

My Dharma Life

Words and
Images

Kamalashila



Insight Experience

For a pair of teenagers in the late 60s seeking insight, the best option was probably the one we took: Californian Orange Sunshine. In a wild way, acid on a blotter revealed fully the truths of emptiness and compassion. My heart opened with love and my world thenceforth became radically impermanent: any attempt to mentally construct it melted immediately. It was a union of form, emptiness and bodhicitta that I knew without knowing those words. I know them now and these days recommend meditation, which is what, following the Beatles and my friend Mike Grenville, I did next myself.

Yet when it came to it, Transcendental Meditation with the Maharishi, with its joyous 1960s associations and obligatory donation of a week's wage, struck my youthful sensibilities as shockingly stale, conventional and middle class. I think Mike had already done it, so my introduction to TM was with a different batch of initiates. In particular, I didn't like receiving initiation in front of the kind lady's cocktail cabinet. A week's wages was a lot of money, so I

certainly practised my secret sound-syllable, but the initiation didn't 'take' for me as it clearly has for Mike, who has continued in that tradition ever since.

I knew I was looking for something radical and nakedly insightful. My passage from the euphoric sixties to the grittier seventies was bumpy, but by 1971 I was looking into Buddhism. I still wanted to understand what lay within that first insight experience, and not only to understand, but to do what Buddhism did, for by then I knew it was about living a life based on what insight revealed. I'm glad to say that a portion of that has actually come about, but back then many things 'didn't work' and I was a frustrated youth. Distressing my parents, I had left school early, voiding my chance of university. Instead I became a ragged bohemian, did drama and went to art school. I read Paul Reps, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, and



The Life of Milarepa. I came from a background common in the immediate post war generation, of rather harsh rejection of the social and religious norms of our parents. I valued friendship most, had a wide social circle and as young people do, savoured deep conversations. People I knew rejected Christianity and experimented with every kind of experience going, including a wide range of drugs. For me it

was the visionary quality of acid-tripping that was convincing. For eight hours or more it was blindingly true that one was aware, had been born and would die. The visceral truth of it was so much more real than the moralistic, intellectual blandness of the Christianity I had encountered at school and at Saint Matthews Church, High Brooms. It was also frighteningly far bigger than me, and I didn't know how to deal with that, either.

The Movement

Indeed, at that time no one knew what to do with the acid revelation. I was convinced there must be a path of some kind there, but the only way I could see was to dabble in image making and theatre. So I became an artist, and with hindsight, the arts provided a wonderful induction into life. But art was not the spiritual path that, quite unknowingly it seems, was

what I really wanted, and I gradually moved to an embrace of Buddhism. Everything I read indicated that Buddhism offered exactly that, a real spiritual path. I was open, with no work-career to distract me, and so the dharma came into my life in various ways. One evening in my room in Muswell Hill, I was deeply moved after reading Evans-Wentz's *Life of Milarepa*. And my good fortune shortly after was to meet my future teacher, Sangharakshita, just a



week later, and just a stone's throw away, in the next street: we were neighbours. He had even received teachings in Milarepa's lineage, though I didn't know it at the time. I learned the meditation, read the whole of his tome 'A Survey of Buddhism', became convinced that he knew what he was talking about, and was drawn into his movement, the 'Friends of the Western Buddhist Order.'

At this point, Transcendental Meditation was still the only formal teaching I had received. Repeating

the sound-syllable I had been given was clearly a way to calm the mind, but I almost never saw any need to do that, unless I was experiencing very difficult, conflicted mental states, and those came rarely to me. So to my youthful mind at least, TM seemed an insipid response to the mystery of human existence. I am sure that I must have missed important points in the TM teaching, but the way I learned it (I recall various handouts with scientific-seeming diagrams detailing the possibilities of 'higher consciousness') didn't seem to address the issue of insight at all.

Meditating with Sangharakshita was completely different: it was obvious that, to him, sitting practice connected to a path of insight and awakening. He had long experience of dharma practice that wasn't from books but from living as an ascetic in India for twenty years. Yet he was also a writer and scholar with an ability to clarify anything that might puzzle me. I was very happy with that.



Practice methods

So I can say with gratitude that the path began with The Venerable Maha Sthavira Sanghakshita, to give him full (Sanskrit) title as the Buddhist monk of twenty years' standing that he was when we met. At that point this monk, who had arrived in London in the mid-sixties, was making a considerable transition. He often wore the yellow robes of the Theravada tradition he had been initiated into, but paired with thick sixties jumpers, purple in a colour probably intended to signal the Mahayana, since he professed a far broader Buddhist faith than that of Theravada. He was letting his hair grow medium long, presenting a tousled, lived-in appearance, and was sometimes to be seen out on Hampstead Heath, his robes covered with an ankle length cloak.

But being stylish wasn't at all unusual at that time. I was also stylish. We all were. What stood out far more from our encounters was his spiritual vision and ability to articulate it. Through his teaching I started regularly practising the Mindfulness of breathing, the Metta bhavana and the Six-element practice, all of which I learned in the first few months of my involvement. Bhante taught the

elements practice every afternoon on a summer retreat that, thanks to Lokamitra generously loaning his tent, I attended for a few days. Being young, idealistic and still very much a hippy I refused to pay, it being my conviction that spiritual things should always be free! Despite this manifest impediment I imbibed teachings on the elements which I practise to this day.

Out of the Six Elements practice the first 'Buddhist' insight arose, of anattā, non-self. Lying back in the luminosity of my tent one afternoon after a session of meditation, I felt liberated.



I saw the truth simply by looking into the experience of earth and water and knowing that I could never be them, or own them. It was so simple, so obvious. It was what I had seen on acid but could never have articulated. There was no need for a self; indeed, everything worked fine without, probably better. All the meditation practices, metta and mindfulness of breathing as well as the rituals we did, all took part in this simplicity that was deep and endless. The experience stayed with me and the more I thought about and revisited it, the more I felt confident that the Dharma really was true.

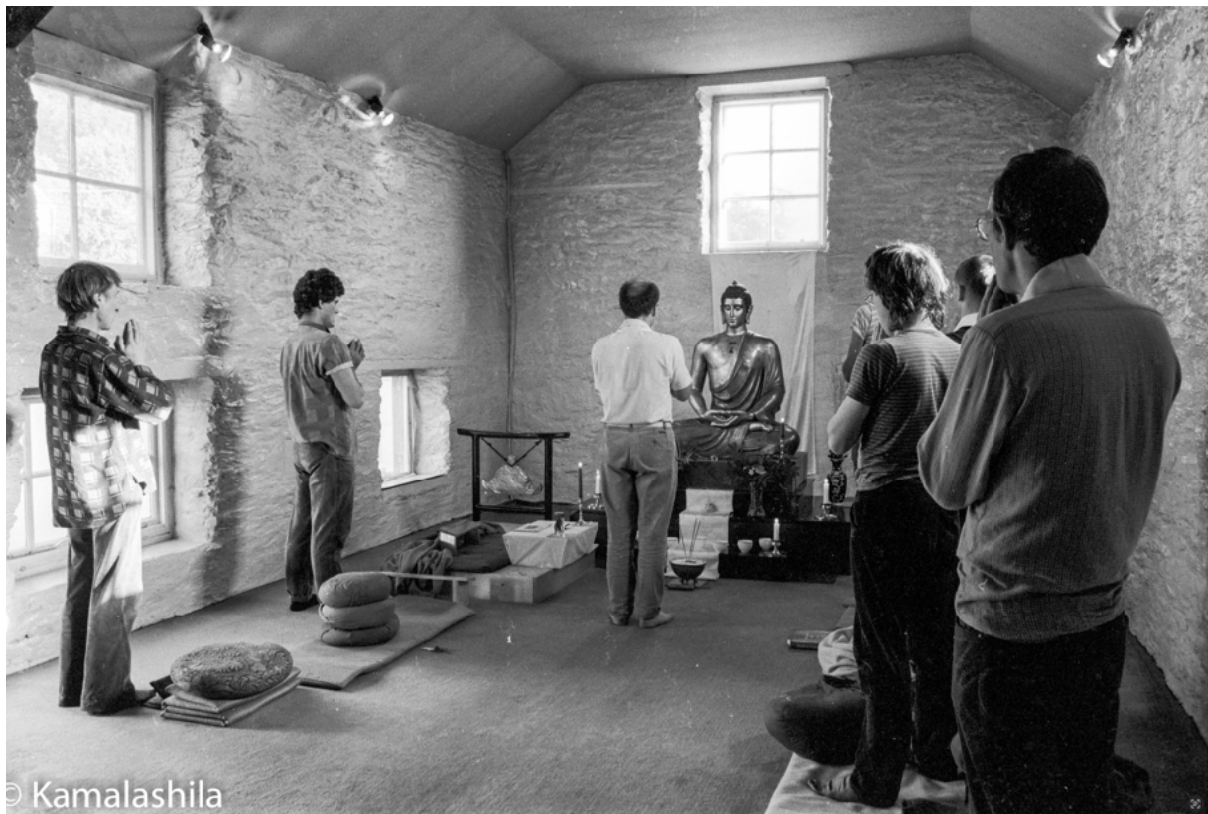
Something was confirmed from that point on. I had always been drawn to insight, which I knew was what the Buddha taught, but I never saw it as disconnected from the rest of life. So now I was happy to involve myself in the whole package offered by the Friends, as a way to gain the human skills I knew I lacked, amongst others who were also on the same path to awakening. It was a huge relief not to have to do that in the more socially approved ways of marriage and career. I had resisted those, and there had been a cost, but I'd known intuitively that they would leach away the sensibilities I most valued. So I felt deeply grateful for the training I received. I suspect this is still how our movement works for many young people.

A Culture of Community

But to a lesser extent I also accepted the FWBO package of ordination, community and 'right livelihood' because of a general upsurge of interest in spirituality. Everywhere there were cultish groups springing up offering self-actualisation, mystical experience, divine illumination and whatever appealed to the spaced-out survivors of 60s bohemianism. Cheap

travel and increasingly globalised news media had widened everyone's horizons. People in Afghanistan, India and Africa had cultures that seemed vastly less superficial than the post war conventionality satirised by David Frost, John Peel or Monty Python. The indigenous cultures seemed deeply poetic and religious to us. We felt a deep need to move on from a drugs-and-fashion-induced spirituality. The new movements seemed to offer a new kind of society that corrected the narrowness in western culture.

Sangharakshita himself was clearly also motivated by a wish to create a corrective culture. He called the FWBO 'The New Society.' He managed to avoid, to an extent, the pitfall of cultishness by ensuring that the movement was not exclusively built around his example, even though he was our inspiration. Recently I have been learning that key ideas, that I always assumed must have been Sangharakshita's, actually came through other individuals. 'The Friends' then, as it aspires to be now, was a co-creation, a community of individual people open to one another and free to approach things as they liked. There was little of the later sense of hierarchy. We knew we had yet to realise it, but at least our view of the scope of spiritual practice was satisfyingly broad, ranging from friendship and work to insight meditation.



Monastic Community at Vajraloka



In 1978, and four years ordained, I spent a memorable summer alone in a derelict old farmhouse called Tyn-y-Ddol. Camped amidst the ruins I lived on vegetables and read the Lankavatara Sutra. It was deeply inspiring to read about Buddha Nature and other Mahayana unfoldings of the teaching of sunyata. The experience primed me to take, the following year, an opportunity to leave the centre I had started in West London and join the building project there in the Welsh hills that we later called Vajraloka. I worked as a labourer under Atula's direction and after the initial work phase was over, was appointed as its chair.

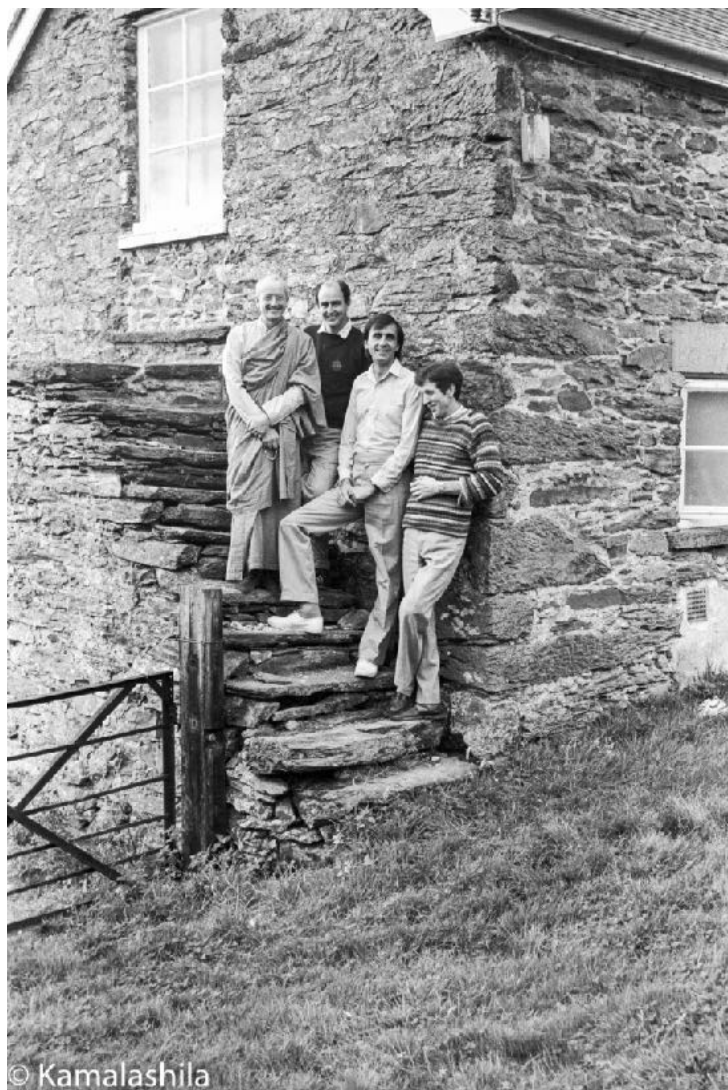
The place was initially conceived as the Order's retreat centre, served by a residential semi-monastic community. Individual members could join for periods. I had various responsibilities but the situation gave me ample opportunity to meditate. I usually did four sessions a day, deepening into the foundation yogas and some sadhana practices as well as all the other practices we learn in the Order. I had all kinds of experiences as a result, some of which I'd call insight, with strong shifts in perception and perspective. There were also many small visionary experiences, as well as a general happiness and joy in the practice.

Views about insight

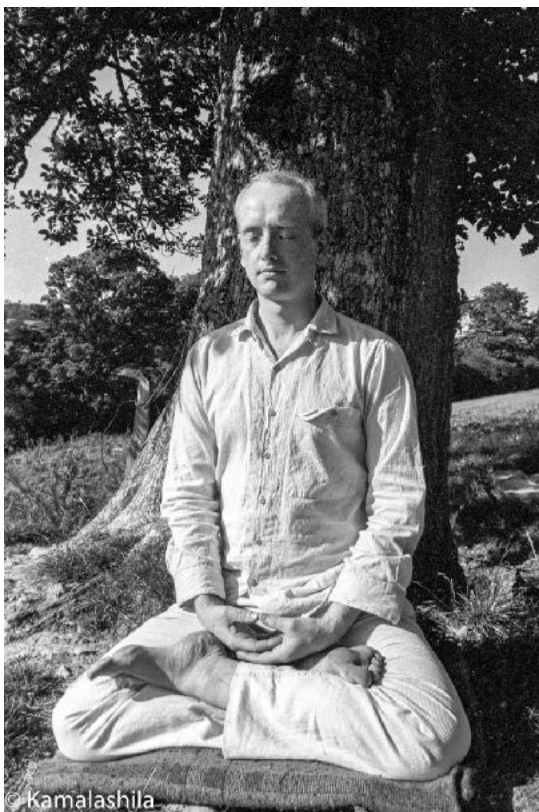
In those days there was no language around insight at all apart from the theoretical doctrines, which we were not taught how to apply in experience in a sustained way. The main understanding was that shamatha i.e. calm, seen in terms of the jhanas, needed always to precede vipassana i.e. insight. We were led to believe that insight would not be genuine unless supported by shamatha. Sangharakshita generally did not teach how insight was to be recognised or understood in experience, or about how to work with insight experience; so we did not miss or expect that. However, since jhana was considered indispensable to insight, people tended to focus on achieving it, or on whatever

hindrances prevented it. And since jhana is hard to achieve outside retreat conditions, there eventually arose a widespread sense that practically speaking, a deliberate cultivation of insight was out of reach. It was considered that there might be exceptions, and insight might also descend on its own, so there was still hope.

Despite the above, people did sometimes find insights arising, and occasionally we might discuss these personally with Sangharakshita. One to one, his comments could often be somewhat positive: usually some kind of acknowledgement that the experience was in the territory of insight. But his public comments about insight were usually that one should be wary of alienated awareness, ego-appropriations of insight, and false claims. Of course, we accepted these pronouncements.



Caution is always to be advised about sharing insights: if the other's confidence is low, or they are anxious about status, or they view insight as so exalted as to be unobtainable in practice, there can be a strong reaction. An atmosphere eventually came about in which it was considered bad taste to speak of insight experience at all, since it would involve making a 'claim' to having experienced actual insight—which, we understood, was likely to have been a production of their ego. Within this scepticism was also a view that insight entails a claim to higher status. So if someone (especially if they were not an Order member) dared to 'make a claim' to insight, Bhante's comments would be used to disparage them with suggestions that actually they had been alienated from their feelings, or that their ego had made a false claim. While that could sometimes have been true, the motive for such behaviour could also seem egotistically defensive or dismissive. It appealed to a particular group mentality within the Order, and the result was a stalemate wherein positive discussion of insight became almost impossible, since someone, somewhere, would first need to make a claim to it and run the gauntlet of disapproving comment.



I trusted Bhante's wisdom, and my own practice seemed to be producing good fruits, so none of that bothered me. I was much happier, I went on many solitary retreats and had all kinds of experiences, none of which I even expected to be able to talk about. Everything I encountered about the Dharma through meditation made sense. Buddhist teaching that for others appeared to be philosophy or theory to me was generally something I could connect to in my experience. Otherwise I at least understood that it could only be appreciated in that way. I received directly from meditation many inklings and openings to what the

words *anatta*, *bodhicitta* and *sunyata* actually refer to. Sometimes I would penetrate these in ways I'd not seen before or known about, and that was convincing. All the practices contributed to this. I

did not have any large, life changing insights until much later, but there were many moments of seeing, for example, the reality of the emptiness of self-nature in things. These were life changing in small ways, and certainly confirmed my confidence in what I was doing.

I had plenty of work to do on my emotions: again and again practising the Brahmaviharas, developing love and patience, empathy and equanimity. I was—and am still, essentially, in my untransformed *samskaras*—an awkward, shy, sensitive and impatient person, probably neuro-atypical. I was often given responsibility, and also wanted to take it, but I always had a difficult ride in relation to those who had to work with me. I know with the hindsight of age that I can sometimes be hard to work with, and to relate to.



Celibacy

In a kind of refuge from the excesses of my teens I had been inspired by the path of *Brahmacarya* even before I joined ‘the Friends,’ so I maintained it from the very early years through to the end of my long retreat in 2004 (with a few lapses, including a year-long break). I could only practice celibacy in my 20s and 30s because I clearly saw that sexual craving could cease if I persisted in not attending to it, and that it is possible to loosen the habit. The conviction to carry this out came from my practice. I was young and healthy. I had been sexually active since age 15 and there was plenty of temptation. But meditation had shown me that temptation always wins if you have a view that you can’t resist it. I could change that wrong view. Of course, as a heterosexual it helped a bit when I moved to the male environment of Vajraloka permanently, but what tended to undermine my resolve even more than contact with women was most Order members’ views in those days. Generally, views about sexuality were still rather crudely fuelled by 60’s ideals of ‘free love.’ There was

also an utter lack of empathy for the ideal of celibacy, so that it felt normal, natural and maybe even healthy to regard celibates as weird. Seeing how entrenched such views were, I was content to let go any wish to be understood, as part of what I took on with the *Brahmacarya* precept.

Celibacy helped me to stay happy and motivated in practising meditation in the first half of life, and I feel grateful for Sangharakshita's support of my practice of *Brahmacarya* over long years, even if practically no one, including Sangharakshita himself, seemed particularly sympathetic. It seems odd that Triratna has never set up real monasticism, and that Order members wait till old age before taking up *Brahmacarya*. I have happily gone the other way: in the second half of life the inclusion of sexuality has afforded a different, more embodied kind of happiness and a felt connection to the rest of nature, which I know has enhanced my practice and my faith in the dharma. It has also been similar to hatha yoga in helping bring alive an inner body awareness, which has been very helpful for that element in sadhana practice. But I know from my own experience (and from the example of Sangharakshita's earlier vocation as a practising monastic) that for younger adults *Brahmacarya* is a real possibility. It offers a powerful refuge from worldliness, and it also helps one appreciate far more directly the limitations of worldly life - the *dukkha* that the dharma is pointing to. I think the lack of an organised monastic wing (and the deep practice and dharma realisation that is often nurtured in such situations by those who are drawn to them) has contributed to some of our problems and I hope that will one day someone will come along who is able to inspire and sustain such a formative project.

The Original Conception of Vajraloka, which didn't last

Sangharakshita inaugurated the Vajraloka community as the next big project after Sukhavati. It was to be a semi monastic situation with all those participating committed to *Brahmacarya*. The centre was intended as a resource for the Order, and while a year of building work was going on, meditation was given extra attention, for example at the Order Convention at Vinehall School, in which Bhante led through many sadhana practices. All Order members, that is the men (who in those days were in the great majority), were enjoined to use Vajraloka when they needed the refreshment of a few weeks of meditation. The women were allowed to take over Vajraloka for a month each year and do likewise. Naturally they chose dry, sunny August.

Thus for a while Vajraloka was placed at the centre of Order life. However its centrality shifted as Order members began to discover what a few weeks of meditation (and the *Brahmacarya* precept which in those days everyone took there) could actually be like in the



middle of their normally very busy lives. That kind of application is truly challenging, and in those early days the resident community, all of us naïve young men fuelled by high ideals, lacked the skills we later developed for helping others. We tended to get on with our own practice and leave others to struggle. Partly as a result of our unfortunate inexperience, it gradually became acceptable for outsiders not always to take up Bhante's injunction to practice deeply, in a shift that eventually even came to apply to Sangharakshita's own involvement in the Vajraloka project. At the beginning of Vajraloka's existence he told us that he would be dropping in from time to time to give teachings on meditation. But these never actually materialised, to my mild disappointment then, and if for a moment I may step out of the 80s into the bigger picture, I believe that a devastating loss of vision resulted from his neglect, one that has profoundly affected the overall tone of our Buddhist movement, i.e. what we now call the Triratna Buddhist Community. It is recoverable of course, but it seems to me that we are mostly still floundering in our faith in the path to awakening forty years later!

I remember one much-anticipated visit when Bhante came as part of a more general tour and chatted with us for an hour or so. But he and Kovida left before lunch, excited by the prospect of—the coastal drive down from Colwyn Bay. It was a pleasant, sunny day – how can I blame them? I know that in reality, it can be hard to relate to people who spend all their time meditating, unless you are doing that yourself. In those days I know I was shy, hard to fathom, and definitely no conversationalist. Nonetheless, I had poured myself life and soul into his project, and I rather wished that Bhante had wanted to spend real time with us. And as though by way of compensation he did, indeed, spend three months at the nearby cottage

Tyddyn Rhydderch in retreat, with his current companion. But apart from allowing me to visit him one afternoon, during which we disagreed about whether the more seasoned Order members got enough dharma teaching for their needs (he suggested that they discuss their practice in Order meetings), we never heard from Bhante. So sadly, it seems that he lost interest in Vajraloka and of course, that sent its own signal.

An unfortunate inability to connect

It is important to understand that at the time none of this caused any bad feeling. It didn't occur to us even to think about it - I was happy to practice at Vajraloka over the fifteen years I was there. Nevertheless, on reflection, I do believe that the effects were as significant as I have suggested. I think Bhante must have realised he didn't have much to say and didn't quite know what to do with the intensive meditation centre he had set up.

He always told me he was happy for us to get on with what we were doing, which was good of him, but we really could have done with a steer in those early days, and we trusted him implicitly. It never occurred to us for a moment that our expectations might exceed his ability to communicate insight. Sangharakshita was well qualified, with clearly his own experience of insight, but it seems he couldn't connect us to it. This did not occur to us as a possibility then, in someone so generally gifted in communication. But it certainly occurs to me in older age, having seen other sides of his character, and the way my own ignorance has trickily evaded exposure. I am completely sure, forty years later, that our practice was mature enough to receive some direction towards insight. But Sangharakshita's response to us was probably more complex than we could imagine then. For example it may partly have been a sense of limited time, in combination with the needs of his own personality and in relation to the rest of the movement. To work with our specialised community he would have needed to commit, and stay with us a longer time. Reluctantly, I can understand that such a prospect was just too much, or even deeply unappealing, to him.

Leaving the monastery and meeting my doubt

Anyway, as indicated, such questions never bothered us. Our faith was unwavering, even if it wasn't that fine-tuned. Time rolled on. I was invited in 1994 to Madhyamaloka, Sangharakshita's community of 'senior and responsible Order members' in Birmingham. That marked the end of my fifteen-year period of practice on retreat. I was happy to leave the male, semi monastic world of Vajraloka and looked forward to a more outward-going

lifestyle. I had experience to offer, and in my new role I was privileged to be able to travel the world giving talks, teaching retreats and being seen as a 'senior' order member in my mid-forties.

However, as I entered the world outside the monastery, what was actually building up was a heavy weight of doubt about the validity of the practice I had done. I didn't seem to be that insightful for someone who had been ordained twenty years. Of course I see now, that not having received such teaching about the significance of what I had done, I simply had no way to recognise its fruits. And I was still reactive, still imperfectly transformed by the practice, so that occasionally I would be tortured by others' unintentional slights and slurs, occasionally even to the point of suicidal thoughts. If I had any insight into the nature of existence surely such emotions would be impossible, according to what I had learned. I was sure I had experienced big openings, moments of insight. But the worrying thought that now came to me was: how would I even know those were real? In practice I knew so little about what insight actually was and what its characteristics were. Sangharakshita had taught the theory of insight well but said virtually nothing about it as an experience. Whenever I tried to get him on that subject, he clearly did not want to dwell on it for long. He even seemed bored by my questions. He was usually far more interested in what I was doing to develop the movement. Most other Order members (and we all knew one another then) weren't able to help. They were in the same position as me.

At the time this seemed very strange. Bhante clearly regarded me as one of his main disciples. He had told me that I was one of twelve 'most trusted Order members' who he had invited to this special community. He had trusted me to do public ordinations in India in his name. He knew I had been at Vajraloka all those years and was deeply involved in the movement's meditation practices. I had even written what was then the movement's definitive book on the subject. It might not be perfect (I got the impression he didn't like it much), but it certainly showed a strong interest and familiarity with the subject. So what on earth was the reason? The most obvious one was that he could not communicate with me; given my quiet, introverted, perhaps rather unreadable, nature, no doubt that was it, I thought rather sadly. It was nice to be so trusted, but to then be ignored was hard. It never occurred to me that Bhante could not relate to my insight experiences or might even have his own communication difficulties. To my youthful trusting mind this seemed like an impossibility, but I now think of course he was an imperfect communicator, since most people are, in one way or another. I don't think he could relate easily to my type of character. But another thing that I understand nowadays is that these things never have to be a barrier – and so later, after my long retreat, we felt a lot more in common and got on very well for a while. There is a lot that could be said about our relationship over the years that would take me off my main

topic. I feel deep gratitude to his introducing me to the vastness of the Bodhisttva Vow (as he did during this period of greater compatibility) even though the insight aspect of that (which was what attracted me) was something that ‘didn’t work’ that well in relation to him. But I see now that there was no reason why it had to.

An Unexpected Guest

As these doubts increased, Bhante had a visitor. Shenpen Hookham was an old friend of his. She visited more than once and sometimes would stay a couple of days. Madhyamaloka wasn’t that huge, so you’d see her around and find yourself chatting in the conservatory with her now and again. I found her remarkably easy to talk to about practice. It was like being with another Order member – but her familiarity with Dharma was deeper than anything I’d encountered in our Sangha. We talked about ‘Just Sitting.’ I had known for a very long time that it had great potential as an insight practice but had been confused by Sangharakshita’s strictures about it. I had been practising Just Sitting since before ordination twenty years before and hence had many experiences and reflections around the practice, but there were very few people I could share those with now I had left Vajraloka, and it was unfortunately pointless talking to Sangharakshita about it. So it was a revelation to speak with Shenpen. She called her approach ‘formless meditation’ and, as I already knew, it was the main practice she taught as part of a Mahamudra approach.

When she left I was so taken by our easy communication that I wrote to her asking if she would teach me. Her response was to invite me to Tyn-y-Gors, a small house in mid Wales owned by her husband Rigdzin Shikpo. When I arrived Shenpen explained the plan: we’d do a four day retreat together, the two of us. Four sessions daily of 2½ hours. The practice would be just sitting with no instruction, and we’d discuss anything that came out of the practice after each session. Goodness: I had never sat for so long in one session, apart from once or twice maybe, when I was very inspired—or was in dhyana. I put my doubts to one side though: ‘If Shenpen thinks I can do that, probably I can.’ And it turned out that the sessions, and our conversations after them too, were amazing. I learned a lot in a short time, especially about having confidence in my own experience.

The ‘formless’ practice can be said to be fundamentally about resting in (effectively, establishing and re-establishing) the *śraddhā* that awakening is intrinsic to awareness. If it were experienced fully as it is, heart opened and obstacles removed, our own mind would be known as of its nature awakened and already experiencing the way everything really is. This immanence of awakening was also what the acid blotter had indicated originally, so rather

unconsciously I had been drawn to engaging with this for a long time. I am sure there had been some hint in the Lankavatara Sutra about this. Anyway, sometime in the mid-eighties I had discovered Khenpo Rinpoche's booklet 'Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness, which totally fitted that idea. I think we studied the text at Vajrakuta, then the Order study centre. I later did a week long study retreat on it at Padmaloka, and eventually Subhuti went through it at Guhyaloka with the early College. The content was very advanced yet so simply explained and so practical.

It is a book of pointing-out instructions in a series of viewpoints on the truth of emptiness. The five stages begin with basic anatta as described in the Pali teachings, continue through emptiness as expounded by Nagarjuna and end up with the Shentong view of Buddha Nature, the fifth and final perspective. It is still, I believe, one of the best practical dharma books available. Shenpen had edited it, so of course I had become familiar with her ideas long before meeting her, and its perspectives were naturally in the background of our talks and meditations. I was very interested in the fifth of the five views, Shentong Madhyamaka or Tathagatagarbha, because in teaching sadhana meditation I often came up against a negating view of sunyata. Some people seemed to find it impossible not to see emptiness of self and substance as reducing or eradicating their existence. I knew from my earlier experience that it was actually an intensely positive, liberating truth, but explaining why had been beyond my ability. Being able to meditate on this with Shenpen in the Formless practice was particularly freeing, because I could tell that I was beginning to understand. I had begun to understand the Shentong Madhyamaka viewpoint as celebrating that 'there is life beyond sunyata' and that sunyata was definitely not nothingness.

Learning from Shenpen and Rigdzin Shikpo

As a result of these connections coming together so fortuitously, I became Shenpen's and Rigdzin Shikpo's student for the best part of a decade, learning about the approach of their teacher Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, the author of the booklet on emptiness. He I also met on retreat numerous times. Later Khenpo Rinpoche supported my idea of going on a long solitary retreat, which was guided by Shenpen via email and phone conversations. This was enormously encouraging to me and I felt deeply grateful. Rinpoche discouraged his own students from such a retreat, but thought I would definitely benefit. Again, there is much that could be said about these relationships, but as regards what worked best as an insight practice, it was definitely the 'formless' approach to meditation that worked, and that in particular because the context, emptiness, was always so well explained. I was drawn to the approach just as I had been by Bhante's clarity 25 years before. In Shenpen's world the

conceptual teaching around insight was clear and connected with the wider Buddhist tradition. This for her comprised the Pali canon, the great Mahayana Sutras that Bhante had said so much about, and also the practice traditions of the Tantra which she was initiated into. The important thing, though, was that I could discuss it all so easily. There was so much in FWBO teaching that wasn't working for me at that time; so much in our approach that you could never discuss actual penetration into. That is why finding this new perspective was so wonderful; it complemented everything I had already learned from Bhante (though of course he would probably have a few reservations about it.) My interest encouraged many other more experienced Order members to get to know Shenpen's tradition, and over the years a large number of friends started exploring its riches. At one point around 2005 Vessantara and I were organising an event at the Hermitage, Shenpen's retreat centre near Criccieth, and we had a hundred Order names on our invitation list. Though no doubt these explorations are still frowned upon by some, I think at least when carried out by seasoned Order members, these often turn out to be an encouraging and clarifying influence in the Order. It is notable that, nearly 20 years later, a majority on that list are still actively engaged in Order life.



I should say, before I press on, that Bhante never voiced any objection to my explorations. Indeed, he had generally been tolerant of them, and trusting of me, having in the past suggested I explore certain vipassana retreats. So I knew he could have no persuasive objection to this. However I also knew that the history with Michael Hookham, who later became the teacher Rigdzin Shikpo, had been personally difficult for Bhante, and I could tell

that he saw my learning from Shenpen and he as a bit disloyal. That was unfair, for I was really his faithful follower, but nonetheless, his buttons pressed, Bhante gave me a copy of the letter that the young Michael had sent him in India during the crisis precipitated by Bhante's radical nonconformity at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara. Bhante had already portrayed that letter as a personal betrayal, so I was sure that in getting his secretary to make me a copy, he wished to convey a negative impression of Rigdzin Shikpo's character that would cause me to question my involvement with his teaching. However, my impression of the copied letter was that it was far from disloyal: a callow young man is warning that the atmosphere had turned so strongly against Bhante that in his estimation, he would be wise not to return. Michael writes with youthful earnestness and naivety. What his words convey depends on one's understanding of the value of 'loyalty' in a Dharma context. It is true that Michael was in process of leaving Bhante for Chogyam Trungpa, but someone of his age and experience, surely, should be left free to choose. My sense is that in general, Sangharakshita has been a little over sensitive about 'loyalty'. My more recent experience of Rigdzin Shikpo is of an intensely faithful person who retained appreciation of Bhante's mentorship over his entire lifetime, and expressed it still, for example in the substantial letter he wrote to the Middle Way Magazine praising Sangharakshita when a close and mutual friend had died. Anyway, they are all gone now, all passed on, and so shall we all be, all of us.



Associations beyond the Order

This new phase of practice with Shenpen, based much more on insight, began a long phase of rich associations beyond the Order that led up to and beyond my long retreat. Some time later, along with Dhammarati, I began attending the European Buddhist Union teachers' forum and became friends with Lama Lhundrup (now Tillmann). Shenpen also went to those meetings. I found it very illuminating to realise the issues other western Buddhist groups faced, and most of all, to discover what other teachers were like personally. It was again like meeting experienced Order members: we could communicate so well and so freely about the Dharma! I realised I and Dhammarati had been well raised by Sangharakshita, since we could speak from a good, basic, in-principle understanding of the Dharma. These connections with experienced practitioners gave me a reassurance that in those days I could not get from my own Sangha, that I was on track with my view and experience in insight practice.

Towards a complete retreat from the world

From meeting Shenpen onwards, I conceived the idea of doing a substantial retreat to counter my doubts and establish my practice on another level. I decided to give away all my possessions, abandon having a permanent home, and do a three year retreat. Sangharakshita had some objections to this. His reasoning was that someone responsible for the movement has to take the movement into consideration and shouldn't merely follow their own personal needs. He therefore thought I shouldn't go away for more than eighteen months. Fair enough, eighteen months seemed like a long time to me, so I didn't argue or bother to think through the implications and principles of his idea. 'Giving away all my possessions' was in fact a bit of a joke, as I wrote later to him. It consisted in having a 'sale' in my room in which everything was free, and giving away lots of things whenever I could. I kept all my books, and I must have kept my laptop as well, and I still had money in a bank account. Yet, though what I did was hardly a heroic act of dana, it lightened my heart: I felt freer.

The homelessness vow was more significant. I was an Anagarika which (in combination with the *Brahmacarya* vow) means 'without a home' and though it is the spirit of this rather than the letter that counts, I had always had a yearning for the homeless life. The experience of being in nature that Buddhafield had shown to me, and also Khenpo Tsultrim Rinpoche's personal example (as well as *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness* Rinpoche had for many years been a homeless practitioner inspired by my original Dharma hero Milarepa),

strengthened that desire. So, for a couple of years - and I think given the conditions I can include my years as a hermit - I finally left the security of a permanent home. Over the millennial new year, I did the last of my Bodhgaya teaching sessions with Lalitavajra on the roof of the Mahabodhi Society. Then began a final year of teaching engagements, meetings etc., all the while preparing to leave the world.



Reflections at Buddhafield on pagan spirituality

Buddhafield to me was already otherworldly. Its ethos of living lightly on the land spoke to my heart: there is nothing like sleeping on the naked earth, far from any town, beneath a glittering night sky. Living close to the elements with wood fires and simple dwellings produces beautiful mind states, a sense of primordiality that I had not experienced since childhood. The awareness induced by that simple life is direct and clear in a way that seems to take you close to insight. Certainly, it placed you within a space of existential reality, in which one really felt the truth of having once emerged from the mystery of the womb. Life became vast and endlessly mysterious. It was, indeed, a pagan spirituality that Sangharakshita, to me very impressively, also endorsed, evoked outdoors in rituals and

ordeals like the sweat lodge. It seemed to me that this largely unappreciated dimension was potentially an important condition for realising the Dharma. The Buddha himself had actively chosen to live like that. As a well-born individual, son of a king, he certainly hadn't had to, and whoever would have thought less of the Buddha's teaching had he lived in a more civilised fashion? But Sakyamuni wanted his Bhikkhu Sangha to live in the wild. He was born, became awakened, and died, according to tradition, under the sheltering branches of trees.

Pagan spirituality also tied in with meditation. Its focus on the mystery of our existence and our commonality with all life forms gave meditation a special significance. The formless practice that Shenpen taught became sitting 'in nature,' in the sense of sitting in the nature of the mind, which ultimately was Buddha Nature. Something similar happened with the meditation on the Elements. Meditating on the land entailed literally sitting on the earth, and feeling the water, fire and other elements. In this atmosphere I soon began receiving what were effectively dharma insights from nature. Though to properly understand these the reader needs to imagine what is actually involved in living 'off grid' and on the land. If you are used to normal home life with walls and a roof, heating, water and electricity, the difficulty and inconvenience of living in nature may at first be close to intolerable. Water needs to be found, fetched, stored, and the store itself looked after. Contrasted with our usual experience of obtaining water by simply turning a tap, each of these is a task requiring real time and energy. And every kind of weather brings unique dangers. The fire is crucial and needs an attentive eye, not to mention the difficult skill of fire-lighting, and firewood must somehow be found and kept dry. Every job takes far, far more time than modern people are used to, and uses up far more energy. These challenges can thus cause huge tension until one learns to let go a certain kind of ego-clinging and enjoy the conditions. In more dharma-related language, living in nature exposes one's domesticated conditioning, one's ignorance of the way things are in nature, and one's clinging to particular, often artificial, forms of comfort. Addressing these shortcomings can be hard; nature in its rawness can appear harsh, and the need for constant physical work can at times seem dehumanising. But if one has all the time in the world, as one does on retreat, one can discover a curiosity and gentle resilience in relation to the array of processes and natural forms, and this I have found to bring a blessing that eventually makes me feel more natural and free. I feel with this an easy connection to our real nature as Vajrasattva. The simplicity and directness of nature is, I find, an excellent condition for some, at least, of the agitated mental complexities of *avidya* to drop away.

Shenpen never completely swallowed these ideas, though I frequently expressed them. She tried a retreat at a land based community in Wales called Spirit Horse, but the experiment

wasn't repeated. As the Buddhafield team know, retreats in nature require such radical solutions that they won't be practical for most organisations. But she and Rigdzin Shikpo often spoke of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's interest in the land in mid Wales, and his love of the Grail legends linked to some of the landscape there. Once Shenpen and I spent a day in



the hills around Bwlch Mawr in resounding rituals 'claiming this land for the Dharma.'

And everything comes from nature of course, even Sangharakshita's example of something no one would consider to be alive: stainless steel. Me, I like animism, and Buddhist cultures are often animist, since it fits well with *anatta* and *pratityasamutpada*. If nothing can be said to exist independently, and 'self' is just another construct, we can identify 'other' in things like mountains, rivers and atmospheres that we can, if we allow, experience as other beings. Over years of practising formless meditation in nature along with people from the general

Buddhafield community, I came to enjoy deep experiences of the truth that everything is sacred. Nature is essentially everything, since nothing can happen outside its laws; and also ‘everything’ is an experience, as in the perspective of Yogacara. The Buddha called it ‘The All.’ In those glimpses, when seen rightly, all experience is inherently awakened, beyond added-on constructions like subject and object. Natural surroundings are a condition that make this clear if you sit for a long enough time, with *śraddhā*, so that eventually the assumptions drop away and the mind emerges in its true nature. I came to think that this must have been why the Buddha chose to live outdoors.



I had Devamitra to thank for the connection with Buddhafield. The organisation had asked him to be their president, and we were neighbours on the top corridor of Madhyamaloka. So it was in his neat attic that the role was kindly transferred, as ‘rather more your cup of tea than mine Kamalashila.’ We had hardly heard of Buddhafield, but I soon fell head over heels in love with the lifestyle. I wrote and led retreats on the land and lived in a caravan at Trevince House with the team who create land-based festivals and retreats. The parking area was crammed with dilapidated old vans and their occupants, of which I (and later on, Yashobodhi) were examples. In the house every free space held sprawling junk and equipment. You quickly learned that the business of erecting tents, creating drainage, toilets,

water supply, access, parking, food and cooking in the wild - and then taking it all down, sorting and storing it (if not sodding wet from a week of rain) is massively, unbelievably laborious. I am by temperament rather careless and absent minded and was grateful to learn so much about real, practical things. I began carrying a pocket-knife and a lighter; I still do.



Setting up and living the long retreat

So of course, my 18-month retreat had to be on the land. Lokabandhu kindly helped me by negotiating an agreement with the elders at Tipi Valley, a community of two hundred or so land-dwellers who in the late 60s bought up a patchwork of fields covering several square miles, near Talley in south-west Wales. People still live there in tipis, yurts, African huts and every kind of handmade dwelling. The original valley was reserved for traditional Tipis with some woodland at the top of the hill maybe a mile distant, which was where I

was allowed to stay on my own as a hermit with no one visiting or disturbing me. It was an incredibly generous gesture, and such an experience it turned out to be that my heart still tears in gratitude, in particular to Rik ‘Vic’ Mayes, my main contact. Those people know, of course, what a big step it is to move to such a way of life.

My retreat started on 21 December 2001, the solstice. I soon settled into a ‘four session yoga’ of two hour meditations in the early morning, mid morning, afternoon and evening. These I kept up, exploring sadhana and six element practice as well as some Chöd, but

mostly I practiced formless meditation. Shenpen gave me some guidance: we'd talk on the Nokia I brought, and corresponded via email, moving into Mahamudra practice.

Much happened in the four years I lived in my hermitage, especially during the solitary period. Especially I clarified the nature of the practices themselves. I had nothing to occupy my thoughts except Dharma, so as I simply put into practice everything that I'd learned, things clarified that I had not known were unclear. For example, I got to understand the Mahakarunika sadhana that I did most days far better through so much repetition and reflection.

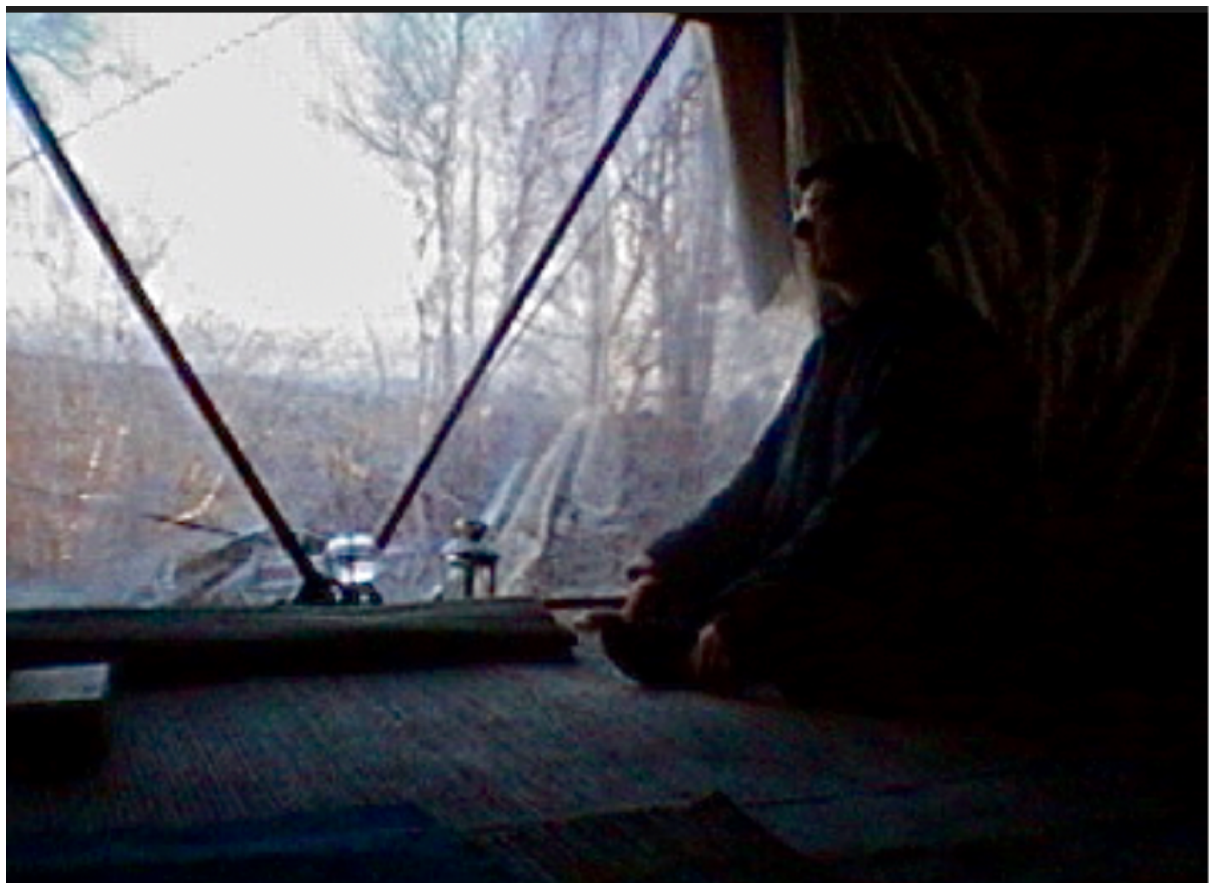


Sadhana is a practice that works for me in relation to insight, not always so much as a direct initiator of insights but as a

container for revisiting and reflecting on them. Provided you avoid the westerner's conditioning of seeing it as petitionary prayer and instead take up the Mahayana view of Madhyamaka/Yogacara, the sadhana form provides a fine context for deepening wisdom once it has arisen. The visualised forms work best, in my understanding, as devices that evoke Buddha Nature. As Sangharakshita once said, the yidam is 'you as you will be when you are enlightened,' and that transforms the practice into a relationship with that Buddha nature in the context of Bodhicitta. What didn't work in the field of sadhana practice was the blunt injunction to 'just do your practice every day and everything will be ok' that in those days

was rife amongst us. Bhante himself explained the basics well, through several seminars, and gave us a good start. He also had a huge wealth of stories about the teachers who initiated him into the sadhanas which gave inspiration and also some direction. There is so much in sadhana that relates not only to insight experience, but also the integration of insight experience into regular life. However, it takes some work to understand how the sadhana form does this. It is a topic I find myself talking about very often these days on retreats.

There were many times that I found myself in samadhi. Life was smooth and gentle - at least inner life was. Day to day existence, in contrast, could be extremely hair raising. Remember, I was living in a tent on the side of a hill in Wales. If there was a gale blowing for example, I had to watch out that it didn't take the roof off, exposing all my possessions to the storm. The wooden struts that held the geodesic shape were forever breaking or coming loose, a constant worry, and I was forever tying canvas down, digging trenches to divert water, and suchlike crisis management. That was the outer world, but the inner world of practice was rich. Without consulting the long diary I made, I remember the main insights came up out of the formless practice, which I spent at least four hours a day on. With Shenpen's mentoring, I spent some time studying the *Mahamudra Pranidhana*, a text that defines the nature of the practice.



Realisations and openings

We were having an ongoing discussion of the way thoughts arise in the practice, when by ‘thought’ is meant any experience, including feelings and sensations. The instruction was to watch thoughts arise, stay and go. Then in an email Shenpen asked if in truth I could observe anything arise—or stay—or go. Her instruction exactly coincided with a doubt that had emerged about the nature of what was arising, or whatever it was they did. Because what was actually perceived, when observed closely, was never anything that persisted. Any persistence, for even the shortest time, would have to entail arising staying and going, and there was none of that. I am not describing my analysis that there must logically have been arising-staying-going, but my bafflement at the logical impossibility of what I was actually observing: that there was no arising, staying, going, at all. It was a jaw drop moment. One assumes that events must take time, but this is not from observation—at least not from deep meditative observation of mental events. One of the issues is that our logical mind cannot accept that time is illusory. Another is that we assume there is an observer. For a while, my meditations entered a new phase in which there was a lot of wonder and some samadhi. I realised that in actual experience, things cannot accurately be said to arise. When you looked at them closely, it was clear that actually there is no place for such arising to happen. Or for anyone to inhabit as the one for whom they supposedly happen. We have these assumptions about how it all happens but if you actually look, it isn’t like that. The manner in which things arise is indeed inconceivable, just as the Mahayana sutras point out.

I also noticed how easy it is, having had that experience, to apply the idea that ‘arising is inconceivable’ without consideration of how that applies in a fresh instance. So it then becomes another habitual assumption: ‘oh yes, it’s inconceivable’. This is how insights lose their effectiveness, and why the path of what Sangharakshita called spiritual rebirth entails the constant re-application of what we have realised.

Quite soon after this, I had a more radical insight experience of loss of identity in the arising of thoughts. It came whenever I was in a state of immersion in the relaxed mind, maybe close to the dream state, when thoughts and images arise freely while the conscious mind is also present and mindful. As I had been on retreat for five months at that point, I could be in this state in meditation, when actively doing things, going to sleep, getting up to pee during the night, or even in the dream state, since I was by then ‘awake and watchful’ a lot of the time. I quote verbatim from my diary for this:

‘I had a long period in the session where I didn’t know where my thoughts had come from, or where they are going, what they connected with or even what they were, what they meant. They didn’t seem like my own thoughts. I was having many many thoughts, and I couldn’t understand my own thoughts! It was very unpleasant and unsettling – I was struggling for

some kind of recognition of what was happening. I'd recognise tail-ends of thoughts, then I'd think 'I remember thinking that, but I don't know what it means, and I don't know what it links up with'. I'd remember bits of dreams and so on in the same way, not knowing its meaning or its connection, not knowing head or tail of it. It was very disorienting and also terrifying as I struggled to find something to identify with.

These phenomena happened repeatedly. In one example I was doing the mindfulness of breathing practice, and eventually it was as though everything just 'thinned out' and my thoughts 'boiled over' as it were, and trains of thought just undid themselves like snakes shedding skin—undid themselves beyond comprehension, completely outside my control—so intensely that I became terrified, and I fainted. I passed out while I was sitting, it was impossible to contain the feeling of it—I rolled back and lay down until I came to. What I could remember was snatches of dreams which didn't add up to anything, they were just snatches, and I couldn't remember what the context was. This kind of experience happened again and again over a couple of weeks, and I became quite scared to meditate. I even thought that something serious might be happening to me, that I might be dying, or losing my mind. But after a while I realised that these phenomena really were a result of the practice of looking at the arising of thoughts. That was when I started to gain the confidence to enter into the 'dissolving' state with a softer mindfulness, so the fear lessened and I began to learn. Then, of course, it stopped happening; something had been absorbed.

I have pondered and discussed this with numerous people since. Shenpen gave it a fairly technical assessment as 'an incomplete insight experience,' i.e. some kind of insight but not irreversible awakening. This makes a lot of sense. My attitudes and relationship to this existence and this life has been profoundly altered by what happened, but there is still plenty that remains untransformed. Practitioners I know such as Satyadhana and Vajracchedika have at different times thought that what happened might have been in the territory of *nirodha samapatti*, the so called 'ninth jhana' when all experience ceases as a result of deep looking. That certainly seems to describe what happened. I have thought more recently that the experiences also appear to be similar to the 'black light' phase that at death, according to some traditions, accompanies the final dissolution of the thinking mind. This according to Shenpen in her book on death can be touched on in life as well.

Certainly the experiences, which I can't imagine I'll ever forget, showed me how thoughts have their own life and a merely nominal connection with meaning—a fact that without right view could be profoundly psychologically undermining, and is perhaps an unacknowledged factor in age related amnesia. The reason why I could not work out their meaning was similar to the earlier insight where there was no room for things to arise in time. I was seeing

my thought processes with a similar 'timeless' clarity within which meaning, identity and even thought itself was nakedly revealed as entirely attributed, fluid and empty.

No doubt some will find these descriptions incoherent or obscure. I have tried to record faithfully what happened but it may not be possible to do that adequately. I was definitely changed by the experience. Some pride and conceit left me. I was sobered and became clear that 'this is for others, not just me. May all beings find true happiness, I thought, even those I find most difficult.'

Many other experiences came to me on the retreat. I will say only that certain fruits appeared, that to me indicated that the methods I had been taught by Sangharakshita and practised for so many years had definitely worked well, and that it did not matter that I had needed a mentor outside our system to give me the confidence to generate those fruits. Many experiences were deeply unifying and, in some ways, virtually the opposite of the kind of dissolution I described just now. I sometimes had an experience in meditation that 'existence is in reality all of a piece and not divided into relations between subjects and objects.' I noticed that once it became a little more absorbed, this perspective profoundly altered the space in which *sadhana* takes place.



Emerging from Retreat

Tipi Valley was a kind of paradise; it won't be repeated. The overall experience was as difficult and awkward as I am, and sometimes the loneliness was intense:

Mind uneasy, walking to and fro,
I chant the Tiratana just to keep my spirits up:
My voice keeps choking on 'saranam gacchami'.

I was philosophical about it, though:

The blackbird knows it all.
He sits quite still and watches
As I and everything fall into pieces.

Life at 'The Wind Element Hermitage,' like timeless Eden or a clear meditation, eventually had to be emerged from, and I see via hindsight that much of my life since has been about embodying what happened there.

Emergence from the Mainstream



I now needed to remake my life. My father, I think, had kept going for me over the retreat, while we exchanged our monthly letters. I stayed with him until he died the following year. It was then that, as described earlier, I joined the Buddhafield community in Devon, continued with Shenpen and Khenpo Rinpoche, met Yashobodhi and began our now lifelong relationship. The transition between my entering a long retreat as a celibate anagarika and

emerging a married man was certainly a huge change, and a number of people in the Order found it disturbing and gave us both a hard time about it. For me the decision came out of the practice I'd been doing which was essentially turning towards suffering, turning towards every aspect of experience on the assumption that the openness, clarity and sensitivity within



all experience was untransformed wisdom. It just needed to be seen and recognised. This view of reality did not really go with the view that sexual desires should be opposed and relinquished. And in many ways, it seemed to be a good time to make a transition away from solitude, into community and relationship. I was 55 and I felt that I'd had a good go at being a monk, and there had been many benefits. But now I wanted to live

in a new way. I made the decision during the long retreat that I wanted to marry, to make a commitment to a woman and live with her.

I also needed to remake my life outside mainstream Triratna. I had given thirty years to a central role furthering its institutions, and though I remained a member of the College of Preceptors, my centre of gravity had shifted fundamentally during the retreat. The sense of responsibility I now felt for the movement was far less active and personal. I was there as part of the College as a senior advisor, a friend, or simply a reminder from the early years. Others would always want to take an active role, but I cared little for the institutions of the movement now; I wanted to live far more organically, deepening practice and friendship.

Interests at the Fringes of the Order

As I began to re-link with the world of the Order, and to explore what I might find interesting in the doings of my peers, I discovered that there were all kinds of inspirational activities going on that the College in general either knew nothing about, or were inclined not to be interested in. These were always activities that draw older more mature practitioners, like insight into the nature of reality, or semi political concerns such as how effective or fair are our ways of self-government. I began to realise that in any organisation, the mainstream and the fringes are likely to be in conflict. The mainstream is interested in coherence, in the

standards and customs we hold in common, and is to some degree concerned to ensure and even forcefully impose such values. Such concern is what helps manifest a neat coherent mandala of Triratna dharma activity at Buddhist centres. Through a regular diet of introductory meditation, ethics and such activity, newer people feel encouraged. All they have to do is practice dharma in line with that kind of presentation, and there will be some kind of personal development that will do them good.

For older more experienced people, however, this approach to the dharma and 'the movement' can often begin to feel unnatural. It can seem bland, simplistic, hollow and especially, to exclude their more diverse experience. Looking more deeply into the causes of this, older people may become critical of the standard approach when they see how those with institutional influence promote their preferences. For example, some people are welcomed quickly into the Order whereas others have their ordination delayed for years, with seeming endless discussion and consultation occasioned by some once-expressed doubt. Of course, the person themselves may have all kinds of issues to sort out. So it's not simple; I think the point I wanted to make was mainly that the value of commonality can acquire an exaggerated importance and even end up seeding distrust in activities or people whose ideas or approach seems too different.

And if the false values of conventionality and fitting-in do start to prevail, it will propel good, mature individuals into full flight away from the centre and out towards the periphery of the mandala, where things can be fresh and interesting again. And that's a wonderful and natural thing. I believe this phenomenon of the richness at the fringe has been an important catalyst throughout Buddhist and other histories. For Buddhism it seeded both the Mahayana and Vajrayana, both of which were fringe activities for centuries, not to mention the Mahasiddha and Forest Monk traditions.

By this point of course, the fringe was exactly where my own heart lay. Concerns about the restrictive influence of the mainstream on more mature members of the Order, became more focused as I prepared to emerge from retreat. I was still officially living in my dome in Talley, on the moor above Byrgwm, though by that time I had acquired a Jeep Cherokee for getting on and off the moor, and probably would no longer call myself a hermit, though I still led a peaceful, meditative life. I participated in the life of the local community, spending time with others and turning up for the sweatlodge ceremonies that took place on the new and full moons.

It was around the official end of my retreat time that we college members received a letter from Subhuti informing us about a letter that was about to appear in Shabda, the Order newsletter, written by Yashomitra, someone many of us knew and respected. He wrote criticising Sangharakshita's at times psychologically damaging sexual advances towards, in

particular, vulnerable young men, and the sincerity of his words broke open a fissure within the complacency that prevailed within the Order of that time, amongst both men and women, in relation to single sex community, sexuality and 'spiritual friendship.' In time that fissure widened to become a mighty stream of doubt and confusion, that has been replicated in many other religious and secular organisations too since the late 90s into the present day, with numerous iterations within our own movement including the famous 'Guardian' article exposing Sangharakshita's misogyny and other failings in 1997. We needed to address those doubts and see what was good and what was not, where we were dragging our heels and where we could still be proud of our movement. That some of the process still continues, forty years later, shows just how necessary it all has been.

Anyway, this opened my eyes in some ways. I have long felt a responsibility for the needs of the more mature Order practitioners, who often seemed to get such a poor deal from what I am calling the 'mainstream' – the majority faction within the movement concerned only with showing a coherent picture for the benefit of newcomers. I mentioned earlier that around 1982 Sangharakshita told me that in his view, any more detailed or personal advice for more experienced Order members' spiritual needs would be covered through their discussions at weekly chapter meetings. The actual composition of Order chapters is very variable and can easily become dominated by personal opinion, as he knew, so at the time I could hardly believe that Bhante actually meant this. But later experience of both him, and of myself too as I have aged, has made me wonder if sometimes he simply could not empathise with his disciples' position. Empathy doesn't always arise! And then there were his trusted successors, many of whom only seemed to feel the same disconnect from the more mature Order. Some of the problems thrown up by these people I have also mentioned, for example the wonderfully potty idea that anyone daring to express that they may have experienced insight into the absolute reality is in danger of making a 'claim' which is simply in bad taste, creating an unpleasant and competitive social odour. There was something quintessentially English in the atmosphere this idea evoked, and from that point it was never straightforward to discuss insight practice. And indeed there was no Order forum for such a discussion.

This seemed like a crucial thing, and I resolved to start something. One person's example inspired me – Richard Hayes, an Order member called Dayamati. A Buddhist academic then at McGill University in Canada, Dayamati ran with exceptional good humour a 'bulletin board' called Buddha-L where there were extensive discussions on every kind of dharma topic. It was his good humour and ability to meet people where they are at which convinced me it is possible to communicate online, and though I was sure I could never match the intelligence of his example, it was something to aspire to. So around this time, perhaps in 2004, I started an internet discussion group for the Order called Mahasangha. It simply

enabled free conversation about any topic, which at the time was unavailable. In those days we Order members could write into Shabda once a month, which guaranteed a certain readership, but we could not say whatever we wanted; there was a certain censorship of content, or at least editorial consultation as to whether content could be included. But there was also the 'English' social reticence and the sense that any critical writing was in 'bad taste,' which was really a typically anglocentric form of repression, it seemed to me. Nowadays the Triratna Order consists of several thousand initiates from all over the world and is multiracial, so it is worth trying to imagine the early years when a high proportion of Order members, especially those with special responsibilities, were male, white and had been to English public schools.



It was obvious that Order members needed to communicate unreservedly sometimes, especially about the Dharma – at least that was my point of view on this. True, often people simply wanted to express their feelings and opinions, which could be inflammatory and unskilful in all the ways that have become familiar with the rise of social media. This did, unsurprisingly,

become a problem for us too, and eventually Mahasangha needed to be upgraded to include moderators and other voices of reason. The reformed website also eventually ran out of steam, so that nowadays, twenty years having passed, these conversations happen on private Facebook groups and the like. There has even been an attempt on the part of the 'mainstream' to start a Triratana-exclusive online world, to circumvent some of the perceived problems while retaining control of some of the discourse. But generally in the world the online bubble has burst, and those who wish can discuss issues about the Dharma without being referred to the self-appointed Superiors of the Order, and without those conversations being kept under too much control. This tendency on the part of the 'College' was all I wanted to disrupt and undermine, and I am glad to say that the momentum of my earlier efforts have gathered sufficiently well to give courage to those who need it now. (Even Buddhists being human, all too human, I think it would be a quixotic dream to hope for real institutional, systemic change!)



Over this period, my years of retreat experience on the land moved me to join with Guhyapati Maitrisara, Akuppa, Parami and Akasati and to form the ecological group ‘The Redwoods.’ Yashobodhi and I also joined Guhyapati at a new land-based community project in the Spanish Pyrenees called Ecodharma. Ever since leaving my long retreat I had yearned to live like that again in community, in combination with teaching dharma. So I hoped to help with others' long retreats there as a teacher under Lhundrup’s guidance, he having indicated that he would be willing to help me train for that work. But full of these ideas as I was, I typically missed the full extent of Guhyapati's aspiration for a Dharma facility for eco-activists to train in Europe, and I also failed to take into account Yashobodhi’s lack of a role in either vision. In the end the developments in traditional Buddhist practice I had hoped for seemed irrelevant to the style of idealism in the community. People including many friends of mind travelled to Ecodharma for solitary retreats in awe inspiring locations, and to enjoy courses in activism and retreats on the land. What I had wanted to offer didn't really fit, and no one at Ecodharma was really interested in it either, so we were stuck there, feeling irrelevant and facing the collapse of all I had hoped for. We lasted three years in our beautiful yurt while the dream of living on the



land and working with long retreatants that I had nurtured since Tipi Valley unravelled and died. It was a difficult transition, but in the end the community helped us by repaying some of the money we had invested in Ecodharma, and we eventually found an affordable flat in West Hampstead, London. And apart from the Buddhafield season over the English summer, that was the end of the ideal of living on the land. In many ways we were happier living in the city where life is so much easier. From 2010 Yashobodhi and I helped manifest the beautiful West London Buddhist Centre, and I reflected on grass species that magically find their niche between certain paving stones, and the awe of sun and moon that still spread their lights across the cityscape, reflected in the grubby old Thames. Nature is inescapable, and life, along with death, always continues.

Those were happy years on the whole—my sixties—and interesting ones, for there arose a new atmosphere around insight. As I had found with Order discussion through Mahasangha, the sheer global reach of the internet makes discussion around insight, and even direct teachings, far more accessible. And as everyone was now realising, the technology has a wonderful, revolutionary capacity to circumvent authority. The whole field expanded over that decade.



Daniel Ingram wrote a book that highlighted the shadow side of insight practice and also said he was an Arahant, stirring fascinating controversies. In 2011 Liberation Unleashed created a system of mentoring whereby direct pointing to the nature of reality could be done over email. Indeed this was completely familiar to me: I'd undergone a Mahamudra version of that with Shenpen's guidance, in my tent in Talley. Nevertheless, I 'did' LU at Vajralila's suggestion, which recalled that former experience as again I 'saw the empty nature of self.' There were considerable waves and eddies as practitioners and those with responsible roles in Triratna tried to absorb, and in some cases of course, to control, what amounted to a new wave of insight experience. At that point hundreds of us were at least thirty years ordained and wondering as I had at Madhyamaloka, if our years of practice had done anything to support insight practice. To me of course this backlog was the obvious fruit of

Sangharakshita's inability to work directly with the Order members who had been drawn to the obvious depth of his practice since the late sixties and seventies, growing into the eighties – the Order members whose deeper practice could, according to him, be 'discussed at Order meetings'. I was glad to see that there could be at least a few answers for them, even if there was also, still around, the clumsy influence of those who believe that insight is dangerous to the community in some way, and needs to be contained.



While I was on three months retreat at Guhyaloka, Spain in 2013, Satyadhana (now Kevin Schanilec) contacted me about the Cula Sunnata Sutta. That was how I found out about his work on the ten fetters. A few months later we did some dialoguing around the later fetters, and the effect on my habitual mind states was huge. My resentment of those who side-line me, or ignore what I say—a feature of my life that would sometimes rack me with anxiety—simply went. It was a major psychological breakthrough for me, it took place because of seeing the empty nature of such emotions, and maybe there was some weakening of fetters four and five. But that was as far as I could get at that time, and I'm not really sure that I have made even a dent in any fetters apart from the first three.

Now it is the midsummer of 2024, which will be, almost certainly, the final year of my life. I have multiple cancers. Yashobodhi and I have been living in Kennington, London, for half a year, and we're both glad to be back in London. Before that we were surrounded by fields in an isolated, beautiful part of Suffolk, where we moved after the first pandemic lockdown. That was very pleasant, but at this point in our lives we need to connect with the wide world. And at the end of this account of my 'dharma life', only one thing remains to be mentioned: the online retreats which began from March 23, 2020, when the UK government announced that there would be a complete lockdown in response to the risk of coronavirus. So far as anyone understood then, plague was rife and no one should even go outside their home. As Yashobodhi and I took in the situation, I realised that we would now be able to lead retreats online, that they would be well attended, and that I would be able to generate a consistent style of teaching.

Technologies like Zoom that enabled meetings to happen online had been around for years but like computer things generally in Buddhist circles, were disapproved of as unnatural, technical, alienating, etc. But now in-the-flesh meetings were risky, people began to see the many advantages of online gathering. For me the amazing thing was seeing once more on a daily basis old friends still living in far flung lands like New Zealand or the wilds of Spain. People I had not expected ever to see again. Yet now it was so easy simply to sit and meditate together, or discuss some dharma. This was what I really loved about the medium of online retreat. Even though we live in different parts of the world we can come together easily and connect through the practices we know, and it costs nothing.

When that announcement came in March 2020 I had only just finished leading a three month retreat with about a dozen Order members at Maesgwyn, Subhuti's smallholding near Arenig Fawr in Wales, which he offered to sell to us. It had been a superb venue for such a retreat and I wanted to fund raise and buy it. Yet the event had been complex to set up and calculate food costs, and to pay rent and bills every participant needed to find a thousand and more pounds, not to mention the time. I could see myself being drawn into a financial agreement that would occupy my whole life, and make necessary all kinds of costs and retreat practices. I was back thinking in the old way, using the old model of property, as I have been so many times before. With Vajraloka we had to put on retreats to pay the costs of owning our property and of course this is normal. Buildings cost lifetime-sized amounts of money and time investment. And religious institutions like Buddhism require large buildings, and the cost of those determines, somewhere along the line, the relationship between the owning, providing charitable Dharma institution and the beneficiaries who, through invisible legal arrangements in the background, are enabled to practise Dharma in that place.

This works all right, most of the time. We of course feel proud of our buildings; we identify with them. Yet there is something complex and limiting about the hidden responsibilities that reliance on property entails, and the ensuing dynamics around leadership, control and information flow. So it was rather liberating to realise that an annual Zoom subscription would replace the need to set up a marvellous new retreat centre, raise £2 million, and feel forever in chains.

There isn't much I need to say about the retreats that flowed from this realisation over the next few years. I simply led events on the topics that I know well through having practiced them over my lifetime, starting with the life of Milarepa (an early inspiration as previously mentioned). They are listed on my website and hopefully some of the materials I present are of some use still. And they took place, not in any building or stretch of land, but in that completely undefinable shared virtual space that we all experienced yet which never existed as a unity. Nothing more was needed for sharing the Dharma.



On Discipleship

Some thoughts on Sangharakshita and the Triratna Order

Summer 2019

Since Sangharakshita's death in December I have been thinking over my position as a member of the Order. I've not finished thinking yet, but it has involved looking back on my life in the Order, so I'm sorry if what follows seems self indulgent. It has been a useful, clarifying exercise and will very likely lead to some action! Any feedback is welcome — you know where I am.

I am in some ways typical of those of my generation who spent their best years creating institutions. It was all about spreading the dharma: in the first five years, I'd been chair of two London centres and was about to become chair at Vajraloka. In the first twenty-five my star continued rising in the sky through establishing meditation and study institutions, doing public ordinations, joining the original 'college,' touring and giving major talks around the movement. But the following decades, and I'm glad to say this, have been a fall back into the earth. Up in my large comfortable room at the top of Madhyamaloka, I had my Naropa moment. It was as though a dakini appeared at my window and showed me not only my lack of real insight, but that I simply wasn't on a path of insight.

The years since that moment have mostly been about relinquishing the urge to establish the movement, and instead pursuing realisation. I couldn't really regret what I did before, but it was as though I'd been told: Kamalashila, your time is up! It was a call from the beyond, and it was a blessing that I was able to hear it. This long phase of falling into earth has been more difficult: difficult in itself, but also often difficult because of not being understood, and not feeling as celebrated as I was before. 'The bubble, reputation' is a worldly wind: those feelings when it slips in others' eyes, or in your own imaginings! But everything must change; when your experience does not match others' expectation of you, there's a dissonance not easy to resolve.

Bhante encouraged my ‘rise,’ of course. He didn’t seem to understand my need to ‘fall to earth’ so much. But still, over the 45 and more years we were friends I enjoyed much goodwill and trust from him. We always disagreed about minor things, and I know, because he told me, that I gave him a few sleepless nights when I was editing the ‘Western Buddhist Review.’ About important matters, though, we always seemed to understand one another, apart from just one thing: vipassana, insight. I was always for making it more available and talking about it more. He was always wanting to make its practices exclusive to the Order, and was over-concerned, I always felt, that people would get arrogant, or alienated, or irresponsible. Well of course inevitably some would, but I always wanted not to avoid such interesting problems, but deal with them and learn from them.

I can remember a conversation walking along Chantry Road in Moseley, where we lived, about the stupa practice. Not so long before, it had been commonly introduced on regulars’ weekend retreats as an alternative, more imagination based way of integrating the mind as I’m sure I remember him occasionally describing it. I was keen to see that preserved; but he had started thinking that it resonated too closely with the six element practice, and must be dropped. You were letting the elements dissolve; this was hardly different from letting them go as at death, he insisted, and insight practice should only be for Order members. I could never see why... but we were always like that. It’s not that I’m stubborn; I can stand my ground, but I feel I am pretty open. I was just not persuaded by his arguments when they didn’t make sense in lived experience. We disagreed when his reasoning seemed to me based only on theory, or some memory. So at such times we had to agree to disagree. But he never stood in my way even when (in my ‘phase two’) I started exploring teachings from Shenpen and Michael Hookham. For sure, he was not exactly delighted about that: he seemed still a little sore, too, around Michael leaving him in the 60s. And we clashed about the real meaning of Tathagatagarbha as well. But there was, and is still I feel, a loving and understanding atmosphere between us. I liked that he appreciated me as an individual with my own mind, and he opened up whenever I remembered to treat him similarly, rather than being beholden to him (a dynamic I also dislike in relationships). At one point he encouraged me to formulate my own Bodhisattva Vow, which I made in his presence.

So we were close at times; at other times our relationship was less easy. But that makes no difference to and is even an important part of the depth of his influence on me. As a young man I read everything he wrote, listened to all his lectures and studied all of it thoroughly to make my understanding independent, so I could then practice it. So in that sense, I’m certainly a disciple. And as I say on the page dedicated to him on kamalashila.co.uk, which

has pictures of the old community in St.James Lane, Muswell Hill: 'His thinking [became] knitted into my own in a way reminiscent of these sixties era pullovers.'

Bhante's sexual adventures did not affect me. I was pleased he was gay and I generally approved the sexual goings-on. That is, as a child of the 60s I approved the ideology: personally, I always kept a clear distance! I did not realise people having those kinds of sexual encounters could be damaged and I don't think anyone did then. It was common for spiritual teachers to be exploring such things; what we were doing seemed a sane and sensible version of the outlandish stuff that Osho, Trungpa and other gurus were getting into. Many people were exploring spiritual matters and In these circles it was a complete given that people were blocked and needed to break through taboos; it was considered politically correct. There was a sense that there should be no sexual morality. So such things may have moved full circle now, but I was a product of my time; we were all so very affected by all this. If you are of a later generation, or for some reason did not take part in what was happening, this takes a lot of imagination to understand, I fear too much. It is not that I excuse Bhante for his naivety and unskillfulness, because there were regrettable unexpected effects, but I do understand it, and so I can empathise. Empathy seems not even possible for many contemporary people. It's because so much has changed, and that's how things are with societies, it seems to me. I recently watched a BBC film about David Bowie and Ziggy Stardust. Though nowadays I find glam rock pretty hard to watch, it reminded me how prominent the notions of androgyny and bisexuality were then amongst young males in particular. Everyone needed to break these taboos. That video looks ridiculously extreme nowadays, but then it was a big part of youth culture, just like gangsters and knives are right now. Anyway... as I say, I studiously avoided all that stuff in the 70s. I was already traumatised by my experience in the 'swinging' 60s! I had started early, and by age 22 I was sick of love and even of relating sexually. What I longed for was a celibate, monastic life. And I got my way: all those years as an Anagarika really helped fuel my rocket-like ascent through the skies of punya!

To return to the topic of discipleship, I've been a disciple of other teachers too, in a small way. Bhante was resistant. Actually he started me off by asking me to check out a vipassana retreat; but I never felt he really disapproved. I saw no incompatibility myself, because my training in his 'critical ecumenism' enabled me to discern what I need, like a bee finding honey in a flower. My basic allegiance was always to the Order, and I was clear to me the explorations would enhance things. Sangharakshita's training (and my note taking) had given me a strong start; it also turned out to be a fine basis for my 'phase two'. The reason

practising with Shenpen Hookham turned out to be such a joy was that I could share from an articulate dharma understanding, along with some real experience from the six elements and sadhana practice I'd done. I don't agree with opinions I sometimes hear that Sangharakshita's teaching is ineffective as a basis for realisation. To me, it was a great preparation and I feel indebted to him. Having the language of dharma meant we could communicate in depth. I also met other teachers around the same time and found to my delight that what I understood and saw was similar to what they understood and saw. Shenpen's Lama, Khenpo Tsultrim Rinpoche, could see I was ready to do a long retreat and advised me to; which was not at all his recommendation for Shenpen's much less experienced students. I was inspired by Khenpo Tsultrim because of his connection with Milarepa and his homeless, carefree lifestyle.

Accordingly, I did eighteen months fully alone in my dome tent with Shenpen as my retreat guide, as an early example of 'virtual direct pointing': I got my instructions via email and occasional phone calls. I stayed on afterwards for another two-and-a-half years as the 'Hermit of Tipi Valley', or at least one of them! This retreat led to experiences that will probably seem strange or unbelievable. Some of them I mentioned in my 2004 convention talk 'Spiritual Rebirth', given while I was still living a hermit's life. They were strange enough. But still others I hesitated to mention since they could be even more misunderstood. For example the repeated experiences of passing out, so intense that I thought I must be dying, but which I gradually realised was a positive result of the practice. I was doing four sessions of two hours just sitting each day, looking into arising and passing away. The elements had opened me to that, and Shenpen's Mahamudra based methods got me looking more decidedly into the empty nature.

I'd explored the six elements practice intensively in the years running up to my long retreat, and had done it since long before I was ordained. It was, and I suppose is still, at least officially, 'our' main approach to insight. It was what I'd been taught, and it inspired me in all kinds of ways. My way of doing it had of course evolved over 25 years since 1972, when Bhante introduced it on a retreat at 'Keffolds'. Then, as now, the approach was basically a reflection on death: you looked at the material of your body, recalled that it is no different from material in the outside world, remembered that it will have to be given up some time, and tried to give it up then and there — opening to that reality, mentally and emotionally. I did that for years, but once I got to Vajraloka and had so much meditation time, and also got into solitary retreats much more, the 'opening to that reality' part had become the main exploration in each individual element. In each stage of the practice, I was able not only to

reflect on my non-ownership of (say) earth, but to let go into the felt experience, the direct experience of the element. The two aspects in combination — the sensate earth-experience and the vague emotional sense of a me that increasingly clearly, could not possibly ‘own’ that, since the me, if it existed at all, certainly consisted in exactly the same way as a sense experience (mind and body).. as a mere changing series of sensations. I would just allow myself to soak in these incompatible yet tangible truths, like a bath, knowing that ownership is impossible, not knowing where this was going, yet with faith that it was going somewhere.

When I started coupling this with the Mahamudra methods. all this became a different kind of experience. The letting go was far more profound, because I was getting a clearer sense of the nature, if I can put it like that, of sunyata. I was doing the Mahakarunika sadhana each morning, so I felt fully tuned into Bodhicitta: that sense of motive gave me a very strong confidence in the practices I was doing. There was no doubt. In those two hour sessions, I was just sitting, and it was elemental. I attempted to practise continual mindfulness and that, if you know your Satipatthana sutta, prominently entails awareness of the four elements. For a while my instruction from my retreat guide was to observe thoughts arising, staying, and going... if that is what they do. But wait, that is an expectation! - and as I noticed the dukkha entailed in that expectation, and so was motivated to look more closely, I realised that actually, what happens is inconceivable.

As I became vividly aware of the empty nature of thought, thoughts manifested like snakes eating their own tails and disappearing, on an inconceivably vast scale. This vastness was gut churning, like looking overboard an ocean liner on a heaving sea and seeing the waters all the way to the ocean bottom, moving in all directions infinitely. It became an experience of collapse so unsettling, at least at first, that in my tent, a dot on a green hillside with no one around apart from high summer brackens and birch saplings, I would yell in fear and just pass out. Such was my clinging to the self view and samsara. It took me a couple of weeks of getting used to this happening at all times of day and night, during dreams and when I got up to urinate, before I realised that it was a fruit of practice. Oh, it wasn’t something medical and I probably wasn’t going to die! Such was my ignorance — such the power of assumption! After that I began to be able to relax and absorb the insight aspect of it, realise what it was, why I was having that particular experience — and indeed appreciate exactly how this was a profound thing, something to be learned from. As it turned out, that learning was not going to be straightforward, but it was a good moment. It happened in the first half of my eighteen months of solitude, and I had ample time to absorb it.

When I returned to the movement around 2005, I was changed. I knew myself in a new way. And I was very aware that the context even for talking about such an experience, let alone learning from and taking it deeper, was very limited within Triratna. The theory was not totally missing, but there had been little actual experience of insight in the Order, and what there had been was without a context that was shared, in which one could go further. Nothing had been developed, collectively, to support insight. So I realised that was what was needed. My contact with Shenpen, and some others over my life, had shown me how well articulated and practical the context for insight can be in more traditional Buddhist circles. I didn't feel I must leave and join a more traditional group, because I knew we had to create that for ourselves in Triratna. So ... there my former urge to develop the movement snuck in again! Since then, I have engaged in many discussions seeking just to create that context, and done many things always with that aim in the background. And now, after many years of developments, ups, downs, confusions and controversies, it seems we may finally be getting somewhere. I am certainly happy to know it. I feel exhausted now though, and also now have MS, with the power to disable my body and mind quite radically if it wants, so we will see.

What I want now is to concentrate on practice again for a while. I will continue in the College for now health permitting, mainly to connect with the new generation there. I will do a few retreats, and a little teaching, just enough to stay in touch with everyone. I want to revive the Order Sundays in London (and they'll be open to the Order generally, as before) and there are a set of dates awaiting confirmation at the West London centre for this year and next. I have some plans to start a simple retreats facility where I could live for part of each year. That would be a nice place to end my days, if life could only be so simple... still, it hasn't quite come to that yet!

Post Script

I see that what I have written, and done in my life, in some ways plays out a conflicted inner relationship between merit (punya) and wisdom (jnana). And perhaps the needs of the institution and the individual. Generally our institutions tend to promote the path of merit rather than wisdom, and tend to be wary of both individual needs and of the need for prajna. In terms of the eightfold path, the emphasis is less on the Transcendental, more on the Mundane eightfold path. And I think there are many reasons for these. Some have to do with

our history, the way the movement developed and the people it developed out of; others are more to do with culture. From a teaching point of view it's generally a lot easier to promote the idea of the great woman or man, the person who lives life to the full, who is kind and strong, than the wise woman or wise man, who sees the way things really are... in a sense such a person feels separate. Becoming 'a better person' is often what people need first, and for most people, it's more attractive. It's easier to teach and easier to understand. But the Buddha has insight, he's not just a great person, and insight is a lot more tricky: it is in the first place inherently ungraspable because reality itself is... but it's also hard to grasp for most teachers too, so it's easily mis-described. You have to have it to teach it, like everything else, and this is problematic as well. But the problems just need understanding and application. So I would like to see the conflicted relations between these aspects of the path resolved as we move into the future and I hope my story shows the need to move to more of a balance. The Great Man is not a Bodhisattva and there is no Bodhisattva without wisdom. As Bhante once put it, there are no 'holy fools' in Buddhism.

An early autobiography

Kamalashila

In the spring of 1949 my mother brought me into this world in a convalescent home somewhere in Hitchin, Hertfordshire. Being a nurse in the brave new NHS gave her the privilege of giving birth to one's offspring, free, in a protected environment. Yet with my two sisters she did not repeat the experience, and I have never returned to Hitchin, though I once passed it on the train.

As an infant I was happy, indeed I am told I was unusually gregarious. If not watched closely I would disappear from the house, to be found chatting with any one of the housewives which of course, in 1953, every neighbouring house contained. Our house, 288 Mayplace Road, was on the corner of a small cul-de-sac, and opposite was a golf course. I was bright, could read at three, and at age five was sent, after a few months at a local kindergarten – my mother's way of giving me the edge – to the local infants' school.

One morning I excitedly pointed out a green car to my mother – the few cars then were generally black or grey. The relative safeness of the roads was presumably one reason why my mother quite happily let me walk to and from school. The school can't have been far away. Mum simply took me there on the first morning; I walked home myself at lunch-time. During my first few hours of independence, something traumatic and very formative took place. This incident had to do with mid-morning milk. In those days schoolchildren were given free milk, and the universal tarmac playgrounds were always piled high with crates of used third-pint bottles. But what was more fascinating than the availability of milk was the way some other boys, using the drinking straws provided, could make subversive farting sounds. When I tried to follow their example, the entire contents of the bottle transferred itself to my jumper and shorts. In this way began a progression of social embarrassments that has continued to this day.

Another reason why I walked alone to school may have been that my mother wanted me to be independent. Certainly now I have this characteristic to a fault – if I ever work with others, they find me difficult to work with. So really I wish she'd taught me to be co-operative. That, however, would have required a firmer hand; she was probably just doing what she could with me, taking the line of least resistance. I always knew what I wanted, and she usually let me have my own way. My father tried to take a stronger line, but unfortunately he usually lost his patience with me, which would at once send me back to an easy life under Mum's protection. This obviously led to somewhat of an imbalance – I grew up avoiding my father's influence, protected by my mother.

Nonetheless I loved my Dad, at least from a distance. Arthur Matthews was handsome and dark haired. Even in his eighties his hair – what there was of it – retained some of its colour whereas I have been white, and bald since my forties. Dad worked for the London Council. His task over the period up to and around my birth was helping rebuild London after the damage of war. He was responsible then for the borough of Tower Hamlets; later on he was responsible for buying land for the South Bank project, i.e. the National Theatre and the Festival Hall. He knew a great deal of poetry by heart – he could recite, to give but one example, the whole of Wordsworth's 'the Ancient Mariner'. When I was ill he used to sing to me all kinds of songs, some of Shakespeare's like 'Where the bee sucks, there suck I' - songs that are now woven deeply into my heart's memory. On the South Bank walkway near the Festival Hall there are still one or two pavement stones he had made, inscribed with poetry about the Thames. In those days he was also a Communist (I believe both my parents were at one point members of the party) with a fascination with how it worked out, and disappointingly didn't, in Russia.

I have many memories of Barnehurst, the furthest eastern quarter of London where we lived, but few of the infants' school, so I conclude that we made our big move out of London fairly soon after I was five. A house in a new estate in Kent, on the outskirts of Tunbridge Wells, had been purchased – however there must have been some delay, since we had to leave Mayplace Road while the building was still incomplete. So we stayed with our grandparents – first in Forest Hill, South London, with the maternal grandmother and her daughter, Auntie Jean, and later in Grays, Essex, with Dad's father and mother. According to my child's sense of time this in-between state seemed to go on for at least a year. Not that I minded in the slightest being a nomad – I don't think I was at all concerned, or even aware, that we had no home.

In London over the winter months I was enrolled at a local school, but when we did finally move into 15, Brian Crescent in Southborough, I was nearly too old for the infants' school, and since it was near the end of the spring term, it was decided that I should enrol in the Boys' Junior School in the autumn. I remember going with my mother to the infants section of the school in High Brooms, where this was decided, and feeling glad that I would be going to a boys-only school. Most of the kids at High Brooms school were working-class; my parents were not really what (English) people nowadays think of as middle-class.

I had missed well over a year of school, and the social integration that comes with school; this distanced me to some extent from others. This was accentuated by the fact that I was also bright, especially at spelling and reading. At this, I was considerably more advanced than the others. We would have group reading sessions in which each boy would pick his way haltingly through a few lines before passing on; I would read ahead at great speed, and

be several pages further into the story by the time it came back to my turn. I became increasingly interested in reading around this time, and having exhausted the shelves of the tiny Southborough library, in those days in a back room in the council offices, I would go each week, by bus, to the children's library in Tunbridge Wells and pick several books. I remember reading the entire output of Arthur Ransome and subsequently having a dream in which he entrusted to me the responsibility of continuing his lineage with further episodes of the activities of the Swallows and the Amazons. Probably it was because all that remained to read was his 'Old Peter's Russian Tales' that I became interested in mythology, especially Norse and European fables and folk tales, and I read everything I could of this kind.

I enjoyed my four years at High Brooms Boys' school; this had a lot to do with the kindness of the teachers – in particular Mr. King, the headmaster, and Mr. Richardson, one of the form masters. I made some good friends, a few of whom I kept into adolescence. Derek Camfield was my great friend. He lived in High Brooms – this was something else that separated me from the others, for I lived up the hill in the slightly posher Southborough. It did not separate me from Derek, however, for we were constant companions. Our time together usually took place at his house in Weare Road, since it was a single street away from the school. There we would watch television, which was a treat unavailable in Brian Crescent. In this way I was introduced to the broader English culture – I saw advertising, and watched football and, later on, Top Of The Pops. Derek and I would also play a greatly extended version of Monopoly of our own invention, with special money. At the end of Derek's road was The Rec. – a half-acre field which sloped down to a run-down farm with a few pigs. The Rec. was provided with a tall slide, large and small swings, a Maypole, a sand-pit (next to the pigs), a shed, and a Roundabout – all standard playground kit. Young boys of all ages used this facility, and we continued to play there right into our tenth year.

Though we occasionally larked around on it, the slide did not draw much of our interest. Our main area was the swings, which we usually requisitioned and used for the very particular sport that we had developed. This was a kind of battle. In the bay were two swings. These we would straddle sideways – we perched, our legs splayed like frogs, with one chain at our back and another between our feet. Arching our backs and pushing with our feet, we propelled our swings sideways at tremendous speed, both moving backwards and forwards in parallel, sometimes going quite high into the air, until one of us made an aggressive move. The aim of the tournament was to knock the opponent off his swing with a sideways shift, overtaking and catching him off guard. We would do this by suddenly catching hold of one of the metal support struts behind. This interrupted the to-and-fro rhythm and give an opportunity to swing sideways and forward just as the other party was propelled towards us. If they did not spot this manoeuvre, we could hit them sideways on and perhaps topple them

– though of course we became very adept at staying seated, and cunningly avoiding such moves, by pulling on the chains in various ways. We could stop in mid-flight or make feint moves by shifting from one side of the struts to the other. We would of course challenge other boys, but Derek and I made sure we were the kings simply by spending far more time on the swings, and in this way, than anyone else.

The other use for the swings that I recall was for peering up the skirts of the girls. Sometimes quite a number of us boys would gather when the swings were occupied by the local talent, and lie ‘innocently’ in front on the grass. I cannot remember whether this was encouraged by the girls or was a source of annoyance to them – perhaps it was both – but this was of course the time when sexual curiosity began to blossom. I fell in love, not for the first time – I think it was the third time, for I am sure I can remember such emotions even before the age of five – with someone called Jennifer, and later on with a Josie Bridger. Neither of these angelic beings I ever spoke with. Both were fair haired. I used to think of them at night, imagining myself with them. Being a wordy person, I fell in love with their names – the name ‘Jennifer’ became unbearably evocative and, if I think about it, still is.

Sometimes Derek and others would come to my house. Then we would usually play in the wood at the bottom of the garden. This was Brokes Wood. I also used to play there alone quite often, and even now can remember individual trees, and even patches of certain plants. If I take my mind there, I recall particular stretches of paths within the wood. I often dream of these places, and it is often these places that become associated in my memory with stories or descriptions I read.

For example, there is a famous story in the Buddhist Pali Canon of King Ajatasattu, the king with a guilty conscience, who had murdered his father for the sake of the throne. Ajatasattu is led by his chief minister, on a beautiful full moon night, into a deep wood to visit the Buddha, who is encamped there with thousands of disciples. But the king suddenly halts, wondering: am I being led into a trap? If not, how is it that it is so quiet? It is quiet because the huge gathering of monks are all silently meditating in the light of the full moon. Whenever I remember this story, the place where the king halts – in my imagination – is by a large beech in Brokes Wood which I remember being on the left, quite close to the start of the path going down towards the lake.

Another place in Brokes Wood has also become part of my imaginal referencing system, in the story of Ksantivadin. This unfortunate monk’s limbs are severed, one by one, by an evil king, just to test his patience, and Ksantivadin experiences this terrible comeuppance in a small clearing just behind the holly tree directly at the bottom of what was once our garden.

I remember this particular tree extremely well. Due to an intense crowding of trees at this point, it had been forced to grow straight up, like an ordinary tree (I don't know much about trees, but I usually expect holly to be more of a bushy thing). Generally, people - i.e. my youthful friends - were put off climbing it because of its sharp, scratchy leaves. However I discovered that this danger was more notional than real. The holly had a good set of horizontals, and I could perch comfortably on a branch some twelve feet above ground. Since it was directly below our house, whose garden sloped down a steep hill before meeting the wood, this tree gave a vantage point for me to withdraw from the world and, regarding the house at a distance up the hill, reflect on life, the universe and such matters. Actually of course I do not remember anything of my thoughts - I don't imagine I had many; it was probably more of a feeling. But it was definitely a place where I felt a positive separation from others. Probably I was aware that no one else, not even my friends, was likely to come up here, or imagine that I might be up here.

This tree was important to me in another way, probably also connected with withdrawal from the world. I developed a special game in which I let myself deliberately fall down from it, relying on its strong, pliant branches to slow my fall. I would experience an ecstatic feeling of liberation and freedom as I did so. It was not only that I knew I could fall from a height and survive; it was a kind of metaphysical release. I would place stress, as I let go, on completely abandoning myself to the force of gravity. This total abandonment was what the 'art' was all about.

I often used to indulge in 'falling out of the sky'. It began, I think, when I was six or seven, but even later, when I was a little older, I can remember testing myself and being pleased that I could still do it. That may have been immediately before we left Brian Crescent, when I think I was ten, but it may well have been considerably later, since I have a memory of going back there, and of wearing my fashionable two-tone brown 'foamback' raincoat. This memory, if accurate, dates the occasion, I think, to my fourth year at grammar school, when I would have been a stylish fifteen. Yet I don't think it is unlikely that I would do something so juvenile at that grown-up age. It is typical of the kind of self-amusing eccentricity upon which I have always tended, for my sins, to pride myself.

And probably it goes a little deeper than that, for there seems to be something rather shamanistic about the ritual falling; the holly tree itself definitely represented for me a kind of spiritual isolation. Not that I thought at all about it – certainly not in that way. The ritual just developed out of my play. It is interesting that the site of my odd asceticism is also connected, in my mind, with Ksantivadin, the 'Preacher of Patience' (who, incidentally, emerged victorious from this cruel test - he didn't bat an eyelid, we're told). I should clarify

that this connection wasn't something I thought up, it is just the way I notice that my mind works -

As I mentioned just now, I was fascinated by Nordic mythology at this time, and no doubt there is a connection with that kind of shamanic, heroic, power-based, spirituality. Nowadays I have an intense fear of great heights, of high cliffs especially. This came on, as I recall, in my late thirties. However, that would not apply to a twelve-foot holly. I am sure I could still fall out of that tree.

Derek, I, and others, would play the kind of games you can play in woods – usually cowboys, or Robin Hood – anything involving warfare and weapons would do. I first went through catapults, then homemade bows and arrows, then a shop-bought bow with real metal tipped arrows, then a homemade crossbow that fired the same but at an armour-piercing velocity, then home made guns that fired nails... This escalation led eventually to my owning an air gun with telescopic sights. However this quite soon finished me off as far as weaponry was concerned when I managed to kill a Jay, an event that was so distressing that I still remember it with great remorse. I don't think I used the gun much more afterwards. I hit the huge bird crucially, and it fluttered to my feet; but an airgun pellet had not been enough to kill it at once. I panicked at its writhings and heart-rending cries, and ended up squashing it to death, most horribly, with my foot. May all Jays everywhere live happy and long-lived lives, undisturbed by the machinations of naïve little boys.

There is so much I could tell about these very rich years, but one more thread, the musical one, will have to suffice. I love music and, I think, am somewhat musical. David Seal, Stephen Hoare, Dave Levett and I at an early point briefly formed a Skiffle group. Due to the cultural impoverishment caused by our family's lack of television, I knew nothing about Skiffle – a short-lived craze of this period – but nonetheless I managed an extempore violin along with their guitars to songs such as 'Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley (Oh Boy, You're Gonna Die). Indeed this may have been our only song. Dave, I think, played the essential washboard, and we had to do without a box bass.

This means I was already playing the violin under the fine tutorship of Miss Gould. There were three Misses Gould, sisters who occupied a top floor flat in a quiet part of Tunbridge Wells. I pursued this art for several years and was a fair-to-medium student, passing a number of exams, playing nervously at public recitals, and eventually playing second fiddle in a small local orchestra, the Wells String Players. I also played in the school orchestra. But my great love, and my best talent, was for drums and percussion.

This love and talent revealed itself some time in the late fifties – or perhaps early sixties – a few months after I had started buying records for myself. The first record I bought was by

Dion, and was called 'Put Your Head On My Shoulder,' with really quite an untypically sentimental appeal. It was after that that I found my first real musical groove: instrumental music, which came into vogue just then. Groups like the Shadows, Jet Harris and Tony Meehan (surely the first supergroup) and the strange group who recorded 'Telstar', played anaemic melodies on an all-electric range of instruments: electric guitars and organs, using the range of special effects then available, usually echo and 'tremolo'. To me, at around eight, it was excitingly modern and innovative. I appreciated Beethoven, too – very much, indeed I would listen again and again as Fritz Kreisler played the Kreutzer sonata on our record-player with its modern disc-changing device (useful for sets of six or more 78's, of which we had many, as well as LPs). But though I recognised the impoverishment of Jet Harris and Tony Meehan's whining, dull melodies, there was something here that was full of raw, exciting potential. To some extent, it was the rhythm. One day, playing my records again and again, as I often did, I saw what it was that Tony Meehan, the drummer, was doing, and I realised that I wanted to play drums.

From that point my visits to the music shop in Monson Road would take in not only the latest 45 (rpm) or EP in the listening booth, but a brief look at their scant selection of percussion items. I was unable to discuss my interest with, and thus show my ignorance to, the coiffured shop lads. Eventually I plucked up courage and bought a pair of sticks and, later, a pair of brushes. From that point on, Derek and I spent every Sunday afternoon drumming, continuously, to Top of the Pops – Alan Freeman's radio show, which played the whole Top Twenty in ascending order. My bedroom, where these sessions took place, contained a peculiar architectural feature: a plywood platform at (my then) chest height, which covered the stair-well below. To this bare wood, Derek and I would apply our sticks and brushes with ferocity. The sound must have been amplified throughout the whole house, and I admire my father and mother for their indulgence of our tremendous pleasure.

I entered my ninth year. Soon would come the eleven plus exam, and according to its result, entry into the next level of schooling. My father, hoping that I would develop some scientific or at least rational bent, tried schooling me in mathematics. This was a humiliating failure and only increased the divide between us. My mother, who was rather good at seeing where my talents lay, had me tutored in French. This I found easy and interesting. I progressed in my lessons, and this soon led to correspondence and an exchange visit with a fifteen year old French lad from Colombes, in Paris. It was really rather unfortunate that our ages – and hence our interests and experience – were so unmatched. We could hardly be friends, though we were not unkind to one another. The visit to Paris, of course, greatly widened my horizons, though I did not notice at the time. For it was not easy for me having no one to play with, to be in such a strange place with such strange people, who ate bloody steaks with

chips several times weekly, and drank with everything, even adding to soup, wine from bottles refilled at a local shop. They must have thought me even stranger, a quiet little English boy, able to say little and inclined to say less, and too young for them conscionably to allow out alone, Colombes then being, I think, a bit of a rough area. The month went slowly; apart from visits to places like Notre Dame I remember spending a lot of time in their living room reading Asterix comics.

That year I was the only boy at High Brooms who fully passed the eleven-plus. Most boys were destined for the Secondary Modern; Derek and some of my other friends passed at a lower level and went to the 'Tech'; I was to go to Skinners', the grammar school in town. It was the end of my friendship with Derek. Once the autumn term began, we hardly saw one another again. When we did, much later, we could find no common ground.

The Skinners' School still exists. it was originally set up for the sons of a mediaeval guild known as the Worshipful Company of Skinners. It occurs to me only now to wonder how such an institution survives in twentieth-first-century Tunbridge Wells. Royal Tunbridge Wells is not at all a mediaeval town – it is a spa which began in the 1700s, in the wake of fashionable watering places like Bath. Its proximity to London earned it the patronage by the smart set and the never-omitted prefix 'Royal'.

Skinners' was a half hour walk from Brian Crescent - or a bus ride. However, unless it rained or I was late I walked, because I was allowed to keep the money I saved. During this half hour walk between my two main worlds I would become aware of my own thoughts and feelings about things in a way that the presence of others seemed to inhibit. Not that I realised at the time that that was happening – I would just enter a different world; and an oddly uncomfortable world it was. I do not remember ever meeting anyone I knew, and at that time of day, apart from milk and post, there was rarely even a passer-by or a passing car. As I walked along the wide pavements that bordered the white suburban roads, I did not feel bored exactly, but the lack of immediate stimulus made me acutely aware of myself. As the familiar ease of home receded into the past, and the inevitability that I would soon be entering the school gates pressed ever closer, I became focused on the present moment in a most peculiar way, so much that I did not know what to do with such a tangibly mysterious sensation. At some point I devised a form of meditation to channel and address it. (It is of course only now, over forty years later, that I recognise what I was doing.) The practice was to count my footsteps for the length of Newlands Road, which was perhaps a ten minute stretch. As I walked with the necessary awareness to make counting possible, my mind would quieten and become relatively clear. The feeling of anxiety that came with the self-awareness was somehow contained and channelled.

I don't know when I started this, but I suspect it was during my second or third year, when I began half-consciously to realise that I didn't like Skinners' School, and that it didn't seem to like me. Perhaps surprisingly, this was not an especially negative feeling: I didn't resent being at school, despite disliking it. The realisation simply heightened my sense of self-consciousness: who was I then, I wondered, and what was I doing. Even I wondered, very hazily, what am I doing in this world?

From being acknowledged over several years as the brightest lad in school, I was now among my equals and betters, and no longer enjoying the attention of admiring teachers wanting to draw me out, my academic progress declined term by term. I was at first considered promising and placed in One 'Red'. As we soon discovered, 1 (green) and 1 (blue) were the inferior grades, and after the first year, classes were graded a, b and c as normal. I did well at French, coming top or close in the first term, tolerably well at English, OK at Latin and other subjects, and poorly at Maths. In my second year I scraped into 2a, where I continued to lose interest. By the third year I was recognised as being of 'b' grade potential. By my fifth, at sixteen, I was pleased to leave.

As soon as I discovered I could not excel in any subject, not even in English, at which I tried hard (I was good at French because I had studied it already, but English was something at which I felt I should be excellent), my attention shifted to my friendships.

This in fact was the missing factor at Skinners'. What was wrong I don't know, but none of the teachers were especially friendly. Certainly they were not friendly to me, but my impression now is that this was quite general. The Headmaster, Cecil Beeby (known as 'Cess'), seemed to us boys a distant, superior sort. Some of the masters were OK – for example the young Science and English teachers, or the music teacher Mr. Pamment ('Pansy'), who was rather old, and probably not queer as we all assumed, but simply kind (our imaginations in that quarter doing overtime). Most, however, seemed unpleasant: the R.I teacher Gerald Chamberlain ('Dog-End', rumoured to have only one lung, and to us obviously homosexual); Mr. Reynolds ('Rhino' after his aggression and titanic build) – all were disliked. Or was it just me? It could have been.

I had many friends, though no one became as a close friend as Derek had been. Life was busier, and more testing. And people lived much further apart. Almost no one from my year lived in Southborough, and certainly no one did in High Brooms. Kent is a county of villages, and apart from Tonbridge – a small, dull public-school town five miles north, in a quite different part of Kent – there are no other large towns. Tunbridge Wells is the cultural centre of all the many scores of small towns, villages and hamlets within a twenty mile radius. So boys came to Skinners, usually by bus, from anywhere between Tonbridge and Uckfield. After school, they of course went home. Thus friendships had to be pursued

during school time, which imposed certain limitations. But the prevailing view of the purpose of school, as I think I have already made clear, had little to do with friendship. The purpose of school was to educate – academically, that is – not to foster human or cultural values. That, I imagine, was seen as the province of the home and family, if it was considered at all, or failing that, perhaps, as the responsibility of religion.

My father was pretty much an atheist. I think my mother wondered about religion, which is surely why she sometimes took me to church. These feelings, or whatever they were, were quite likely the influence of her own mother, who was a Baptist whose sect baptised by total immersion. I was christened, I went to Sunday school at St. Matthews in High Brooms, and I sang in the choir.

I also attended the Youth Club attached to the church. That was, I think, on Saturday evenings. What sticks in my mind is that there were girls and a chip shop opposite. It was held in the church hall, where there was a dusty back room with seats, shelves full of bibles and hymnals, and an old pedal organ, on which I used to play ‘Green Onions’, still my only keyboard piece, and rusty, but still - you can improvise for a very long time to a 12-bar blues. About twenty lads and girls used to go regularly – there was little else to do, and for us 8-10 year-olds it seemed like an introduction to real adult (well, teenage) life. We all acted as though we were in our mid teens. The girls wore a trendy short shift dress – a tubular, sleeveless affair – and over tan-coloured stockings, white socks turned over below the knee. This fashion, then universal, is one of the few of that era I have not seen recalled. Certainly the blue hooded nylon anoraks all girls wore came back again (black, and hoodless), around the millennium. We, the men, wore narrow trousers and, if our parents were indulgent or couldn’t care less – mine were neither, so far - winkle-pickers or chisel toes. Even though the youth club was the centre of our budding social life, we were all completely unappreciative of it. It was a joke, quite valueless, just a sham, merely a way to get you involved in church. This must largely of course have been true. Generally, we thought of religion as a bad joke, a corrupt institution; something that it was right to hate. I remember the vicar of St. Matthews, the Reverend Edward Baines, who lived in one of the High Brooms’ very few desirable dwellings, as the first person I consciously hated. I remember clearly the moment when I perceived that I hated him – and that, therefore, I could hate another person. I don’t remember having had this feeling about anyone before, even though there were other authority figures I disliked. Mr. Baines seemed to me simultaneously smug and false. It may well be that I was simply acting out of my post-war conditioning – vicars embodied the archetype of all that was not with-it, that was straight, conventional, boring, and – more sinisterly – false and corrupt. But there was more: I also felt he hated me; that essentially, his attitude to me was one of contempt based upon a conviction of superiority. For this wrong I

desired revenge, and I took it in whatever ways I could devise, even if they were only in my own mind.

I enjoyed singing in the choir, and the church services. They had many aesthetically pleasing moments. In his Sunday school classes, however, Ted Baines managed to convey to me nothing of what Christianity might really be about. To me it simply seemed foolish to believe in Jesus as the ‘only son’ of God, who came down just this one time to save us, etc. – none of it made any sense. If God was omnipotent, surely anything could be achieved. So why do it like that? If religion was about how to live, and an explanation of what life is all about, why did it have to be so odd, so distorted and complex? But such questions, even if they could have been formulated, would never have been comprehended, let alone addressed with sympathy. My friends and I soon became irretrievably bitter, cynical, and ironic about Christianity. What worried me was that so many people were Christians – I thought that surely there might be something in it. Ted, I could see, was basically well-meaning, narrow though he seemed, and Christians generally were not stupid – indeed, some of those I knew seemed, in many ways, admirable. But then they believed so much that no reasonable person could accept. I was quite confused about this for many years – to a certain extent, in fact, I still am; though now I can appreciate the mythic aspect of Christianity, and other forms of faith that can transcend the literal interpretation of its doctrine, though I know these are actually heterodox. I can also understand that for most ordinary people, Christianity is just what’s available – it is the European religious tradition, at least post paganism, and there is no real alternative. Other forms of religion, to most people still, is for ‘intellectuals’, or people who want to be seen as being different. This problem created a tremendous gulf in my life, for I could not be a Christian, even though in a sense I wanted to be. I felt religion was a good thing.

I had a night time life from an early age. As soon as I lay down in bed I would watch as my thoughts – or whatever they were, they became something different from ordinary thoughts – rolled back and back in a spacious, kaleidoscopic tapestry of light, colour and meaning. This unfoldment started with thoughts, displayed itself in this way for fifteen or twenty minutes, and ended with sleep. Sometimes it was something marvellous and beautiful, though since it simply happened each night, I did not think of it as anything special. Nor do I think now that it was really anything special to me: it was simply the mind.

As puberty dawned, this did not change, but my nocturnal activities changed. I acquired a transistor radio, a relatively recent invention. Indeed, I made one from a kit, but I seem to remember that one not working well enough to use. With my plastic earplug, or by simply lying right under the clothes, I would listen, undetected, to Radio Luxembourg instead of at once merging, as I formerly did, with the ineffable tapestry of consciousness. I would listen

until I was ready to sleep, which would sometimes be for a couple of hours. This would make me reluctant to rise the following day.

It was also at this time that I discovered that the pleasure of sex did not merely consist in that meeting of organs I had known about, imagined and made furtive jokes about since age seven or eight. I desired that even then, but in a relatively innocent way, since no one had said anything about orgasms. No one at school had twigged this either, since, of course, they hadn't had one. We experienced boyish erections. We knew about babies, and that they resulted from sex. And it was obvious that sex would be pleasurable. But I think we all assumed that penetration, which was sure to be pleasant, was the long and the short of sex. But as I played with myself and listened to the enthusiastic American accents on 'Wonderful 208 - Radio Luxembourg – your Station of the Stars', one night I began to experience those all-absorbing sensations that lie at the root, so to speak, of so much human endeavour. And thus began a long, and it seems unconcluded, career of masturbation. At home I would do it at any time of day, but I specialised in the early morning, just before school, a juncture that was encouraged by the fact that my bedroom window gave onto the main route leading to a local school. While I lurked very furtively in the shadows, taking extreme precautions so as not to be seen, past my window paraded at least half the sweet-faced girls of the Ridgeway Secondary Modern, in their hooded blue anoraks, white blouses, short grey skirts and white knee socks. This, as well as being something I was ashamed of, was a frustrating exercise, since there was too much choice and too little time really to savour the experience. Yet for a while I became a little addicted, for I was reluctant to go to school, and this opportunity arose at the very point where I should be girding my loins to go there. Mum would be shouting 'Anthony!... come on, it's already half past eight' just as another set of knee socks hove into sight, and I would shout back 'Yes just a sec. Mum, I won't be long...' but the viewing angle wouldn't be quite right, or she might suddenly seem too young, or not as developed as I'd hoped, or not dressed as excitingly as it had seemed at a distance – and then she'd be right there across the road, and I'd have to make up my mind – but then I'd have carefully to swap sides of the window, and then it would be a rear view, not interesting in quite the same way... yes, it was an exercise in pure frustration. It was not until many years later that I could see how universal and how central this intense picking and choosing kind of mental activity is for us human beings, and by no means only in relation to sex.

Probably, I wasn't really very happy around this time. A limiting factor on my friendships throughout school may have been that, having entered at age ten, I was roughly a year younger than others in my class. But luckily, my capacity and opportunity for finding friendships suddenly improved tenfold when one afternoon I walked into 1 Blue's classroom to find three fourth year boys playing guitars. Whether by coincidence or design, I had my

drumsticks with me. Steve Fisher, Terry Moran, Hugh Maitland and I formed the Chanticleers, an R&B group that continued for a year or more, playing in a local youth club and practising at least weekly. At first I had no drums, and on our early practice sessions played a selection of cardboard boxes and a fireguard. Even on our first live performance, at the Pembury Youth Club, I used an upturned washing bowl stuffed with the two-tone foamback mac already mentioned. Shortly after this, I managed to buy a cheap snare drum, and in time, my mother indulgently bought me a kit. But even this inadequate beginning won us the attention of the opposite sex, and all four of us began relationships of one kind or another. I was too shy to make a first move, and so others paired me off with someone called Sandra, whose twin sister was going out with Terry. Apparently, she liked me. I walked her home after the club, not knowing really what to do or even say, Sandra's house getting closer and closer. In the end I took the plunge and, awkwardly, we kissed. Soon afterwards we met in Tunbridge Wells and went 'over the common' (this was what you did), lay in the bracken, kissed and fondled. One evening her big brother, a 'hard nut' caught me looking at him, and thought I was 'taking the piss' out of his sunglasses – apparently they concealed a black eye and he took a swing at me, knocking out a lower front tooth. 'I've got bad eyes, chav, alright?' said he in the familiar Kentish dialect. I do not think it lasted long with Sandra. The connection was not at all elevating or interesting for either of us. It was hardly a friendship – a mere product of sexual curiosity. I found her attractive, but no more than many girls; and I immediately noticed something I have ever since been keenly aware of in sexual encounters. As soon as the barriers are down, and it is clear we may now do what lovers do, the attractiveness fades and you see the spots, the sweat, the naivety, the vulnerability, the lack of polish. I at once saw that at least half of sexual attraction comes from the barrier itself, whether that be temporary, permanent, real or imaginary. Not surprisingly, I suppose, this early insight made no difference at all to my pursuit of the unattainable.

This period of my life is really quite unclear to me. It is only in recent years that I have realised how unhappy I was at Skinners. My dreams often take place in its corridors and classrooms, but I remember little about it, so my best strategy is to tell you how I came to leave. I was in the sixth form, and I remember sitting in a class – I believe it was geography or history – and for the first time started thinking about what I wanted to do with my life. It was not something my parents had pressed upon me. Reflecting now I realise how grateful I am that they exerted no such pressure, yet I was certain my father wanted me to go to university, and whether to go for university or not was, indeed, the issue on my mind. What did I want – what was important to me? I saw that the only thing I saw as crucially important was other people. It wasn't that I felt a particular calling, such as becoming a social worker or anything at all heroic. But I did feel as though this idea of orienting my life towards others

was tremendously important. This should be my starting point. What mattered was that I could be with others, help and befriend them. From this point of view It didn't matter what I did as a career. And it seemed to me that there was no point in going to university, since it would be just like Skinners. I would not be particularly good at my work, and though I would get some qualifications, as I had here, the time would essentially be wasted.

Though this was certainly naive, uninformed and unadvised, time seems to have borne out my decision. I don't regret leaving school, even though it was from almost every conceivable angle a huge mistake that gave me a very challenging start to adult life. But my heart was simply not in school as it had been earlier. As a pre-adolescent, I had wanted nothing but study and education, but the atmosphere of grammar school had killed that aspiration. So I had decided. I walked straight from that class to the head's study and told him I wanted to leave. Cecil was not at all sorry, and I am afraid he even said so, but surely he can't have done. Probably it was just a hint. Telling my parents was more difficult – they were not at all party to my thoughts on all this! I do not remember what my father said or thought. He must surely have been bitterly disappointed, but no doubt, perhaps a bit like Cecil, the headmaster, realised he could do nothing with me. I would go my own way in this as in everything else.

I thought I would get a job, but I had no idea of what kind of job I wanted. There was a careers advisory service attached to the local education department, so I went there and in a talk with someone decided that I'd enjoy being a buyer for a shop. I have no idea why this appealed to me – probably I considered that I had a good eye for what was needed. I quickly found a job at Chiesman's, a smart department store in the centre of town, as a trainee buyer. Obviously a sixteen year old trainee buyer needs to know everything about selling, and to work his way up through the store, but I don't remember anyone actually telling me this. What I do remember is being put to work in the Linens department. I learned how to sell single sheets, double sheets, Egyptian sheets, woollen blankets, 'Acrilan' blankets, towels, tea towels, bath towels, face flannels – in short, an extended variety of pieces of rectangular material – to the generally female customers who visited the department. I worked well enough, but I was soon very bored. I started going out with someone, another shop employee – that soon finished... I fell in love with an unattainable girl called Maz who I am sure was not really unattainable, bought mod clothes – levis, bush jacket (ex-War Department gear was just coming into fashion), a parka, and a down-at heel scooter... I lasted three months at Chiesman's, and left after Christmas.

Mum came to my rescue with a prospectus for the West Kent College. In principle the idea of further education had of course already been rejected as part of my idealistic leaving of school. I was now, however, in a quite different mood, having now understood that there are different kinds of work in the world, and that at this stage I still had a certain choice. How it

was that I decided that I wanted to be a stage designer is no longer clear to me, but that's what I did. I would do an art 'A' level – a requirement for Art School – and study English Literature and Drama. All these were favourite subjects – English literature I loved and wanted to learn far more about; I was very interested in drawing and painting, and had a modicum of raw talent. The WKC was offering a two year course in the basics of Theatre – it sounded great. It was, too.

The course was led by Ivor Morris, a Welsh ex-pro in his fifties. To us at least he really looked the cracked actor, with his oiled hair, nicotined fingers, actor's intonation and alcoholic manner. There were fifteen or so of us on this new course, which occupied each morning for five days a week. I can remember all of them in some detail. We got to know one another extremely well as we worked together on plays, improvisation, and in the intensive training we were given in acting, stage management, and theory of all kinds. In all this, Ivor was a wonderful teacher, and he clearly enjoyed us immensely. I had the impression he had managed to recover from a rough patch in his life, and now it was as though he had accidentally tripped out of the lonely obscurity and unemployment that most actors endure, up to a heaven of genuinely rewarding and engaging work.

I imagine the West Kent education department had accepted pretty much anyone who applied for this, but we were a good mixture. The majority wanted to act, or thought that they might. A few, like me, were interested in the more technical side of theatre – one lad wanted to do lighting and electrics, while another, Sue, was interested in wardrobe; and I of course, for some reason I cannot remember, wanted to do stage design.

In our first term we did *Under Milk Wood*. I played Organ Morgan. Since *Under Milk Wood* was written for radio, it did not require a set. In fact, I don't recall designing one set during the two years of the course, though I must have done. It didn't matter to me. My wish to train in set design was genuine, but I had no real interest in it – that is, I had no idea, really, what having that kind of interest in a career might mean. It was something almost abstract.

Almost all the students became well known to me, and I would spend a lot of my free time with all but, say, five out of the fifteen. There is more than one friend of whom I cannot recall whether they joined this or the second year of the course, since several of our friends also decided to join as they saw how much we enjoyed it. Simon, I think, was one of these. Simon Withers became my closest friend since leaving primary school. I certainly met him during my first year, which was held in Tonbridge. I may have met Simon through encountering David Goodale. But I am going too fast! I must backtrack to fill in what had been happening in Tunbridge Wells.

I managed to lose my virginity soon after I left school. This was through the good agencies of a school friend, Pete Adams. Peter and Paul were giants, the twins from Harrogate. And as did a couple of other friends, they lived in Crowborough, a township some eight miles south-west of Tunbridge Wells. I got on exceedingly well with both brothers, in the usual way – my sense of humour – but Peter was closer, and the friendship continued for a year or so after school. Indeed, so much of my final year of school was spent half out of school, that the edges are now quite blurred. Anyway, Peter had somehow made a definite arrangement with two girls from the Tunbridge Wells girls grammar school. We arrived, via his Tiger Cub, at a small country house, very likely somewhere in Crowborough; the parents, of course, considering the nature of our assignation, being away. We paired off, and the deed was done to the pleasurable satisfaction of both parties, in my case at least. However, as we returned to the kitchen, we discovered that Pete had for some reason not been able to bring himself to perform, to his partner's evident disappointment. Accordingly I volunteered for another round – which also seemed to go well, though darkness and giggles is all I remember. Pete certainly wasn't upset; I think he was relieved at my action. Though it is true that in those days I was a quick, flashy little tyke, I don't think I would have done anything to hurt Pete. He was slow, kind, thoughtful, and intelligent with it - the better man, I think. We waved goodbye, kick-started and roared off into the summer evening.

The fact that in those days I had three good friends called Peter never occurred to me until this moment. It was in Crowborough that I first got drunk, too, with Peter Beech, a diminutive and thoughtful red-haired lad and a close friend. The experience was shared with Peter Maverley who, like me, lived in Southborough and whose gilded LI probably transported me to the other Peter's house. Since he was another giant, he bought the vodka. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon and we drank the whole bottle between us and reeled around some woods, laughing at the crystalline magic of it all.

While at Chiesman's, as may already have been apparent, I became something of a mod. The earliest mods were very androgynous in their dress, with long, bouffant, lacquered hair and makeup. As the trend became popularised beyond central London, however, its aesthetic became more masculine with highly tailored suits and shorter hair, still slightly bouffant – back-combed at the crown, with a fringe over the eyes. As it became even more popular, it adopted the motor scooter as part of its modern, clean image, influenced by the designed look of sixties London. My own scooter was not really of this order: a Lambretta LD, a five year old model. I attempted to give it the look by attaching a chromium bath-rail to the front, but I knew I could never compete with the smart GS's and LI's, with their chromed or sometimes coppered side panels, tall aerials and banks of lights. These glamorous machines would

sweep by, the wind billowing the driver's parka and smart haircut, and freezing at his back a pale-faced girl with huge eye makeup and a bright coloured leather coat.

I could not really be like that – for one thing, you needed to be earning real money, and for another, I don't think I could really have been so committed – but I was inflamed by the aesthetic. It felt liberating and modern in a way that was not just a primitive reaction to convention, like the teddy boys of the fifties and their successors, the rockers. It appealed to me because it seemed intelligent – it implied a new kind of culture that included art, design, and a new kind of music. I somehow smelt in this not just another youth culture, but the beginning of a new cultural era which, I felt, I could not be fully part of. I and my friends just wore some of the clothes, and some of us went dancing at the clubs – La Bamba in Tunbridge Wells, Bligh's in Sevenoaks, and Peyton Place by Bromley railway station where they played ska and blue beat. We were out of our depth with West Indian sounds, however. Country boys like us were more used to Soul and Tamla. The music we bought and listened to ourselves encompassed folk music, the exploding developments in post-Beatles Britpop, and the new electric blues. This was John Mayall's heyday, with future superstars like Eric Clapton under his wing. The names of obscure blues artists such as like Howlin' Wolf and Big Bill Broonzy would casually drop from the lips of a growing band of image-conscious young males who told themselves that this music was not about dancing and getting off with girls, but it was about the music itself. Music could be worthy of appreciation for its own sake. I attended a dance at Blighs where Mayall's band played in the centre of the floor, surrounded by youths like myself who simply stood, stared, and listened to the music, especially to Clapton's out-of-this-world guitar. This was what was new about the new kind of music – it was something you concentrated upon. Music was becoming something more personal – it was becoming an experience.

Listening to the music as such was happening partly because of the growing availability of drugs. The original mod drug was of course amphetamine – purple hearts or 'blues,' and methedrine. You took a handful of blues on a Friday night, and – if you were eighteen and healthy – you'd still be high on Saturday night. You'd have the brain of a carrot, while feeling omniscient, crystal clear – and invincible. And by that Saturday night, you might also be feeling somewhat irritable, because, somewhat unwillingly no doubt, you would be starting to feel the effects of the drug withdrawing. This left your brain still operating at super-speed, while you felt increasingly flat and empty inside. (This combination must have fuelled the mod/rocker rivalry and other violent outbreaks.) Methedrine was the original 'speed.' It was an extremely powerful drug, designed, I think, for injection. Which, of course, is exactly what some people, known as 'speed-freaks', did with it. For us humbler folk, however, half an ampoule, taken in some milk, was all you needed for an experience of pure

intellectual and emotional pleasure. Amphetamine concentrated the mind, so that you could really listen to music – you’d be utterly transfixed by it – or read a book from cover to cover, or hold forth with tremendous confidence, and at great length. You’d be unstoppable, for it also gave you an undreamed-of quantity of energy – you could just keep going on and on. However, the feeling of enhanced intelligence it bestowed was entirely subjective. Others would find one’s conversation tedious; the brilliant written or artistic endeavours produced during a night on amphetamine would be seen, in the cold light of the following day, as more or less valueless. Furthermore, ‘speed’ affected the short term memory, so that however incisive the insights of the previous evening, one could never recall their actual content. There would perhaps remain just a piece of paper, on which one had scrawled the secret of the universe in an obscure phrase which now conveyed nothing whatever.

I have to say that for all their inherent problems and dangers, drugs were, on the whole, very good for me. I am tempted to speak of particular drugs, since some have been far more helpful than others, but I think it is for the whole phenomenon of drug-taking that I feel gratitude. Drugs certainly wasted my time, drained my energies and involved me in activities that I regretted. But the benefit that far outweighs all these was the change of consciousness involved in taking any drug. This made me realise something very important: that the quality of life is dependent on a state of mind, indeed that is precisely what it is. It is true, as has sometimes been said, that drugs can awaken religious or philosophical understanding. Drugs changed my whole viewpoint on life. But it was not that a particular drug experience bestowed some kind of guiding vision. There is a more complex thread here that I shall have to follow from its source.

Alcohol was my first drug, as I have already mentioned, but it showed me less than nothing. After that first experience, I developed quite a taste for the drinking lifestyle. In my last year at school I almost always went out to a pub, usually the Clarence Arms in town, with several friends for lunch. By the time I was of an age to drink legally, I was in the habit of knocking back five pints or more of bitter in an evening, with perhaps spirits as well. And it was all because at some point I had fallen under the illusion that I could not do unaided whatever it was I wanted to do. I felt I needed the help of alcohol. My second drug arose out of similarly doubtful origins. I discovered that my father’s jacket pockets, which I regularly searched, contained bottles of tranquillisers. I can imagine only now what he might have been going through. At that time, however, I was interested only in what these might do for me – so I’d take two or three and go down to Surf City, a new club in the centre of town that was open all day. The effect was not unlike that of alcohol: ‘tranqs’ bestow the confidence that nothing can really go wrong, since you are so pleasantly insulated from the world by a rubber wall of numbness. At that time I went to Surf City almost every day. Its décor was

not at all reminiscent of California or the Beach Boys, but was more like a cave, with a small dance floor surrounded by little booths with tables, each partitioned off with rough concrete daub painted white. Apart from the spots that highlighted the tables, the illumination was low and partly fluorescent. During the day the club hosted the local yobs on the dole, who tried to tempt the less experienced into their continual games of three-card brag, played for high stakes. From about four it filled with teenagers from the local schools, who also played cards, or just sat around drinking coffee, larking about, and feeding the jukebox.

That phase didn't last long, though I did meet Claire at Surf City. The Chanticleers were still going strong, practising each week in Bill Rankin's basement opposite the Clarence, our school lunch pub. However, for all our rehearsal of such delights as 'Route 66', I don't recall us ever performing anywhere, ever, apart from the aforementioned debut at Pembury. I think the important thread between us was our enjoyment of friendship. In this, some of us explored drugs – well, Hugh and I did. Steve seemed too middle class, and Terry too working class, for drugs to be easy to accept, at that point, for either of them. This was a shame, really – it would have suited them, too, had they been able to make the leap; and in the end, that cultural difference split us up. We, the group, had once or twice played a game which in spirit was very similar to the drug experimentation Hugh and I were getting into. In this game, one of us would squat on his heels, breathe deeply and rapidly in and out for some time, and then blow hard on his clasped thumbs. At least I think that was how we managed to pass out. When one 'comes back' from a faint, one has absolutely no idea what has happened. Even one's sense of identity is quite attenuated – it's quite an interesting state of mind that raises numerous questions. So knowing this, the others playing the game would create a special atmosphere. There would be, perhaps, the fragrance of Gitanes, harmonium music, the clink of glasses, and whispered conversation en Français. And then – after a moment or two of bewilderment, one experienced a moment of existential purity. For a short while the world would become the clear and magical place that it always has been, but we lose sight of it.

The main drug was of course cannabis. Graham Greene gave me my first taste of this. Graham was a rich kid whose parents worked in Hong Kong. He was rather unusual looking – tiny, that is shorter than my 5'8½", with reddish shoulder length curly hair and a slight, sinewy body like a model. I don't know why I mention this – I didn't fancy him or anything, but he was definitely a sexual being. About my age, Graham seemed infinitely worldly wise, and disturbingly amoral. He was a brat, and perhaps a little unhinged, but contact with him revealed how unsophisticated and inexperienced I was, so for that at least I can thank him – as well as for 'turning us on'. Thus Issur and I (this was now Hugh's adopted name – I don't know where he got it from) began our respective careers as hash-smokers with long joints of

Pakistani black rolled impressively by Graham in his parents' smart modern flat near Dunorlan Park. Much of the evening was spent falling around the floor laughing at anything anyone might say, or even not say. The effect of cannabis is liberating, certainly at the beginning. As I imagine many of my readers must know, the effect is that all sense experience, including the mind sense (i.e. that which recognises and elaborates objects of mind, especially including thoughts) is enhanced to a degree previously unimagined, so that food, for example, is indescribably delicious, a heavenly pleasure. That applies, however, if the food is of a kind that one naturally enjoys. That which one dislikes, whether it is food or any other kind of experience, may sometimes be experienced as truly horrid – as very unpleasant, perhaps even nightmarishly so if one is deeply under the influence. After a few hours the effect of the drug wears off, with no ill effects. However my experience of a number of years' smoking was that regular use tends to dull the experience, and with that, the experiencer themselves.

Then it was a steady feature of my life and of most others I knew. At that time I must have known several hundred young people, very few of whom did not, or would not, smoke cannabis. At first we would try anything to get high. I can remember smoking herbal mixtures and banana skins, and eating the bitter contents of decongestant inhalers. We were lucky that in those days the dubious pleasures of glue sniffing were not common knowledge. But the drugs of choice were cannabis and LSD. As drugs go cannabis seems to me a reasonably civilised pleasure, easily rivalling alcohol. Occasionally, for entertainment, people would take something called Mandrax, a heavy tranquilliser – an intensified version of my unfortunate father's prescriptions. Of course at that time, as now, drugs were illegal, so what one imbibed depended on what came on to the underground market. Crack had not been invented. Cocaine and heroin were not widely available in those days. They had circulated in the older, more exclusive, drug scene that began, I think, in the late 40s and 50s. We were part of a new, seemingly healthier renaissance of drug use. In the late sixties, obtaining drugs had not assumed the hard, criminal dimension that surfaced in the early 70s. In 1967, LSD itself was not illegal, and hashish had only very recently been scheduled. To my generation, smoking hash and dropping acid was seen as something very positive, progressive, open-minded. Drug dealers I met were nice people like you and me, genuinely friendly, caring, interested. They took the LSD they sold, and it seems to me that any basically sane person who takes LSD cannot knowingly act with harmful intent. It was when a majority of people stopped taking the drug, from the 70s on, that the scene went bad.

It is understandable that this happened, however. LSD is often a considerable challenge, and if you often take trips, you can't really live normally; almost certainly, you can't run a business. Many tried to do both, but after a while they nearly all settled for cannabis as their

regular drug. LSD can seem to intensify your experience, like cannabis, but that is not really what it does. (Its effects were easily conflated to those of cannabis since it was common to smoke it whilst tripping.) It is not merely the input from the senses that are intensified so much as one's awareness of the reality underlying all experience. With acid, then, one enters much deeper water. The veil of rationalisation that we all build up, from our birth onwards, is temporarily perforated. That part of our mind which selects from the vivid raw data of reality all those little facts from which we derive our orientation and sense of ground, begins to dissolve, so that standard givens, like 'this is a person', 'this is me', 'this is a room', 'this is a cup of tea' melt as the drug radically shifts the 'experiencer's' point of view. And I have to place that notion in inverted commas, since under the influence of LSD one can no longer be sure whose experience this is, if indeed it can be said to be anyone's property. So in many ways acid is like dying, since the ordinary world, and our place in it, is fundamentally undermined. That is certainly how Timothy Leary saw it. One can then be faced with very strong religious and ethical imperatives. So this is not at all like any ordinary drug – acid cannot be used in an expectation of pleasure, even though the experience is often ecstatically joyful. It has been called 'the truth drug' and though that is a little banal, it is a closer match than the usual labels that derive from a legalistic view of drugs, such as 'hallucinogenic'.

I can't remember the circumstances of my first trip – they have all rather merged into the same experience, which is essentially as I have just stated. As is well known, for some the experience brings out a latent schizophrenia, but I don't personally know anyone who suffered permanent damage. Some friends took a great deal of it without ill effects - a current colleague took LSD every weekend for years; my friend David Goodale met, and filmed, Indians in Venezuela who take something similar every afternoon of their lives. I could not do that! Or rather, I would not want to. I have taken acid at the most twenty times.

Typically I would experience visions of walls of words, written in flowing scripts which I could read if I wished, but they contained no message I could ever decipher. That wasn't the point at all. The visions were powerfully meaningful in another, nonconceptual way that arose straight out of one's deepest being. One felt as though one were party to the deepest truths of existence. To be among natural things was the best way to use the opportunity of a trip. The forms of trees and mosses, clouds, fire, the sounds of the wind and the light of the stars were seen with amazing clarity, and as something literally incredible – beyond comprehension. It was LSD users in the 60s who turned that adjective into a cliché.

Expressions like "Wow, that's incredible". "Oh, incredible..." "Oh what! – how amazing, look at this..." "Oh wow... man, that is so incredible..." would very typically comprise the conversation of a group of happy trippers absorbed, say, in the markings on a piece of tree bark.

Or it could as easily describe a set of parallel monologues. For that was another limitation of drugs. It was true that the great majority of trippers, including myself, were not mentally and emotionally equipped to communicate what they were experiencing, and so were reduced to the banal mode of utterance I have described. But it was also the case that the fact of having ingested a substance that changed your consciousness was never especially conducive to communication. Speed made you want to talk a lot, and drink can loosen the tongue, but neither allow for real communication. Drugs allow one simply to be left alone on one's personal island of experience. This was quite comfortable for me, for in that world, the Tunbridge Wells drugs scene and its later diaspora, I was a fairly extreme introvert. I rarely spoke, and when I did I was inarticulate to a degree that concerned me. I didn't understand that the issues I was trying to broach just didn't interest those around me. So though it was easy for me to be into drugs, I could see that that aspect really did me little good. The people I used to go around with in Tunbridge Wells, the drug crowd, were not greatly into personal interchange – generally they were content to sit around, roll joints, and open ears and hearts to the latest electric music. And so was I – for the music coming out at that time was, well, quite incredible. And in any case, I was getting my more human and emotional satisfaction from the friendships coming out of the drama course. Indeed, these worlds overlapped to some extent, and would soon overlap a little more.

After its first year in Tonbridge, the Drama course shifted to a large house in Broadwater Down. This was a typical Tunbridge Wells road – quiet, leafy and wide, paved with the local red brick, and lined with huge Georgian houses and their massive gardens. Tall pines and bulky rhododendrons now lined the walk to college each morning, rather than the cracked, oily pavements and corrugated iron shuttering that had greeted the eye at our previous location, around the back of Tonbridge railway station.

During that summer, the summer of 1967 I had made firm friends with David Goodale and his wide circle, spending much time at the smarter end of Tonbridge where he lived. Like numerous others, David's parents must have moved to that unremarkable little town solely because of its well-known public school, and settled some of the pleasanter streets close by. Certainly many of our friends lived just a few houses, or a street or two, away, and most had some connection with Tonbridge School. I think I first met David at the Railway Tavern at lunchtime, after our daily drama session with Ivor (which took up each weekday morning). I deliberately went to see him, because I had heard so much about him from Jo Bousfield, a girl on the course who deeply impressed me. I don't think much happened at this meeting, but it must have been soon after this that Claire and I found our way to his 'Jelly Freak' one summer evening. We thought this would just be another Saturday night party, but it was not, as we immediately knew as we walked round the corner of Bordyke into Hadlow Road, smelt

the bonfire and soared spiritually at a first hearing of the new Beatles, 'All You Need Is Love.' That single impression, so powerful and inspiring, is the sole remainder of that evening. I heard later there was a huge pond full of jelly and various other typically Goodale occurrences, but I had not encountered them. I was probably quite drunk.

Goodale (often called by his surname rather as one might refer to 'Hockney' or 'Hitler') was inspired by the happenings, music and other liberative phenomena of the cultural revolution, but wasn't especially into drugs. This meant we could talk and have fun. It was what I needed. He had a room in his parents' house, which his younger twin brothers also shared. Thereafter I must have spent hundreds of afternoons and evenings in that room, usually in a threesome with Simon Withers (not the currently famous English artist of that name, though if Simon had gone that way it would have been no surprise.) What made this three way friendship jell was the way our various senses of humour, all wacky in the extreme, interplayed and reinforced one another; also the pattern of the friendships between us individually worked well. I was more Simon's than David's friend; David was more Simon's than my friend; Simon was more my friend than David's, but there were three strong friendships there and a great deal of goodwill, coming especially from David, who was always hospitable, apparently always happy, always full of ideas, plans and new jokes. His parents were also very friendly, even though they viewed me with a little suspicion since they found out I sometimes took drugs, which was probably the main thing they dreaded in the way David was going. Mr. and Mrs. Goodale were active members of the Tonbridge Theatre and Arts Club, along with the parents of quite a number of our friends, and hearing that I wanted to do stage designed they invited me to design a set for a performance of 'the Relapse' which they would be performing at the TTAC – a tiny theatre round the back of the Mitre pub opposite David's house, Tonbridge School, and in Le Puy, a town in the south of France that is twinned with Tonbridge (appropriately famous for its production of lentils).

It is only in connection with the TTAC that I remember doing any actual set design, though I think I may have designed the set for our college Pantomime that year, Cinderella, performed at the Opera House in Tunbridge Wells. The first set I ever did was for David's Alice in Wonderland. It was simple, consisting of black and white psychedelic patterned semi-circular flats that receded, three on each side, towards the back of the tiny stage. Ultra violet lighting worked with the white paint to create a magical and slightly eerie effect. It was a good set, and made quite an impression. David even kept the pieces of stage work – at least, he still had them when I visited him in the mid-eighties. The set for the Relapse, which I must have done after Cinderella, was comparatively elaborate. It used a revolving stage, which required considerable design, not to mention carpentry skills. However it was just the kind of project the TTAC men loved, and they worked on it at the weekends. The play went

well – when we took it to France a three day farmers’ strike kept us blockaded (by tractors) in Le Puy. The very mature and cultured set of adults with whom I was suddenly in contact was a new experience. They were very generous in encouraging me so open heartedly, and I responded knowing that I was in a completely new area. The idea came from Terry McConnell, a BBC director living two doors from David, whose daughter Karen was a close friend of his. Karen was rather like her mother, dark and curly haired (a la Hendrix) with a fiery passion. Terry was comparatively shy, though impressive for his (much admired) professional capacity. Karen wasn’t my type, in fact none of David’s girls was, which was fortunate. David never actually went out with girls, and rarely seemed interested in doing so. I concluded he was bisexual if not out-and-out gay, but he probably wasn’t clear about that himself. The girls he did go for were always classically good looking, even beautiful, and blonde.

The women I fall in love with are invariably dark haired with blue or green eyes, (like my mother’s, I eventually realised). But my best girl was definitely Claire Timewell, who was a blonde, and with whom I was never in love. She and I met, as I have said, in Surf City. I was in a booth playing cards. She came in wearing the short horizontally striped dress she often wore, looking leggy and fresh, and hung around. We got on from that point, and went out, on and off, for a couple of years at least. She was attractive, her straight blonde hair cut in an asymmetric Mary Quant, and a manner that suggested she took delight in everything. So naturally, she herself was a delight; everyone loved her and enjoyed having her around. Claire was happy, energetic and ‘kooky’ – a word from those days meaning that she was eccentric, or delighted in eccentricity. She often laughed, showing her back teeth (and of course her front ones, one of which was pleasantly crooked). Our relationship was not at all intense, which is why it worked so well. We’d both go off with other partners from time to time, but if we wanted one another, there we were. She and I went on holiday together twice to Polperro in Cornwall, inhabiting a shelter on the cliff tops and a single sleeping bag, the only time I’ve ever done that. I’ve occasionally shared sleeping bags with other ladies, but never for more than, say, an hour, for such conditions go beyond intimacy. But Claire and I were naturally close; we just enjoyed it anyway.

Soon after making David’s acquaintance I met a girl for whom I developed a fatal attraction, one that I could not relinquish for many years, and which continually faced me with conflict and self-doubt. Wendy Bindloss was the daughter of one of the Tonbridge housemasters, so she lived at the school (with six hundred boys). She was a touch taller than me, with a creamy white complexion, long thick wavy dark hair and happy blue eyes. I assumed then that her family were originally from Ireland, but recently discovered that Bindloss is a place somewhere in Kent! Wendy, like me, was something of an artist – she wanted to do film

work, and indeed that's what she ended up doing. She was not especially attractive looking, at least by the standards of the average male chauvinist, though she certainly wasn't ugly. I cannot explain her attraction for me. It was something to do with her intelligence, clarity and confidence. She was a confident, spirited girl – she'd grown up in a quite testing environment. Probably, in the classic way of these things, she simply possessed all that I sensed I lacked, especially (my own derivation being lower-middle-class and politically Socialist) amongst the Goodale crowd whose parents were decidedly upper-middle-class and Conservative. At the time of course such considerations occurred to me only very vaguely – I fancied her, she 'meant something' to me. That, however, was what it seems she represented. We did hang around a bit together, especially when we first met – got off with one another at parties, fondled and snogged as teenagers do. And it was generally recognised amongst the men that she was somehow my property – something that perhaps was not appreciated by Wendy. But it must also have been obvious, especially to those who had known Wendy over years of acquaintance, that my attentions to her were not especially reciprocated. She was friendly, we spent time together and in a way were even intimate, but she still held me at a distance emotionally. It was a fact that I could not bear to acknowledge consciously, but which made me extraordinarily diffident with her. I suspect that her holding back was something of a test. Wendy had been brought up around a lot of men; she could see I had a weakness, and this she very naturally didn't want. If I had been able to take more initiative she'd have responded, I think, with pleasure. However I was overawed by her background and her confident groundedness. I was out of my depth, knew that I needed to leap in and swim, and even that she wanted me to do that, but I could not. It was a painfully numbing, deadening feeling: my emotional nadir – I hope.

For these two years I had plenty of free time – my mornings were spent at the Drama course, and some afternoons were occupied either at the Art School or studying English Literature. I did not find the way the English was taught very interesting, but the art lessons I found absorbing. I had started to feel quite confident in the path I had chosen. The rest of my time I was free to meet my numerous friends, either those in Tonbridge or Tunbridge Wells. Tonbridge friends were, as just described, constellated around David. The Tunbridge Wells scene was more diverse, consisting of Issur and the Tunbridge Wells drug scene; and new connections growing out of the Drama course, which was now based in Tunbridge Wells and had been populated, in its second year, with several friends including Issur. I would smoke joints or ingest some more adventurous substance at Issur's place, or sometimes in someone else's house. At one point several of us were arrested with cannabis while smoking with Nick Lowe, one of the local band Brynsley Schwarz, and later fined. Sometimes we would go to

London to ‘score’ from friends near Euston, or go to an all night concert at the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm. I remember in particular seeing the Doors and Jefferson Airplane there.

At a certain juncture the Reays - Trisha, Judy, her quieter sister, and Mrs. Reay, their redoubtable mother, appeared on the scene. The Reays lived fairly centrally in Tunbridge Wells, and quite close to Issur. Mrs. Reay was widowed and devoted to the happiness of her daughters. Their house, No. 20, Arundel Road, was always open house for us – there was always a sofa to sleep on, or a talk to be had into the small hours with any of the three – Mrs. Reay being no less vociferous than Trish. She was a wonderful woman: passionate, opinionated and generous. Trish took after her; Judy, who was rumoured to be a Christian, perhaps took after the father, about whom we never heard. Mrs. Reay disapproved strongly of drugs, like any normal parent of that period, and much of the time we respected her feelings at our innumerable get-togethers and parties in her front room. So even at that insensitive age, we appreciated her generosity in allowing us the use of this outstanding haven. We’d go there in the afternoons after college and play ‘the truth game’ – in which one goes round the circle discovering something that each person really thinks about one. Or we’d just listen to LPs, talking, smoking and drinking coffee.

Adrian Plass, who had been a year higher than me at Skinners, sometimes came to these gatherings. Tall, dark, and Satanic in appearance, he would narrow his already slit eyes, curl his worm-like lips, and roll a cigarette between his nicotine-stained fingers in a peculiarly expressive way. Adrian was fun. Despite his averred, and extremely conservative, Christian beliefs, he was very much at ease with non-Christians, seemingly in a way that nowadays would be called ‘non-judgemental’. Yet Adrian was two decades before his time in his distaste for political correctness. I used to call him ‘June’; he called me ‘Vera’. This, it turns out, is quite a good name for a Buddhist, but this was the sixties and our camp humour was, of course, a reaction to the rising tide of ‘gay consciousness’. I am glad to see that nowadays he has continued in a similarly humorous vein. It is not just that he is still calling on jokes borrowed from those days in his literature. He is as dogmatic and convinced as ever, while at the same time very openly unsure about certain aspects of his faith – aspects about which no-one can really be sure, and be truthful. It is this combination of doubt and commitment that endears him to others, and is his great gift.

Soon, too soon, autumn turned to spring, the second year of the drama course came to an end, and I started a new chapter of my life. Having received a place on an Arts Foundation course at Croydon Art School, and a grant, I moved to Croydon – or at least, to South Norwood, a mile or so away.

It was the first time I had lived alone and away from home. My one roomed, ground floor flat was not at all pleasant, though it was one I had chosen. There was a revolting smell there

which I still recall – not only from this, but also from other rented rooms –somewhere in between vomit and cheap room deodoriser. The odour emanates from under the lino, or from under the huge wardrobe that takes up a quarter of the space, and which you would rather wasn't there.

It was not a pleasant time; I can't remember why, I think probably I was simply lonely. I was smoking dope too much, I think – I'm sure that didn't help. I remember enjoying college – it was a good course and the tutors were friendly and inspiring. All were practising artists. I remember George Popperwell, our main tutor, and the sculpture tutor, Bruce McLean. I made a few friends, but there was no one with whom I could spend a weekend or even, usually, an evening. So much for my varied social life! This was London, and I didn't understand the dynamic. People lived in many different areas and had their friends in those areas. I suffered. I survived a term, and then decided to commute from Mum and Dad's house. It was a long train journey – a couple of hours all in, with changes at Tonbridge and Redhill. I did a project on commuters – taking clandestine photographs of them – but it was weak. My college work generally was not great. It wasn't working very well. I only survived that second term; during the third term I stopped going to college.

It is 2024, and I am editing this autobiography which up to now has needed almost no changes. It now is somewhere in the late 1960s and tails off into rough headings and notes-to-self containing fragments of memories. I left school at 16, did three years of Theatre followed by two years of Art School, which will have taken me to age 21. Over my late teens and early twenties I gradually grasped the truth that I had no idea what to do with myself, and for a few years alternated between anxiety and relaxation about that. Eventually I relaxed into being a simple artist, making prints and drawings in Muswell Hill, and it was during this phase that I stumbled into Buddhism, where I finally felt a fulfilling affinity.

Over the autumn following my aborted Foundation year at Croydon Art School, I have a job in the Northcott Theatre in Exeter, helping with the stage sets. I have a feeling that the McConnells might have helped me with this. It is a miserable time, partly because I have to share a living space with Greg and Sandra. They are quite OK for me to sleep in the corner of their bedroom, where they loudly have sex every night. I have very mixed, unacknowledged feelings about that. But also dislike the work I am doing during the day and late in the evening. It is during this period that I realise that I do not want to work in theatre at all, and that it has all been a terrible mistake.

I think what followed this was a period of contrition during which I allowed my parents to fix me up with a place in a college in Southampton with full board. This was a very low and lonely time and my memory is that I simply ran away. Maybe, since it is the next note-to-self, I ran away to share a flat with my old friend Issur in East Dulwich and managed to

negotiate a second go at the Foundation Course at Croydon Art School. This will have been 1970 because for me that date is associated with becoming a vegetarian after a particularly lucid LSD trip. I've not eaten meat since. In that year also I made a lovely girl pregnant without her telling me, and - something highly traumatic for me - being forced by her mother to have an abortion. I played drums and percussion, with Issur and some other Art School friends, in a Grateful Dead tribute band. For a while Issur and I moved to Hammersmith, and then to Inglewood Road, West Hampstead. At this point I had to get a job. I worked for three months as an office-wallah for the Automobile Association in Leicester Square. It becoming clear that an office environment is not for me, I began Street Trading in that same Leicester Square, selling tourist trinkets from a legal stall before progressing to the more lucrative but illegal fly-pitching in Oxford Street, an occupation that continued for a year, while I lived alone in Agamemnon Road, West Hampstead. I decamped for a while from London life and reoccupied my attic room in my parents' house in 12, Yew Tree Road, Southborough, painting it in horrid shades of brown and blue. I still had little idea of what to do, though I remember finding a plaster Buddha image in the attic and making some copies of Aubrey Beardsley's works.

Soon after this Simon Withers contacted me with a crazy job offer. I was to look after a three year old child: Marquard, son of Hertha Köttner, a German artist, and David, a Jewish businessman. Hertha, whilst conducting an affair with my friend, was constructing a sculpture of Simon having a bath, using steel and perspex. Our bohemian ménage flourished in a pleasant mansion near Carmarthen with nice grounds (including a section of the river Towy) and a Cézanne. The fact that I accepted this offer shows not only how lacking in direction I had become, but that others were able to trust me. It also offered distraction, solitary occupation and a kind of acceptance as an artist, for it was here that I learned that being an artist simply means making art. Accordingly I accepted, loaded my drum kit on to a train along with a pound weight of dubious Moroccan hashish, and joined the family in 'Bryntowy' for an autumn, winter and spring, after which I moved back to London where Steve and Liz had a spare room in Muswell Hill, where I finally settled and started making prints.

I hope Marquard turned out all right. Everything else has vanished without a trace.

