

## Talk: Our gifts to the world – Central European Order Forum 2025

### *Four Gifts*

*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?*

In 1975 Bhante wrote his poem „Four Gifts“, which we are probably all familiar with, since this is one of Bhante’s well-known and often-quoted poems. A year later he gave four lectures in Brighton which were later published as „Buddhism for Today and Tomorrow“. In those lectures he explored the same territory that he had expressed poetically by using the images of the four gifts.

The lectures were given over the course of a week at the Brighton Royal Pavilion in the autumn of 1976. In the audience were complete newcomers to Buddhism as well as mitras and order members of the movement that he had established 9 1/2 years earlier.

Bhante used this opportunity to take stock and to make explicit what this new movement had to offer to the world.

In the introduction to the later publication he writes:

*„It is not that when I founded it I had a detailed or precise idea of what we were setting out to do. However, over the years, Triratna has gradually come to understand its own nature, so to speak. And this may be said to consist in four things Triratna has to offer, four things which are of the deepest and truest importance to developing individuals in today’s world.“*

What I want to do now is to give you a short summary of the four lectures along with the images of the poem. In order to give you a taste of Bhante’s images and language I will use quite a few original quotes from the lectures. As you will notice, I have decided to change FWBO into Triratna to bring it emotionally closer. For me at least, FWBO sounds too historical.

After the summary I will share some of my reflections and my personal response to the images of the four gifts.

### **First Gift: A method of personal development**

*The first gift is a lotus flower.*

*Do you understand?*

In his first lecture Bhante outlines a method for the development of consciousness within the framework of the Higher Evolution of the Individual.

Just a few years earlier he had given the two lecture series „The Higher Evolution“ and „Aspects of the Higher Evolution of the Individual“. This was his attempt to communicate a vision of the Buddhist path in non-traditional terms – reaching from the self-aware individual up to the arising of the Bodhicitta and the full flowering of Bodhisattvahood.

The starting point for this personal development, according to Bhante, is our sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are and an urge to grow, an urge to transcend our current condition.

And what is the method that Bhante – or maybe more correctly Buddhism – has to offer?

Here is his reply:

*„In a word, the method is meditation. But a second question arises: why meditation? How does meditation come to be a method of personal development? We've seen that human development is essentially a change in consciousness; [...] and meditation, of course, helps us to achieve just this, helps us to make that transition from the lower to the higher level of consciousness, [...] Meditation signifies, in the first place, the higher state of consciousness attained, and secondly it signifies the method or methods that lead to the attainment of that higher state or higher level of consciousness.“*

So meditation is the path and at the same time it is the fruit to be attained by practicing this path.

Bhante clarifies his emphasis on meditation by pointing out that other methods like ethical observance, symbolic rituals, devotional practices, social service or the arts work on the mind through the physical body and the senses and thereby indirectly,  
*„...whereas meditation acts on consciousness directly, and it's for this reason that we regard meditation as the primary method of personal development.“*

He explains the difference between lower states of consciousness, which are based on sense consciousness, and higher states of consciousness, which arise once sense

impressions recede to the periphery and finally disappear altogether, states which are much more concentrated: „a natural flowing together of all one's energies“ that lead to joy and happiness.

Next, he describes the stages of this development of consciousness as integration, inspiration, permeation and radiation, which are Bhante's personal interpretation of the four rupa dhyanas.

So meditation is the method for the development of consciousness, but in order to practice meditation we also need a set of specific methods. Bhante chooses to introduce one of these methods, the Metta Bhavana, to his audience.

He then concludes his first lecture by reminding us that the development of calm and serenity is not enough in itself. We not only need shamatha but vipashyana meditation also in order to develop insight.

This is how he describes insight:

*„Here, Insight means direct vision, direct experience of the true nature of existence. [...] One sees that the world, the conditioned, the phenomenal, is unsatisfactory, impermanent, unreal, unbeautiful, and one sees that what is beyond the world, the Unconditioned, is blissful, permanent, real, beautiful, and so seeing one turns finally away from the world, away from the conditioned, one turns permanently in the direction of the Unconditioned.“*

Even though Bhante uses the language of the Higher Evolution in his presentation, his account of the path in this lecture is thoroughly traditional. It's a restatement of the threefold path of sila, samadhi and prajna: on the basis of ethics, one develops a purification and one-pointedness of mind, that then can absorb the wisdom gained through clear seeing.

Shamatha meditation leads to the „Liberation of Heart“, vipashyana meditation leads to the „Liberation by Wisdom“, both together are „Perfect Enlightenment“.

He concludes:

*„So calm and insight are both necessary. The purified heart must be united with the illumined mind. Love and compassion must be united with wisdom.“*

## **Second Gift: A Vision of Human Existence**

*My second gift is a golden net.*

*Can you recognize it?*

In his second lecture „A Vision of Human Existence“ Bhante awakens us to our need of a „drishti“ – a view, which is not the same as a philosophy in the Western understanding.

He carefully differentiates wrong view from right view by giving three criteria that help us spot the difference:

This is what he says of wrong view:

*„It's view which is (1) weak, which doesn't have the force of meditation behind it, which is (2) blinkered, limited to a narrow range of experience and (3) distorted by one-sided emotions and by prejudices. Right view is obviously the opposite of wrong view.“*

He reminds us that there is no view that exists in the abstract:

*„Views are always somebody's view. There's no sight without somebody who sees that sight. There's no sight without a seer.“*

He continues to distinguish three kinds of beings according to the views that they hold:

„Ordinary people“ have wrong view.

Aryas, spiritually developed, have right view on the basis of their clear seeing.

A Buddha, who is beyond a „drishti“, has perfect vision.

In the second half of the lecture Bhante looks at how the Buddha communicated this perfect vision through concepts and symbols.

The Buddha saw that everything was subject to change: arising and passing were dependent on conditions, and he expressed this insight by describing the law of conditionality.

Bhante differentiates the cyclical and the spiral order of conditionality, which is of course Bhante's very unique take on the subject and something he has emphasized since his early days in India.

As we are probably all familiar with: the cyclical order of conditionality – or the reactive mind – expressed in terms of symbols is depicted by the image of the Wheel of Life.

He remarks that the development of consciousness that he had outlined in his first lecture depends – by contrast – on the creative mind of the spiral order of conditionality. This spiral order can be best expressed by the symbol of the path.

Bhante imaginatively evokes this image by describing a path through a beautiful landscape that turns into a ladder which then suddenly transforms into a majestic tree:

*„It becomes the stem of a gigantic plant, a gigantic tree, and on this plant, on this tree, are enormous blossoms. The blossoms lower down are relatively small, those higher up are very much bigger. And at the very top, the very top of the plant, the very top of the tree, shining like a sun, is the biggest blossom of all. And in the calyxes of all these blossoms, there sit all kinds of beautiful and radiant figures: figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and Arahats, figures of Dakas and Dakinis and the rest.“*

He concludes by indicating that the Buddha's vision is challenging and that those who are willing to face this challenge will form the nucleus of a new society.

### **Third Gift: The nucleus of a new society**

*My third gift is a shepherds' round-dance.*

*Do your feet know how to dance?*

The „Nucleus of a New Society“ is the title of Bhante's next lecture, and he begins it by pointing out the difference between the subjects of the first two lectures and the subject of this third one.

In his opinion, the method of personal development and the vision of human existence are somewhat external to the movement that he had founded, whereas the third gift is this movement itself:

This is how he expresses this idea in the lecture:

*„So what is being offered tonight, what the FWBO has to offer tonight, is simply its own self; not something distinct from itself but itself. And this, we may say, is real giving. In one of his poems Walt Whitman says 'When I give, I give myself.' You can give quite a lot, you can give time, you can give energy, you can give money, you can give ideas, you can give work, but not give yourself, but the greatest of all gifts is when you give yourself, totally.“*

He continues to share with his audience why, after having spent 20 years in the East and returning to the West in the 1960s, he felt that he needed to found his own movement, a movement of people truly committed to the Three Jewels and to Buddhist practice, with the order as its heart.

He spends some time describing how one can join this movement, from becoming a mitra up to the ordination ceremony.

And he then defines the relationship between the order and Triratna centers. And he makes a few interesting points here:

*„Triratna centres are the machinery through which groups of order members function, through which they offer themselves to the world.“*

*„The Order, itself, by the way, is a purely spiritual body. It is not a legal entity, and it has, therefore, no legal existence; it has only a spiritual existence. Now there are two points to be made here. First, not all Order Members are occupied in running Triratna centres. Indeed, not all Order Members are expected to be.“*

*„Second, not all the Triratna centers need be urban centres running a regular programme of activities. Some may be functioning as country retreat centres. Communities, right livelihoods etc.“*

At the end of his talk Bhante evokes the vision of a new society whose core is the spiritual community. A community in which relationships between individuals are based upon commitment to a common spiritual ideal and a commitment to personal development and growth. And he contrasts this „new society“ with the „old society“ or group, in which relationships between non-individuals are primarily based upon a common need.

#### **Fourth Gift: A Blueprint for a New World**

*My fourth gift is a garden planted in a wilderness.  
Could you work there?*

Contrary to the offerings of the first three lectures, the gift that Bhante presents in his last lecture, given under the title „A Blueprint for a New World“, only exists as a dream.

And this is how he imagines this new world that he is dreaming of:

*The new world [...] will be [...] a world in which people relate to one another as individuals; [...] a world in which one will be free to develop to the utmost of one's potential, and in which all the social, the economic and even political arrangements will help one to do that, to develop, to grow. The new world, therefore, is what we call a spiritual community, a spiritual community writ large; and our aim therefore must be to transform this world, the present world, the old world, into a spiritual community, because this is the only new world which is worth having, the only new world that is worth working for.“*

But then of course Bhante wonders on behalf of his audience: How do we get from the old to the new world?

First of all, we really need to want a new world enough in order to arouse the energy that is needed to make the change. We need to be thoroughly dissatisfied with the old world to start with.

Then he suggests that there are usually two solutions to the problem:

One could either change the system, which means to change the external conditions. This is the secular approach. Or one could change one's mind, which means to change the internal conditions. This is usually seen as the spiritual approach.

But Bhante agrees with neither position but tries to find a middle way between both approaches instead. He makes clear that this is also the position of the movement that he had founded.

He uses the example of retreats to show how much inner transformation also depends on suitable outer conditions.

In his imagination retreats can already give a glimpse of the new world:

*„...when we are on retreat, we experience, at least to a slight extent, and for a short time, what the new world will be like. What the new world could be like. We might even go so far as to say that the retreat is the new world, on a very small scale and for a very short time; but nonetheless it does show us what is possible.“*

Bhante envisions that the transformation he is dreaming of can happen by replicating the nucleus of the already existing spiritual community and thereby expanding its range of influence:

*„If we want to bring the new world into existence, we have to do it by expanding that nucleus, multiplying that nucleus and pushing out extensions of it, [of them], into the world.“*

He looks at two areas that most people in modern Western society have to come to terms with: working and living, and he talks about the advantages of doing both together with other Buddhists in a Team-Based Right Livelihood or in a residential spiritual community. Both help to expand the scope of one's Dharma practice into crucial areas of one's life by providing supportive conditions in those areas.

Bhante even envisions a new economic system that is capable of providing resources for people who want to dedicate all their energies to meditation and study. They could be supported by the surplus generated from within the new society, from within the spiritual community. He thereby sketches an alternative to the lifestyle of monks and nuns in traditional Buddhist societies.

There are no limits to the areas in which people could work and practice together: schools, farms, theatre groups... these are just a few of the examples that spring up in Bhante's mind.

At the end of the lecture series he comes back to the image of the tree: now he evokes a giant majestic tree with many branches and fruits that is the order. Around it are a number

of smaller trees that have grown from the seeds dropped by the original tree. And then the horizon widens – as if the camera zooms out – and Bhante describes a vision in which there are multiple trees – chapters of the order – each surrounded by smaller saplings that have grown out of it, thereby transforming the whole world into a forest grove.

He finishes:

*„We don't have a detailed blueprint of a new world; we have something that is perhaps even better – the living, growing seed of a new world. The real blueprint for the oak tree is the acorn.“*

### **A few personal reflections**

As promised, I will share a few of my own reflections now.

Not long before his death, Saddhanandi had a series of conversations with Bhante exploring the themes of his poems. “The Four Gifts” was one of them. Saddhanandi asks: Who is the narrator of the poem? Who is the giver of the gifts? Bhante replies that he must have written it from the experience of founding Triratna and then stepping back for a sabbatical, leaving his offerings in the hands of the early order members. So yes, he himself is the speaker. But when Saddhanandi asks whether we are not the speaker now, since the gifts were passed on, he agrees. Bhante’s gifts have become our gifts to the world.

As we come to the end of Bhante’s centenary year, it seems timely to reflect on what we as an order now have to offer. Next year gives us the chance to revisit the lectures Bhante gave fifty years ago and draw out a vision for the next 50 or maybe 100 years.

I also find it helpful to see Bhante’s life in a wider context. He said he was carried by a spiritual momentum present since childhood, and he noted the mysterious closeness in time and place between his birth and the death of Allan Bennett. While preparing a talk for Bhante’s 100th birthday, I looked into Bennett’s life and was struck by how many parallels there were. Both men seem connected by a shared aspiration to bring Buddhism to the West. Next year also marks the 125th anniversary of Bennett becoming Bhikkhu Ananda Metteya, motivated solely by the wish to bring the Dharma to England. He in turn inspired early Western Buddhists like Nyanatiloka. These were the beginnings of Europeans sincerely Going for Refuge.

As heirs to Bhante’s gifts, we are part of that same stream of aspiration. I’ve never liked the term “movement” with its political overtones, but I find it easier when I see it as the current of spiritual motivation running through Bhante, a movement towards embracing the Dharma from within European culture.

Since 2024 I've been part of the Sangharakshita Study Course at Adhisthana. We're studying Bhante's key works in chronological order, now up to the mid-70s. One thing that has struck me is how strongly he focused on communicating the Mahayana vision after returning to the West. His wholehearted embrace of the whole Buddhist tradition had caused friction at the Hampstead Vihara and contributed to him being asked not to come back. After he established his own movement many of his lectures centred on Mahayana scriptures such as the Bodhicaryavatara or the White Lotus Sutra.

For the Bodhisattva there is no individual Enlightenment separate from culture, no distinction between giver, gift, act of giving, or receiver. Bhante touches on this in the third gift: as an order, we ourselves are the gift. To give ourselves is total giving.

He distinguishes the first two gifts—the method of development and the vision of the Buddha—from the third, saying they were at that time still somewhat separate from the giver. Perhaps, after only a few years of practice, the Dharma still felt external to many. I wonder if that is still true. For if we really aim to practise Dāna Pāramitā, then giver and gift cannot be separate. As we mature as a community, we ourselves become the upholders of the Buddha's vision and the path that leads to it.

I will share that same thought with you expressed in the words of the Śrīmālādevī Sūtra, which is very dear to my heart:

*“Lord, the embrace of the Illustrious Doctrine is called ‘embracer of the Illustrious Doctrine’. The Illustrious Doctrine is not one thing and the embracer of the Illustrious Doctrine is something else. That embracer of the Illustrious Doctrine is himself the Illustrious Doctrine. Neither is he different from the Perfections, nor are those different from the embracer of the Illustrious Doctrine. Lord, that embracer of the Illustrious Doctrine himself is the Perfections.”*

Of course, the Path and the Vision are the universal gifts of the Buddha, whereas the third and fourth gifts – the order and all the Triratna centres and activities that have grown out of it – are the very specific gifts of Bhante as the founder of this community and of all of us who have decided to commit ourselves to it.

I find it interesting that in the Brighton lectures Bhante chose to evoke the image of a giant tree with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Dakinis and Arhats as a symbol of the goal. The path and the goal come up in so many of his lectures in the 60s and 70s. And usually the symbol that he chooses for the goal is the mandala. But in this context it is a tree... a tree full of Enlightened Beings, a transcendental spiritual community.

In his last lecture, he echoes this image with another tree: the oak tree that is the order. So somehow these two trees seem to be in relation to one another although they exist on two different planes.

In preparation for this talk, I have been reflecting about what I think it is that we have to offer to people. What is it that the women whom I accompany on their path to ordination respond to most strongly? What was it that drew me to Triratna when I got in touch?

The greatest gift for myself – but also to many of the people I am in touch with – that Triratna has to offer is this gateway to the transcendental spiritual community... the connection with the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and their blessings, and the path that arises from that connection. It is the connection with that magnificent tree that Bhante evoked.

In order to show you how this can express itself, I want to share with you a short extract from an ordination request written by a young woman from Germany a couple of months ago, which I find very moving:

“Avalokitesvara shows me that compassion can work through me, and that it is both possible and important to let go of my limiting views and self-images. At the same time, he reminds me that I walk this path together with others. Only spiritual friendship, community, and connectedness make it possible. [...]”

Avalokitesvara looks down and listens to the voices of the world not only with the ears, but with the heart. He listens before he responds, without judgement, creating a space in which everything may be present: pain, joy, silence, longing. Out of this compassionate awareness, his voice arises. This voice does not divide and does not instruct. It does not speak only in words but is full of compassion and understanding. It connects beings, because it is born from that very source.”

So this connection with the transcendental is one side of the balance that I came up with in my reflection. The other side is that it was absolutely crucial for me that Triratna also offered a vision of a way of life on a mundane level: the order as a network of committed individuals, residential communities, projects to give my energy to... all this offered a real alternative to a conventional lifestyle, and it definitely helped me to commit myself to the path.

And I think this is true of many people who are struggling to find a way of living a spiritual life within the conditions and restrictions of modern society, maybe especially younger people. One of the young women who live in our community in Berlin said a few days ago: the longer she lives in our community, the less she can imagine not living in our

community. I am very grateful that we have the conditions to offer this opportunity to others, at least to some extent.

When I look back at my Dharma life since becoming a mitra in 2015, I can clearly see that the third and the fourth gifts have been the vehicle for me in which more and more of the first two gifts – the path of meditation and the vision of the Buddha – could unfold. But of course, this is a reciprocal relationship: the more we develop individually, the stronger we will be as a community.

At the end of his poem, Bhante asks us if we dare accept his gifts. In his lectures, he likewise points to the fact that the vision of the Buddha represents a challenge.

If we practise wholeheartedly, individually and as a community, sooner rather than later obstacles will arise, presented to us as internal resistance or external difficulties.

It takes courage and hard work to create and to maintain the garden planted in the wilderness of our own unenlightened hearts. But if we call on him, Padmasambhava comes to help us with the enormous task of total transformation.

In his 1979 Padmasambhava Day talk, Bhante envisioned Triratna with all its centres and activities as a sort of “transforming and transfiguring agency” that tames and transforms all the aspects of our culture that are opposed to Dharma practice, just like Padmasambhava did: “a stream of spiritual energy that transforms everyone and everything it comes into contact with”. So it is by the blessings of Padmasambhava that the new society, the new world, comes into existence.

I think it was a naïve fallacy of the early days of our community to believe that the dividing line between the new and the old society coincided with the separation between inside and outside of Triratna. I hope that we are more mature today and see that this line runs straight through the centre of our own hearts and minds, and that it requires a constant conscious effort and willingness to acknowledge this in order to bring the new society into being.

Over the almost 50 years of our history that have passed since Bhante gave his lectures in Brighton, we developed a very specific “Triratna jargon” like the “3 Cs” to talk about the ideas that he had presented in his lectures. This language seems to be rather outdated today. Maybe terms like the “new society” never spoke to some of us because they sounded far too idealistic or too political.

I strongly believe that the vision that Bhante tried to communicate through those words is not outdated. So I think we need to question ourselves: What is the language that speaks to us today? What are the images that really stir up our energies and mobilise us as a community to move towards that vision? Do the images of the “Four Gifts” speak to us?

Personally, I resonated strongly with Bhante's poem. I even wrote a response to it shortly after my ordination, still on retreat at Akashavana. At that time, I had no knowledge of the lectures; I just sat with Bhante's images and explored what meaning they conveyed in my imagination. Interestingly, the image of the garden for me was a metaphor for the clear, bright mind in the wilderness of wrong views.

As we know, Bhante himself had a different association with the image in his poem. But in the lectures he expressed a very similar thought:

*"Nowadays there is a great deal of woolly thinking in the world. There are many different kinds of wrong view, and they all represent rationalisations in one way or another of a limited range of experience. What we need nowadays, perhaps more than anything else, is Right View. What we need is Perfect Vision: the Vision of the Buddha. Because if we have this vision we can grow, we can develop. Without it, we may well perish."*

I just want to finish by sharing my response to Bhante's poem with you.

#### **Four gifts – One line of acceptance'**

You come to me with four gifts.

A lotus-flower –

Birthplace of the Bodhisattvas  
And path to transcendental compassion,  
The ultimate creative unfolding.

A golden net –

A finely woven web of meaning and imagination,  
Imbued with the Buddha's original inspiration,  
His living breath.

A shepherds' round-dance –

The joy of being human at its most profound level,  
In harmony with nature,  
In admiration of the beautiful  
And in friendship with all beings.

A garden planted in a wilderness –

The beauty of a clear mind,

An oasis of brightness  
In a thicket of views.

You come to me with four gifts,  
Precious teacher.  
I dare accept and cherish them  
Wholeheartedly.