

The Six Distinctive Emphases of the FWBO

Sangharakshita

I sometimes summarize these emphases of the FWBO under six headings. I don't necessarily always give them in exactly the same order, but let me run through them briefly just to remind you of them.

In the first place, the FWBO/TBMSG [Indian branch of the FWBO] is an ecumenical movement. Ecumenical is not really the best word in this connection but there seems to be no other, at least not in English. The word signifies that in principle we accept the whole Buddhist tradition as it has developed over the centuries in the East. It means that we do not identify ourselves exclusively with any one Eastern sect or tradition. We learn from all, we appreciate all, and we are inspired by all. We study as you know, Pali texts, like the Sutta Nipata, the Dhammapada and the Udana. We also study the great Mahayana sutras as well as works like the 'Songs of Milarepa' and the 'Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava'. At the same time we study them critically. We do not accept necessarily as gospel everything, every word that they contain. We try to understand what they are getting at. We ask ourselves what they really mean, what they are trying to convey, what they are trying to communicate. And we try to apply that meaning, to the extent that we are able to understand it, to the living of our own lives as Buddhists.

We have the same attitude towards the Buddhist tradition as a whole, that is to say, towards the Eastern sects and schools. Our attitude is one of critical appreciation. We do not necessarily accept them on their own terms and we certainly do not confuse the Dharma itself with the various national cultures in which the various Eastern Buddhist sects and schools happen to be embodied. Above all perhaps we try to see what those sects and schools have in common with each other and with ourselves. This in brief is what I mean by what I call the ecumenical attitude of the FWBO/TBMSG.

Secondly, we are a unified movement. We are a unified movement in a general sense and in a specific sense. In a general sense, membership of the FWBO/TBMSG is open to all. It's open to all regardless of nationality, race, colour, education, class or caste, cultural background, gender, sexual orientation, or age. I hope I've covered everything, otherwise someone is sure to find fault! All are accepted, all are welcomed, all have a place. All are seen and valued, by themselves and by others, primarily as individuals.

In a specific sense we are a unified movement in that membership of the Order, which is the heart of the movement, is open to both men and women on equal terms. We don't always realise how revolutionary this really is within the context of Eastern Buddhism. In traditional Eastern Buddhism, ordination (or it's equivalent) is not open to women. This is true of the Theravada, it is true of Tibetan Buddhism and it is true of Zen. Only in very recent times have some very small changes been made in fact made on the periphery in this respect. In the case of our own Order it has been one of our basic principles, one of our fundamental emphases, from the very beginning. And we should be proud of the fact. In fact I sometimes think that it's ironic that we, the FWBO and the Order in particular, should be criticised for our single sex retreats and single sex communities by people who do not give ordination to women on the same terms that they give it to men, perhaps don't give it at all. Such criticism I find extremely ironic coming from such quarters.

Thirdly, the centrality of the act of Going for Refuge in the Buddhist spiritual life. It is the Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels that makes us a Buddhist. To the extent that we Go for Refuge, to that extent we are a Buddhist. Going for Refuge is of course found in all forms of Buddhism, at least, references to it are found. But unfortunately it is often spoken of, at least in English, as Taking Refuge. This not only contradicts the plain language of the scriptures, where the word is gaccami, 'I go', it also has the wrong sort of connotation, a connotation of appropriation and possession, even of grasping. So let us be careful never to speak of Taking Refuge.

But though Going for Refuge is found in all forms of Buddhism, it rarely, if ever, has a central place in them. That place is taken more often than not by something else – either by monastic ordination for example, or by a particular kind of meditation or some other spiritual practice. In our own tradition

however, Going for Refuge is central. We seek to place the Three Jewels at the centre, at the heart of our lives and to orient all our activities towards them, directly, or at least indirectly.

I'd like to remind you of the four levels of Going for Refuge. There's first of all the ethnic or cultural Going for Refuge, then secondly there's provisional Going for Refuge, thirdly there's effective Going for Refuge, and fourthly there's real Going for Refuge. An understanding of these four is absolutely fundamental. Ordination represents a recognition, by our spiritual friends, that we are effectively Going for Refuge, at least effectively. But Ordination is not enough. We must not rest on our laurels. We are not as Order Members effectively Going for Refuge unless we also are making a serious effort to achieve real Going for Refuge, that is to say to gain Stream Entry or to achieve the arising of the real Bodhicitta. I shall have something to say about the Bodhicitta a little later on. We must therefore ask ourselves if we are really making that effort, really keeping alive the flame of that aspiration. Because if we do not go forward, inevitably we shall slip back, perhaps into a merely provisional, even a purely formal Going for Refuge.

And then fourthly, the importance of spiritual friendship. Friendship is a basic human need. Relations between friends is one of the six basic Buddhist relationships dealt with by the Buddha in the Sigalovada Sutta where the Buddha has quite a lot to say about the subject, especially how to distinguish the good friend from the bad friend. Without friends, good friends, one is hardly human, and without spiritual friends one can hardly be a practicing Buddhist. Spiritual friends help us to make spiritual progress. They encourage us when we're downhearted, challenge us when we're slack, inspire us when we lose touch with the ideal. They also help us in practical, even mundane ways.

In fact spiritual friendship, kalyana mitrata, is itself a means of spiritual progress, itself a spiritual practice. In spiritual friendship we learn to forget ourselves, our petty self-interest and concern. We begin to transcend the difference between oneself and others. Perhaps we get a glimpse of the Bodhicitta. Again all this is well known to you, you've all benefited at some time or other, very likely are benefiting now, from spiritual friendship, and perhaps you've all at times felt the lack of that spiritual friendship. So you all know what it is, so I'll say no more about it.

Our fifth emphasis is on team-based right-livelihood. Team based right livelihood businesses are one of the fundamental institutions of the FWBO/TBMSG, together with chapter meetings, public centres and residential spiritual communities. Recently I discovered that in the UK, the UK alone, there are thirty one team based right livelihood businesses, with 232 and 48 part-time workers between them. This is quite an impressive figure. It represents quite a magnificent achievement, especially when one considers how difficult it is to establish and run a business of this kind, and all those involved, whether Order Members or mitras are to be heartily, to be warmly congratulated on their efforts. They are pioneers, not only within their own movement but within the context of the wider society. They are pointing the way towards the development of a more ethical economic order.

Team based right livelihood businesses have four distinguishing characteristics. One, they provide those who work in them with a means of support. They do not pay wages or salaries, and they give each worker what he or she needs according to their individual circumstances. Two, they engage only in such activities that are ethical, ie. in accordance with the precepts. Moreover, the team based right livelihood businesses are run in an ethical manner, and the workers treat one another ethically. Three, they provide opportunities for the development of spiritual friendship within the work situation. This is particularly the case where the workers not only work together, but live together in a community. Fourthly and lastly profits of the business are distributed as dana, for the benefit of FWBO/TBMSG activities of various kinds.

Sixthly and lastly, we emphasise the importance of the Arts for the spiritual life. We emphasise the importance of culture, great music, literature, drama, painting, sculpture, architecture - all help us to broaden our sympathies and extend our experience. They enlarge our imagination, they refine and direct our emotions. At their best and greatest they may be bearers of spiritual values, values which are in principle identical with those of the Dharma, values which can help us to transform our lives.