

The Way of Trust by Robert Ellis (ex-Upeksacitta)

[This is a text version of a talk given on the Padmaloka Men's Order Weekend, on 3rd February 2008. It is not a transcript, but an expansion of notes, so it misses out the "padding", asides etc used in the actual talk, and I have added some extra points for clarification. In the event I only used about half the material I had prepared in the talk, so what is given here is the complete version, considerably longer than what was actually delivered. The text is open to all.]

Introduction

This talk is on the theme of trust. What is it? How does it contribute to the spiritual life? How far should it go? I will be looking at appropriate levels of trust in various areas.

This links to the theme of the weekend (that of betrayal), mainly in the sense of considering how to avoid betrayal in the first place. Betrayal does happen, when our trust is undermined.

The talk is based on philosophical reflection and my own experience.

1. The Nature of Trust

What is trust?

I would define trust simply as having positive expectations of others. It is also possible to have trust in oneself in the sense of having positive expectations of oneself, but that can be better described as *confidence*.

Trust involves casting ahead to create a positive image of the future and then acting as though it's true. A simple example is that of letting a child take its first step unsupported: you have to let go and have a positive expectation that the child can do so.

Trust is risky: the future may not be as good as we anticipate. Trust may be betrayed. We're perhaps more likely to take that risk if we are impelled by an experience of dukkha.

Trust gives people benefit of the doubt. It treats people as half-full bottles rather than half-empty ones. It is optimistic. This optimism **makes progress possible**. People are more likely to improve in response to positive expectations.

Here is an example of the optimism and the risk of trust from my own experience of sixth-form college teaching. I often used to be in doubt about whether a student giving an excuse for not doing their homework was telling the truth or not. My policy was that it was better to trust – and risk being taken for a ride – to reinforce the possibility of truthfulness. That way I was at least helping to create a world where the students *could* tell the truth because that was what I expected, even if that expectation was sometimes disappointed.

The importance of trust

Trust in oneself (confidence) and in others is basic to the spiritual life. It is needed to let go of greed and hatred. It relinquishes egoistic control where that control would be

stopping positive developments. It allows others to be autonomous and grow out of supervision.

Trust could also be described as a response to integration. We often judge how far someone is integrated by how far we trust them. An integrated person is more likely to be reliable because they are less subject to conflicting internal forces. It could almost be said that trust is a perception of integration, and integration is a focus of trust.

Trust is personal

Trust is also distinctive in being **trust in a person** and demanding a personal response. In this sense it is distinguishable from *belief* in ideas or claims.

Trust is a response to a whole person as we experience them, probably in many different ways over a period of time. It involves “intuition” (by which I mean an unconsciously processed totality of experience). We can’t just put together a set of pieces of verbalisable evidence and arrive at trust (though the evidence may help), because the processes are too complex to be reduced in this way. Humans are too complex.

Trust involves the recognition of **another person present**: they have the potential to grow into a space allowed by trust, just as I do. It might be said that I can also “trust” objects, but this is really just a different way of describing belief in their properties. E.g. “I trust my car not to break down” means “I believe that my car will probably not break down, because it’s been serviced recently etc”. However “I trust Jnanaketu” can’t be reduced to “I believe he will do xyz for xyz reasons”. Although the reasons may be helpful to recognise, my trust depends on an intuitive overall picture responding to him as one person to another, in addition to those reasons.

Trust distinguished from belief, confidence and faith

Belief is commitment to the truth of propositions

Confidence is positive expectations of oneself and trust in one’s own capacity to develop.

Faith is commitment to a certain thing, system, person etc bringing about a certain end result, or providing ultimate meaning or justification.

(All these definitions are my own. One of the freedoms I take from philosophy is the freedom to stipulate. We do not have to be slaves to lexicographers or always accept their prejudices. Nevertheless, I think these definitions are not too far from common usage, whilst at the same time being fit for the purpose I am putting them to.)

I think the Buddhist *Saddha* is best translated as “trust”, not “faith” (as I have defined each of these terms). This will require some explanation and argument.

2. The Trust-Faith Distinction

Trust is just based on experience and positivity, projecting ahead a little. It takes the available evidence and interprets it optimistically. **Faith**, on the other hand, is based on a craving for results and “answers”: e.g. enlightenment as a goal, enlightenment giving meaning to the universe, or an individual teacher giving the answers.

Faith projects ahead *too far*, relying on the truth of things that are too far from our experience to be reliably assumed. Trust takes our level of ignorance seriously but still positively, but faith systematically underestimates our ignorance.

[At this point I read out p. 84-86 of Victor E. Frankl's reflections arising from experience in Auschwitz, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Finding a meaning for life in Auschwitz required a future goal, but this goal also had to be real, concrete and specific, not too distant.]

Saddha is traditionally understood in Buddhism in a way that includes trust, but causes confusion by mixing it with faith in things too far beyond experience. That is why I do not wish to perpetuate the FWBO tradition of using the word "faith" in a way that does not make this line of justification clear. My justification for doing so is pragmatic: I want to use the word differently so as to avoid the confusion it sows.

This is a slightly different issue from the comment people often make that "faith" tends to be understood in Christian terms in the West. My perception is that both the Christian and the Buddhist traditions confuse faith with trust, and fail to draw a line between an optimistic interpretation of experience and an unjustifiable reliance on things which are entirely beyond our experience.

Our scientific legacy in the West enables us to see more clearly (than the Buddhist tradition, perhaps) the importance of trust and provisional belief, but the drawbacks of faith. Western history is full of examples of experience challenging faith, where people associated the whole meaning of their lives with a particular ultimate explanation and reacted against scientific challenges: e.g. Copernicus & Galileo or Darwin.

Trust is essential to the spiritual life. *Faith* is, at least, not necessary to it. There is a further argument I could make, that I will not pursue here, that it is actually unhelpful. However, even if it is just inessential it should not be the prescribed basis of the Order.

Bhante on "faith" in the Survey p.312-324

This point about faith is clearly in disagreement with Sangharakshita as he expresses himself in the *Survey of Buddhism*. Given the degree of influence of the *Survey* in the movement, it seems a good idea at this point to make the reasons for my disagreement clearer by considering exactly what Sangharakshita says about faith.

He writes: "the connotation of the word [*saddha*]...is definitely emotional. Hence it is best rendered, not by 'confidence' as some rationalising interpreters of the Dharma would have us believe, but by ...faith".

It seems clear from this that he would also be against rendering *saddha* as "trust". The terms confidence and trust go together and just apply respectively to oneself or others.

My main disagreement with Bhante here is in his assumption that confidence is not emotional. Both confidence and trust are definitely emotional! As I have already explained, they demand emotional engagement both in making a personal response (in the case of trust), and in requiring optimism (in the case of both confidence and trust). The element of projecting forward in both confidence and trust balances reason and emotion. Reason alone does not justify the risk of trusting someone (including oneself) to gain a positive result. Nor do trust and confidence involve just a

calculated risk: the element of “intuitive” unconscious processing means that trust cannot be calculated.

Am I a “rationalising interpreter of the Dharma”? Yes, in the sense that I’d like the Dharma to be more consistent. I don’t think that’s an unreasonable demand. However, I’m not a “rationalist” in the sense that I want the dharma to deny emotion or its role.

It could be objected here that Bhante has simply defined faith in terms that involve emotion, and confidence/trust in ways that do not, whereas I have defined confidence/trust in ways that do involve emotion. It would be wrong to criticise Bhante’s points on a misinterpretation of his language. But my objection to “faith” is probably an objection to the whole way Bhante (and many other Buddhists) use it, which confuses immediate trust in things that are only a little way beyond experience with faith in things further off, using the same word to encompass both of them. Bhante’s further points seem to reinforce this impression.

Bhante goes on: “Faith in the Buddhist sense then becomes the act (expressed by ‘taking refuge’) or state (condition of being established in the refuge) of acknowledging unquestioningly that the man Gautama... is in possession of Full Enlightenment.” This is clearly incompatible with “faith” being merely a matter of trust. Bhante then goes on to claim that this faith “is not blind faith” but based on *intuition, reason, and experience*.

On **intuition**, Bhante writes: “Saddha...is an acknowledgement of the fact that Gautama is the Buddha, grounded, firstly, on the intuitive response that arises out of the depths of our heart by reason of the affinity existing between his actual and our potential Buddhahood.”

Our potential Buddhahood is clearly a matter way beyond our experience. Our potential spiritual development does not depend on our potential Buddhahood, as we can develop whether or not we ever attain Buddhahood. Neither does either our potential spiritual development or our potential Buddhahood rely on the Buddha’s actual Buddhahood: if the Buddha had never existed we would still be able to develop. So what is Bhante talking about?

I suspect that what he is saying is based on a confusion between inspiration and trust. We need trust to move forward in the spiritual life, and the Buddha and his enlightenment can offer a strong source of inspiration for Buddhists. We can find the Buddha an inspiring archetypal symbol, but this has no relevance to having faith in the Buddha’s enlightenment. We could find the story, or the archetype, inspiring whether or not the Buddha was enlightened. We can even use the Buddha as a central religious symbol regardless of whether or not there was a historical event of him being enlightened.

What arises from the depths of our heart is not to be “rationally” denied – rather celebrated and developed, but nor should it be over-interpreted into a belief about a past event. Even if we have insights that are closely associated with the stories of the Buddha’s enlightenment, this has nothing to do with “faith”, and gives no justification for it.

Bhante then goes on to note “In the case of the spiritually immature, [intuition] is only too often a means of indulging mundane desires and justifying prejudices.” So it seems that he also recognises that intuition needs to be used with caution – which

suggests that it should not be the basis of “faith”. Instead it needs to be used in a way that lies *closer* to experience and reason.

On **reason**, Bhante then says that faith is “grounded...secondly on the sensible evidences and rational proofs of [the Buddha’s] Enlightenment afforded us by the records of his life and Teaching.”

This looks like an over-interpretation of the records of the Buddha’s life and teaching. Records of his life indicate the Buddha’s spiritual qualities (which we have little reason to disbelieve), but not the association of these qualities with Enlightenment as one-off achievement, ending karma and rebirth – this is claimed by the texts but not “rationally proved” or “sensibly evidenced”. The Buddha’s enlightenment as described in the texts is not something that any observer would have been in agreement about, but rather a traditional Buddhist interpretation of the Buddha’s life and character.

It is reason, also, which would tell us that there is actually no necessity to believe such things to be a practising Buddhist. Bhante’s appeal to reason thus appears to be extremely selective.

On **experience**, Bhante writes that faith is “grounded...thirdly on our own attainment of the successive stages of the Transcendental Path taught by him as the means of Enlightenment.”

Our experience of spiritual progress through stages of the Path justifies trust that further spiritual progress is possible, but not faith in its final end-point. Even if we thought we’d got there we couldn’t be sure it was the end-point! If I set off on a journey to a distant place where no-one known to me today has ever been, and only known by vague repute – say, a planet orbiting a distant star – my journey at each stage might justify confidence that the immediate next stage was possible. However, I could hardly claim that my own experience justified specific beliefs about the destination.

So does Bhante adequately support his claim that Buddhist faith is not blind faith? No. Neither reason, nor experience, nor a trustful response to that experience tell us either that the Buddha was enlightened or that this is of any relevance to the spiritual path. Reason, experience and trust simply tell us about **the spiritual path itself**.

Being content with the spiritual path itself without “faith” in its end-point is part of the spiritual path. This in no way undermines the use of enlightenment or Buddha figures as symbols representing archetypes.

The argument on temperament

It has at various times been suggested to me that I have a specific “rational” or “sceptical” temperament, and that I should take into account other kinds of temperament and not assume that my ideas suit them. There is some truth in this. I certainly would not want to undermine anyone’s useful practice, and it’s quite possible that, in ways unknown or unappreciated by me, “faith” in the Buddha’s enlightenment is useful to individuals. I would still want to argue that the intellectual structure they are using is, in the long-term, more confusing (even to them) than helpful. However, I don’t want to press that argument any further on this occasion.

What I do want to argue here is that the kind of temperament that takes faith in the Buddha’s enlightenment to be vital should not be allowed to prescribe the whole

basis of Buddhist practice, or the terms of the Order and movement; and that up to now it has. I read an interesting quotation from Jung recently: “there is a temperament which regards ideas as real entities and not merely as nomina.¹” (*Nomina* means names that have no final reality behind them). Jung identifies this temperament, as I would, with Platonism, as Plato gave strong expression to it.

A “Platonic” temperament feels that the whole path is meaningless without faith in an end-point or absolute reality. As far as I can tell, this is just a feeling people have about it, with no rational foundation that has ever been made clear to me (except for appeals to tradition, which I do not accept by themselves). I am happy to accept that people have this feeling, but a feeling is what it is, associated with a temperament. It may be that this is Bhante’s temperament, and that of many other Order members. But are we to be dominated by this temperament, so that it defines the requirements of Order membership and the public expressions of the values of the movement? We are not an Order of Platonists!

3. The Middle Way of Trust

How far should we trust?

I now want to turn back to the central question of trust. I have distinguished trust from faith, but my main concern here is with discussing the application of trust.

How do we judge what is a justifiable level of trust? The right level of trust needs to be a balanced and sustainable response to conditions. That sustainable response is sketched out by the Middle Way. I don’t want to get bogged down here in the relationship between a Middle Way of trust and the Middle Way in general, which is quite complex. It is enough to say here that if the purpose of the Middle Way in general is to address conditions and avoid the types of delusion represented by the extremes of eternalism and nihilism, the purpose of the Middle Way as applied to trust is the same.

The extremes to be avoided in relation to trust, I would suggest, are those of excessive trust or of deficient trust. Either of these extremes needs to be judged in each specific situation, taking into account not just the nature of the person being trusted, but the person trusting: not just what is an appropriate level of trust to have in this particular person, but also what is an appropriate level of trust for *me* to have in this particular person.

Excessive trust

Trust involves risk, but excessive unjustified risk undermines future trust by inviting betrayal. **Every betrayal makes trust less likely next time.** Excessive trust undermines trust itself and this undermines the spiritual life.

Excessive trust can be identified with faith – it goes too far ahead of experience. There are simply too many conditions we are ignorant of and have not taken into account when we trust excessively. So excessive trust, often seen as a kind of receptivity, can also be seen as a kind of arrogance: we think we know enough to trust this person completely, but actually we have misjudged it and we do not.

¹ Carl Jung, *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype*, from *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious* (Routledge) p.76

When we trust excessively it can be for a number of reasons. One is often a failure to see the trusted person in full context. E.g. in the film *The New World* Pocahontas, a teenage native American girl at the time of the very first European settlements in America, falls in love with the English Captain Smith, but she is utterly ignorant of the conditions of his life and civilisation and the forces acting on him. Her trust in him turns out to be naïve.

Another reason for excessive trust seems to be haste in trusting; a failure to reflect sufficiently. This can also be due to a reliance on superficial characteristics, e.g. charisma or power.

A simple example of my own excessive trust in the past is when I visited Sri Lanka at the age of 23, and met a “tea grower”, who offered to show me round his plantation, and relieved me of a small sum of money to mail me some tea at home; I responded to his superficial charm and plausibility, but I never got the tea and he did not turn up to show me round his plantation. It would be easy to respond to being deceived in this way by closing up and never trusting anyone in a new country, but of course this would be just as much of a mistake.

Insufficient trust

The other extreme to be avoided is a failure to take the risk of trusting, due to fear, narrow-mindedness, egoism or excessive prudence. Such a failure to trust can result in tendency to isolation, and a failure to develop friendships or relationships. Perhaps more commonly it can mean that one’s relationships are limited to the group one is accustomed to.

A failure to offer trust where possible also directly undermines trust in the future, just as excessive trust does. One example of this is not believing someone who may be telling the truth. Sangharakshita in the *Ten Pillars* writes “next to killing a man, perhaps the worst possible thing you can do to him...is not to believe him when he is speaking the truth. Not to believe him when he is speaking the truth negates his identity as a social being and disrupts human solidarity. Such belief is, in fact, an act of violence.” Bhante rather typically overstates his case here, but I also get from this an urgency in requiring trust where it is appropriate and an indication of how strongly negative the results of not doing so can be.

Another aspect of insufficient trust is one I have experienced as a college teacher, where increasing bureaucratisation seems to be a mark of the lack of trust of teachers by government. It’s harder for individual teachers to grow in their practice if every move has to be closely planned and monitored.

Middle Way of trust

The Middle Way of trust, then, avoids both these extremes. This requires constant reflection and awareness. Is this trust just a little way ahead of experience – but not too far?

This Middle Way needs to be applied not just to deciding who/what we should trust, but also in encouraging everyone to trust. This means being worthy of trust and also avoiding conditions that give rise to *distrust*. This takes me to another area that I would like to explore. Why do people distrust us, often without cause, and how can we avoid it?

4. The conditions of distrust

Conditions that encourage distrust

Encouraging others to trust – though not too much – is not just a PR job but a part of spreading the dharma. People cannot develop spiritually if their capacity to trust is inhibited, *especially if they are led not to trust those who are in fact worthy of trust.*

Distrust is not simply the problem of the person who distrusts. I had to face up to this personally in my long period of waiting to be ordained: I was not fully trusted, and trust cannot be forced. I had to address the conditions of distrust.

I have come to the conclusion that there are six conditions that encourage distrust:

- **Unfamiliarity** We're just not sufficiently known. There's no easy fix for this as familiarity takes time. But it's also possible to trust people on short acquaintance – it's not the only factor.
- **Inconsistency.** E.g. saying different things at different times; saying one thing and doing another (even if what we do is better than what we say). E.g. children distrust hypocritical adults.
- **Ambiguity** People can be unclear about what it is they are trusting because values are not clearly expressed. E.g. this seems to be a problem, for me at least, in trusting people who are very New-Agey: their values tend to be vague, so I don't know what I'm dealing with.
- **False certainty.** People appearing to be more certain than they are justified in being. E.g. evangelical Christians.
- **Bias / one-sidedness** One-sidedness gives the impression that some other viewpoints have not been considered that may be true. How, then, can those who take those values seriously trust those who have not really considered or responded to them? For example, I do not readily trust Christians who make confidently prejudiced utterances about Buddhism.
- **Exclusivity** This is lack of awareness beyond a particular group. Outsiders will feel excluded and are unlikely to trust insiders or vice-versa. E.g. cults such as the Moonies.

Distrust of the FWBO

I am now going to apply this analysis of conditions of distrust to the FWBO, as it seems to me that the FWBO has a problem with being distrusted. This is evidenced, for example, by the FWBO Files and the Guardian article. The FWBO is (in my view) largely worthy of trust, but it has not been good at avoiding distrust, because it has been subject to all the last 5 conditions. That the author of the FWBO files distrusts us is not just his problem, but ours too.

It would be easy to put most of the distrust just down to the first condition of unfamiliarity, and certainly that seems to play a role. However, the other five conditions, which are more under our control, also have an important part to play.

- **Inconsistency** I experience the FWBO as being deeply inconsistent, primarily in the sense of its theory not being up to the standard of its practice.

The practice of the FWBO is usually based on open liberal approaches and experimentation. It tends to work on the whole, because it has developed gradually through an engagement with conditions. The theory of the FWBO, however (as reflected, for example, in most of the books published by Windhorse) is strongly influenced by Bhante and therefore reflects his weaknesses by being unduly conservative, idealistic and tending towards eternalism. A simple example of this can be seen by comparing the FWBO's highly effective approach to gender issues in practice, with the theory of *Women, Men and Angels*, which succeeded in completely obscuring the strengths of that practice rather than learning from it.

- **Ambiguity** I find the FWBO and WBO ambiguous in that it is always unclear whether we stand for traditional Buddhist beliefs, or the ones that practice and experience have shown to work. When it comes to the crunch and one of these has to be prioritised over the other, which of these does the Order and movement really stand for? The answer seems to be that we choose what works practically, but we choose what is traditional as our justificatory theory. Whenever we try to resolve this ambiguity we are led back to further inconsistency.
- **False certainty** In practice many OMs are reasonably careful thinkers, but there's still a great weight of false certainty from the past. Subhuti's recent writings seem to reflect a good deal of this, including a Buddhist creed. On the whole, though, my own experience is that this one has greatly improved since the 1980's, when I first got involved with the movement.
- **Bias/ one-sidedness** I think this remains a big problem for the FWBO. We often seem to assume that we have got it all right, and all we need to do is present the true doctrines. One-sidedness is often justified by a "fear that the mitras will get confused". But no genuine convictions can be arrived at without considering the other side of the case and understanding it: some confusion may be a necessary part of the process of gaining a bigger view.

The importance of real consideration of all sides of the case is strongly expressed by John Stuart Mill in his essay *On Liberty*:

Even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth, unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but...the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma being a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real or heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.²

I am in little doubt that it is possible to contest the dharma in the FWBO, but is it "vigorously and earnestly contested"? Considering both sides of the case properly is essential in a modern world full of jostling ideologies. Why do retreats generally only involve study of Bhante or Buddhist scriptures? Where are the Padmaloka retreats on Understanding Christianity? This does not mean that everyone has to completely understand all doctrines, or that depth

² John Stuart Mill *On Liberty* chapter 2

has to be sacrificed to breadth. On the contrary, one only gains *depth* of understanding of the doctrines of Buddhism to the extent that one engages with their essentially contested and contestable nature.

- **Exclusivity** The FWBO 20 years ago had an exclusivity verging on that of a cult, but thankfully this has since improved a good deal. I am still struck, though, by the absence of reaching out to anyone in the 99% of the population that is not Buddhist, even by institutions that I once hoped might do this, such as Dharmapala College. There is an attempt to spread the dharma, but not to listen to others and incorporate the best from their perspectives into an evolving vision of the truth. The furthest that listening seems to go is in events like the discussion with a lama of the Tibetan tradition, which I believe took place recently at Madhyamaloka. This is hardly reaching out very far, but only within a larger minority group.

It seems that we are still dealing with the legacy of exclusivity and a certain yearning for the false security it can provide. We are still in a stage of self-examination, and that may well be necessary in order to resolve the ambiguities before turning outwards.

Applying the Middle Way of Trust

I'm now going to apply the Middle Way of trust in four areas that are of immediate concern to Order members: trust in the Order, trust in teachers, trust in writings, and trust in tradition.

5. Trust in the Order

Trust as the basis of the Order

I think that trust, not faith or belief, is the basis of the Order.

People need to be known personally, and trusted, to enter the Order. It is often described as "just a network of friends", but since we can't all know each other in the way that friends should, it might be more accurate to describe it as a network of trust. The beliefs and practices of the Order are becoming increasingly diverse, but we are still bound by trust. I do experience that even in a certain trust of those Order Members I strongly disagree with.

The trust between OM's has historical roots in the work of Sangharakshita and the way he set up the Order. This is how the trust between OMs came about, but it is not necessarily the reason for its continuation. Starting the Order successfully might have required a quite narrowly-focused group with narrow beliefs, but the same conditions do not apply to perpetuating a much bigger, more open, more liberal Order. Acknowledging the conditioning effect of the past should not be confused with appealing to the past to unify the Order now. It is not faith or belief in Bhante (I will discuss his role as teacher more later) so much as trust in each other developed through kalyana mitrata that makes the Order what it is now, let alone what it may be in the future.

Implications of trust being the basis of the Order

I think there are two important implications of the Order being based on trust:

1. No tests of belief or faith should be applied to OMs. Certain beliefs may be helpful or unhelpful, but let practical trust be the judge of that. Such tests would

reflect *insufficient trust in OMs*. Subhuti's proposals for criteria of belief on which to judge order membership run against the very spirit of the Order.

2. The gateway to the Order cannot be out of harmony with the way the Order functions. People should be trusted *on admission*, not just *after admission*.

To make this second point clearer, one could compare the Order to a gated community of a kind that is now being built in the US. Everyone trusts each other inside such a community, but is fearful of what is outside. Distrust guards the entrance. Public preceptors issue passes to enter the community.

The Order cannot function effectively as a bubble of trust which does not extend the same level of trust beyond itself. We should trust people to decide when they can be ordained, in consultation and communication with OM's and preceptors. In practice most people who should be members of the Order know when they should, and people who should not do not want to join the Order.

What if someone "forces their way in" who is not worthy of trust? Preceptors would advise them against it, but in the end they could ignore the preceptors. Their membership of the order would then be marginal or nominal: but we have lots of marginal and nominal OMs already, so obviously the present system does not prevent that possibility in any case. The benefits of basing admission to the Order on trust would outweigh the disadvantages. It's risky, but trust requires a level of risk.

Another comparison could be made between an "open" Order and the dana economy, also an adventure in trust which often appears to work. In both cases, controls normally used for security are dropped, and usually people do not abuse this. E.g. Dhanakosa runs on dana: the kind of people who come on retreat to Dhanakosa are not generally likely to abuse the system: nor are those who wish to join the Order. There is no more need to "police" ordination than there is to make sure that everyone pays their dues.

6. Trust in teachers

Trust in teachers is important because more is learnt through a teacher's character than through what they say. Children learn much more from a schoolteacher they have personal trust in, and similarly spiritual development thrives on personal example. This is the basis of *kalyana mitrata* and its place in the movement.

But excessive trust in teachers creates familiar problems: trust is undermined by eventual disillusionment because it is based on illusions. How can we strike a balance reflecting the Middle Way of trust?

Insufficient trust in teachers

As I have already mentioned, my main experience of this is as a sixth-form college teacher in the state education system.

Insufficient trust prevents learning through relationship to the teacher's whole personality. A teacher gets reduced to a purveyor of neutral information, not likely to change anyone's life. Without personal trust, bureaucratic controls and formalism also often has to substitute.

A teacher who is not trusted may not even trust him/herself and become alienated. I worked with a teacher like this as my head of department in my first major teaching

job as a Religious Studies teacher. He was an evangelical Christian, who coped with the different roles of evangelical and Religious Studies teacher by creating a strict separation of his own beliefs from his teaching. He tried to present everything he taught “neutrally”, without apparently recognising the ways that it was in fact heavily slanted.

Comparison of this example with the FWBO shows the strengths of teaching in the FWBO: people are usually themselves rather than acting out a role. Vajragupta is a great example of this in my experience: when teaching at the Worcester class he is simply completely himself, totally relaxed. This kind of strength will be threatened if FWBO teachers ever start having to fit into prescribed norms for the sake of “consistency” – in other words, if they cease to be sufficiently trusted.

Excessive trust in teachers

There seems to be a traditional idea in Buddhism that absolute commitment to a teacher provides the best way of breaking through delusion. I think this tradition directly contradicts the critical Western tradition and the more basic Buddhist teaching of the Middle Way. The Tibetan guru tradition is based on unconditional commitment to a teacher, so is an unhelpful influence here.

The practice of kalyana mitrata is based on trust, an optimistic interpretation of experience. The Tibetan guru tradition goes against universal experience that all teachers are human and fallible. Excessive trust in the teacher as guru actually undermines kalyana mitrata by reducing the trust that kalyana mitrata requires.

Bhante himself in “Is a guru necessary?” concludes that a guru is only necessary as a more advanced person with whom one has regular deep contact: i.e. a vertical Kalyana mitra. This seems a very sensible conclusion, but I wish that the norms of the movement reflected it. In practice, though, excessive trust in teachers is sometimes promoted through the use of the Tibetan guru tradition, and in a way that conflicts with the more practically balanced approach that has also developed. The problem is not that the whole Order or movement places excessive trust in teachers, but that the picture is inconsistent.

In practice most of us don’t have an unconditional commitment to Bhante, but the guru tradition creates confusion and distrust and makes it look as though we do. Why is Bhante’s photo so prominently displayed on public shrines? Why is the cult of Bhante so public and thus often foisted on the reluctant? (e.g. chanting the white Tara mantra for Bhante). It is one thing for these practices to be performed in private by those who wish to do them because they find them useful, but quite another for them to be institutionalised either by being part of Order events or centre events.

The idea that Bhante is the “teacher” even of OMs who have never met him, let alone got close to him, also seems to be a legacy of the guru tradition rather than a practical development of the practice of kalyana mitrata. Trust is a personal matter and can’t be created at a distance or required by an institution. I don’t have that kind of personal trust for Bhante myself, and don’t see why I should have to – though I do trust other members of the Order whom I actually know personally. It can only be in a sense of faith, not trust, that Bhante is everyone’s teacher.

To have faith in Bhante (in the way in which I earlier defined faith) is in my view inappropriate, and likely to involve excessive trust which in the long-term undermines trust. Why were Bhante’s peccadilloes so shocking to so many in 2003? Presumably only because some Order Members had placed excessive trust in him, and had not

taken into account the real complexity of his character. To me it was not that surprising that Bhante was imperfect in this way, and I did not feel “betrayed” because I had never placed that kind of inappropriate faith on him in the first place.

Is Bhante bearer of the archetype?

A likely response to these comments, particularly one I have often been given in response to objections to Bhante’s photo on public shrines, is that Bhante is the bearer of an archetype, and that this should be distinguished from Bhante the imperfect individual. Bhante’s photo is intended to provide us with an immediate reminder of the archetype of enlightenment.

I am very much influenced by Jung and the language of archetypes myself, but I have always been unconvinced by this answer as a justification for putting Bhante’s photo on public shrines. Archetypes are found in each person’s psyche. How can their bearers be publicly prescribed and institutionalised? The choice of bearers of the archetype is a matter for individuals. The result of trying to institutionalise an archetype is inevitably to alienate some people and cause distrust, even if others find it useful. Again, I repeat that it is inappropriate to run the Order and the movement purely for the benefit of one kind of temperament.

Relating the bearer of the archetype to a living person also creates dangerous confusion. There is always a temptation to start assuming, perhaps unconsciously, that the person actually embodies the perfections they represent. I can only assume that the cult of Bhante in this sense had a strong causal link with the Order’s crisis when it was confronted with Bhante’s imperfections.

7. Trust in writings

Why writings should never be trusted

Compared with a discussion with a live person, our relationship to writing is much less a matter of character and more of formally stating ideas, more **impersonal** (with the exception of autobiographical and creative writing). We don’t get a person to trust in a writing, and we lose its live context. So is writing an appropriate field for trust?

I am strongly persuaded by my experience of the way people relate to writings in the movement, and by my study of other religions, that the answer is no. We may believe or disbelieve written claims, but it is inappropriate to *trust* a writing. Trust attributes personal characteristics to writing which it lacks. Writings obviously do still *relate* to a person, especially letters, email, and online forums like Sanghajala. In interactive writing we still need to think about the likely responses of those who will read our writing, **but not trust them because of their source.**

Writing is an experimental, provisional medium at a remove from practical concerns. For that reason it is vital to assess it on its own merits, and try to rule out trust or distrust created by the source.

Writings may of course be more *credible* because of their source, but that just affects whether we believe what they claim is true: we could give reasons for that. E.g. I’m more likely to believe a BBC report of events in Burma than an official Burmese government report, because the BBC has a far better record for telling the truth. However, I do not have personal trust in the BBC or its correspondents: I just weigh up the probability of their reports being correct given what I know. I merely calculate, I do not take the optimistic step of trusting their writings a little beyond these

probabilities because they are by the BBC. This is a matter of justified belief rather than inappropriate trust.

Having a different attitude to writings from our attitude to persons in the end **promotes the credibility of writings**. Writings will not become reliable if not subjected to critical scrutiny, and vague writing won't improve if given the benefit of the doubt. Clarity and consistency are conditions of trust, and if we don't expect writings to be clear and consistent in their own right, we'll never make them more trustworthy.

The principle of charity

The principle of charity in relation to written arguments is a principle used in critical thinking: it basically states that we should try to make the best sense of what we find, rather than immediately assuming the worst and rejecting it on the first very superficial appearance of an error. If this is interpreted as a reason for reading texts carefully, then I fully support it. However, in the context of the FWBO I have many times seen this principle stretched way too far. I have found this particularly in Padmaloka study groups. My experience was that it was impossible to criticise Bhante's words because they were always given the benefit of the doubt. It could never possibly be admitted that Bhante was wrong about anything: it must be me who had misinterpreted what Bhante meant. However, it often seemed completely clear what Bhante meant and that it was mistaken in some respects. This happened far too often for it to be likely that I had misinterpreted him every time.

This over-use of the principle of charity seems to be due to a habit of *trusting* Bhante's work, rather than just finding it credible on the basis of previous experience (which is what people in the Order usually claim they are doing). In other words they are projecting onto the book personal features which it does not possess. I find this devotional attitude to Bhante's works extremely unhealthy. On the one hand it means that people in study groups are discouraged from actually investigating the dharma as truth (as opposed to the dharma as tradition). On the other it also means that Bhante has not been under any pressure to address the weaknesses in his work. So, for example, in the 1984 preface to the sixth edition of the Survey Bhante states that he sees no reason to make any substantial revisions to it: presumably because nobody in the movement at that date had pointed out any weaknesses to him.

An appropriate use of the principle of charity is to read a text carefully and think about it before we pass judgement. Obviously if it is on a practical matter we might also need to try it out over a period of time. However, if after careful reading a written source seems vague, ambiguous, or contradictory, or if it makes unwarranted assumptions, we should not give a written source the benefit of the doubt, but demand clarification. Even if you know the writer and think you know what they meant, take them at the word of what they seem to have said, and seek clarification if possible. If clarification is not possible, take them at their word. I hope you will apply that principle to this text!

Buddhist scriptures

When these principles are applied to the reading of Buddhist scriptures, written in India or other parts of Eastern Asia between about 2500 and 1000 years ago, it seems clear that *trust* in writings created in such a different context is even more completely misplaced than it is with more recent writings. We don't know the authors personally. We can take the historical context into account, but not the personal context. We cannot seek clarification from the authors.

Perhaps scholarship can help us form an intelligent estimate of the credibility of many Buddhist scriptures, but intelligent interpretation is one thing, misplaced trust another. Bizarrely, the distance and mysterious nature of Buddhist scriptures seems to lead Buddhists to trust them more, not less, but such trust is excessive because, like Pocahontas trusting Captain Smith, we know almost nothing about the context they were written in.

Usually such trust is justified by appeal to the Buddha's enlightenment, and the idea that it is necessary to have faith in the Buddha's enlightenment to be a practising Buddhist. This faith is then extended to the products or records of the Buddha's enlightenment, or those of other subsequent enlightened beings. But as I have already argued, such faith is not necessary to the Buddhist path. How much less necessary, then, is faith in Buddhist scriptures!

This does not mean that Buddhist scriptures are not a rich source of insights or not worth studying. But where scriptures make claims they should be treated like any others and weighed up on their own merits, not constantly given the benefit of the doubt. We need to accept that the usefulness of Buddhist scriptures to us does not differ from the usefulness of any other text, but depends on the practical value of what they contain.

A good example of the way in which Buddhist scriptures are given inappropriate trust is in the area of karma and rebirth. We need to ask whether belief in karma and rebirth is a relevant part of our practice, not whether we should try to believe it because it's in the scriptures. As with the case of faith in the Buddha's enlightenment, no-one has yet to give me any convincing account even of the potential practical value of belief in karma and rebirth (karma being distinguished here from mere recognition that actions have consequences, with which it is frequently confused), which does not amount to a self-fulfilling appeal to tradition.

Conditions for distrust in writings

Writings on the whole should be neither trusted or distrusted, but again the writers can have an effect on whether writings are distrusted or not. **Inconsistency, ambiguity, false certainty and one-sidedness** all provoke distrust in writings.

These are all major problems in the writings which represent the FWBO, i.e. Bhante's and Subhuti's writings. There are good reasons why they are not more widely recognised and used beyond the captive audience of the FWBO.

Inconsistencies have not been much discussed because of inappropriate use of principle of charity. I think there are major inconsistencies between Bhante's attachment to Buddhist tradition and the Middle Way. The **one-sidedness** of not considering and addressing criticisms is a major weakness in the movement's writings, especially Subhuti's books such as the *New Voice*.

99+% of the population of the West is not Buddhist, and with the notable exceptions of *Dharma Life*, the new discussion website, and the *Land of No Buddha* (as far as I can see the only critical book that Windhorse ever published), we are doing little to engage them in critical discussion or address their concerns in the bulk of the writings that the movement puts out. It is hardly surprising if the result is distrust.

8. Trust in tradition

Buddhist tradition is often said to contain an esoteric element which must be passed down personally. However, trust in tradition goes beyond personal trust: trust in a person trusted by a person trusted by a person etc that you trust. This is not personal but abstract: it turns into an *abstract belief* in tradition. Trust has to be immediate or it rapidly decays! It can't be passed on second-hand or hundredth-hand. Trust in tradition is therefore wholly inappropriate.

But tradition undoubtedly offers us huge resources – whether these are practices, scriptures, stories, other inspiring writings, or teachings. Tradition can be appreciated as a way of passing down these resources. These resources may also be commended by people we trust. We have strong reasons for **using** tradition, selected on practical grounds. The credibility of tradition might lead us to be directed towards examining it and trying out what it offers, but again, a purely rational assessment of this will suffice.

An **Appeal to tradition** by itself doesn't give us reasons for accepting it: otherwise we'd be learning the Pali Canon by heart, letting monks eat before lay people, beating meditators with sticks etc.

Bhante and other innovators in movement have adopted aspects of tradition **on grounds of usefulness**, e.g. metta bhavana. Tradition alone is not the basis for accepting them: rather tradition has provided the library, or the toolbox, from which they were selected.

Therefore appealing to a “tradition” created by Bhante, who himself broke tradition, is simply hypocrisy. Bhante is not given authority by a “lineage”. Making a fuss of this lineage also creates a very misleading impression if we don't actually use it as a basis of judgement. What are the Refuge Tree and pictures of Bhante's teachers doing on public shrines? Again, if the purposes of these have nothing to do with an appeal to their authority and they are purely there to aid archetypal practice, such practice needs to be left to the individual rather than made part of a package with other practices of the movement and thus foisted on the reluctant.

9. Conclusion

Trust makes spiritual life possible. So please let's make trust possible! That means not undermining it by either insufficient or excessive trust. To avoid faith taking its place in the different spheres of our attitudes to the Order, Bhante, scriptures and tradition is to promote trust in the long-term.

This is not a “rationalist” attempt to take emotion out of the Dharma and reduce it to a purely rational undertaking, nor is it a threat to the use of any aspect of the Buddhist tradition as a source of inspiration. Instead it is a Western-inspired attempt to follow the Middle Way by correcting the lurch towards eternalism taken by elements of the Buddhist tradition.

Some practices of the movement practically do a good deal to promote trust – e.g. metta bhavana, kalyana mitrata, NVC, consensus decision-making. Long may they flourish!

Other practices may express trust for some people, but when institutionalised by the movement they undermine trust, e.g. the Bhante cult, misleadingly traditionalist writings.

Subhuti's proposals to promote "coherence", if taken seriously, would greatly undermine trust in the Order, and thus create less coherence in the long run. They need very clear rejection.

We need to be worthy of trust, but also actively promote trust and avoid the conditions of distrust. It's no good just sitting in a circle of purity expecting to be trusted.

More than anything we need to overcome distrust of the surrounding world and of Western civilisation. We need to start celebrating everything it has given us: scientific method, democracy, autonomy, tolerance, education, human rights. We depend on these things as much as on the Buddhist tradition, but focus relentlessly on Buddhism rather than the wider conditions of the dharma.

Moving much faster to a truly Western form of Buddhism is also a matter of trust – in ourselves. We don't have to doubt ourselves constantly and worry about "throwing the baby out with the bathwater". We are a mature movement with an incredible range of able people in the Order. We need to start trusting ourselves.

Note: In accordance with the values offered here I am happy to discuss and clarify any aspect of this talk. The most convenient way to do this is by email (Upeksacitta@aol.com).