

## A NOTE ON ROBERT BLUCK AND THE FWBO

By Urgyen Sangharakshita.

*British Buddhism*, by Robert Bluck, is a comprehensive and detailed survey of the British Buddhist scene<sup>1</sup>. The seven central chapters of the book are devoted to the seven largest organisations, from the Forest Sangha at one end of the spectrum to the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order at the other, each organisation or tradition being described in terms of its historical background, its distinctive beliefs and practices, and its organisational structure. The largest of the seven, according to the author, are the Soka Gakkai International UK, the New Kadampa Tradition, and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order.

I would have liked to write a review of the book, which is an interesting one, but circumstances oblige me to confine myself to a few remarks on Bluck's chapter on the FWBO.

On p.152 he says of me that I "began to learn about Vajrayana from Lama Govinda (the German-born Tibetan Buddhist teacher)". This is not true. While I certainly learned much from my friendship with Lama Govinda, I had encountered the Vajrayana several years before we met, when I came across Marco Pallis' *Peaks and Lamas*<sup>2</sup> and an abridged version of *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa*<sup>3</sup>. The latter made a tremendous impression on me. As I wrote in *The Rainbow Road*<sup>4</sup>, "As I read it my hair stood on end and tears came into my eyes. If I had any doubts about the nature of my vocation they were now dispelled, and from that time onwards I lived only for the day when I would be free to follow to its end the path that, as it seemed, had in reality mine from the beginning" (p.145).

In the course of his account of the historical background of the FWBO Bluck says of my exploration of the 1960s counterculture that it "included rock concerts, taking marijuana and LSD" (p154). I certainly smoked marijuana (a number of times, over a period of several months) and took LSD (twice) but the nearest I got to a rock concert was when I chanced to be in one part of Hyde Park when a rock concert was going on in another, my musical taste being of a very different kind. Bluck cites in this connection a passage in *Bringing Buddhism to the West*; but in order to make me an aficionado of rock concerts he over generalises on the basis of what is, in fact, a small inaccuracy on Subhuti's part<sup>5</sup>.

Perhaps the central section of Bluck's chapter on the FWBO is the one headed 'Essential Buddhism', the first sentence of which reads, "The FWBO practice of consciously drawing on several Buddhist schools is seen most clearly in its teachings" (page 158). The penultimate sentence of the same section strikes a similar note. The space between the two assertions is occupied by discussion of such topics as 'Basic Buddhism', the distinction between what is really Buddhism and what is Asian culture, the three *yānas*, Protestant Buddhism, and the FWBO's attitude to Christianity, the act of Going for Refuge, and the virtue of tolerance. Despite the wide range of topics, the precise nature of the FWBO's indebtedness to other Buddhist schools does not emerge from the welter of quotations from fellow academics and FWBO interviewees, nor does the fundamental nature of the FWBO's teachings become clear. This is partly due to the fact that Bluck fails to make use of

a distinction that I made, many years ago, between teachings pertaining to doctrine and teachings pertaining to method.

Mine and the FWBO's doctrinal teachings are all those teachings that are connected with, or derived from, the Buddha's own teaching of *pratītya-samutpāda* or conditioned co-production, to the truth of which he awoke on the night of his Enlightenment. Thus it is that my teachings and those of the FWBO include the principle of universal conditionality, whether in the concise form in which Ashvajit imparted it to Sariputra or in its more expanded forms: the twelve *nidānas* of the Wheel of Life, with the latter's action process and result process and the three 'junctures', the positive *nidānas* of the Spiral Path, the Four Noble Truths, and the teachings concerning Nirvana, *anātman*, and *śūnyatā*. Bluck is therefore wrong in attributing to me and the FWBO the conscious selection and combination of teachings drawn from several schools of Buddhism, as though this was an arbitrary process and one that was determined by subjective preferences on my part, with teachings being drawn from Theravāda, from Mahāyāna, and from Zen sources without regard to their consonance and compatibility. In the concluding sentence of this section Bluck characterises this supposed selection and combination of teachings as "something genuinely new in a Buddhist movement" (p.162). What I actually do in my doctrinal teachings, however is not so much draw some teachings from Theravāda, some from Mahāyāna, and some from Zen so much as discern, and make clear, the inner, organic interconnection between all those teachings which are connected with, or derived from, the Buddha's teaching of *pratītya-samutpāda* -- a very different thing.

It is these same teachings that undergird, whether more obviously or less, all the different forms of Buddhism. Because I teach them, and because they are taught within the FWBO, I consider myself and the FWBO to be doctrinally orthodox.

Mine and the FWBO's teachings pertaining to method all centre, directly or indirectly, on the act of Going for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These teachings include the observance of the Five or the Ten Precepts; the performance of pujas; the practise of meditation; the study of the Buddhist scriptures; the cultivation of spiritual friendship, and the enjoyment of poetry, music and the visual arts. The teachings pertaining to method are connected, directly or indirectly, with the Buddha's teaching of *pratītya-samutpāda* through the sequence of positive, spiral *nidānas*, for all these teachings contribute, in one way or another, to the practitioner's progress to ever higher levels of being and consciousness, even from the mundane at its most refined to the transcendental. Looked at from another point of view, they contribute to the deepening of the practitioner's Going for Refuge, so that from being provisional it becomes effective, and from being effective it becomes real in the sense of being irreversible. The sequence of positive, spiral *nidānas* is connected with the cyclical sequence at the crucial point where in dependence on *vedanā* or feeling, the last *nidāna* of the result process of the present life, there arises *tṛṣṇā* or craving, the first *nidāna* of the action process of the present life. When *vedanā* is experienced as *duḥkha* or suffering there arises, in dependence on it, not *tṛṣṇā* or craving but *śraddhā*, 'faith', the first *nidāna* of the positive, spiral sequence.

Within the domain of method there is room for individual choice as regards the particular practice, or group of practices, in which members of the FWBO engage. There is even room for innovation. For example, in 1978, in a talk given at the tenth convention of the WBO, I distinguished five different levels of Going for Refuge, the cultural, the

provisional, the effective, the real, and the cosmic. This is not a traditional teaching, but I believe it to be in accordance with the spirit of tradition. The third of the five levels, that of effective Going for Refuge, occupies a place of special importance in the spiritual and organisational life of the FWBO, for it is upon the recognised attainment of this level that one is regarded as being ready for acceptance into the Western Buddhist Order.

Order members observe Ten Precepts, and in this connection Bluck refers to my belief that Going for Refuge and the Ten Precepts are the best basis for unity among Buddhists, who should follow the WBO's example and emphasise what is common and fundamental rather than what is divisive and superficial. Similarly, earlier on, in the chapter on the Forest Tradition, he had referred to Sumedho's belief that the nuns' order in Britain is 'setting a standard that may be followed in Thailand in years to come' (p41). Bluck finds nothing wrong with this belief. Yet after referring to my own belief that Going for Refuge and the Ten precepts are the best basis for unity among Buddhists, who should follow the WBO's example and emphasise what is common and fundamental rather than what is divisive and superficial, he adds, "However, the idea that the WBO has 'given a lead to the rest of the Buddhist world' here sounds like the tail wagging the dog" (p.167). To what extent Buddhists follow the example of the FWBO remains, of course, to be seen. Meanwhile we do at least know at which end of the spectrum Bluck's sympathies lie.

Not content with his jibe at the expense of the FWBO and its founder, Bluck adds, not without a touch of complacency, "Most Asian and Western Buddhists are quite relaxed about the development of different Buddhist traditions in various countries" (p.167). No doubt most Buddhists are quite relaxed about a number of things about which they ought not, in my opinion, to be so relaxed. They ought not to be relaxed that, over the centuries, the different Buddhist traditions have not only drifted apart from one another but that they also have significantly diverged, in some cases, from the Buddha's own teachings. They ought not to be relaxed about the fact that the colourful garb of national or ethnic culture in which the Dharma happens to be clad is too often mistaken for the Dharma itself. Above all, perhaps, they ought not to be relaxed about the fact that despite recent modest gains in India and the West, in Asia as a whole Buddhism is in decline and may soon effectively disappear from some of its traditional heartlands.

Although Bluck is rather critical of the FWBO, generally speaking, he concludes the section headed 'A New Society?' with a handsome acknowledgement. "No other [British Buddhist] tradition," he says, "has developed such a distinctive social organisation, with its single-sex communities, Right Livelihood businesses and a new Buddhist Order which is neither monastic nor lay" (p.175). Since according to Bluck's own account the FWBO is one of the three largest Buddhist organisations in Britain, I trust I may be allowed to hope that the FWBO's example in this respect will be followed by the rest of British Buddhism without it sounding too much like the tail wagging the dog.

1. Robert Bluck. 2006. *British Buddhism: Teachings, Practice and Development* (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism Series). London: Routledge. Paperback edition 2008.
2. Marco Pallis. 1975. *Peaks and Lamas*. Woburn Press, 1975.

3. The abridged version referred to here was originally published in Dwight Goddard. *A Buddhist Bible*. E.P.Dutton & Co.,1938 and 1966. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition published by Beacon Press in 1991.
4. Sangharakshita. 1997. *The Rainbow Road*. Windhorse Publications.
5. Dharmachari Subhuti. 1995. *Bringing Buddhism to the West*. Windhorse Publications.

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