

(I was invited to write the following little memoir as a contribution to a possible booklet to be published for Bhante's funeral. Plans then changed, so it now seems fitting to post it on the Remembrance page. I will also send it to Shabda for wider readership. With warm wishes to all at this strong time. Abhaya)

I first met Bhante one summer afternoon in August 1967 in the shadowy hallway of a country house in Surrey, where he stood welcoming the new arrivals. It was the first ever retreat run by the movement he had founded earlier that year. His complexion was dark, his hair thick and short. He wore ochre robes and black-framed spectacles. We shook hands. He was friendly and welcoming, serious but not solemn. Was he English or Indian? It was difficult to say. I had returned to England from a two year spell of teaching in Thailand, and was hungry for the Dharma. When a friend had read aloud to me verses from Evan Wentz's *Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, my superficial response had been sceptical. I was emphatic about having left religion behind, but a few days later I found myself in the bookshop buying a copy of the text. Somehow, the verses had penetrated my defences. Back in England, I was determined to find a group of practising Buddhists. One morning my wife pushed the *New Statesman* across the breakfast table, pointing to a tiny box advert on the back page: 'Friends of the Western Sangha: Buddhist retreat in Haslemere, Surrey....' We decided to go, in spite of the cranky detail, 'All meals vegetarian'.

The first event on the programme was a meditation session. We all sat on upright chairs, except for the weird few who sat cross-legged on the floor at the front. Bhante introduced and led us through the Mindfulness of Breathing, a practice which, he told us later, could take us quite a long way on the Path. This was the beginning of a delightful week of beginner's mind; it was like a long cool draft after years of drought.

That's how it happened for me: first the book, then the man. It was one thing to feel the spiritual impact of those verses my friend read out to me in Bangkok, muffled though it was by my rather cynical response. It was quite another to meet for the first time, in the flesh, someone who so clearly and powerfully embodied the Dharma. There was a palpable aura of magic around Bhante in those first couple of years of my friendship with him, an aura that gradually faded as my projections were withdrawn. Perhaps it was something to do with the fact that he was still quite fresh from his life in India. He seemed to have come from another world. But it was also the swinging 60s. With the heady smell of illegal substances in our nostrils and the music of *Sergeant Pepper* in our ears. it was a time of sudden melting into spiritual possibilities, At last we could grow our hair, and not be square. The zeitgeist suited Bhante too; no longer hampered by the stifling culture of the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, his energies were released for the great work ahead. Yet at the same time, there was something quite ordinary about him. He was very down-to-earth in spite of that magical aura; it was a curious even challenging mix. He moved so naturally between modes. There was a little incident on that first retreat, for example. The two of us were casually chatting about this and that, standing there after dinner with our cups of tea, when he suddenly injected into the

conversation that story he tells in his memoirs, about waking in the middle of the night to find a pit next his bed, with a man in deep trouble of some kind standing at the bottom. Then, he went on, the white letters of a mantra had poured out of his mouth to form a sort of rosary which descended into the pit so that the man could grasp hold of it and haul himself out of trouble. 'Yes, oh yes, strange.' ('Strange' was a word he often used for what I would consider utterly mind-blowing!). Then the conversation reverted to talk, say, about literary matters, dear to us both.

In his first letter to me, dated September 13th 1967, he gave me what I took as his first informal teaching. 'The pendulum will swing', he wrote. 'The whole secret, for quite a while, is not to let it swing too far, on the one hand, or try to immobilize it artificially, by brute force as it were, on the other'. From a distance of some fifty years, how telling that little phrase, 'for quite a while'! Yet he made it clear to me at the outset that he had no wish to be treated as a guru, strongly discouraging any tendency to project on to him. 'I can't be myself', he told me, 'until you are yourself'. It was straightforward human contact he hungered for. But it wasn't easy to avoid, as he later urged us to, the danger of conflating the ordinary human being with what he called 'the bearer of the archetype'.

Bhante shared a flat with Terry, a tall dark young man, intense and highly intelligent. One evening Terry introduced me to the *I Ching*, and told me about Gurdieff, Ouspensky and the Indian guru Ramana Maharshi, and where to find books about them. Earlier that year he had driven Bhante to Greece in his 'little bus', the '60s Volkswagen camper van. On my first visit to their place in Highgate, Terry treated me to a viewing of what Bhante called his Buddhist treasures, which they had brought back with them from India. One I recall was a beautiful rupa of Amitayus, the one that would grace FWBO shrines in the years to come (and that can now be found at 'Rivendell', our retreat centre in Surrey). That day Terry also gave me a few Bodhi leaves, one of which I still keep in the pages of an old commonplace book. Another young man I was drawn to at Haslemere in 1967, intermittently a companion of Bhante's – they went on writing weekends together – was Stephen Parr, who would be ordained as Ananda the following year. He worked as a technician for the BBC. This he considered a waste of time and was trying to persuade Bhante that it would be a good idea to give it up. What he really wanted to do was to devote his whole life to literary work. Poems came easily to him. After a few hours together on their writing weekends, Bhante said he would see a certain look suddenly appear on Stephen's face, a sure sign that inspiration was dawning.

Terry would never become an Order member, not on account of his untimely death but probably as a result of the deep distaste for anything to do with religion that had been implanted in him by his family conditioning. 'He doesn't like my monkishness', Bhante told me. He always called Bhante 'D', D for Dennis. Terry found in him a welcome soulmate; at last here was someone of like mind with whom he could discuss well into the night the matters of philosophical and spiritual significance that were so close to his heart. How desperately he was searching. Sadly, Terry was also deeply depressed, a condition which all those hours of discussion could only temporarily alleviate. Bhante did everything he could to relieve his pain. 'Sometimes', he said, 'I spend hour after hour in the evening with Terry, pouring energy into him'. Shortly after Terry's suicide in April 1969, Bhante

wrote to me briefly: 'I wanted to write to you about Terry, and in fact tried twice, but just could not do it'. A year later, sitting next to me in my car, he suddenly started weeping. Surprised and concerned, I turned to him, asking what was wrong. With tears streaking his face, he said, 'It's exactly a year since Terry died'.

Though he had his weekly duties at Sakura, the tiny Buddhist centre in Monmouth Street and was nearly always at work preparing a lecture or series of lectures, Bhante had, relatively speaking, time to spare. A year after that first retreat, I went to visit him in London and stayed the weekend at his flat. There was an ingrained smell of joss sticks in every room, and Bhante himself smelled of incense, his robes and hair fragrant with the scent of it. He took me to Highgate Cemetery where he glided, in his ochre robes, among fallen angels and decaying tombs, butterflies flitting about in the tall fragrant grasses. On the way back he said that 'these days', he felt ecstatic, pretty well all the time, and thought that with a bit of luck, it would become permanent. I walked beside him in silence, filled with a mixture of awe and envy as his words sunk in. There was an echo of this in a letter he sent a year later: 'I have been feeling very well recently, both physically and mentally. Most of the time I feel quite ecstatic, with a sense of the heavens opening'. With these incidents coming to mind as I set out to write this little memoir, I remembered a verse from the *Dhammapada* in the chapter on mindfulness: 'The mindful person, absorbed in superconscious states, gains ample bliss'. Just being with Bhante, just having the pleasure of his company and communication could get delightfully intense for me in the first two years of our friendship. Sitting with him once in his living room at Highgate and, I have to admit, taking myself by surprise, I blurted out with passionate intensity, 'I love you, Bhante'. It had nothing at all to do with sexual feelings. He responded, very gently, with a simple 'Ah!'. Maybe this was the same occasion as when, listening to his little transistor radio, he stood up and started to dance.

Memories change and conflate with time, like bubbles floating on the surface of a stream. At the same time the memories also vividly contrast. One of my more naïve projections onto Bhante was shattered one evening as I was driving him to Stephen's place for dinner. I had no idea how to get there and though his knowledge of the route was vague when we set off, I had complete confidence that his inner spiritual radar would guide us infallibly through the maze of London streets. After a series of increasingly frustrating wrong turns and cul-de-sacs, at each of which Bhante surmised that, 'Oh dear no, perhaps this was not the right way after all', my trust in his superconscious navigation skills was rudely and permanently shattered. Periodically he visited me and my wife, Val, in Bournemouth. We soon noticed a strange habit he had in those days. Both his conversation and his silences were punctuated with a kind of regular mantric grunt, a quiet subvocal 'Hmmm'. We guessed it might be his way of ensuring he didn't lose touch with those superconscious states. The first time he came to see us I showed him a small silver rupa of a strange looking figure wearing a hat like a bishop's mitre, which I had bought rather impulsively in Nepal. I didn't believe the stallholder's sales ploy when he assured me it was the Buddha, but I took the rupa and paid what he asked for it without bargaining. I had a plane to catch. 'Oh good', said, Bhante as I passed it to him, 'it's Padmasambhava'. Who was Padmasambhava? He placed it to his ear, rattling it. 'Ah, it's consecrated too'. It was

only later that I recognised with a little thrill that the figure was the same one as the coloured picture of the Vajra Guru which formed the frontispiece of *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*.

Bhante got on well with Val. From one or two things he said to me, I understood he was impressed with the stage of spiritual development she had achieved. Shortly after the birth of our daughter, he was, for a period, seriously considering setting up house with us. He had in mind a Queen Anne house in Laugharne, the village on the estuary of the river Tâf, where Dylan Thomas had lived. When I questioned him about it, the only communal activity he had in mind for us was an evening puja! I was astounded that he could even consider, monk as he was, or as I understood him to be, living with a family! It didn't come to anything, partly because we couldn't raise the necessary finances. When I thought about this years later, I saw how it related to something Bhante had written, perhaps in a volume of his memoirs, that in the very early days of the movement, he was content to be guided by intuition and see how things developed naturally, not thinking at all in terms, for instance, of setting up or encouraging single sex communities.

The characteristic that made perhaps the biggest impact on me was his unfailing mindfulness. He would write years later in a book of aphorisms that 'peace is a fire'. His mindfulness was a fire, glowing and beautiful. Striving to emulate him in this, I felt puny by comparison. On journeys he would wear his mindfulness rather like armour. I remember once travelling with him from his flat in Highgate to a meditation class at Sakura. It's not that he wasn't mindful before we went outside, more that, as soon as the front door closed behind us, he stopped talking and his level of alertness (yes, guarding the gates!) ratcheted up several degrees in the face of the potential distractions of the imminent journey from Kentish Town to Leicester Square. He sat opposite me on the Tube, wearing a maroon cloak over his robes, with a look in his eyes faintly resembling an animal keenly alert to danger, his attention not faltering for an instant. At the end of the journey back, as soon as the front door closed behind us, he relaxed back into default mode, mindful still, but at ease.

A sign that the early magic was fading came to me one day in the early 1970s. As more Order members appeared and the movement slowly gathered momentum, there were increasing demands on his time. I had 'dropped out' and we had moved to Cornwall. Bhante still came to visit us. Once he warned me, a few days before arriving, to be prepared for a shock. Restless with curiosity, I drove to Plymouth station to pick him up. The train drew in and the carriage door was flung open. There he stood, a mischievous gap-toothed grin spreading across his face, not dressed in his usual robes but in mauve drainpipe corduroy trousers and a pink T shirt. 'Well', he asked, 'What do you think?' I can't remember my answer, but I thought he looked drastically reduced: no danger at all of confusing the ordinary with the bearer of the archetype! But his magic manifested in other ways, and always would. It was more subtle now, as he got on with the work of drawing, through the institutions of the FWBO/Tirratna and with the help of the handful of men and women he had ordained, as many beings as he could into the Golden Light. Perhaps because I had only just been brought into the Light myself, it was the Entreaty and Supplication section of the Sevenfold Pujas that I found

particularly moving during that first retreat in Haslemere all those years ago. I can hear Bhante's voice now, as I write, his measured sonorous tones imploring the Buddhas:

May they remain here for endless ages, So that life in this world does not grow dark.

Abhaya April 2015