Perceptions of the FWBO in British Buddhism

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1. INTRODUCTION

SOME TIME IN 1997 several British Buddhists started an anonymous campaign against the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. Although over the years I have observed a number of controversies in the Buddhist world, some of them very unpleasant, I have not seen anything quite so pointed or venomous as their attempts to 'put Sangharakshita on trial', and discredit the FWBO's work. Their efforts prompted a substantial and critical article on the FWBO in *The Guardian*,[1] and their own 'researches' were published as a more worked-out critique in *The FWBO Files*.[2] In turn this text has been widely distributed, and its highly unfavourable portrait of the FWBO has been given some credence.

When all this happened I was the Director of the FWBO Communication Office, and it fell to me to co-ordinate our response, and to work on our rebuttals. I co-authored the FWBO's *Response to the FWBO Files*. Along with my colleague Guhyapati I worked closely with Madeline Bunting, the author of *The Guardian*'s article, and later I had dealings with the *Files*' author as well. These events were something of a denouement for my engagement with the world of British Buddhism and in the FWBO's relations with other Buddhists. I have long been aware that there were problems in relations between the FWBO and other Buddhists, and my own engagement with this issue started in 1987 when I helped to run the Cambridge University Buddhist Society. Sometimes when I have told other Buddhists of my affiliation I have been met by mistrust, or even aversion. I have become aware of an undertow of rumour in the British Buddhist world, and I think I have seen some of the assumptions, predilections and prejudices that were have been brought to the encounter and skewed the ensuing debate. [197]

In these ways I have heard innumerable criticisms of the FWBO from many perspectives, and I continue to hear them. I have grown familiar with these criticisms, and equally familiar with the counter-arguments. I have not lost my faith in the FWBO as a result of this experience and, conversely, I hope I have not reacted to the experience of being attacked by resorting to the security of an entrenched position. I have felt perplexed that well-intentioned people – Buddhists at that – apparently acting in good faith, can have reactions to the FWBO that are so different from my own.

The question with which I have been confronted is, why do my own perceptions of the FWBO differ so radically from those of its critics? Are my colleagues in the FWBO and I blind to the movement's faults? Are we in denial? Have we rejected our shadow? I can hardly answer that question, of course, and this paper is written in the belief that my own perceptions have at least some validity. Furthermore I am sure that some criticisms of the FWBO can be made quite legitimately, and I sometimes have my own criticisms of the FWBO. One could hardly hope for a better illustration of the Buddhist teaching of the subjectivity and relativity of perceptions.

The first subject of this article is how some outsiders perceive the FWBO. I offer these observations in the hope of clarifying a sometimes tangled debate, and to explain to people from the FWBO some of the responses with which they may be confronted. Its second subject is *why* these perceptions arise, and this is harder to know for sure. As a point of ethics I believe that one should not ascribe nefarious motives to one's interlocutors, but I do think that one can legitimately seek to tease out their assumptions, and clarify underlying points of difference. I hope my reflections offer a starting point for understanding the deeper issues that are raised by the controversy around the

FWBO, which may shed some light more widely, on issues that face Buddhism in its transmission to the West.

My comments primarily concern the world of British Buddhism because in most other countries, especially the US, the FWBO is too small to attract much interest or attention, while within Indian Buddhism, where it is a considerable presence, the context is so different that it would require separate treatment. Even within the UK these generalisations may go too far. The British Buddhist world is varied: many people look favourably on the FWBO, [198] and many have no opinion of it. It is not true that the FWBO's relations with other Buddhists are universally problematic. Perhaps it is best to say that the FWBO raises a variety of issues for other Buddhists, with the proviso that those Buddhists respond to those issues to the issues in a variety of ways.

In my account I am not be concerned to prove that these perceptions exist, or where they exist – that is, I will not be quoting from critical documents, recounting anecdotes, or repeating conversations. This article offers an analysis of my perceptions of others' perceptions. I am sure that this account is not comprehensive, and that further perceptions could be unearthed.

I want to emphasise one point at the outset. My subject is not the reality of the FWBO – not what it is actually like, but how it is perceived by some observers. Perhaps there is a need for another article dealing with the true nature of the FWBO in the light of criticisms it has confronted. Although I shall make some comments along these lines in the course of the article, that is another subject. I hope this present article can make a small contribution to moving on the dialogue between the FWBO and its critics.

2. THE CONTEXT OF DIFFICULTIES

(A) BRITISH BUDDHIST HISTORY

THE FWBO'S TROUBLES are not new. It was born in conflict when Sangharakshita was excluded from the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, and for many years its relations with other Buddhists were clouded by the bad feeling generated in the 1960s. But to show the full context requires a step further back in the history of British Buddhism.

Looking at this history from an institutional perspective, up to the 1960s British Buddhism largely meant the Buddhist Society and associated organisations, plus various scholars. That Buddhist world may well have been fractious and limited by its orientation towards texts rather than committed personal Dharma practice, but it was small and relatively homogenous. Things changed when the Buddhist world started to expand in the 1960s with the arrival of experienced practitioners and teachers, including Sangharakshita. These people started teaching and founded centres and then movements that were oriented towards committed study and practice. Sangharakshita's estrangement from [199] the previous Buddhist 'establishment' was particularly intense, but it was not unique. Several other teachers also fell out with the Society, or at least felt a desire to establish their independence from it, notwithstanding its desire to represent the whole of Buddhism in Britain.

This is one reason why the movements that started after the 1960s, which now comprise the core of the British Buddhist world and include the FWBO, developed in isolation from one another. Whatever further reasons there may have been, the result was that, although there has always been a background noise of mistrust and criticism between the various organisations and traditions, it was possible for people following different traditions largely to ignore each other.

This is no longer the case. Things started to change with the emergence of various teachers and movements into public forums, such as the media, education, and inter-Buddhist groupings such as the Network of Buddhist Organisations, where they became visible to each other. With the

proliferation of Dharma centres, especially in London, the various Buddhist organisations came into closer physical proximity, and found that their meditation classes and Buddhism courses attracted the same people. Then there was the effect of developments in the US, where a parallel process of self-awareness had been taking place, prompted by the scandals and crises of confidence of American Buddhism in the 1980s. This led to books, conferences, teachers' forums, and publications such as *Tricycle* that articulated an inter-Buddhist awareness, and whose effects spread to the UK. Finally there was the Internet, which is a very public space in which Buddhists of all colours encounter, and often collide with each other's perspectives.

So Buddhists in Britain of all traditions have now become aware that they are not alone. Consequently they feel a need to have opinions about each other, or alternatively to express opinions that had previously been held in private. But that is not to say that we understand each other. The encounter is conditioned by many forces whose effects are often unconscious, and assumptions come into play. What, then, are these assumptions? [200]

(B) ATTITUDES OF BRITISH BUDDHISTS TO ONE ANOTHER

IN PONDERING THE VIEWS held of one another by Buddhists of various denominations we should recall the unprecedented nature of the encounter. Since the death of Buddhism in India a thousand years ago the various traditions have grown up in diverse Asian cultures often in isolation. So there is literally no established answer to a question such as, how does Zen relate to Tibetan Buddhism? These traditions have had virtually no contact in their history in Asia, and it is a novelty that in the modern West they have been thrown together, along with numerous other traditions. Even where traditions have co-existed in the same country they have sometimes been associated with distinct cultural groups or separated by ingrained sectarian distinctions. It is hardly surprising that British Buddhists are perplexed to find themselves in a modern Buddhist world in which all of the Buddhist traditions co-exist, and are followed by people from similar cultural backgrounds.

Some British Buddhists respond by looking to what their school has said in the past about its relation to other traditions, and some of these attitudes have been carried over. For instance there are Western Theravādins who consider the Mahāyāna degenerate; and many Western followers of Tibetan traditions regard Vajrayāna as a higher path. In some cases such views contain considerable antipathy or disparagement, but generally this goes against the grain for contemporary Buddhists. Buddhism does indeed have a tradition of tolerance and pluralism that contrasts with the exclusive claims of theistic religions, and this contrast is an important aspect of its attraction for many Westerners. So even when they follow traditions that have tended towards sectarianism in Asia, Western followers tend to respond to their fellow Buddhists with an overtly inclusive and non-judgmental acceptance of diversity.

However this tolerance has limits, and the FWBO has encountered these. It is one thing to feel an ecumenical kinship with other Buddhists following paths other than one' own, but what if they are not real Buddhists at all? What if the Buddhism they practice is heterodox, or represents an historical anomaly, a misunderstanding, or even a degeneration? In other words, one is confronted by the question, what is real Buddhism? And behind this is another question, who is to say? Is it only those who have been authorised in a [201] specified way, or are all opinions of equal weight and worth? So far as the internal workings of a tradition or organisation are concerned, this could be called the question of the authority. In relation to other Buddhist teachers, practices or organisations it is the question of legitimacy.

3. AUTHORITY AND LEGITIMACY

EACH TRADITION HAS its own definition of legitimacy, which in this context essentially means authority to teach. For Zen and Tibetan Buddhists the crucial concept is that of lineage. In Zen this is enacted through transmission. In Tibetan traditions it comes through the passing on of initiations, and the parallel system of the rebirth of *tulku*s. By contrast in the Theravāda the most important determinant of legitimacy is the *Vinaya*, which establishes the form of monasticism and links modern monks with their forebears (though, as Sangharakshita has pointed out, issues of transmission apply here too).[3] In fact ideas of legitimacy in all these traditions are more complex than I can account for here, and include factors such as reference to canonical sources, and doctrinal orthodoxy. The point is that the apparent tolerance of Western Buddhists is haunted by the question of legitimacy – the issue of what makes something authentically Buddhist.

Most Western Buddhists of all denominations are relatively inexperienced in their own tradition, and grant wary and sometimes grudging respect to others. But for all their wariness, and for all the doctrinal differences, to a Tibetan practitioner, for example, the simple existence of Theravāda in the West requires no justification: it exists here because it exists in the world. But there is no such necessity about the existence of the FWBO. It is a Western creation that exists only because westerners have constructed it. Some of the FWBO's adaptations of the external forms of Buddhism to the West seem strange to outsiders, but I do not think that this is the primary issue – all traditions have had to adapt to some extent as they arrive in the West. The underlying issue concerns its authority to make adaptations at all.

The FWBO is based on a radical critique of Buddhist notions of legitimacy that is tantamount to a rejection of many prior notions concerning it. The FWBO does not seek authorisation from a lineage or from following certain aspects of forms in which Buddhism has been practised in Asia. Sangharak-[202]shita has not been authorised by anyone to do what he has done, and so he is not answerable to any external ecclesiastical authority. His creation of an independent Order *ex nihilo*, as it were (i.e. not as a development of a prior Order) may have some precedents in Buddhist history, but it is certainly unusual.

Sangharakshita has argued extensively for his position,[4] but the present issue is not the rights and wrongs of these arguments. My concern is how the FWBO, the movement that grows from Sangharakshita's principles, is perceived by others, most of whom have not read his works. Not only does the FWBO not draw legitimacy from a prior school, it does not even locate itself within the framework of the *yāna*s, which many Buddhists use to make sense of the relationships of the various schools to one another. So they are likely to ask, where does the FWBO fit in? Is it Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, or Theravāda? Then there is the novel status of Order members. To those steeped in the distinction between monks and lay monks, Order members' assertion that they are neither fuels mistrust. Not receiving answers to any of these questions in terms they are familiar with people ask, who are these FWBO people? What authority do they have to teach Buddhism? And they worry, is the FWBO distorting Buddhist teachings?

So even before they hear anything in particular about the FWBO many British Buddhists are predisposed to mistrust it. They conclude that, by the standards of some traditional frameworks, ordination into the FWBO has no substance, Sangharakshita has no authority, and its practices are inauthentic. *The FWBO Files* is essentially an exposition of the view that Sangharakshita has no authority to interpret the Buddhist tradition for the modern world.

The FWBO is not alone in confronting suspicions related to legitimacy. Controversies around Soka Gakkai and similar Japanese New Buddhist Movements go even deeper, because they derive from 600 year-old debates about the orthodoxy of their progenitor, Nichiren, himself. But the

FWBO's position is still problematic for Buddhists who do not accept the radical critique on which it is based. Its position is different from that of organisations who seek to make lay adaptations of the Dharma, such as the 'vipassana community'. Such people rest their efforts on their ability as Dharma teachers, or similar attitudes, but they make no authority claims, and this lends their position a degree of consistency. [203]

Sangharakshita's position is not so simple. The level of authority he claims is misunderstood – there are those who wrongly believe he claims to discern a timeless essence to the Buddhist tradition which has mysteriously eluded all teachers who have lived previously. However he does claim the authority to assert, apply, and re-express teachings that are common to the Buddhist tradition. Above all he has founded an Order, and this is an authority claim in itself.

I have found that people from the FWBO often find these questions meaningless, irrelevant, or even laughable. For them the FWBO is justified by its capacity to enable them to practice the Dharma effectively. They have accepted Sangharakshita's critique of the notions of authority that exist in other schools and are happy to accept those that exist within their own. However, Sangharakshita's own awareness of these issues is reflected in the fact that several of his publications have concentrated on the FWBO's relation to the wider Buddhist tradition, and the nature of its divergence from traditional ideas of authority and legitimacy.

The troubles at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara that preceded the foundation of the FWBO were, so far as I can understand them, an early expression of these different views of legitimacy and authority, in particular the authority to make adaptations in a Western context. It grew from the clash of two very different ideas of Buddhism: a conventional Theravādin view, and Sangharakshita's pan-Buddhist ecumenism and radical willingness to adapt to the West. These are also two versions of what Buddhism should be like in the West and they have never been reconciled. Over the years they have been joined by other views and as these collide in modern Britain old tensions have been dredged up. While recent controversies have subsided, because the underlying tensions concern the very basis on which the FWBO is founded it is unlikely that they will ever disappear.

4. CRITICISMS OF THE FWBO

THE COMPLEXITY of the western Buddhist world means that Buddhists from different backgrounds themselves have differing relationships with the issue of legitimacy, and even where there is a real difficulty disagreements with the FWBO are often not consciously formulated in these terms. In practice criti-[204]cism and debate tend to be focused on specific issues and points of difference, and naturally these differ according to the views of our critics.

(A) ISOLATION

THE ISSUE THAT FOLLOWS most directly from that of legitimacy is the perception that the FWBO is, in some distinctive sense, isolated from outside influences and the wider Buddhist world. To become a mitra (that is, to affiliate to the FWBO) one is required to 'stop shopping around' other spiritual groups, and more generally FWBO centres do not invite teachers from other traditions to teach on their premises. It is rare, though not unheard of, for outsiders to address meetings of the Order.

One of the FWBO's responses is that it is not a Buddhist tradition to invite outsiders to address one's own students. Another is that the FWBO's early experiences of doing just this were problematic (as when a Zen teacher declared himself to be Enlightened in the course of a retreat in an FWBO centre). And it is argued that mitras and others are free to attend lectures and read books by other teachers –

– many of which are sold in FWBO Centres – but that for the time of their training they are asked to settle down with one teacher and tradition.

The problem with these responses is that, while they are reasonable on their own level, they do not address the real, and often unstated, source of concern. Underlying the criticism that the FWBO is isolated is a view that it is not connected to the sources of inspiration and practice within the 'living tradition' of Buddhism as it has persisted in Asia. Its approach seems, therefore, like a 'premature synthesis', that is predicated on a belief that all the necessary lessons have been learnt from the Buddhist East by Sangharakshita, leaving no need for further learning. The response that Order members do indeed study traditional texts and engage with a wide range of traditional practice is met by the suspicion that this engagement can only be superficial if it does not include contact with authorised teachers from the traditions that transmit these texts who have been properly trained.

Another, perhaps more sophisticated, version of this criticism is the suggestion that, far from being 'in the vanguard of Western Buddhism',[5] the FWBO is an anachronism. This view sees it as one step on from the era of [205] Buddhist societies, but nonetheless a throwback to a period when it was thought that it would be impossible to bring Buddhism to the West in the forms in which it was practised in Asia. It has, therefore been superseded, it has been suggested, by the successful establishment of Zen, Tibetan, Theravādin and other traditions in the West. Some Buddhists in the West share the FWBO's desire for a truly 'Western Buddhism', and accept the need for such a phenomenon, but they would consider that this can only emerge as a development of Westerners' practice of these Asian forms.

This is not the place to debate the rights and wrongs of having outside teachers in FWBO contexts, but I offer the suggestion that those who propose this can underestimate the seriousness of the FWBO's endeavour and its success. The justification for the FWBO is that it works: that it has been effective in creating contexts for committed Dharma practice. They can also underestimate the difficulty of its undertaking and the relative fragility of its achievement. If one grants this, its wariness of outside influences can be seen as a concern to ensure the stability and health of these contexts. Furthermore, whereas some observers seem to believe that the FWBO considers it has the finished product, people from the movement itself are more likely to see it as germinal, something that might grow into a fully developed Western Buddhism over the centuries. The difference from those who wish to see Western Buddhism develop from Asian forms is, then, a matter of strategy, not of goal. From the FWBO's perspective, precisely because it is new and lacks continuity with a single Asian tradition, if the seed planted by Sangharakshita is to develop it needs a degree of seclusion from the varied and turbulent influences of the Buddhist world.

So far as the view of the FWBO as an anachronism is concerned the answer can only be that time will tell. Indeed a historicist perspective implies its own redundancy. If one considers one's own approach to be better simply because it is a step on from what preceded one must accept that, in due course, a subsequent development will leave one's own behind.

(B) BEING A MOVEMENT

THE FOLLOWING CRITICISMS of the FWBO are of a somewhat different order to the charge of isolation, and concern feelings rather than worked-out critiques. [206] Perhaps the strongest reaction – though it applies only to some observers – is simply the fact that it is a movement. Many Buddhists in the West are not affiliated to any tradition, or at least to any organisation representing a tradition. This is particularly true of America, where people say 'I practice with Thich Nhat Hanh', rather than 'I belong to his organisation'. This expresses the individualistic character of the

social trends that have been associated with the growth of Buddhism in the West. At root there is a deep suspicion of organised religion that derives from experience of established Western religions, and sometimes from bad experiences of established Buddhism.

The stance of the non-affiliated Buddhist leaves a deficiency with regard to sangha or spiritual community, but for those who accept the need for such a community there are various half-way houses. Most Buddhist organisations in the West offer forms of involvement that test individualism less strongly than do the FWBO's mitra system and the Western Buddhist Order. In general the FWBO places a relatively strong emphasis on involvement which is anathema to the unaffiliated. They feel that, as fellow travellers themselves, they could not imagine being involved in something so apparently homogenous as the FWBO, and cannot understand the mentality of those who are.

This imaginative deficit means paradoxically that these people who so value diversity find it hardest to relate to people from the FWBO as individuals and in effect assume that Order members all do the same things and think in the same ways. Likewise there is little sympathy for the difficulty of creating a collective endeavour. When they hear of problems in the FWBO, Order members who act badly, or tendencies to institutionalisation, their mistrust seems to find confirmation. Interestingly people with experience of other religious organisations, Buddhist or otherwise, are often far more sympathetic on this count, appreciating that all human creations have failings. Indeed they are often impressed by how the FWBO copes with these difficulties.

(C) LIFESTYLE

NEXT COMES THE VIEW that the homogeneity of the FWBO extends to lifestyle: that all its members live and work in certain prescribed ways in the context of FWBO institutions. Perhaps the problem here is the tendency to identify the FWBO with its distinctive expressions such as communities and Right Liveli-[207]hood businesses, rather than seeing it as a diverse community that is united by its common principles and a shared commitment to Dharma practice. The assumption is that everyone in the FWBO follows this lifestyle, and therefore that there is overt or covert coercion for people to do so. Looked at another way, however, the FWBO's communities and businesses exist because people want to participate in them. Moreover this view of the FWBO is demonstrably a misperception as the majority of Order members and mitras neither live in a community nor work with other Buddhists. However the FWBO's diversity sometimes seems to be invisible to outsiders.

The FWBO's institutions can arouse mistrust for other reasons. I have encountered people who think that the FWBO's degeneracy is apparent from the commercial orientation of Evolution shops. I know of others who respond to large and impressive FWBO Centres such as the Manchester Buddhist Centre with envy, fear, and suspicion. Its very success is a reason for some to find it admirable and inspiring, but for others to consider that it has strayed irredeemably.

A further assumption is that its championing of a particular lifestyle means that others are regarded as inferior. Thus it is thought that 'the FWBO is anti-family', rather than simply pro-communities. It is a simple dualistic trap to think that because someone says that one thing is good they think that other things are bad. But this way of thinking is familiar to those who work in FWBO centres, where people living in families can feel they are marginal to the centre's activities. It may even be that community-dwellers fall into this dualistic trap themselves sometimes.

(D) 'IDEOLOGY'

SIMILAR CONSIDERATIONS apply to what we would call the FWBO's emphasis on Right View, and what others have seen as its 'ideological' character. In my opinion this emphasis (apart from being

traditional) is especially pronounced in the case of the FWBO because it is a re-expression of the Dharma. It cannot rely on doing things in the time-honoured fashion, so it needs to interpret the teachings that express general truths to see how they apply to our own situation. [208]

This is problematic to some observers for two reasons: firstly because we go into the area of views at all, and secondly because of some of the particular views that Sangharakshita espouses. The perennially problematic issues here are women, families and sex, and coming up behind these are Sangharakshita's criticisms of pseudo-liberalism and his sometimes robust approach to Christianity. In expressing these views he offends the liberalism that most Buddhists in the West (including, incidentally, most of those in the FWBO) hold in common and equate with the views of Buddhism itself. When Eastern teachers express such views they are they are taken to be simply repeating Asian traditions or prejudices, and it may be possible for Western disciples to edit out the things they find unpalatable. No such excuses can be made for Sangharakshita, and protestations that he is simply reiterating traditional positions tend to be discounted.

There is a little more to it than this. Both Sangharakshita and Subhuti have sometimes written in a highly polemical, even confrontational style. Naturally justifications can be made for this approach, but it is not surprising that people sometime feel confronted and provoked. This tone is also distinctive to the FWBO and can seem odd to readers who have been weaned on the writings of the Dalai Lama or Sogyal Rimpoche, for example. Some people find this style bracing, others find it offensive, especially when the provocation comes in sensitive areas such as gender issues.

An assumption that usually accompanies such responses to Sangharakshita's views is that these define 'the FWBO's views', and even that his style defines the individual characters of members of the Order. This is a thorny question. On the one hand Sangharakshita does not ask his disciples to agree with everything that he says, only to take it seriously. On the other hand the FWBO is founded by him and is based on his teachings. Within the Western Buddhist Order itself these issues are only just starting to be explored and articulated, and it is hardly surprising that the diversity of views among Order members is not visible to any but the most perceptive outsiders.

An issue in each of the last three categories I have mentioned – being a movement, lifestyle and ideology – is the perception of homogeneity. I have suggested that this is often misplaced, but I also think that the FWBO has itself contributed to this perception. Its publications can give the impression that [209] the FWBO is without debate, diversity, or critical engagement with its own position, because their concern has been to express and communicate it defining ideas and principles. *Dharma Life*, the magazine I founded and edit, was conceived as an attempt to address this problem, but the perception is entrenched, and the magazine is usually ignored when this is discussed. However I hope that as the FWBO matures, more of its members are confidently committed to its key principles, and these principles are more familiar and accepted, greater scope will emerge for diverse explorations of these ideas and principles. Indeed my perception is that this has been increasingly occurring as the years have gone by.

(E) GENDER ISSUES

I CANNOT GIVE an account of how the FWBO is perceived without mentioning *Women, Men and Angels*,[6] from whose publication (in 1995) I believe it will take the FWBO's reputation many years to recover. There is a widespread view, held in some quarters with unshakeable conviction, that the FWBO is institutionally misogynistic. My view – and that of everyone I know who has a good knowledge of how the FWBO operates – is that this is nonsense (which is not to say that there may not have been instances of misogyny or misogynistic individuals within the FWBO). To ill-disposed outsiders evidence from the women's wing of the Order seems to count for little when set against a

typical reading of *Women, Men and Angels*. The fact that the FWBO is perceived to be misogynistic leads to doubts, for instance, about its single sex activities, and this may well be compounded by the fact that few Dharmacharinis are substantially involved in the FWBO's contacts with other Buddhists.

(F) SEX

THE *COUP DE GRÂCE* that can turn concerns and reservations about the FWBO into outright hostility is provided by accusations of sexual activity, especially where these involve Sangharakshita himself. A central accusation of *The FWBO Files* is that the whole FWBO is, in effect, a front for coercive homosexual activity. No matter how absurd and insulting this idea may seem to peo-[210]ple with experience of the FWBO, I regret to report that there are those who believe it implicitly, and interpret any attempt to deny this as a lie.

Criticisms of Order members' sexual behaviour are also significant because they pick up more general criticisms of the FWBO. Being neither monks nor lay, and being members of an independent Order, Order members have no role that outsiders can easily identify or understand, and no external authority to whom they are answerable. Unlike most religious denominations it does not have rules that define the status of those in teaching positions *vis-à-vis* those who are taught, and this opens a door through which suspicion can march. Protestations that Order members are exhorted to apply ethical principles and sensibilities can sound hollow in the face of a propensity to mistrust. Examples of unethical sexual behaviour by Order members confirm the suspicion that Order members in general are not validly ordained, and even that they are not really Buddhists.

The main reason for mistrust on this count is the charges against Sangharakshita himself, but this is compounded by the difficulty for the FWBO of talking about this topic publicly. Sangharakshita has a role as a teacher in varied cultures and this makes him a focus of faith and a spiritual guide for thousands of people. Such a role is not easily assimilable to a self-revelatory mode, least of all in an Asian context and the differences in sexual mores between East and West complicate discussion to the point of impossibility.

As one of those who has struggled to find a way out of this impasse I would add that the difficulty of being open in this regard is greatly increased by the presence of prurient journalists and malicious critics. The result is that the FWBO has said little about Sangharakshita's behaviour, and this silence goes against the demands for openness that are normal in our culture and fuels suspicion. This area is problematic for some Order members – how much more so for wary outsiders to whom the FWBO cannot even find a way to explain the cultural sensibilities involved.

(G) THE PERCEPTION OF ARROGANCE

GIVEN SENSITIVITIES about legitimacy and issues of adaptation that are common in the Buddhist world, and the doubts that many hold about FWBO's status, the 'assertive' style of the prose emanating from some of its [211] proponents can seem arrogant. Indeed to some the very designation 'Western Buddhist' can be interpreted as implying that the FWBO considers other forms of Buddhism anachronistic, degenerate, or encrusted in Asian cultural accretions. For instance, those who are struggling against great odds to establish a *bhikkhu sangha* in the West can feel undermined by assertions that 'lifestyle is secondary', and by Order members' desire to claim equal status with *bhikkhus* without, in their eyes, making the same sacrifices. A similar response has sometimes been expressed with regard to the names of public FWBO centres, which are called 'the London Buddhist Centre', and so on, as if they were then only Buddhist centre in the city, or

claimed to represent Buddhism as a whole. This is easily read as a political ploy to marginalise others. Somehow the FWBO's ecumenical approach comes to seem highly exclusive.

And yet I do not think this is solely a matter of misapprehension. Sometimes, I believe a competitive element has crept in to the views of other Buddhist traditions held by some Order members. Occasionally when I speak to Order members about other traditions I find there is an implicit desire to ask if we are 'the best'. Once or twice when I have mentioned difficulties others have encountered I have found my comments seized on as confirmation of a suspicion. This is perhaps understandable, but in my experience few people in the FWBO know enough about other traditions to make a meaningful comparison. Sangharakshita's polemic in *Extending the Hand of Fellowship*[7] warns against naively assuming that others are effectively going for Refuge. There is also a need to guard against the cynical assumption that they are not.

(H) FWBO 'DOCTRINES'

ALTOGETHER THESE PERCEPTIONS create a picture of a most unattractive movement: chauvinistic, doctrinaire, monolithic, inflexible and intolerant; spuriously Buddhist, and sometimes a feeding ground for predatory homosexuals. How, some people ask, is it possible for such things to be done in the name of Buddhism? Here the concerns about legitimacy become an interpretation of the FWBO's doctrinal position, which suggests that far from following traditional Buddhist teachings, it places primary importance upon Sangharakshita's adaptations and reformulations. According to this view the true teachings of the FWBO concern the Higher Evolution, and this is con-[212]nected with Nietzsche and rigid notions of hierarchy so that the FWBO's credo is sometimes thought to be a homo-erotically-tinged 'romantic super-humanism'. This is seen as an expression of Sangharakshita's own idiosyncrasies, which thereby distorts the understanding of Buddhism held by Order members.

The principal source of this perception seems to be Subhuti's *Buddhism for Today*, but it has been reinforced by elements of *Sangharakshita: a New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, and *Women, Men, and Angels*. Yet these books are expositions of Sangharakshita's teachings written by Subhuti, and in Sangharakshita's writings and lectures themselves, these elements seem to me a minor component. So there is a issue of interpretation in deciding what place to give teachings such as these in an account of Sangharakshita's ideas. Do his comments on the Higher Evolution and so on constitute a core to his work, or are these adumbrations of his central concerns? My view is the latter because these terms appear in Sangharakshita's writing and thinking only for a fairly short period from the mid-1960s to the late-1970s, and he has barely touched on them since. And secondly he presents them as 'skilful means' – experiments in translating traditional Dharma into a Western idiom.

This is not to say that these ideas have not been influential, particularly for the generation of Order members who studied intensively with Sangharakshita in the mid-1970s when he was still exploring them. And I recognise in the caricature of the FWBO that sees its devotees as would-be *Übermenschen* a shadow, no more, of my experiences of the FWBO twenty years ago. Perhaps, then this perception was once accurate, and the FWBO has moved on. I can say that it has little current relevance.

As the FWBO changes its emerging character is most likely to be influenced by elements that are central and definitive. To those who know the FWBO from the inside it is clear that traditional Buddhist doctrines are primary. However for an outsider to see it in this way requires a good deal of knowledge as well as imagination, and these are unlikely to arise unless the FWBO is approached with sympathy. More often the FWBO's distinctive teachings such as those on Higher Evolution

offer a convenient way to pigeon-hole it in contra-distinction to traditional and normative formulations of the Dharma. [213]

5. RESPONSES TO THE FWBO

(A) THE ROLE OF DISAFFECTED EX-MEMBERS

WHILE THE ISSUES I have mentioned create a propensity to mistrust, the greatest source of antipathy to the FWBO in the Buddhist world is people who have left the FWBO and are now hostile. In some cases the cause of this hostility is mental imbalance or temperamental volatility; in some there has been a parting of the ways for reasons of doctrine and practice; and in others again there are genuine grievances where people have been treated badly. But whatever the basis of their criticisms, some of my former fellows are extremely vocal in their denunciations of the FWBO's work.

A considerable proportion of Buddhists in other traditions in the UK had their introduction to meditation or Buddhism with the FWBO, which has FWBO centres in many cities. Some of these people simply decided that an alternative path would suit them better, or else they were separated from the FWBO by circumstances. Such people are often grateful for what the FWBO taught them. But others have chosen not to practice with the FWBO because they have perceived the FWBO in the ways I am discussing in this paper. People in this category often have strong views and are happy to express them.

(B) THE RANGE OF RESPONSES

THE BUDDHIST SCENE in the West is diverse. Using a crude map one may think of two wings. On one side are the traditionalists or conservatives, who maintain the importance of the forms of Asian Buddhism. On another are the liberals, who are sometimes secularists, who insist that we are Westerners first and foremost, and must make sense of Buddhism in relation to our culture's values. These tendencies cut across all of the Asian traditions in the West – there are both conservative and liberal Theravādins, Tibetan Buddhists, and so on. These tendencies may be related to elements in Western culture, but they can also be related to liberal and conservative tendencies in the Buddhist traditions as they have existed in Asia. The West has not only inherited Buddhist teachings and practices, but also the debates and divisions within the tradition. [214]

Differences between conservative and liberal approaches do not mean that the people holding these views realise that they are in some sense in disagreement with each other, especially in the UK. In America the size of the Buddhist world means that there are representatives of well worked-out versions of these positions within each school, and the tensions are to some extent conscious. In Britain while tensions between people with different approaches do exist they are seldom explicit and their influence on perceptions is usually unconscious.

Both conservatives and liberals assert their legitimacy by referring to easily accepted sources of authority. Conservatives appeal to the authority of lineage and Asian precedent; secularists appeal to sceptical rationality and the values of the European Enlightenment. The FWBO, which sees itself as following a middle way between these two, finds itself at odds with both tendencies, and is criticised by each. Conservatives differ from the FWBO's critiquing of their positions, and may even feel threatened by it. In disputing with the FWBO they equate their position with tradition and its with deviation from tradition. Liberal secularists object to the FWBO's insistence on points of doctrine and practice that runs wholly counter to the current of individualism. They can equate their position with rationality and the FWBO's with dogmatism or cultishness. Once again, to understand the FWBO's approach demands effort and willingness to

rethink assumptions. That requires sympathy, the availability of explanation, and a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of Buddhism in the West to make comprehension feasible. Not surprisingly there are few people outside the FWBO who have done the work required to understand it – even those who are sympathetic tend simply to dismiss areas of contention as 'politics', and pass on.

An interesting characteristic of the author of *The FWBO Files* is that he describes himself as having trained as a Tibetan Buddhist monk and he appeals to sectarian orthodoxy as a standard by which he judges the FWBO. At the same time he told me personally that he feels closest to the overtly liberal and secular approach of Stephen Batchelor. Consequently he criticises the FWBO from both stances simultaneously, oblivious to any possible contradictions. [215]

6. CONCLUSION

THE PERCEPTIONS I have discussed in this paper have long been abroad in the British Buddhist world. As I have said there is a range of responses to the issues they raise, but the most unsympathetic response has recently been adopted and publicised by the author of *The FWBO Files*. His considerable efforts come on the back of the campaigns that have been run over a longer period of time by Mark Dunlop (an ex-Order member formerly known as Vajrakumara) and in the past of Maurice Walshe (who was a prime mover in the Sangharakshita's removal as the incumbent at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara). This too is a factor in conditioning perceptions.

Over the eight years that I have worked in the FWBO Communications Office I have tried to change perceptions of it, especially among the UK Buddhist community. I see the development of Buddhism in the West as an experiment and a discussion, and I believe that the FWBO has a great contribution to make. I also think there is much it can learn, and it might gain much if the FWBO's relations with other Buddhists were sufficiently friendly and relaxed that more interplay was possible. However *The FWBO Files* campaign has made it much harder for dialogue to develop.

I do not hold the view that the FWBO is without flaws and I even believe that there are things about the FWBO that we can learn from our critics. But the movement they describe bears no relation at all to the one I have been living with for twenty years. I do not follow the doctrines they ascribe to us, and neither do my friends. Sangharakshita is a wise, kind fascinating man, not the ogre some people believe him to be. So I am happy to stand up for what I believe in the face of such blatant misperception.

However I have seen nothing in the statements that have been made by the FWBO's critics to make me think that they are not acting in good faith. There has been a good deal of deception in the way they have conducted themselves (using false names etc.). But it seems that their motivations are to uphold the true Dharma and to fight injustice. The irony is that these were also my aims. It is our perceptions that differ. One would have hoped that Buddhists might be more willing than has been the case to question the authority of their percep-[216]tions, and yet once someone has become convinced of the rectitude of their position, their perceptions are ineluctably conditioned by that conviction.

I hope that my colleagues and I may avoid such rigidity ourselves. Our response needs to include humility, self-questioning and a willingness to discern whether there is substance in any accusations. But perhaps the best safeguard against becoming defensive is to understand the complex dynamics that are in play: the intractable tangle of perception and reality.

NOTES

[1] The Dark Side of Enlightenment, *The Guardian*, 27/9/97, G2 p.1.
See also the FWBO's Communiqué responding to the article: *The Guardian's Article on the FWBO*, FWBO Communications Office, 31/10/97, available at www.fwbo.org, and further discussion in *The Guardian*: Vishvapani, *Buddhism Distorted,* Face to Faith *The Guardian* 28/11/97, and: E. Harris, Face to Faith, *The Guardian* 5/12/97.
[2] *The FWBO Files; The History and Teachings of The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), and its leader, Sangharakshita* may be viewed at www.fwbo-files.com.
[3] *Forty three Years Ago*, Sangharakshita, Windhorse 1993.
[4] Particularly in *The History of My Going for Refuge*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1988, *Forty Three Years Ago* op.cit.; *Was the Buddha a Bhikkhu?*, Windhorse, Birmingham 1994; and *The FWBO and Protestant Buddhism*, Windhorse 1992.
[5] As Subhuti suggested in *Buddhism for Today*, Element, Shaftesbury 1983.
[6] Subhuti, *Women, Men and Angels*, Windhorse, Birmingham 1995.
[7] Sangharakshita, *Extending the Hand of Fellowship*, Windhorse, Birmingham 1997.