane and undisciplined mischief.

S: Well, no, I haven't given any further thought but I have read the works of St. John of the Cross but that was years ago. I don't remember that particular passage. But of course it depends on what one means by undisciplined. That depends what one means by disciplined. I don't think that St. John of the Cross was talking about discipline in the more ordinary, as it were, ethical behavioural sense. I think he made that comment within the context of a discussion about mystical experience. So as a Christian mystic he would wish to be occupied with nothing else except the presence of God Himself. So he would regard a vision or anything of that sort as a distraction. Well in a sense a Buddhist would too.

So if one uses for example, undisciplined to mean any sort of movement of the mind which strayed from whatever you regarded as the Gospel or your spiritual life, well yes one could say to have visions, unless one regarded visions as the ultimate goal of one's spiritual life, then visions would be a sign of an undisciplined mind. Because it would mean that you were having what in fact you did not want to have because you could not help having those

visions and that is the essence of undiscipline. (Pause) Then when you sit to meditate you don't want to fidget, you've no intention of fidgeting but you fidget. That's lack of discipline. Or when you're trying to concentrate your mind you start thinking or wondering what you are going to have for supper, well that's a sign of an undisciplined mind.

And in the same way when you're supposed to be meditating on absolute reality, you happen to reflect on a Buddha or Bodhisattva, well that is a sign of an undisciplined mind. [Laughter] And if you're on the brink of realising Nirvana you have instead a vision of the Buddha, well that is a sign of an undisciplined mind. (Laughter) So there are degrees or levels of undiscipline. Well, undiscipline accompanies you all the way through until Enlightenment. (Pause)

_____ : When you were questioned about the vision of the Virgin Mary you said that 'deeper levels were being approached, I wouldn't say higher levels were being reached.' We often use deeper and higher as different ways of saying the same thing. What was the distinction you were trying to make there?

S: I think when I spoke about deeper there I meant simply the psychological subconscious. Subconscious in the sense that there is a part, or if you like, an aspect or a level of one's mind where impressions are retained of experiences that you've actually had in, as it were (). For instance I had seen a picture or a painting or a reproduction of a picture or painting of say the Virgin Mary or whatever. But I had forgotten it, nonetheless it had left an impression in, so to speak, my subconscious mind. That impression was capable of being revived if the appropriate stimulus was applied. In other words I was capable of remembering it or calling it up before me. But inasmuch as it is an impression which originally () n one's own experience, I speak of the subconscious.

And when I speak of the higher states of consciousness I speak of states above those which pertain to one's normal waking state. But of course, yes, I have mentioned this I think it's in 'The Journey to Il Convento', that one can use the language of the heights or the language of the depths, as it were, interchangeably. If you look outside it seems higher. If you look within it seems deeper. Just as - if you're standing on the shore of a lake, on the opposite shore there's a mountain, you look up to see that mountain. But if you look into the lake you see that mountain as far below you as it was in fact above you. So that which is higher to you in reality or higher than you in reality when you look within yourself is perceived as beneath you. So it's as though when we use objective language, when we're talking about degrees of reality in an objective sense, we use 'higher' in the same sense that when we are talking about degrees of relative within us we use the term 'deepest'. So the subjectively deepest coincides with the objectively highest. So I can use either language but one has to be careful of the context and make it clear whether you're speaking about inner experience or degrees of objective existence or reality. It's a pity she didn't ask me about that. (Laughter) She didn't actually, that wasn't cut. (Pause)

Did anybody see any other programme in that series, by the way?

_____ : I saw one on the Jewish mystic and she asked very similar sort of questions including ending with asking him about joy in the Jewish faith. (Pause)

_____ : I saw one on Sufism.

S: Who was the Sufi? Was he from the east?

_____ : Yes. I think he was from India.

S: Not Eliat Khan?

_____ : I don't remember the name.

S: Was he a very old man? (Laughter)

_____ : () (Pause) His name was Mohammed actually. (Laughter)

_____ : () (Laughter)

_____ : At the beginning of the interview you talked of what interested you about Buddhism was the timeless aspect of it. Could you say a little more about that?

S: I didn't that what interested me about Buddhism. I said that that was a feature of an early experience which I had had which she was referring to. She'd done a bit of homework. She'd read 'The Thousand Petalled Lotus' and a few other things so she was questioning me about the early experiences that I had after reading 'The Diamond Sutra' and 'The Sutra of Wei Lang'. I said that the experience itself had a timeless quality. It was that she was asking me about.

_____ : Your experience had a timeless quality or what you had read had a timeless quality?

S: No. It was my experience of the meaning of what I'd read which had a timeless quality. In the sense that it didn't seem as though it was something that I could look back to as though it had happened in the past. It seemed out of the time sequence altogether. (Pause) That's why I said one could really say that one had had that experience because to say that one had it would put it within the time of sequence whereas that was not the nature of the experience. The nature of the experience was not that it was within the time sequence. (Pause)

_____: Bhante, you said that the vision of Amitabha was important to the externals of your spiritual life. I assume as opposed to the internals. Could you say more about that?

S: Of course, you realise that I was, sort of, gently pulling her leg. (Laughter) But what I meant was that it did actually result in my travelling north and becoming ordained as a samanera and afterwards as a bhikkshu, so that at least I could be clear about but that was a definite external change. What internal change it brought about is more difficult to say. Perhaps I was sort of making sure that she didn't ask any sort of far out questions. (Laughter) Keeping her a bit at bay.

Actually the experience wasn't quite like that in the studio. Very often I noticed having had a few interviews now that one's experience in the studio doesn't always correspond to what one actually sees on the screen. She comes across on the screen as much more, sort of, eager beaver than she did in the studio. There was a bit of that in the studio. Unless of course she's in some shots had been redone or retaken. That's not impossible (Pause) In fact I think it's quite likely because she rushed her performance quite a bit. [Laughter]

_____: Can you give a definition for me between celibacy and chastity?

S: There is a dictionary difference though very often, of course, the terms are used as synonymous. The dictionary difference, so to speak, is that celibacy means leading a single life whereas chastity definitely means abstaining from sexual experience and sexual indulgence. So you can understand we usually do use the two terms as synonymous but originally it seems they were not quite the same. So if one wants really to talk in terms of abstention from sex one should speak in terms of chastity rather than celibacy.

Celibacy refers more, so to speak, to lifestyle, one might say and chastity to actual ethical behaviour. (Pause)

_____: Somebody told me that after the show the technicians came up and spoke to you, and thanked you.

S: That's true. Yes, I'd forgotten, they did. Yes, they did. Yes, that's right I remember now what they said. They said, "We don't usually enjoy these sort of things but we enjoyed this one." (Laughter) Quite a compliment (Laughter). There were about ten of them in the tiny studio, the studio was smaller than this lounge. There about ten of them. Nine men and one very silent young woman. I usually find technicians in recording and TV studios quite interesting. () (). I remember an experience I had when I was being interviewed, I think for radio, in New Zealand once, on my first visit, I think it was in Christchurch. The interviewer was very, very keen on getting me to admit there was God in some form or other in Buddhism. He didn't mind what form [Laughter] but only just agree to call by the term God. I was sort of steadily resisting this and the studio technicians were killing themselves laughing (Laughter obscuring the rest of the sentence). They were very pleased when I didn't.

_____ : Did these particular technicians elaborate as to why it had been such an enjoyable experience.

S: No. They just said this and off they went. Round the corner to the nearest pub I suppose (Laughter)

_____ : In 'The Thousand Petalled Lotus' you didn't refer to this experience, the timeless one, as an insight experience but in the interview you refer to it as an insight experience with a capital I. I wonder why in 'The Thousand Petalled Lotus' you hadn't referred to it in that light. Why you did this time?

S: I don't even remember what I wrote in 'The Thousand Petalled Lotus'. Due to the publishers I had to play around a bit with 'The Thousand Petalled Lotus'. To give a more rounded story I had to introduce here and there certain incidents that actually occurred before 'The Thousand Petalled Lotus' begins. So it may be that I just cut things down. I'm can't be sure. It's possible. Or it may be that sort of one doesn't evaluate experiences much at the time but looking back one thinks well I suppose it must have been such and such. Or as I said to the lady one doesn't engage in theological or psychological analysis at the time. Subsequently you reflect and try to evaluate things and place things. One finds that with quite ordinary experiences. When you're in the midst of them you don't quite see where they fit in to the total pattern of your life or what their significance is.

You might appreciate their significance only years later, but I'll give a little example of this, it's a much more ordinary type of experience. I mean, years and years ago, many years ago that is to say when I was just starting the FWBO I remember, I think this was when I was living at St. James' Lane in Muswell Hill or it might even have started earlier but I used to go down to Camden Town. At that time I'd stopped wearing my robes in public, it was just after that I think. I used to go quite often to Camden Town or down to Kentish Town and I used to just go into a café and have a cup of tea or sometimes I would go into a pub and have something to drink there. I did this quite a lot. I used to go down, well, three or four times a week, but always to this very seedy areas - cafés and (Laughter) pubs and so on and you know if you know Camden Town or Kentish Town, you probably know it's a very seedy area! (Laughter) With lots of very seedy people. You sit in some of these cafés, some of very seedy pubs and you see all sorts of strange people, you see very old ladies about seventy or eighty years, muttering to themselves over a cup of tea () sort of semi-drunk, () all that sort of thing - I need

not enlarge upon the descriptions - but some years later I was thinking, well, why did I do that? I must have had some reason, I think I wasn't, I didn't do it for any conscious reason, I just did it, I didn't think about it but subsequently I thought that what it signified was that, well I'd come back from the East and I'd lived a good life there for so many years, and first of all I'd come back to the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara and yes, I'd been in Buddhist surroundings, mixing mainly with Buddhists, I was wearing my robes, I'd been in a certain sort of set up, and even to some extent the same was the case when I started the FWBO, but I think what I was actually doing was I was trying to see that if I took away all the external associations of Buddhism, what was left. Do you see what I mean?

If say one wasn't any longer, of course, in the East, yes right, or wasn't in a Buddhist centre or wasn't say wearing one's Buddhist robes, and one was in the midst of people who were the antithesis almost of all that, well where was one's Buddhism? Did it survive? Was it external or was it within oneself? I think on reflection that that was what I was trying to see, or trying to experience. In theory it's got some connection with or significance for the starting up of the FWBO. But the point I want to make is I didn't think that at the time. I wasn't thinking, oh let me see this, or let me try to do that. It just happened. Subsequently I sort of worked out the meaning. So I think this is very often the case with significant experiences of various kinds. At the time we don't always realise what we are doing in the full sense. Because in a sense we do know what we're doing but what do we mean by know? We don't know in the sense that we don't consciously refer it to some wider pattern of interpretation within which it has perhaps its fuller significance. (Pause)

_____ : I was considering the Movement today and you said that if you knew then what you knew now, you would be more mindful about the thoughts you used to have. About your thoughts.

S: Thoughts?

_____ : Mm.

S: Uh-huh (Laughter)

_____ : Could you elucidate on that perhaps.

S: I can't remember saying this. (Laughter)

_____ : I must have picked it up from somewhere. I remember hearing it on one of the tapes.

S: More mindful about the thoughts. Well, clearly one needs to be mindful about one's thoughts. Without recollecting any particular instances, I'm quite sure that there is room for improvement in that respect. [Laughter] But why it should be so is probably quite obvious. In the sense that one needs to be as aware and as mindful as one can of one's bodily movements, feelings and emotions, thoughts and mental states generally and, of course, higher spiritual realities. I can't think why I might have said that. Perhaps I need to look at the context. But you say that I've said it in a number of tapes?

_____ : I remember recording it in a previous tape, and I was wondering perhaps if you could.....

S: I mean I've always been under the impression that mindfulness is one of the things I've concentrated on. (Laughter). But I might have just let slip something on that particular occasions. I'm afraid I can't seem to recall it. (Pause)

_____ : In the tape you talk about discipline at one stage, and you just comment that this self discipline and self-restraint are important. Do you think there's a stumbling block or particular stumbling block in the west or is it just something that everyone has trouble with.

S: Do you mean discipline or self-discipline.

_____ : Self-discipline, you talk right at the end of having to understand why are you doing things?

S: Yes, I'm thinking of course of self-discipline within a purely ethical and spiritual context. But in some ways within other contexts people don't find self-discipline so difficult because athletes all practise self-discipline, don't they? I mean train is an effort, training involves self-discipline. I mean you can't eat all the things that you would like to, you can't drink as much as you might like to drink, you can't perhaps even go to bed when you'd like to go to bed, you have to impose a certain discipline on yourself if you wish to succeed in that particular field and most athletes do. So I think we're familiar with self-discipline in that sort of context. I think very often artists and creative people impose the discipline on themselves but I think that it's within the purely religious sphere that the idea of self-discipline doesn't appeal to us so much. Perhaps because within the religious sphere, we're accustomed through our association with Christianity, we're accustomed to thinking of discipline as something which you are told. We tend to think that discipline is something that means that you're told what to do. In a sense there is sort of self-discipline within the older Christian ascetic tradition but isn't sort of very much in evidence nowadays.

So I think that people who get into spiritual life or are likely to come along to Buddhist centres, perhaps with a sort of hippy or semi or vaguely or remotely hippy background tend to think that well, spiritual life is doing what you feel like doing, letting it all hang out and all that sort of thing. They

don't think of it terms of self-discipline. But if you really do want to achieve a certain goal, especially when you want to achieve it within a certain period, say this lifetime, certainly when the goal is very remote and difficult, discipline and that means essentially self-discipline, would seem to be essential. So I think if one is serious about personal development and individual growth one can't avoid self-discipline. It has to be self-discipline by very nature of the process. You can impose discipline on a child. You can impose discipline on someone who is sort of physically subject to, but inasmuch as personal development involves development of consciousness, your individual consciousness, discipline in the religious sense, even in the ethical sense, can't really be imposed. It has to be self-imposed. That means you have to realise what is the goal that you want to achieve and you have to have a very clear idea of what the means to achieve it. That will necessarily result in self-discipline.

But, yes, perhaps people do associate discipline, including self-discipline, with just being told what to do. And they tend to react against that. But that's a reaction that they must get over, otherwise they will be unable to discipline themselves and if they are unable to discipline themselves in the sense of all practical sort of ways that the athlete does, in preparing for a race, they won't make much progress in the spiritual life.

This doesn't mean that you just draw up on say New Years' Day a whole list of do's and don'ts and stick to that strictly. I mean self-discipline must be more intelligent than that. You may do that sort of thing but that's far from being the be all and the end all of self-discipline. Well, for a lot of people discipline is a dirty word, like beauty is () I'm afraid we'll have to launder that word a bit (Laughter). Restore it to its original Christian purity. (Pause) Discipline only means that if you really want something you'll go all out to get it and will adopt the most effective means at your disposal. It's really no more than that.

_____: You mentioned in the tape the experience you had, or the vision you had of Amitabha as being quite necessary for your moving on or accepting accepting Buddhism.....

S: No, not accepting Buddhism because I'd already accepted that. But I was thinking especially in terms of monastic life and formal ordination. I use the word 'freelance' because I hadn't been properly ordained and so I was living among non-Buddhists. I was sort of retesting myself. So I took that particular experience to mean that the time was right for me to move up to North India where there were Buddhists, where there were Buddhist centres, where there were Buddhist monks and get in touch with them and see if I could not be ordained, as it were, into Buddhism formally or into the monastic life formally. This is what I took it to mean. (Pause)

_____: Bhante, in the interview the subject of fasting came up. And it was dealt with briefly. I was wondering if you still recommend an element of fasting to help progress in reducing cravings certainly as part of the disciplined life.

S: Well, most people eat too much anyway. So perhaps one might say that fasting..... Well, why should one use the word 'fasting', I mean, it's a question of, to begin with, of not eating more than you really need. So, maybe, get it down to that first, and fasting really means, in a sense, eating less than you need. So that you can experience that need, or even that greed. You see what we usually do is if we want something we just grab it. We feel hungry we automatically go and make ourselves a sandwich and so on and so forth. So when you fast it means that you are sort of inhibiting that automatic process. You don't just automatically give in to your craving. Well, it may not even be a craving. It may be actually a healthy hunger, but whatever it is you train yourself not to give into it automatically. In other words you train yourself to allow yourself space to consider well is it skilful or is it unskilful? Is it good for me to satisfy the need or craving or whatever it is or not? You allow that sort of gap to impose itself upon it. In other words fasting is, from this point of view, a sort of means of overcoming your mechanicalness or the mechanicalness of your reaction to the signals which are sent to you either from your stomach which means it's healthy, or from some other part of you - perhaps your neurotic mind - which means that it's not healthy. A signal which is sent to you saying 'Eat', 'Eat', 'Suck' 'Suck', 'Chew' 'Chew', 'Masticate', 'Swallow' and so on. (Laughter)

It's just a means of overcoming one's general mechanicalness of activity. I must also add this because I did experience it and I touched on it the interview. You do experience yourself to a slight extent, at least, as a bit distinct from the body. I mentioned that you feel a bit light, a bit ethereal and I think most of you who have fasted for a few days know this. But you also begin to experience yourself as a little bit independent of the body and the senses and material nutriment. You experience yourself more as a mind. Not in an alienated way, mind you, but just as a mind distinct from the body. Because very often we can't see the difference, because you say, well, me meaning the physical body. You say I dressed myself, we don't say I encapsulated myself in my clothes, or I hung my clothes on my body, you don't say this. You say I dress myself as though the body is oneself. And this is what we usually think and feel, but when we fast we have some experience at least that that is not quite the case, that we are distinct from the body, even though very much tied up it. (Pause)

(End of side one side two)

_____ : Bhante, do you think the importance of meditation as a stage of the spiritual path is undervalued within the FWBO?

S: I don't think it's undervalued in theory. (Laughter) Whether it's undervalued in practice is more difficult to say because one would need to do a survey of centres and communities, perhaps even co-ops and of course of individuals and you see what the standard of practice was. I don't think it's undervalued in theory. I rather suspect though the quality of practice is not what it might be. In the sense that people may well sit or they may well sit quite regularly. It's perhaps significant a lot of people talk about 'sitting'. Perhaps they don't dare to speak about meditation! (Laughter) You started off with that. (Laughter). So yes, maybe quite a lot of people do regularly and faithfully 'sit' but then the question is what happens when you sit and I think this is why I raise the question of the quality of the meditation.

I suspect that even in the case of those who sit, the quality of meditation isn't what it might be. I think there are mainly two reasons for that. One: insufficient preparation and two, insufficient determination. By insufficient preparation I mean, perhaps we don't get up quite early enough so you have to rush to the shrine, or perhaps you haven't made quite sure that your stomach is neither too full nor too empty, or perhaps you haven't given yourself time after say your work in the co-op or whatever, just to settle down a bit. Maybe you haven't, sort of, tidied the shrine or lit the candles slowly to get yourself into a devotional mood or maybe you've just not had the right sort of day, perhaps it's your fault, maybe not. So that I think is the first reason why the quality of meditation is not what it might be, insufficient preparation.

And the second, I would say, is insufficient determination. That is to say when you actually sit, when you've completed all the preliminaries and you've got into the shrine room, you've sat and you've adjusted your posture you don't as it were, wholeheartedly put aside everything else, quite definitely what you're going to do afterwards, what you were doing before, and really put all your energy in a very conscious way into what you're doing in complete determination that you're definitely going to concentrate, that you're definitely going to do your practice, and you're going to go all out to do it successfully for the whole of that period. I think there is not that sufficient determination.

In other words one begins to treat it as a bit of a routine and actually to think more in terms of, yes, sitting for an hour. Perhaps you don't believe you can get very far. I think you've got to have the faith that you really can. And I know many people had the experience that when they thought they were not going to have a particularly good meditation, actually they did have. Maybe they thought I'm much too tired, I'm much too busy and nothing much is going to happen this session, this sitting, but actually, no, it sometimes just happens that they have a particularly good meditation. And so you never can be sure.

So first of all there has to be adequate preparation and then that very definite determination. In other words the fact that one has to mention both these things means I think that meditation, the sitting has become a bit of a routine. It is just something that you go through. If you just eat food, you can just go through the process of eating and the stomach will look after the rest. But it's not like that with meditation, it's not that you just sit and your mind will just automatically do the rest. No it won't. You've got to make a definite, conscious, deliberate effort. You've got to put all your energy into it. You've got to go all out during that hour actually to meditate otherwise you won't have a particularly successful meditation. This is not to say that you're to strain or to be wilful but quite slowly systematically, deliberately, you just put all your energy and all your interest into that particular session, that particular practice. (Pause)

_____ : Do you think, Bhante, that we could actually encourage that more by having much more definite difference in the atmosphere in the shrine room than the outside, or do you think it's very much a personal thing. Could ...

S: What do you mean by different?

_____ : Well, it seems at the moment the shrine room is.... well I experience it , a sort of feeling lax, we're still fairly lax and fairly informal. I tend not to notice I'm walking through a shrine room door quite often. I don't ...

S: Well, you should notice really there's the shrine room door and there's the toilet door! (Laughter). You should notice. So, yes, certainly, one should be quite aware that one is in the shrine room, entering the shrine room. And so on and so forth and be, yes, to use that word, disciplined in one's behaviour, aware of the effect of whatever you may be doing or other people, don't sniff, don't fidget, don't scratch and all the rest of it, don't clear your throat too many times, do all that before you enter the shrine. Sit up straight.

Maybe - this is something I did mention a little while ago - Maybe people who lead meditation classes or sessions, should check, especially retreats or on retreat, should check up on people more. Especially those who do yoga, or know yoga, or are yoga teachers, especially check people's postures. Because quite often their postures are not all that they should be. Don't hesitate just to walk around before you begin and just straighten people up, or pull their shoulders back or put your knee in the small of their back (Laughter), do a small wrench (Laughter). Put them in a vertical position. (Laughter) If you see what I mean. And I think those of you who take classes or who will be taking classes, don't assume that beginners know it all or have remembered it all. Go over the basics again and check up on them that they're doing it right, because I think we have had at least one incident of someone getting all the way to Tuscany before realising, before finding out that he was doing the mindfulness of breathing wrongly. (Laughter) Because he had apparently done it wrong right from the start, three years previously, and no one had ever checked that he was actually doing it correctly, and it was only actually found out that he was doing it wrongly when he got to Tuscany.

So this isn't really very good, so it does suggest that people who lead not just beginners' meditation but meditation on any occasion that just check up, make sure that everybody knows the basic techniques and is doing them properly. I'm not in favour of people talking about their meditation experience, but I think it isn't a bad idea if more senior and experienced Order Members, especially those who are kalyana mitras should from time to time just check up quietly, how people are getting on with their meditation. Do you see what I mean? (Pause)

_____ : Why do you say you're not keen on people talking about their meditation experience. What sort of ...

S: Well, for several reasons. First of all, meditation experience is an inner experience and if you talk about it too much, you sort of externalise it. To that extent you almost lose touch with it. Or you can even get into arguments with people about experiences. Sometimes you can even become a bit

competitive. That means that a slightly negative association clings to meditation or to the meditative experience. So therefore one must to be very careful about talking about these things because you talk with people, there is always the possibility of disagreement. If you disagree over such things, well, it means that quite negative emotions come to be associated with them. That doesn't help you. So be very, very careful of who you talk about these things with and in what sort of situation. Don't talk sort of lightly, don't sort of announce at breakfast, 'Oh what do you think I experienced this morning', in a light sort of way. Take it quite seriously.

In the case of Order Members, well an Order Meeting is an ideal occasion to discuss these things if one feels that they need to discuss them (). (Pause)

_____ : Bhante, I notice some people like meditating for maybe an hour and a half and others for about forty minutes. And I believe you said in Tuscany that the leader who is leading the meditation can judge the length of times but I feel if I'm doing a longer session of mindfulness of breathing I just take it more easier but the way I work in everyday life is in sort of quick, sharp bursts and, well, what I was trying to get at is the nature of the people. Should one with a quick, sharp burst sit for an hour and a half or something like this?

S: Well, I think there are two situations. One where you're just practising on your own and you're the complete master of your time, well then you can sit as long or as short a time as you please. But if you're part of a group, especially when you're on retreat, well clearly there has to be a bit of compromise, and it's there where the skill of the leader comes in. That it shouldn't be so long that those who can only sit for a short time become really tired and not so short that those who are able to get more deeply into meditation become frustrated. There is something to be said for a bit of leeway so that those who want to sit longer can just sit on even after others have left the shrine. But this presupposes two things: one, the general programme permits that, say in this case of a morning sit, breakfast time permits that, permits some to sit on longer; and also that those who leave before the end do so very, very quietly and mindfully because it can be quite irritating to people who are sitting on longer. A constant, sort of tramp of tiny feet to the door and constant slamming of the door, the sort of creaking of shoes and whispered conversations on the other side of the door and so on - it doesn't help. So, yes, there is room perhaps for a bit of flexibility. This is part of the skill of the leader, able to keep everybody absolutely happy and give everybody just what they want. (Laughter)

But if you're by yourself, on your own there's no problem. (Pause) One thing I have been mentioning is in the case of beginners, especially it is important that you enjoy your meditation, so I think those who are taking classes or retreats for beginners should be careful to see that come the end of the meditation session that people don't feel 'Oh, well, thank heavens that's over now', they should rather feel 'I could have actually gone on for a few more minutes quite comfortably'. In that way they'll look forward to the next session rather than sort of dreading it and associating it with creaking joints and stiff backs, and surreptitious glances at their watch (Laughter).

As I say, it's all right for these Order Members sailing along up into the third dhyana, but (Laughter) what about us poor beginners still struggling with the five hindrances. (Laughter)

_____ : Were you suggesting that the Order Members are not to enjoy it? (Laughter)

S: Well, the Order Members are expected to go beyond the enjoyment of () (Laughter). Be full of compassion for their brother beginners.

Anyway we're nearly at the end. Any more, one or two final questions?

_____ : I would just like to ask a question with respect to meditation. There's a tendency in a meditation when you're reaching a certain point in the meditation when you begin to feel things moving, there is quite a tendency to stop, to withhold, to hold back. I find that experiences plus others, there is a tendency. Can you give some feedback on that?

S: This is something that happens I think one can say with everybody. Well, of course, with practise you become accustomed to reaching a certain point and of course the more often you reach that point, the more easy it will be for you to go just a little bit further than that point. So it is a question of bringing yourself to that point again and again, and sort of holding yourself at that point, for as long as you can, and then of course, gradually - this will probably happen sort of spontaneously - just going a bit beyond that point, and then finding that you can go beyond and come back quite safely. (Laughter) Because very often the feeling is of, well, things are getting beyond your control or you're sort of sinking or sliding into some great gulf which will swallow you up and you won't exist anymore. Of course that is exactly what happens (Laughter) After a while you won't mind. (Laughter) So you just have to accustom yourself with coming to the brink and then letting go. Which is obviously what you do every night when you go to sleep, and you're not afraid of not coming back so you can think of it in those sort of terms. You can come back. Of course one day you won't but then (Laughter)

Last question then.

_____ : You were speaking about how people when they first come to the Friends often, they're quite neurotic and

S: Less and less so. Less and less. (Laughter)

_____ : They start to become more healthy, so to speak. How does that relate to a more traditional application of the Dharma, that is of a monastic

situation? Which would be the more effective, if you see what I mean?

S: Are you asking if it's better to come in neurotic or... (Laughter).

_____ : No. No! (Laughter) No, what I'm asking is from the viewpoint of treading the spiritual path. Like for example we're a non-monastic as opposed to a monastic situation. Which is do you feel the most effective means ()?

S: Oh, I think I'd make you all monks tomorrow if you'd let me. (Laughter) It's much better if you can take it, but then it has to be self-discipline, you see. Whereas you see, in the East what traditionally has happened for a long time, is that your mother decides that you'd make a dear little monk, a super (Laughter). Love to see you in those pretty yellow robes. So she takes you by the hand when you're about 7 or 8 or 9 and she takes you along to a monastery and you're made into a sweet little monk and you don't have really much say, and you grow up usually quite a good monk, you're well trained and for that reason in Eastern countries they do look up to their parents and elders and they do their best but they may not be the greatest as monks.

I don't think so many people even now go into it as adults. I think many go into it when they're quite young and it's all bound up with their education. They receive much of their education in that way. Because in the past that was the principal way of getting an education as in Europe in the Middle Ages.

But, I mean, having said that I think that the sooner that one can get into a really positive situation and a really positive structure whether technically monastic or not, the better. I think especially when you're young you really do need the support of a good positive environment, and a positive helpful structure. I think to be left to your own devices is almost the worst thing that could happen to you when you're young. It's all right when you're older. So therefore I think if you can come into a men's spiritual community when you're very young, preferably in your early teens, well that's fine. That's ideal. And that in fact does seem to be tendency, that people do seem to be coming in earlier and earlier.

I don't really agree with the idea that you've got to experience the world and taste life and all that sort of thing, and make lots of mistakes before you can do anything right. I think that is all quite misleading. But whether it's technically monastic or not, I think you need to get into a very positive situation which gives you positive constructive help in developing all that is best in you. Once that has been done and you are really and truly an individual, and really and truly mature, well, if you think fit you can then go out into any situation that you choose and cope with it. (Pause)

Anyway perhaps we'll end on that note, because you will be sort of going out from this retreat back into the world for some of you almost literally, others less so, in quite a few days. (Pause)

_____ : Thank you very much. (Applause)

(End of tape)