



## Religion today: tradition, modernity and change

### *Buddhism in Birmingham*

Vishva Parni:

My name is Vishva Parni. I am a member of the Western Buddhist Order and this place is Majimaloka, which is the head quarters for the Friends of the West Buddhist Order. I've been a member of the Western Buddhist Order for about nine years. And I've been practicing Buddhism with the FWBO or about twenty. I became a Buddhist when I was a teenage. I practiced Buddhism through my time at school and then at University as well. After University I really needed to make a decision. Would I practice full time within the FWBO and live and work within the FWBO? Or would I have a career of some description? I decided to commit myself to practicing within the FWBO.

Vishva Parni:

Well the FWBO was founded in 1967, by an Englishman named Sangharakshita. Sangharakshita had spend 20 years in India and for much of that time he was a Buddhist monk, ordained into the Theravada tradition but he had a very ecumenical approach. He wanted to learn from the Buddhist tradition as a whole. So when he came back to the west, and he encountered the situation of westerners wanting to practice Buddhism, interested in understanding how to do that, he formed a new movement, rather than transplanting one of the eastern traditions. He decided to base his teaching on what he considered to be the principals underlying the Buddhist teaching and Buddhist traditional as a whole. Meditation is central to that. In a sense it's the cutting edge. And we do, there's a system of meditation that starts off with simple practices drawn from the Theravadan tradition. The Mind... breathing, which is focussing on the breath and the development of loving kindness. So those two meditation practices everyone does.

We see ordination as a spiritual commitment. It's saying 'practicing the dharma or the teachings of Buddhism and committing myself to Buddhism. That's really what I want to do in my life'. So it's quite a strong commitment and it takes people quite a number of years usually to be ready to make that commitment and that's the point at which they're ordained. And then you get to wear one of these things and you get a Sanskrit name. My name is Vishva Parni. Parni means holding in the hand. Vishva means everything, or universe. So Vishva Parni means 'the holder of the universe'.

Majimaloka is a community for men. The 10 people living here are all men. And there is another community connected with it, that's for women. And the reason for having single sex communities are most WVI activities beyond the time of people who are coming on for a couple of years tend to be on single sex basis and that's really because we just find it a more straight forward, less distracting and more satisfying way to live. The Buddha in the shrine room at Majimaloka is a western Buddha. It's a figure called 'Amitabha' who's the Buddha of the west and also the Buddha of meditation and if you look at the face, you will see it has western features, rather than Chinese features, or something like that. It's, also the style is something at least to a western sculpture. The muscles of the body are more like a Greek sculpture or the western tradition of classical sculpture than you'd see an eastern figure and the same with the robes and the drapery.

I sometimes meditate in my room. I have this beautiful image in my room. I meditate in my room if I miss the morning sit or sometimes late at night, I might meditate or do a bit of chanting.

Five or ten minutes down the road is the Birmingham Buddhist Centre. I go there principally when I lead a study group on a Wednesday evening which is what I will be doing tonight.

One of life's ironies, that Birmingham Buddhist Centre now occupies a former Synagogue and you can still see the Star of David set into the wall.

Vishva Parne

So these are.. ...this is from Tibetan tradition..

This evening at the Centre is a men's study night so there are several study groups, that all meet together on the same night and we meditate together and then we split up and go our separate ways. It's another night when women's study groups meet together.

Satcha Pala:

I am quite a meditator, but I am not a great study person. So it's good to have an opportunity to learn from here.

Vishva Parni:

This is the Birmingham Buddhist Centre Bookshop and as you see there are many many books here. Some of them are Wintors publications titles. These ones are. And many of those are by Sangharakshita. But not all. There are many other authors that Wintors also publish and there are many other books by other publishers, about different kinds of Buddhism. So these are books about Tibetan Buddhism, this rack here. We're not Tibetan Buddhists, but it's valuable to have them because we draw on the whole Buddhist tradition and Tibetan Buddhism is a very important part of that tradition. We wouldn't have every book that's on the market. We wouldn't have books of a misleading, or a mystifying or obfuscating about Buddhism.

Wintors Publications started as Sangharakshita publisher and it's published many of his books, his 42 books.

Vishva Parni:

Hello, how are you?

Female 1:

Whatcha! I'm alright, thank you, and you?

Female 1::

I live just ten minutes away from here, in what's called a Community. There are five of us there. Five women living together and we've been doing that for just over two years. I used to work for Amnesty International. I had a great job actually working on the positive side if you like, building human rights activism and with my growing interest in Buddhism, it was difficult to find the right amount of time for both of them so when I decided that I needed to have a change I started looking around for other work and I was very fortunate in that they were looking for somebody here.

Working here has got many things in common with working anywhere else. You come in and you turn on the computer and you look through your Emails and you open your post. It's different working here as well though because we're again all practising Buddhists so there's an extra focus on trying to communicate with each other, on ethics. We also incorporate sort of ritual elements to our work so we start the morning by chanting the refuges and precepts. At the end of the day we do something called the transference of merit. Which I must admit sounds very grand. The idea is that any merit you've accumulated, you give up to the world but I think it's just coming back to that basic principle of altruism, doing things for others.

Group chanting:

My personality throughout my existences, my possessions and my merit in all three ways I give up without regard to myself for the benefit of all beings so may I become that which maintains all beings situated throughout space so long as all have not attained to peace

Male:

I came to the centre after meditating, and find the peace and tranquillity of meditation opened up parts of the brain I never knew existed so I started making enquiries about this. I went to the central library in Birmingham, and I looked up all the various religions and I think Buddhism spoke to me.

Satcha Pala:

Originally my name was Michael. My family name Howes. And I changed, well my teacher Sangharakshita gave me a new name when he ordained me in 1983. He gave me a Satcha Pala. And it's actually rather a lovely name when you get used to it. Satcha means 'truth', and Pala means 'guardian' or 'protector'. And I don't say I do guard or protect the truth but it's quite something to sort of aim for, so it's actually, I think probably most English names have meanings as well but we're quite aware of the meanings of our names.

Vishva Parni:

It's important to be able to think clearly, and to think critically including thinking critically about Sangharakshita's teachings and the FWBO's teaching and Buddhism's teachings.