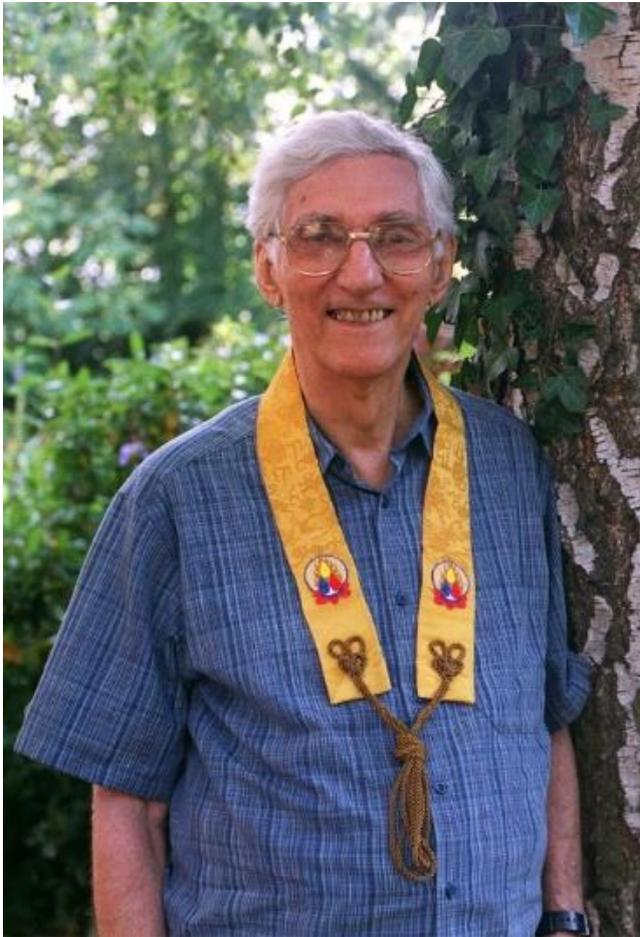


Account of Sangharakshita's life (Dennis Philip Edward Lingwood)



With great sadness, we announce the death of Sangharakshita, the founder of the Triratna Buddhist Order and the Triratna Buddhist Community. Here is a short account of his life and teachings.

Early Years

The man we know as Sangharakshita was born Dennis Lingwood in a working class family in Tooting, south London, in 1925. Aged nine, he was diagnosed with a heart problem (a misdiagnosis, it later turned out) and confined to bed for several years. He read prodigiously, discovering a passion for literature and educating himself with the help of an encyclopaedia. When he was sixteen and living in wartime London he realised, after reading *The Diamond Sutra* and the *Sutra of Wei Lang*, that he was a Buddhist. He joined the Buddhist Society, which was continuing to meet and meditate despite the bombs falling on the city.

In 1943 he was conscripted into the army and posted to India and then Sri Lanka. Once the war was over, he and an Indian friend, determined to take their Buddhist practice seriously, gave away their possessions, destroyed their passports and took to the roads as homeless wanderers, following a time-honoured tradition. They wandered the length of India for two years and met many, mostly Hindu, sages and gurus before they finally achieved their objective: ordination as novice Buddhist monks (sramaneras). Sangharakshita described this journey and his subsequent experiences in several volumes of memoirs.

India

With full ordination as a bhikkhu in the Theravadin Buddhist tradition, he received the name Sangharakshita, which means 'One who is protected by the spiritual community', and spent some time studying at Benares Hindu University with Bhikkhu Kashyap, an Indian convert to Buddhism who had become one of its most prominent exponents. He then settled in Kalimpong, a small town in the Himalayas, not far from the border with Tibet. Told by his teacher to "stay here and work for the good of Buddhism," he remained in Kalimpong for 14 years.

Throughout the 1950s many Tibetan refugees arrived in Kalimpong, fleeing the

Chinese occupation of their country. Sangharakshita met and learned from many Tibetan lamas, receiving initiations from Dharo Rinpoche, Dudjom Rinpoche, Kachu Rinpoche, Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Chatrul Sangye Dorje. He also studied Ch'an Buddhism with Yogi Chen, a Chinese hermit living in Kalimpong. His many Western visitors included the German-born Lama Govinda, and Sangharakshita found a strong affinity with his views on Buddhism, and especially on the place of art in Buddhist practice.

While in Kalimpong Sangharakshita read everything he could about the Buddhism of all traditions, his motivation being, as he later explained, to understand what the Buddha had communicated and the essential truths that unified the Buddhist tradition. He established a Buddhist magazine, 'Stepping Stones', which published the work of thinkers and scholars from across the Buddhist world. His own contributions, later published as *Crossing the Stream*, signalled many of the themes that would concern him for many years: the unity of Buddhism, the benefits and pleasures of a simple life, the importance of thinking for oneself, the aesthetics of spiritual life and the value of friendship. He was also critical of many aspects of the Buddhism he observed in Asian countries and called for radical reform. His most substantial work in this period was *A Survey of Buddhism*, published in 1957, which distilled his understanding of Buddhist teachings and presented all aspects of the tradition in a single perspective. He also wrote poetry in which he expressed his love of nature, his devotion to the ideals of Buddhism, and his emotional and spiritual struggles and victories.

Sangharakshita established a hermitage in Kalimpong, to which one of his teachers gave the name 'The Place Where The Three Ways Flourish', referring to the three major strands of Buddhist tradition. In this way, he established a distinctive, ecumenical approach to Buddhism, which drew on, but did not subscribe to, any one of its established schools.

In 1952 Sangharakshita met Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, who had been born as what the Hindu caste system termed an "Untouchable" (or a 'Dalit' in later parlance). Having trained as a lawyer he became independent India's first Law Minister and the architect of its constitution. In 1956 Dr Ambedkar converted to Buddhism along with thousands of his followers, escaping the identity allotted by Hinduism. But a few weeks later he died and his followers were left without guidance. Sangharakshita spoke to the grief-stricken crowds in Nagpur, the city where the mass conversions had taken place, explaining what being a Buddhist involved and encouraging them to follow Dr Ambedkar's wish that they live according to the Buddha's teachings. For several years he toured the cities and plains of central India each winter, giving talks and helping the new Buddhists to understand and practise the faith they now espoused.

Return to the west

In 1964 leading figures in the small Buddhist movement in Britain invited Sangharakshita to take over the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, and he returned to the west for the first time in many years. Encouraged by the growing interest in Buddhism, especially among young people, and stimulated by his renewed engagement with western culture, he decided to remain. His classes were popular, but it quickly became clear that he was not going to fit well into the British Buddhist

world.

While in India Sangharakshita had reflected on the prevailing orthodoxies according to which Buddhist practice, for monks, consisted of living according to monastic rules and, for lay people, of supporting monks to live in that way. Now that he was back in England, observing that people were apt to relate to him purely on the basis of his orange robes, he began to feel dissatisfied with the monastic lifestyle. Bit by bit, disagreements arose about approaches to meditation and Sangharakshita's way of presenting Buddhist teachings, and eventually matters came to a head.

Sangharakshita was forced to leave the Vihara and this spurred him to act on his instinct that a new approach to practising Buddhism in the west was needed. He moved his classes to the basement below a small shop in London's West End and the group that gathered around him became the nucleus of a new Buddhist community. In 1967 he founded the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, and the following year conducted ordinations into the Western Buddhist Order.

Establishing the FWBO

From one perspective, these activities were part of the wave of experimentation that characterised the Sixties. Sangharakshita let his hair grow, and wore his robes with a mixture of other clothes, or sometimes jeans and a sweater instead. He didn't look out of place amid London's burgeoning hippy life. But from another perspective, they represented Sangharakshita's distinctive approach to Buddhism. He recognised that Buddhism needed to adapt to the changed circumstances of the modern world, setting aside many sectarian and culture-bound features of individual Buddhist traditions, but not losing touch with its core teachings and values.

Sangharakshita gave talks on Buddhism and psychology, the arts, western philosophy and, experimentally, presented Buddhism as 'the path of the higher evolution'. He also gave talks, and later seminars, on classic Buddhist texts, which were eventually edited into his commentaries on works such as the White Lotus Sutra, the Diamond Sutra and the Satipatthana Sutta. At times, he explored matters of daily practice; at others he sought to make seemingly abstruse or esoteric teachings relevant and meaningful. His teaching was enlivened by his extensive knowledge of western literature and philosophy, and his wide experience of Buddhism.

Sangharakshita was working out his understanding of Buddhist practice through the development of the FWBO. Over many years of practice, reflection and contact with Buddhists of many schools, he had concluded that what mattered was not whether you were monastic or lay, but the degree to which you were committed to living in accordance with the ideals of Buddhism: the Buddha (the Enlightened teacher), the Dharma (his teaching) and the Sangha (the community of those who follow the Buddha's teaching). Ordination into the Western Buddhist Order meant making this commitment, or in the traditional phrase, "Going for Refuge" to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, which he came to consider the "central and definitive act of the Buddhist life". The Order was unified by this shared commitment, but it included men and women who followed a range of lifestyles: celibate, married or in a relationship, and single. From the very beginning, men and women were ordained equally, a

quietly revolutionary fact given the gender inequality in the Buddhist tradition as a whole.

Sangharakshita stressed the importance of a rounded spiritual development that included cultivating the range of what Buddhism calls “spiritual faculties”. Meditation practice had an important role, but it needed to go along with study, friendship, altruistic activity, ethical observance and devotional ritual. Sangharakshita explored the underlying meaning of all these aspects of practice, and sought ways to re-express them meaningfully. He emphasised, for example, the importance of following a “path of regular steps” in meditation, starting with developing integration and positive emotion and moving on to practices concerned with spiritual death (or Insight), and spiritual rebirth.

The FWBO’s growth

Inspired and challenged in equal measure, Sangharakshita’s students set about trying to live according to the teachings to which he had introduced them. Many of those who were free to do so lived in communities: mixed households at first, and later single sex; for some this was a creative alternative to family life. Some people established what came to be known as “Right Livelihood businesses”: shops, vegetarian restaurants and other ventures run by teams of Buddhists on an economic model of “giving what you can and taking what you need”. The most successful of these was Windhorse:Evolution, an ethical gift business that eventually employed 200 people.

The effort to develop fresh ways of living and working grew from Sangharakshita’s sense that new approaches and lifestyles were needed if Buddhist practice were to be effective in modern society. He was willing to think radically, provided the new forms still expressed an underlying commitment to the Three Jewels and were undertaken in the spirit of friendship (*kalyana mitrata*).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Order members also established FWBO centres across the UK and around the world. Important early milestones included the purchase of Padmaloka, a substantial retreat centre in Norfolk, which became Sangharakshita’s home for many years; establishing Buddhist and social work activities in India among Dr Ambedkar’s followers (1977); the opening of the London Buddhist Centre, a large centre in east London (1978); developing a three- or four-month long ordination retreat for men (1981 – a similar women’s ordination retreat came some years later); and founding Taraloka a retreat centre for women (1985), a part of a network of retreat centres and the first of several for women in particular. Arts events and Buddhist festivals were important aspects of the movement’s life, along with Buddhafield, which teaches meditation at summer festivals and runs its own outdoor retreats and gatherings.

Although the rapid growth of the FWBO’s early years slowed somewhat in later decades, at least in Europe, it has become established as a substantial, worldwide movement at the forefront of Buddhism’s development in western countries, South America and India. In 2017 it had activities in 26 countries and the Order had around 2200 members, about thirty percent of them in India. In 2010 the movement’s name was changed to reflect its internationality, becoming the Triratna Buddhist Community and the Triratna Buddhist Order. (Triratna means ‘Three Jewels’). Gradually, starting

in the late 1980s, Sangharakshita handed on responsibility for all aspects of the movement to senior members of the Order. A group of Public Preceptors undertook responsibility for ordinations, and in 1994 Sangharakshita moved with them to Madhyamaloka, a large house in Birmingham. In 2013 they moved to a substantial retreat centre in Herefordshire, called Adhithana. This was Sangharakshita's final home.

Later Years

Around 2001, Sangharakshita's eyesight deteriorated considerably and in his later years he suffered periods of debilitating insomnia. Nonetheless, he continued with his literary work and embarked on a final phase of teaching. Subhuti (a senior disciple), wrote a series of papers based on interviews with Sangharakshita in which he clarified the core elements of his approach to Buddhism: an approach grounded in the teachings of the historical Buddha while drawing inspiration from other sources; and offering a coherent approach to meditation and other forms of Dharma practice that was alive to the supra-personal character of Buddhist practice and the role of the imagination.

Some aspects of Sangharakshita's life and behaviour attracted criticism. After founding the FWBO he became sexually active with some of his male students and in later years some of those students felt he had let them down. Some people disagreed with his views on gender, and some Buddhists of other traditions believed that his decision to establish a new movement, rather than following one of the established Asian forms of Buddhism, was fundamentally illegitimate.

These criticisms have long been part of the discussion about Sangharakshita. However, those who knew him as students, disciples and friends principally remember Sangharakshita as a man of tremendous presence, kindness and wisdom: a deeply intelligent and sensitive man with a remarkably original and independent mind.

The Buddhist movement Sangharakshita founded will outlive him. Its history is just beginning, and its members envisage that it will grow into a truly distinctive Buddhist school founded upon his particular presentation of the Buddha's teaching and understanding of Buddhist practice. In India, Sangharakshita is widely seen as a key figure in the revival of Buddhism and the liberation of millions of people from the oppressive caste system. And Sangharakshita's many books comprise a further legacy. He published over 50 titles and his Collected Works are currently being published in 27 volumes. In addition to its merits in communicating Buddhist teachings, this body of writing has, for its admirers, a literary breadth and depth that is unmatched in other modern writings on Buddhism.

More broadly, in the course of more than 70 years Sangharakshita threw himself into the task of enabling Buddhism's transition from traditional Asian societies to the very different conditions of the modern world. His aim was to renew Buddhism by focusing on the essential teachings at the heart of the tradition and retaining its profundity as a sacred path. Through his practice, his writing and the community he founded, Sangharakshita revived Buddhism's spirit of friendship, commitment and depth.

Sangharakshita's disciples and friends rejoice in his merits and offer him their

heartfelt gratitude for everything he has given them, and their determination to continue the work he began.

by Dharmachari Vishvapani