

1976 'Brighton Lectures' 3 & 4

Extracts from Bhante in Mahamati's keynote talk for ECA June 2025

I come to you with four gifts.
The first gift is a lotus-flower.
Do you understand?
My second gift is a golden net.
Can you recognize it?
My third gift is a shepherds' round-dance.
Do your feet know how to dance?
My fourth gift is a garden planted in a wilderness.
Could you work there?
I come to you with four gifts.
Dare you accept them?

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Here my purpose is to make clear what Buddhism, and in particular the FWBO, has to offer, what it has to give – and this is only fitting since giving, or generosity, is of the very essence of the Dharma. We may even say that where there is no giving, there is no Buddhism. However, so far as the FWBO is concerned, the gifts offered so far are, to some extent at least, external to the FWBO itself. The gift and the giver are distinct. After all, other Buddhist organizations also offer these gifts – a method of personal development and a vision of human existence – albeit in different forms.

In the case of the third gift, by contrast, there is no distinction between the gift and the giver. I want to focus on the nucleus of a new society, and to explore the ways in which the FWBO is such a nucleus. In other words, one of the things the FWBO has to offer is itself. In his poem 'Song of Myself' Walt Whitman says, 'When I give, I give myself,'83 and this, we may say, is real giving. One can give many things – time, energy, money, ideas, work – and yet still not give the greatest of all gifts, oneself.

Nucleus of a New Society: Third of the Brighton Lectures

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'I can't help quoting from the Bible: *Where there is no vision the people perish.*'
Interview with Saddhanandi CWP (Proverbs 29:18)

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There is thus the possibility of two kinds of society: on the one hand, a society of individuals based on common spiritual ideals and a common commitment to personal development; and on the other, a society of non-individuals who are

simply members of various groups. The first I would term a spiritual community, and the second a 'group'. The first type of society is what I am choosing to call the new society; the second is the old society. The first is based on the spiral type of conditionality, the second on the cyclical type. The first is the achievement of the creative mind, the second the product of the reactive mind. Finally, of course, the first is very small, the second very large. But although it is a daunting task, we must try nevertheless to turn the second into the first, to transform the group into the spiritual community, the old society into the new. I want to move on to discuss some of the ways in which this transformation can be achieved.

It is as the nucleus of a new society that the FWBO offers itself, a nucleus of which the Order is the central and most essential part. The FWBO offers itself not as an organisation but as a spiritual community that is willing to welcome into spiritual fellowship all those who want to grow and develop.

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Without the idea - without the vision - of the New Society our Movement loses its cutting edge.....Without the idea of the New Society – without the idea of transforming world as well as self – our Going for Refuge is in danger of becoming an individualistic affair and, to that extent, in danger of being not truly a Going for Refuge at all.

My Relation to the Order 1990

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So this is Buddhism's dream, or Buddhism's daydream, or if you like its vision of an ideal society and an ideal world. But you may of course be feeling, you may be thinking that this is all rather remote, this is all rather ideal, this is all rather archetypal, this is all rather mythological - it doesn't concern us very much. But we should also remember that though upon occasion Buddhism does dream and dream very beautifully, it isn't content merely to dream. We may say that on the whole the approach of Buddhism, of the Buddha's teaching to all these questions, is very sane, is very practical, is also realistic. So Buddhism isn't content to dream about the ideal society of the future or about some ideal world on some other plane. It tries to create also the ideal society, the ideal community if you like, here and now, on this earth. It tries therefore to transform, it tries to transfigure this society and this world into the image of the future, into the image of the ideal. And it does this in a number of different ways.

Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path "The Ideal Society: Right Livelihood" 1968.
(FBA Transcript)

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If individuals and spiritual communities can emerge from time to time out of the group, then we must also believe in the possibility, however remote, that the spiritual community may one day outweigh the group, that light may overcome darkness.

A Vision of History 1978 included in the chapter 'What is the Sangha' as "The Historical Development Of Spiritual Communities".

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The name Sukhāvātī was chosen to signal an aspiration that this centre should serve a more noble, radical, even revolutionary function than simply giving people their spiritual vitamins to help them stagger along on the path of worldliness for another few days. Any centre associated with the movement I founded is intended to be nothing less than the nucleus of a new society.

Authority and the Individual in the New Society 1979 - from *What is the Sangha?*, chapter headed 'The Positive Group and the New Society'.

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In the last twenty years FWBO centres have sprung up in many parts of the world, as have spiritual communities and team-based right livelihood businesses, and in this way there has come into existence the nucleus of the new society, to borrow that expression, or at the very least the nucleus of that nucleus.

Twenty Years on the Middle Way 1987

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.....subsequent to the Axial Age.....

from a spiritual point of view, (there are) two forces (henceforth) working in opposition to each other throughout history: the group and the individual. To these, a third force should be added: spiritual communities. Because it is generally characteristic of the true individual to enter into relationship with other people who are committed to developing individuality, we usually find them working in the context of spiritual communities.....

Three traditions of spiritual communities were, and still are, of particular importance on account of the number of individuals involved in them, the length of time they thrived, and their influence on the world. These are the Buddhist, Sufi, and Christian communities. Of these, the Buddhist sangha is the longest-lived. It is not often realized that the Buddhist sangha is, so to speak, the classic form of the spiritual community. Buddhists formed a

spiritual community from the beginning, not as a sort of afterthought. Indeed, it could be said that Buddhism is essentially a spiritual community.

These should not be thought of as academic schools of thought in the modern sense. They were founded as spiritual communities – at least in certain respects – of masters and disciples, searching for the truth together.
A Vision of History 1978

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Well, this garden is in the process of creation. We started off with a few seeds and a little patch, and we planted those seeds, but gardeners are needed. Rather than waiting for it to be completed by others, could you be one of those who helps to bring that beautiful garden into existence? In other words, in a spiritual movement like Triratna, you don't just go along to the centre or other activities and passively take things in. It's part of the growing process to help out. That's why when I drew up those criteria for Mitraship, along with doing a daily meditation practice, practising ethics, committing yourself to this particular sangha, and getting to know Order members, there was helping out at the local centre. That way, from very early on you become involved with the life of that community in quite an active way. You become a fellow gardener.

SADDHANANDI: And now, although in the poem you say, 'I come to you with four gifts', it's not so much you, but us. We're coming to other people with these four gifts.

SANGHARAKSHITA: Yes, the four gifts are being passed on. We don't create that garden just so that we can play in it ourselves, but so other people can come and enjoy it too, and eventually also work there.

Bhante in conversation with Saddhanandi about The Four Gifts

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In what does the extension of the FWBO consist? Not in the publicizing of a personality, not in the popularization of an idea, but in the growth of a new society and a new world.

Aphorisms, the Arts and Late Writings CWP

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