

Commonality of Practice

Bhante's recent illness has reminded us that we face a future without our teacher. As we get closer to this major transition, if we are to remain a united Order and Movement it is important that we have what we need in place to pass through it as smoothly and effectively as possible.

Over the past five years, Bhante has been clarifying the fundamental principles of the Order and Movement. This process, which he himself described as a 'refounding of the Order', began with the conversation with Bhante in 2009, published as *'What is the Western Buddhist Order?'* where he described the Order as 'the community of his disciples', practising in accordance with his particular presentation of the Dharma. The main outlines of this presentation were then set out in the series of documents that followed, *'Revering and Relying upon the Dharma'*, *'Re-imagining the Buddha'*, *'Initiation into a New Life'*, *'A Supra-personal Force'*, and *'A Buddhist Manifesto'*.

This gradual re-clarification of the basis of the Order and movement brings us to a point where we can take a further practical step. One of the important suggestions Bhante makes in *'What is the Western Buddhist Order?'* is that the unity of the Order depends on there being a 'high degree of commonality' of practice, and teaching, among Order members. The clarification of the essentials of Bhante's presentation give us the opportunity now to work out how to make sure we have a coherent approach to teaching and practice that is at the same time authentic and alive.

At the heart of the discussion are some fundamental questions:

How do we maintain that 'high degree of commonality', whilst remaining open to the development and evolution of our overall system, and the deepening of our individual experience?

How do we balance the need for unity on the basis of the principles laid down by Bhante, and at the same time make sure that unity is alive and creative?

Over the last 12 months, Shabda discussions about the question of insight, and Liberation Unleashed, for example, have highlighted the need to find a way of evaluating new teachings and practices in a way that minimises polarisation, while protecting the integrity of Triratna's system of practice.

These questions have been looked at in some depth in other forums. At its meeting in Nagpur in February 2013, as part of a discussion on succession planning, the International Council discussed ways to support innovation while sustaining a shared tradition. And in May 2013, two meetings at Maes Gwyn with Subhuti and a range of Order members to explore 'commonality of practice' and the Adhithana syllabus found themselves dealing with the same issues. More recently, these questions have been discussed by the Preceptors' College, the European Chairs Assembly, and the International Council Steering Group*.

In consultation with the College, the International Council Steering Group has proposed a process for addressing these questions based on Bhante's thinking in *'What is the Western Buddhist Order?'*:

"The Public Preceptors need to discuss these matters [concerning new teachings and practices] very carefully, if necessary with me, and come up with some way of sorting out what is valuable from what is not. They need to evolve very clear and effective procedures...

...They would not necessarily have to do it all themselves: they could appoint others they considered best qualified for any particular purpose. And they would need to consult with other Order members carrying weighty responsibilities, such as the Chairmen and Chairwomen."

Following from this, the Steering Group is proposing a way of evaluating new procedures and practices. This would begin with a series of retreats at Adhithana, with members of the Preceptors' College meeting with Order members who have particular experience of the approaches that are being discussed, and a diverse and international group of other experienced order members with responsibility for teaching and training on the men's and women's wings of Triratna, from ordination training through to retreat and city centres.

We'll test this approach before using it more widely, by looking in detail at a two specific areas of practice where there are already significant innovations, not all of which are well assimilated: teaching and practicing the Spiritual Death stage of the System of Practice; and Mindfulness.

At the end of these first discussions, we hope that we will be able to:

- i. look at the lessons that can be learned from these new approaches and the issues and problems they might raise for us;
- ii. make recommendations about whether or not such approaches can add to Triratna's existing system of training, and if so how;
- iii. look at ways of communicating most effectively with the wider Order and Movement;
- iv. review the procedure of discussion and evaluation itself, and the principles underlying it.

If these first discussions are successful, we hope this approach will give us a way to evaluate and assimilate new practices in the future.

The International Council Steering group will play a coordinating role in the organisation and communication of these discussions. The first of them will take place early in 2014, and we will report regularly on their progress in Shabda and on the International Council web space on thebuddhistcentre.com.

So, while this process is unfolding, we would encourage wider discussion within the Order – in Chapters, at Regional and National Order Weekends and Conventions – focusing and reflecting on the same questions:

How do we maintain a 'high degree of commonality', whilst remaining open to the development and evolution of overall system, and the deepening of our individual experience?

How do we balance the need for unity on the basis of the principles laid down by Bhante, and at the same time make sure that unity is alive and creative?

Dhammarati

Chair of the Triratna Preceptors' College and the International Council Steering Group

*The International Steering Group is made up of representatives from each of the three strands of the International Council -

Preceptors' College: Dhammarati, Padmasuri, Saddhaloka, Yashosagar

Order: Parami, Mahamati, Amrutdeep

Movement: Viveka, Vajragupta, Vajrajyoti