

WHAT IS A MITRA?

A talk given by Padmavajra at the Manchester Buddhist Centre on 06/09/02.

I am speaking on the subject of 'What is a Mitra?', and in a way I could go straight into talking about what a Mitra is, especially the new kind of Mitra. But I feel that it is really necessary, it is really important, to place it all in a context, to give it a kind of background. I think it is very important that we see what we do, whatever it is, in the widest possible and even the deepest possible context. I think very often we get lost in our lives, in our spiritual lives, because we don't see it in its context. We don't see ourselves in a context, a historical context, spiritual context, and so on and so forth.

Now, I am not going to give the whole context, that would take several lectures. But the context of everything that we do in our spiritual Movement we call the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order is of course the wider Buddhist tradition. And of course the origins of that tradition go back to ancient India, go back to the Buddha. And it is very important I think that we meditate upon, that we reflect upon, those origins, that we reflect upon the Buddha. Everything really in the entire Buddhist tradition pours out of the Buddha beneath the bodhi tree at Buddhagaya. The whole tradition pours out like a great stream from this man, Siddhartha Gotama, Shakyamuni, the Sage of the Shakyans, seated in the forest. Not as you see him in the thangkas, these lovely thangkas here, they are wonderful, but he wouldn't have looked like that. He would have looked rather rough I think and maybe even some of us might not have found him that appealing. He probably would have been a bit bearded even and his hair might have been quite long, wearing stained cloth robes, stained with mud, not nicely laundered, really stitched, freshly pressed silk or cotton robes. They would have really been quite rough. There is something, when you look at the early texts, almost of the shaman about the Buddha dwelling in the forest.

He had to go off alone, remember, he was deserted by his friends, he had had six long years of ascetic practice behind him and in that great aloneness, this man, this Siddhartha Gotama, attained bodhi, anuttara samyaksambodhi, supreme and perfect awakening or enlightenment. Which is often described in the ancient texts in terms of a sort of privileged, a unique, insight into the true nature of things. It is very simple the way it is put in the Udana where the Buddha expresses his insight just in terms of when things grow plain to the ardent meditating sage, his doubts all vanish like the sun shining in a clear blue sky. His insight is described as knowledge, a sort of privileged knowledge, it is described as the opening of the eye, or just simply the eye, it is described as light, as a light shining in the darkness. But the result of that insight of course is the experience of liberation, of moksha, liberation, freedom, even ecstatic liberation, his experience is described as the supreme bliss.

And of course that insight is inseparable from the emotions, in this case the transcendental emotions, of love, of compassion, of a very profound empathy with others. His insight is inseparable from love, his love and his wisdom are both sides of one coin. And then of course that enlightenment flows forth as energy, as creative energy, a sort of spontaneous energy. His energy just sort of flows forth. And it flows forth as activity, activity particularly in the form of communication, liberating communication, or, if you like, potentially liberating communication. It is very interesting, after his enlightenment, after his awakening, the Buddha spent the rest of his life just communicating the Dharma, communicating his attainment. He just wandered from place to place talking to people. Sometimes of course it would be a formal discourse, like a sort of sermon, where he would lay out the path in great detail. But very often he would just converse with people. It didn't matter who they were, it didn't matter what background they were from, whether they were poor or rich, aristocratic or peasant, men, women, whatever, he would talk to them, he would get into very profound communication with them. Not everybody of course was interested in what he had to say or responded to what he had to say, but many people did.

In the early days, when you look at the old texts, it is quite clear that there was very little organisation. In the

early Sangha the Buddha didn't sort of sit down and think up a whole set of rules for his community or something like that. He didn't, after his awakening, come down with sort of tablets and said, 'Thou shalt live like this'. In fact the very early communications of his teaching are very much to do almost with direct transmissions, if you like, of his transcendental attainment. So there was very little organisation, very little structure. All that emerges, all that grows, out of the Buddha's liberating communication, and out of the response of his followers to one another and to him. So it is very important I think to appreciate this.

If you look at some of the most ancient texts, you find these in the Pali collections like the Udana and the Sutta Nipata, you get the impression that the early Sangha was really very vital and alive and vibrant, and in a way revolutionary. The whole critique, for example, that the Buddha had of the caste system and the Vedic sacrificial tradition caused a revolution in Indian thought, in Indian religious life, in world religious life.

And it is quite clear as well that the early followers of the Buddha, when they entered into this profound communication with him, they would have an experience of something like conversion. There is a kind of oft quoted passage, you find it again and again in the Pali texts, in the ancient texts, and clearly originally it has the ring of somebody's actual experience, but it becomes sort of stereotyped throughout the Canon. Where somebody says, after the Buddha has communicated, whether it is just a chance conversation which has emerged into something else, or whether he has given forth a great discourse, the person says, 'Amazing, amazing bhagavan [which is often translated as 'lord'], amazing, the Dharma, the truth, has been set forth by you in various ways. Amazing. It is as if that which was knocked over, that which is thrown over, is set up right. It is as if a light, a lamp, has been lit in the darkness so that those with eyes can now see, it is as if the way has been shown to someone who was lost'. It is very interesting these metaphors that they used, they kind of break into poetry. They don't say, 'Well, that was a jolly good talk he gave and how interesting'. No, they are changed. The metaphors are all to do with putting things straight, things are now in order, or I can see now, or there is a way now whereas before I was lost and confused. And then after all that they expressed their feeling of, if you like, commitment to the Buddha and his teaching, their sense of the Buddha being at the centre of their lives, in these words, 'To the Buddha for refuge I go, to the Dharma for refuge I go, to the Sangha for refuge I go. As long as breath lasts I shall go for refuge'. So this of course has become the classic way, this going for Refuge the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, in which people become Buddhists. They recite these refuges. But originally it is quite clear it was an overwhelming spiritual experience for people, it was a kind of revolution in their consciousness. And that revolution in their consciousness was expressed in this language of going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

So, the vision that you have of what you might call early Buddhism, or really it has sometimes been called archaic Buddhism or I think Sangharakshita once called it pre-Buddhistic Buddhism, Buddhism before Buddhism. Of course you have to remember that the term Buddhism is a modern word, a Western word, the Buddha didn't found any 'ism' at all. What happens with the Buddha, he has a transcendental experience and he unfolds that, communicates that, to others. Others want to be with him, they want to practice according to that teaching. So there is not really any Buddhism at all, early Buddhism. You have got this man communicating from his experience and people responding to it and also not just practising but also communicating their experience as well.

But this vision of early Buddhism is not my own original vision, it is Sangharakshita's, Bhante's, vision of early Buddhism. And it is a great inspiration to him. And it was particularly important to him during the early days of his time in this country and when he was thinking of starting a new Buddhist movement, and when he started the FWBO in the 1960's. In fact he did seminars on some of these ancient Buddhist texts. And it is quite clear when you look at the seminars that he is sort of looking at those texts as an inspiration for us in the modern West. He insisted on going back on, on trying to discover that experience of early Buddhists, that experience of going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. But of course, for our time and our place.

So of course there is many implications to this. Many implications of trying to practise Buddhism for our time and for our place, in our time and in our place. We of course have to take into account the entire Buddhist tradition, we can't ignore Buddhist history. You go into any bookshop, I went into Waterstones today just to

check things out, and you look at the Buddhist section and you have got everything. You have got Pureland, Zen, Tantra, Theravada, modern Buddhism, you have got the whole works. You can't ignore that, you have to kind of make sense of it. But the whole Buddhist tradition evolves out of the Buddha's experience, and the experience of his disciples. It is an amazingly rich and varied tradition that took many turns in India and of course throughout Asia. These can often be very bewildering twists and turns when you look at all the different books on Buddhism. Sometimes you even wonder if it is Buddhism, you can't see any kind of connection between what is said about particular Buddhist traditions in particular Buddhist countries and the Buddha's early experience. But Sangharakshita, Bhante, believes that we must see Buddhism as a whole and take from the whole tradition and discern, if you like, the essential Buddhist principles that are being expressed in different ways, in different forms, throughout the whole Buddhist tradition. And identify those teachings and those practices that we can actually use, that express that essential movement from the mundane to the transcendental, that express in other words going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

This is why Sangharakshita speaks of the FWBO as being an ecumenical Buddhist movement, not in the sense that we are a kind of hotchpotch of all sorts of different Buddhist traditions, making a bit of a sort of mess of it, but more that we are inspired by the whole Buddhist tradition, but in particular we are trying to identify those teachings, those practices, throughout the whole Buddhist tradition which express that essential movement from the mundane to the transcendental.

That means of course just leaving aside what is local, what is particular to particular Buddhist countries, to particular times and places, no matter how well they might have worked, when they are irrelevant for our time and our place. We need to apply whatever Buddhist teaching we come across to our time and to our place. And we need to remember that we are in a very different world indeed from the traditional Buddhist East. As Buddhism has come to the West for the first time in its history Buddhism is operating in non-traditional conditions. And these conditions are now spreading throughout the world. We are operating in the industrialised, sometimes post-industrialised, secularised world, and it is a totally different place with completely different assumptions from the ancient Buddhist world which was a thoroughly traditional world where if you like religion pervaded every aspect of the culture, a very hierarchical world, and so on and so forth.

Being a Buddhist therefore in the modern world is a very great challenge indeed, it is a tremendous challenge. I don't think we often realise how heroic it is to be a Buddhist nowadays. It really is an amazing thing that you are doing, that I am doing. In a way if you were in a traditional Buddhist country you would have so much support. The kind of assumptions that you would have, if you were born in the old Tibet for example, all the assumptions within that society would point towards spiritual practice, Buddhist practice. It doesn't mean that everybody necessarily got up and did it, but actually if you did the support system is amazing. All the assumptions, they assume spiritual values. We are not in that situation at all. This is, by the way, the meaning of the word 'western', it doesn't just mean that we started in the West. The term 'western' is a kind of symbolic term for the industrialised, secularised, world.

And it is going to be very interesting to see how it will develop. I sometimes think of us Buddhists in the modern world as kind of archaic, we are going to be known as kind of archaic Western Buddhists, or archaic modern Buddhists, if you can have an archaic modern Buddhist, very sort of primitive. And hopefully in centuries to come when you have a fantastic kind of Buddhist world everywhere people will look back on our efforts and think, 'Gosh, they were really good those early Buddhists in Manchester, they were really trying to do something. And it was really difficult in those days but look how creative they were. Isn't that fantastic'. So I find this quite an inspiring thought, that we are in completely new territory if you are involved in Buddhism to whatever degree. We are doing something unprecedented trying to practise the Dharma in the kind of world that we are in at the moment. There is a painting of Sangharakshita which a friend of mine named Aloka painted which I am very fond of which kind of symbolises this for me, this whole way of thinking. It is very dear to a lot of us because it is how he looked in the mid 1970's and late 60's. He is wearing yellow robes but he has got really long hair. And that is incongruous I should say because if you wore monk's robes you

should have your head shaved. But I think it is a really important painting because it sort of shows him as a kind of transitional figure bringing this traditional teaching of Buddhism into the modern world, into the circumstances in which he found himself. It is a kind of picture, if you like, of Sangharakshita as translator.

So, yes, we are in strange times, we are practising Buddhism in strange times. But of course it is a great opportunity to create. A great opportunity to sort of start again, to start Buddhism again, as it were, inspired by the Buddha and the tradition. Because it has to be said that many parts of the Buddhist world have got, or even still are, rather stuck, rather stuck in the forms and structures that have sort of developed over the centuries. We have an opportunity to be able to create a spiritual community that is really vibrant and alive, we have an opportunity to create a world where spiritual values are central, where spiritual values, Dharmic values, permeate all things. A Centre like this is a fantastic creation. It is amazing. I was walking around Manchester earlier just to kind of get the feel of things, going to Waterstones, had a quick look in Gap if there was a sale on, a quick look in HMV, and, yes, looking at the good books as well in Waterstones. And you are kind of wandering around and all these people who were going shopping, and that is what it all exists for, to shop. They are the kind of temples, that is where the spiritual life happens for most people. Not really a spiritual life. But then you kind of walk in here and immediately you are in a completely different world, you are in a world where the Dharma is pervading everything. You look around and everywhere there is an image to remind you of Buddhist practice. Not just that, there is a whole atmosphere because this is where people practise the Dharma, where the Dharma is taught. It is an amazing thing. And incredible to be able to walk into a space like this.

So this is what we are trying to do in the FWBO, is to create these sorts of environments and to create in a way structures, institutions if you like, where people can come together to experience the Dharma vividly. Of course nowadays there are many Centres and communities and right livelihood businesses and retreat centres, and so on. But of course it is very important to remember what they are for, they are for spiritual practice. So at the heart of all these things, at the heart of this Centre for example, there must be a spiritual community, there must be people who go for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. And who are trying to communicate on the basis of their common spiritual endeavour, their Buddhist endeavour. Whatever their level of experience, whatever your level of involvement, for this place to actually work it needs to be full of people who live as a spiritual community at the heart of it all.

I can remember in India many years ago when Sangharakshita came back out when we were starting our movement out there, we call it in India Trilokya Bauddha Mahasangha. We didn't start off building centres and things like, we couldn't, we didn't have any money, we just started off doing lots of classes and retreats wherever we could do it, in all sorts of strange places. And I remember a talk that Sangharakshita gave, he gave this lecture and he was talking about why have we started to do this, why are we not building big centres and temples and things like that because some people think that is the way you spread Buddhism. And he said it is a bit like if you build lots of centres and you haven't got the people to actually be in them, you haven't got the spiritual community to be at the heart of them, it is a bit like having hospitals without doctors, which is a point that everybody listening to the lecture over there could understand. So in the same way, this building is fantastic but it would not be a Buddhist centre if there wasn't a spiritual community at the heart of it.

So this is why when Sangharakshita started the FWBO he decided he was going to start a Buddhist Order, a spiritual community. He wasn't going to start a society or a club or an organisation. He had no interest in starting some sort of organisational structure. What he wanted to start was a community of people who were sparked off by the Dharma, who were sparked off by the Dharma as he taught it. He was very clear about that. So he started an Order so that the Dharma could be practised and so that people could experience what it was like to come together on the basis of their going for Refuge. So that is what an Order is.

I know last week I think it was you had Sona here giving a talk on what is an Order member. Ordination into the Western Buddhist Order happens when you are effectively going for Refuge. This is a technical term, effective going for Refuge. Let's just say effective means here it has an effect, your going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha has an effect on your life, you have placed the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha at

the centre of your life. So they are affecting you, affecting you very strongly, you are living differently. Not necessarily changing your lifestyle, though that might be affected if it is a lifestyle that needs to be changed a bit. But certainly your values are different and you are expressing those values differently.

It is not an irreversible attainment this effective going for Refuge. When you become an Order member you don't suddenly become perfect. I am sure you are well aware of this, those of you who know the Order members at this Centre. Even though they are jolly good I am sure you know that they are not perfect. Effective going for Refuge means that you have been touched deeply by the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. I remember in the old days when we once asked Sangharakshita in an Order meeting how can you tell whether somebody is ready for ordination, he said, rather cryptically, well, you have to be able to see whether they have a reflection of a reflection of the transcendental, a reflection of a reflection of reality, in them. And we all said, 'Oh yea, that sounds good'. And I can remember for years talking about this and then it occurred to me a few years ago: what does that mean? It is an incredible thing to say. But yes, you are touched deeply by the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, but you need when you are effectively going for Refuge, you sort of realise, that you need to make constant effort to keep in touch with the effect that the Refuges have had on you, you need to make constant effort to develop your response to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. So an Order member is not a Stream Entrant, not somebody irreversible from enlightenment. He is not a saint, necessarily. I suppose it is possible that he might be, but they don't have to be. An Order member hasn't got it all worked out. He or she is somebody who is making effort, who are very strongly dedicating their lives to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. They might even be a mess. I sometimes look at my own life and I think, 'Gosh, I am a complete mess'. I don't necessarily mean a psychological mess. A very good friend of mine once described his own life as a mess in progress, and I thought that was quite good, I thought that was quite a good definition of what an Order member should be or even what a truly human being should be - a mess in progress, that it is not all neat and tidy and sorted out. The thing is that you are trying to understand yourself, you are trying to understand the Dharma, but you are in progress, you are working on yourself. So it is OK to be a mess and be a Buddhist. So if you are thinking that you are a mess then it is alright, so long as you are in progress. So an Order member is still in training.

So that is why a term which I wish we had used more, that is why our ordination is known as the Dharmachari, if you are a man, or Dharmacharini, if you are a woman, at ordination. So we are Dharmacharis and Dharmacharinis. Dharmachari or Dharmacharini means one who fares in the Dharma, one who is walking in the Dharma, or simply one who is practising the Dharma. And we use this term Order member, it would be much better if we spoke of one another as Dharmacharis and Dharmacharinis.

Now, everything I have said about effective going for Refuge and what it means to be an Order member has become clearer to us over the years.

I am going to tell you a little bit about my own ordination. I was ordained when I was quite young, I was 19 when I was ordained. I got involved in the Dharma when I was about 17. Which I don't think that is incredibly unusual. Sometimes people say, 'Oh, you must have been so special'. Well, I wasn't. It was just because people made the Dharma available to me at that age. And I am sure there is loads of teenagers who would respond to the Dharma. My ordination was an incredible experience. It happened on a weekend retreat. I didn't go away for four months on an ordination retreat. I went away on a weekend retreat. It was an incredible weekend in Thetford forest in a farmhouse in Suffolk. And Sangharakshita not only ordained myself and Ratnaguna, he did a seminar on one of the Songs of Milarepa. But the ordination itself was very special. I can't really in a way describe it, but all I can say was that I gained tremendous inspiration from the ordination. It was like being linked up to an incredible sort of surge of energy. I can only describe it in that way. Very strong, if you like, spiritual energy. I suppose I was given a real glimpse of something at the time of my ordination, I was sort of shown something incredibly rich, really quite extraordinary, a different way of being, a whole way of being that was quite different. And yet at the same time something that seemed incredibly familiar.

But I also have to say that I was a very immature vessel for all this and there was much to transform, and still

is. And looking back from the point of my ordination, and I think of my ordination every day, there has been a long meandering journey. Not alone, but with other Order members, with the whole Order if you like. Yes, I have been very devoted to the Dharma, I can say that, both in terms of my personal practice and personal effort, my own individual practice, I could have made a lot more effort but I have certainly made some effort. But also in working for the Dharma, working to communicate the Dharma, helping to spread the Dharma. I have been very actively involved in the Sangha and in the work of the Order. But having said that, there has been much error, many mistakes, both on my own and with others. Sometimes big mistakes, sometimes disasters, and moments of real crisis and difficulty. I never lost touch with the sort of vision I had of the Dharma but some really tough times. I won't go into details. And in a way a lot of confusion about what was I doing, what are we doing. I think things started to become clearer in about 1990. I was ordained in 1976. I think I started to get more of a sort of handle on things in about 1990. I think it wasn't just individual, I think many Order members from my generation, many friends of mine, started to get much clearer about things sort of around that time. So one has to remember that it is a collective exploration of the Dharma. But in my own case I can definitely say about 1990 the penny started to sort of drop. That is not to say that I have got it all sussed out and worked out, I certainly haven't. So we are working it out, mess in progress. It is a kind of collective thing as well. It is not that the whole Order has everything worked out, we are exploring the spiritual life, we are exploring the way a spiritual community works together in this modern world, in this strange world of ours. So that is very important and keep all that in your mind as we get to what is a Mitra.

One of the things I haven't mentioned about ordination is that it is an expression. It is very important, it is an expression in deeds and in words of one's deepest spiritual aspirations. That is what I certainly felt when I was ordained. I was expressing, as I said, the Refuge and Precepts after Sangharakshita, I was expressing to him and to other people, to other Order members and to people outside the Order, that going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is the deepest, the most important thing, in my life. It was very important to be able to express that. So the ordination ceremony marks that expression. It marks the public expression of those aspirations. That expression is seen, it is appreciated, it is affirmed and confirmed, it is sealed if you like in the ceremony by your Preceptors or Preceptor. They say, yes, this is genuine, your spiritual aspirations are genuine, they are real. And this gives great confidence to you. Your Preceptors are people who you respect, who you kind of look up to, and when they say yes, your aspiration is genuine, it really does mean so much to you.

Spiritual aspirations, aspirations to practise the Dharma, are often very tender things indeed, they really are very tender shoots and flowers. I don't know if any of you can relate to this. They are easily covered or choked by weeds, and easily blown and bashed by wind and rain. The most serious of these weeds and wind and rain are things in ourselves. Yes, it can be really painful when other people don't take our spiritual aspirations seriously. That is why spiritual community is so important, spiritual friendship is so important. But it is things in ourselves that I think are the most undermining. Our own doubts, our own indecision, even our own self-despising. Some people really seem to suffer from that. They really sort of undermine themselves, even despise their sort of better nature, their better impulses, and are very self-destructive. Sometimes it can seem, as you start to unfold, it is like this really little flower has kind of opened up and there is Mara kind of looking down and saying, 'Oh, a spiritual aspiration. Have that!'. Sometimes it really does seem like that. You kind of pop your head up, things are opening up, and then, squash. But if you give expression to your spiritual aspiration, especially if you do that formally and ritually, ceremonially, if you are ready to do that those aspirations grow stronger, they grow ever stronger. And even if you forget your aspirations, your spiritual friends, especially your Preceptors at the time of ordination, they never forget, and they remind you of it when you would rather not be reminded of it.

Now, expressing one's spiritual aspirations doesn't just happen at the time of ordination. Of course we need to give expression to our spiritual aspirations all the time, in all the things that we do. If we could do that, that would be wonderful. But some people feel the need to express their aspiration formally, ritually, ceremonially if you like, long before they are ordained into the Western Buddhist Order. Indeed, some people want to express their spiritual aspiration but don't actually want to be ordained in the Western Buddhist Order. And this of course is where the Mitra community comes in. So I can now begin to answer the question: what is a

Mitra?

But before I do, a little bit of background. I don't know how much you all know but some of you might be aware that recently the Order has redefined what a Mitra is. This is a very healthy thing, the fact that as an Order we can redefine some of our most cherished and long established institutions. We started what we used to call the Mitra System in about 1974. But the fact that we can change it and redefine it, and with the agreement of the whole Order world-wide, I think that says a lot for the sort of health of our Order. So to understand what it means to be a Mitra I want to tell you a little bit about how this notion of Mitra has developed.

As I said, it was introduced in round about 1974 or 75. And what actually started to happen was that there were very few Centres in those days. There was a Centre in North London, a Centre in Glasgow, a Centre had just opened in Brighton, and there was some activities in other places, but that was about it. And there was a Centre in New Zealand I think around that time. But more people were getting involved and Sangharakshita was finding that he couldn't have so much personal contact with people before he ordained them. So very tentatively he suggested that what some Order members could do, they could sort of sponsor people who wanted to get ordained. Sponsor in the sense that they would get to know them, and they would sort of help them into the Order, if they wanted to be ordained. But then his thinking sort of developed, it grew. And what he started to think was what would be really good was if there were as it were another level. So before people became ordained they become a Mitra and they would have two Order members who would be their kalyana mitras. Kalyana mitra meaning something like spiritual friend, mitra of course being the Sanskrit for friend. I think Sona was the first ever Mitra, he was the first person who went through this ceremony of becoming a Mitra and having two Order members who were his special spiritual friends. This became very popular.

In 1975 it was introduced at the Brighton Centre and I think there were about 12 of us who became Mitras and there were just two Order members who became kalyana mitras to us all. I know some of you are probably aware that we have a Kalyana Mitra system nowadays, it was rather different then, it wasn't the kind of intensity of contact that we look for now. And I can remember we had a weekend retreat, again at this farmhouse in Thetford forest, and Sangharakshita conducted all of these ceremonies. And he did a question and answer session for us about what being a Mitra meant. I don't remember all the details of that question and answer session, but one thing he said that was very clear and stuck in my mind was that becoming a Mitra was not necessarily a stepping stone to becoming an Order member. He said you could be a Mitra, as it were a special friend of the Order, for your whole life. It was a viable spiritual stage in its own right. He said some people may well see it as a preparation for ordination, they definitely see it as something they are going to become a Mitra and then become an Order member. I certainly felt that. But others would be just happy to be Mitras, part of this sort of community of people who had a special connection with the Order, and that was it. So the Mitra ceremony was the expression then of your connection, not only to the Dharma but in particular to the Western Buddhist Order.

And looking back at my time in Brighton, those of us who became Mitras at that time, men and women, certainly reflected those different flavours. I certainly wanted to be ordained as quickly as possible, I was 17/18, something like that, and I was going for it. Well, I thought I was. I certainly had that idea of myself. I wanted to be ordained as quickly as possible. But others, friends of mine, who became Mitras, part of our little community there, quite openly said I am not sure I want to be ordained, I don't want to be ordained. But they wanted that special connection with the Order, that was quite clear. We didn't sort of think that I was obviously a superior sort of Mitra because I was going for it and they weren't. We were just a really good group of people. And I have certainly looked back with a lot of fondness to those people and to those times. We were a very friendly and devoted little group of people who were involved in the Centre, people with very different backgrounds. People were married and with families, and others like myself who were single, living at the Centre, and so on. And we used to have great classes and retreats together. But there was a real range if you like of aspiration amongst us.

It was interesting what happened in Brighton especially, but in other Centres. So many people wanted to be Mitras that there just weren't enough Order members to become their kalyana mitras, so they just became Mitras and we just dropped the notion that you had to have two Order members to be your special spiritual friends in order to be a Mitra. It was just too difficult to organise. Later on that became just for people who were asking for ordination, that you had two Order members as your kalyana mitras. That is a whole other thing to talk about.

Over the years what a Mitra meant sort of developed. As I say, earlier on I tried to sort of communicate how our understanding of what we were doing has sort of grown. And I can remember at a certain point, I think probably in the late 70's, Sangharakshita started to talk that a Mitra needed to fulfill four criteria. That a Mitra would need to do a regular daily meditation practice. A Mitra would have decided that not only were they a Buddhist but they were definitely part of the FWBO and they weren't going to other Buddhist or other religious groups. A Mitra would be in regular contact with Order members. And a Mitra would be willing to help out with the activities of the FWBO in some form or other. And I can remember when he first spoke about these four criteria he spoke about them in a very broad, rather quite a light sort of way. He seemed to communicate them as sort of signs of a definite commitment to spiritual life. They were kind of signs that it was serious about spiritual life.

But over the years I think these four criteria, their definition became sort of a bit harder. And we added even more things to them. And over the years becoming a Mitra required quite a level of commitment, and a lot of people benefitted from that, there is no doubt about it. Some people were very happy with that. But others, it has to be said, felt frustrated. They felt frustrated because they had a deep feeling for the Dharma, a deep feeling for the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha actually. There they were coming to classes year in, year out, but they couldn't fulfill these four criteria, but they had a very deep feeling for the Dharma and for the FWBO. And they wanted to give expression to that, they wanted to particularly express that in a ritual, in a ceremonial, way, they wanted that aspiration to be acknowledged. But it couldn't because they didn't quite meditate every day and there was a bit of this and a bit of that.

So after quite a bit of thought and consultation and discussion within the Order we decided to change what it means to be a Mitra. And as I said, there is worldwide Order agreement on this, in Europe, India, North and South America, Australasia, we all feel it is time for a change. And ceremonies are happening.

In a sense, the way I see it, becoming a Mitra is a return I think to its original meaning, to the kind of experience that I had when I became a Mitra back in Brighton on 1975. Essentially, we are giving people the opportunity to express their spiritual aspiration, if you like, earlier on in their involvement with us. What we say now is that the new kind of Mitra must be able to make three as it were declarations. Not necessarily going out and shouting these in the street. It is more that you can affirm three things.

Firstly, that one feels that one is a Buddhist. Secondly, one is trying to practice the five great ethical precepts. And thirdly, one feels that the FWBO as far as one can see is the spiritual context within which one wants to further one's Buddhist practice. So I will just go through these three declarations, as we are calling them.

So first of all, one feels that one is a Buddhist. Essentially what this means is that you have come to identify yourself in some sort of way with the Buddhist tradition. You feel that you are a follower of the Buddha. For some people this might mean that they have a very strong response indeed to the Buddha's attainment. They have a strong response to enlightenment, to the truth, to reality, as embodied in the Buddha. They may even see themselves as definitely wanting to attain that, they definitely want to move towards that. For others it might be something much less full on than that. Maybe they admire the Buddha, they see the Buddha as a great example to them. For others it might be that the teaching of the Buddha makes sense, it just seems quite straightforward and they think, 'Well, if anything I am a Buddhist. It just seems quite straightforward and it is quite ordinary and down to earth'. However it is expressed, however it manifests, there is a resonance with the Dharma, there is a resonance with the Buddha. There is the beginnings if you like, or it might even be quite developed, of a Buddhist perspective, a Dharmic perspective, on life. It is as if a certain potential in one

has been activated. Something in you, maybe the seed of enlightenment has begun to respond to the rain and sun of the Dharma. And you want to express that formally, publicly, ceremonially. It is not enough that it is in your heart, you want to show it, you want to reveal it, because it is so precious, so important to you. You might even feel that it is even sort of essential to you.

So secondly, one is trying to practise the five great ethical precepts. So these are the great basic ethical principles of Buddhism. So I will just remind you of them . Abstaining from harming living beings, or love. Abstaining from taking the not-given, or generosity. Abstaining from sexual misconduct, or contentment. Abstaining from false speech, or truthfulness. And abstaining from drinks and drugs that cause intoxication, or mindfulness. So your identification with Buddhism isn't just an idea, you have been touched by the Dharma, and this expresses itself in the way you live your life. You have a feeling for these great ethical principles and you regard them as the expression of a truly human life, as the best kind of life. You might even understand from your studies, from your reading in Buddhism, that the Buddha is the perfect embodiment of these great ethical principles, the Buddha naturally lives according to these principles. So you try to practise the precepts, you work on abstaining from certain things, for example false speech, you try to make sure, it is not just a matter of lying but you don't minimise or exaggerate or whatever. More importantly, you are going to try to work on developing the positive aspects of the precepts as much as you can. And of course there is no end to that, there is no end for example to loving others. Maitri or metta is described as a boundless emotion, an immeasurable emotion, so there is no end to it. There is no end to the creative expression of loving kindness.

So working on the precepts will probably mean that you will practise meditation. It is very difficult to love others without doing the metta bhavana and it is very difficult to be mindful without practising the mindfulness of breathing sometimes. But the important thing is that you are trying to observe these great ethical principles. And you want to show that you are committed to doing that. So you want to express that aspiration that you are trying to live like that.

The third declaration is that one feels that the FWBO, as far as one can see, is the spiritual context in which one wants to further one's practice. So this declaration expresses your sense of connection with the Sangha, with Dharmacharis and Dharmacharinis, Mitras and Friends. You have feeling of friendliness, you might even have friendship with people in the FWBO, the people at your Centre. You probably go to classes, you go on retreats, and so on. You might even help out a little bit at the Centre, maybe even a lot sometimes. You don't only feel connected to Buddhism but you feel a particular connection with the FWBO, not that it is the best Buddhist movement in the world that has even been or anything like that. But it is the one, as far as you can see, within which you can practise, you feel comfortable practising within this context. If you like, it is the best one for you as far as you can see, it works for you, it makes sense to you. Of course, this feeling of connection with the FWBO might flower into developing very strong friendships with people. You might start to experience at times a strong sense of spiritual community, or what Sangharakshita has called on one occasion, a vital mutual responsiveness. Or he has spoken of Sangha as a common exploration of the spiritual world in complete harmony and complete honesty. So it is not just your practice, you are seeing your practice and other people's practice you sort of spark one another off. You might even want to be part of the work of the Sangha, of bringing the Dharma to others. However it manifests, essentially you feel comfortable with the FWBO, you identify with it to some extent. And you want to give expression to that.

So these three declarations in a way refer to three different aspects of the Dharma. The first one, feeling oneself to be a Buddhist, in a way it is the Dharma as view, the Dharma as a particular view or perspective on life. The second one, trying to practise the precepts, is the Dharma as practice. And the third one, feeling the FWBO is the context in which in which you want to practise, is the Dharma as context. They even correspond a little to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The first one, if you like, you are regarding yourself as a follower of the Buddha. The second one, you regard yourself as practising his teaching. And the third one, you are part of the Sangha of followers of the Buddha.

So if you feel ready to make these three declarations, and you would probably only feel like doing that after

some months of involvement, you can talk to a Dharmachari or Dharmacharini at your Centre, those Order members that you know, and you just talk it through. Just clarify things a bit, see what it means, make sure that it is what you want to do. And at the appropriate time, when there is a ceremony that can be organised there will be your Mitra ceremony. That will probably happen on a Sangha night or something like that, on some special evening. It all takes place in the context of the Puja. It is a very simple ceremony involving the making of offerings to the shrine, the offerings being the ritual expression of your aspirations. And by the time the ceremony is over you are a Mitra, a special friend of the Order. And a whole new phase in your spiritual life will open up.

I was sort of reflecting as I wrote this talk on my own Mitra ceremony. And it was a different ceremony to the one that you will go through if you ever decide to become a Mitra. It was a more private ceremony. But I have never forgotten what Sangharakshita said to me. He gave a little discourse, which will probably be part of your own Mitra ceremony as well, you will have a discourse from the person taking the ceremony. But Sangharakshita gave a little discourse and what he said I have never forgotten. He said after I had made the offerings, this is a ritual, this is a ceremony, and therefore it is an act. He said, referring to me, well, everything has been thought, everything has been felt, everything has been said, this is your first action in the spiritual life, this is you beginning to really act and follow through your aspirations. And then he said becoming a Mitra is like joining a dance. Up until this moment you have been in the wings and you have been watching the dance, and he meant a collective dance, he said you have tried out a few steps but now with this act, he kept emphasising action, now you are joining the dance. He said maybe one day you will get to the centre of that dance, but it begins with this act, with this act you join the dance.

The kind of image that came into my mind was of sort of dervish dances or something like that. These dances I have seen in India of shepherds, dungas, dancing. That is what floated into my mind. Whatever it is, it is a great image I think for being part of a Sangha, of a spiritual community. When you join a Sangha, when you become part of the Mitra community, you are dancing with others, you are doing as it were a spiritual dance. You are learning the steps of the dance. That means that you have to not just be aware of yourself but aware of others, creating a beautiful, a harmonious, whole. You are continually, it is dynamic. And of course there is great effort and yet great joy as well. Dance is a means, as you probably know, to ecstasy, even the expression of spiritual ecstasy. I have been looking at some Mahayana sutras recently where the Bodhisattvas, on hearing the Buddha's teaching, start dancing. There is even in Japanese Buddhism a traditional nembutsu, dancing the name of Amitabha. I think we should revive these traditions. But of course you have got to be profoundly moved by the Dharma, not drum and bass or something like that.

Sangharakshita was right, becoming a Mitra was like joining a dance. And looking back on my days as a Mitra, I think I was only a Mitra for about a year before I became an Order member, they were really very happy times. Looking back on that group of people, all the other people who were Mitras at our little Centre, there was a very good feeling of Sangha. Maybe not in the full blown sense, but a very good human relationship between us all. Based on our common devotion to the Dharma. And we learnt the Dharma, we were learning new things, we were going on a great adventure, we were learning these new steps in harmony with one another. We helped one another to practise. We had a lot of fun together. We also helped to communicate the Dharma to others. There was no pressure to do so, the Order members who were running the Centre didn't put any pressure on us to do that, there was just a lot of very good feeling around and we wanted to do that, we wanted to be like that. Everybody made their own particular contribution, everybody had their own particular expression.

But of course the dance doesn't stop. It goes on. If you go on in your involvement in the FWBO to whatever level you want the dance goes on. I think there is two forms of Avalokitesvara and you might have heard that the eleven headed and thousand armed Avalokitesvara is a kind of symbol of our Order. What we try to be as an Order is this figure who has a thousand arms reaching out to bring people to the Dharma. It is an image, that thousand armed Avalokitesvara, of individuality, uniqueness, everybody being unique and individual but in perfect harmony with one another. Well, there are forms of Avalokitesvara where he is dancing. There is a female form known as Kurukula who is a deep red goddess really with a bow and arrow and flowery

hooks. And she kind of allures people into the Dharma. And she is dancing, she is completely free and dancing. Well, our Sangha should be like that. There is also a figure, a red figure again, named Padmanartesvara, the lotus lord of dance. And he is dancing and his 16 arms are all holding red lotus to attract people to the Dharma.

So our dance won't just be with one another, won't just be for ourselves, it will be a dance that is attracting people to the Dharma, that is drawing people into the Dharma. Something very beautiful, very harmonious, which can really bring some harmony, some unity if you like, some meaning, to this very divided and very dark world of ours.