

The Five Pillars of the Triratna Buddhist Community

<http://triratna-nyc.org/the-five-pillars-of-the-fwbo/>

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1. THE PILLAR OF IDEAS
2. THE PILLAR OF PRACTICES
3. THE PILLAR OF INSTITUTIONS
4. THE PILLAR OF EXPERIMENT
5. THE PILLAR OF IMAGINATION

Note

In what has been described as a landmark talk, Sangharakshita evokes the five fundamental things that lie at the heart of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order: Ideas, Practices, Institutions, Experiment, and Imagination.

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In the ancient days when Greece was glorious, and the temple of Apollo stood foursquare and beautiful against the sky at Delphi, carved over the portal of that great temple was an inscription that was famous throughout the whole of the classical world, an inscription that resounds through the ages: 'Know thyself'. However we understand these gnomic words, it is certainly not easy to know, to understand, oneself. Indeed, when we are young, we do not usually know ourselves at all, or even think in terms of knowing ourselves. Self-knowledge starts to emerge only later on in life, partly as the natural result of our ordinary human maturity, and partly through our experience of life, and of the people with whom we come into contact. Very often, of course, our experience of life and other people is painful — in fact, it is often only through painful experiences that we start to know ourselves — but whether or not self-knowledge is painfully won, it is achieved to any depth only comparatively late in life, and it comes slowly and with difficulty.

This is true not only of the individual man and woman, but also of people collectively. The ancient Greeks as a whole did not know themselves; the Athenian people did not know itself, at least until after the Peloponnesian war. Medieval England did not know itself, and modern America, perhaps, does not know itself. One might even argue that the group as such never knows itself, or at most knows itself only in the person of a few individuals who are more than just members of their particular group — like Thucydides in the case of ancient Greece.⁽⁶⁾ In the same way, a spiritual Movement does not know itself; the FWBO does not know itself at this early stage, and will not come to know itself until later on in its history.

Today we celebrate the twenty-third anniversary of the FWBO. We attained our collective majority two years ago, so as a Movement we have attained some maturity, and should at least be beginning to know ourselves. So how do we see the spiritual Movement of which we are a part? Speaking personally, I see the FWBO in a number of different ways. I see it as a sapling that has sprung from the seed planted twenty-three years ago, a sapling that is already bearing fruit, and providing shelter and nourishment for thousands of people in many different parts of the world. Other images occur to me — a bed of lotuses, a garden, a road, a raft — I see the FWBO as all these things. I also see it as a temple, a magnificent temple that began twenty-three years ago as a tiny improvised shrine, a temple that is still very much in process of construction, with great building blocks here and there that have not yet been incorporated into the overall structure. Of course, some people, looking at the FWBO from a great distance, don't see it as a temple at all. They may see it as a fortress, or a factory, or a barracks. Some of them, indeed, though they seem to be looking in the right direction, don't see anything at all.

Indeed, it is not easy to see the FWBO as it really is. It is not easy to see the FWBO as a temple,

even when one is quite close up to it, or standing right inside it. If one is able to see it, however, one sees a temple filled with enormous vistas, light and space, thronged with a multitude of great golden figures, and overarched by a dome like that of the sky itself. Around the central shrine, five mighty pillars support the entire edifice. These are the five pillars of the FWBO — ideas, practices, institutions, experiment, and imagination.

Perhaps it is necessary to add that it may not be the case that there are five pillars and only five. There may be more to be described, even more to be seen. Moreover, the pillars are not necessarily pillars of stone, not necessarily fixed and rigid. The Bible, for instance, speaks of pillars of cloud, and pillars of fire; pillars can be of living light and radiance. We can think in these terms when we consider these five pillars of the FWBO.

1. The pillar of ideas

'Idea' in this context does not mean simply a concept or a mental object; it is more like what we have in mind when we speak of 'a bright idea'. An idea of this kind is simple, and can usually be expressed in just one or two words. It is in a sense abstract, but at the same time it is full of possibilities, and opens up new horizons. Hence, an idea is capable of stimulating people and moving them to action. It moves them to change things, to change themselves, even to change the world. People are even ready to die for the sake of an idea. Ideas therefore occupy an important place in human life and history; sometimes they even change history.



Plato's great idea of justice, which dominates his most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, is an example of this kind of idea; Plotinus's idea of emanation is another. In medieval times there was the idea of degree, or hierarchy as we would say nowadays, strong echoes of which we find in several well-known passages in Shakespeare; and the connected idea of the chain of being. The eighteenth century produced a number of important ideas — for example, the idea of reason, and, connected with that, the idea of enlightenment (not Enlightenment in the Buddhist sense of bodhi, of course). The three interconnected ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity which emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century for a while convulsed a good part of the world. We have perhaps grown used to the more recent ideas of the 19th Century — progress, evolution, science in the modern sense of the term — and no longer find them interesting, but once these ideas were new, exciting, highly controversial. Nowadays we have such 20th Century ideas as relativity, the unconscious, repression, and so on, and I need hardly tell you what part they play in our lives.

In the same way there are ideas that occupy an important place in the history of Buddhism, ideas that are still important to us as Buddhists today. For instance, there is the idea of conditionality, which brought about such a tremendous spiritual upheaval in Sariputra, who became one of the Buddha's two chief disciples, that it caused him to attain Stream-entry(7) when he first heard it briefly stated. Another example is the later Mahayana idea of the perfect mutual interpenetration of all phenomena.

When Buddhism came to the West towards the end of the last century, it was not introduced as any kind of organization, or in any living way. People did not come into contact with its practices, its institutions, or its festivals. They came into contact first of all with its ideas, some of which struck at least some people very forcibly. At that time, not much more than a hundred years ago, most people in the West believed that they had only one life on earth, followed by an eternity of either bliss or torment; but Buddhism taught the idea of karma and rebirth, the idea of a whole series of lives governed by impersonal moral law, both here on earth and in other realms. We are used to the idea now, but people of our grandfathers' and great-grandfathers' generation found it an eye-opener which placed their lives within an infinitely broader context, gave their lives a different meaning.

In those days, difference of religious belief would divide families, estrange brother from brother, father from son; there are instances of this in many works of fiction of the Victorian period. Another

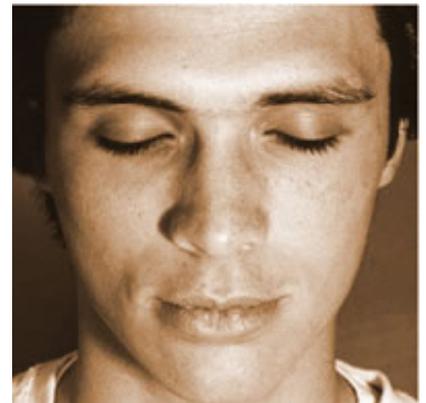
great eye-opener, then, was the Buddhist idea of tolerance, the idea that people of different religions were not natural enemies bound to fight and even kill each other, but could live together peacefully, agreeing to disagree. Nowadays, many of us are so used to this idea of tolerance that it is impossible for us to imagine its dramatic effect on many people in this country when they first came in contact with it. Buddhism also introduced the idea of non-theistic religion. Previously people had believed that religion was necessarily theistic, so that to speak of a non-theistic religion was simply a contradiction in terms. Even now some people in the West who regard themselves as Buddhists have difficulty with the idea of non-theism. Some of them would like to think that in some way, in some form, Buddhism believes in God.

So ideas occupy an important place in human life, in history, in Buddhism, and naturally, therefore, they occupy an important place in the FWBO. As well as the traditional ideas of Buddhism, there are also those ideas which are more or less distinctive of the FWBO. These include ideas which emphasize hitherto comparatively neglected aspects of the Buddha's teaching, such as the idea of positive conditionality, the idea of Going for Refuge, and the idea of spiritual community. The FWBO has also introduced ideas which restate the Buddha's teaching in more contemporary terms, such as the idea of the Higher Evolution, and the idea of male friendship. (It is necessary to emphasize friendship between men, because it has been rather frowned upon in modern times; this is not so much so in the case of friendship between women.)

Very often we do not realize the power of ideas, the effect that they have on people, because we have become used to those ideas. It is important, therefore, that we keep our 'beginner's mind' — important for our own sake, and also for the sake of other people. If we can only keep our beginner's mind, then we shall continue to find the ideas that originally attracted us to Buddhism stimulating and inspiring, and want to communicate them to others, whether by word of mouth or in writing. Sometimes I think that in the FWBO we do not communicate our ideas sufficiently to the outside world, to the people we meet — only too often we are too preoccupied with our own subjective mental and emotional states. I would suggest that we could talk more about the idea of conditionality,⁽⁸⁾ more about the idea of Going for Refuge, more about the idea of non-theism, more about the idea of male friendship — more, in fact, about all the stimulating and exciting ideas that form one of the pillars of the FWBO.

2. The pillar of practices

Spiritual practices have been important in Buddhism from the very beginning, a fact which is illustrated by a well-known passage in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, the sutta dealing with the last days of the Buddha. The sutta tells us that the Buddha spent the rainy season with Ananda at Vesali, on his way to Kusinara, where he would finally pass away. Towards the end of his stay there, knowing that he did not have much longer to live, the Buddha asked Ananda to call together all of the monks in the locality, as he wanted to give them his final advice. We can imagine them coming from their little wattle-and-daub huts, from the foot of trees, from caves; perhaps they knew that the Buddha's end was very near, so they came all the more eagerly. And when they had gathered around him, and all was quiet, the Buddha addressed them.



According to the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, he told them, 'Monks, the principles which I have discovered and taught should be well learned by you, and practised, developed, and cultivated, so that this best life (Pali brahmacarya) should be enduring, and last long, for the benefit and happiness of men and gods'. He then proceeded to give a list of lists: (1) the Four Foundations of Mindfulness; (2) the Four Right Exertions; (3) the Four Bases of Psychic Power; (4) the Five Spiritual Faculties; (5) the Five Strengths; (6) the Seven Factors of Enlightenment; (7) the Noble Eightfold Path.⁽⁹⁾ Later on in the course of Buddhist history these 37 items became collectively known as the 37 bodhipaksadharmas, or 'principles that are wings of Enlightenment'.

It is striking that on that solemn occasion, on the eve of his departure from this earthly life, the Buddha did not say anything about conditionality or any other doctrine. He spoke of the principles that he had taught and discovered simply in terms of spiritual practices — mental exercises, forms of meditation, things to be done — which suggests that practices are very important indeed. They are important because mind is important; ‘Mind is the first of things’, as the first verse of the Dhammapada says.(10) It is important to change the mind from unskilful to skilful, from impure to pure, from unenlightened to Enlightened; and spiritual practices are the central means by which this change is brought about, the most direct means by which the mind is transformed from the samsaric to the Nirvanic mode. Such practices are, of course, specific, concrete. If you are a beginner (that is to say, someone who has not gained Stream-entry), you cannot really practise meditation or mindfulness in a general way. You need specific methods, concrete things that you should do. Moreover, practices are something that you do regularly, even daily, not just when you happen to feel like it.

Some people will say that spiritual practices are a form of mental or psychological conditioning. It is true that they are; one need not be afraid of this word conditioning. Our minds are already conditioned by our upbringing, our education, the work we do, our environment, our relations, our acquaintances, our sexual partners. They are conditioned by the newspapers we read, and the television programmes we watch. They are conditioned by the different groups to which we belong. Our minds are conditioned in so many ways, for the most part in ways that are unskilful, impure, and samsaric. Spiritual practices are meant to undo that; they counteract negative mental conditioning by positive mental conditioning. As a result of spiritual practices, our negatively conditioned mind becomes a positively conditioned mind. Only a positively conditioned mind can become an Unconditioned mind; only a positively conditioned mind is capable of gaining Enlightenment.

Spiritual practices are therefore important, and for this reason we have many practices in the FWBO, virtually all of which are traditional Buddhist practices. We have the mindfulness of breathing, and the development of universal loving kindness, the six element practice, various types of visualization, and the Going for Refuge and prostration practice. There are also the various sets of ethical precepts; these too are practices. In traditional Buddhist societies, dana (giving) is also a very important spiritual practice, one to which I feel we do not as yet give sufficient attention in the FWBO.

3. The pillar of institutions

Some people might be surprised to learn that institutions are a pillar of the FWBO. After all, in some quarters nowadays ‘institution’ is regarded almost as a dirty word, rather like ‘discipline’, or ‘obedience’. When institutions are mentioned, we tend to think of prisons and mental hospitals. According to the dictionary, however, an institution is ‘an organization or establishment founded for a specific purpose, such as a hospital, church, company, or college’; it is a neutral word, rather like the word ‘organization’. As we can see from the examples given by the dictionary, institutions are of many different kinds. We could even say that without institutions, the society in the midst of which we live could hardly exist; human beings, even, could hardly exist. Human beings have various specific aims — to acquire knowledge, for instance, or to be cured of disease. Unable to achieve their aims in isolation, they co-operate to found an organization, or an institution; most people belong to or make use of quite a number. Anyone tempted to decry institutions as such could perhaps try making a list of all those to which they belong — they might be surprised at the length of the list.



Institutions, however, are principally of two kinds: those whose specific purpose is mundane, and those whose specific purpose is spiritual. Some fulfil both purposes to some degree. It is important to remember that mundane institutions are not necessarily bad, although they may be. Sometimes, indeed, they provide the necessary basis for spiritual institutions, or at least make it easier for spiritual

institutions to function. To use the language of evolution, mundane institutions belong to the lower evolution, whereas spiritual institutions belong to the Higher Evolution. Mundane institutions ideally enable one to develop as a healthy happy group member, while spiritual institutions enable one to develop as an individual — not as an individual in isolation, but rather as an individual in co-operation, an individual existing intrinsically in spiritual community.

At present the FWBO has three main spiritual institutions – the public centre, the residential spiritual community, and the team-based Right Livelihood business. They are not mutually exclusive; the same person can belong in varying degrees to any two of them, or even to all three. The specific purpose of the public centre is to be a meeting point between the FWBO – Order members in particular — and the outside world. At the public centre, people can come in contact with the ideas of Buddhism, ideas that may well change their lives. They can start learning some of the practices of Buddhism, especially meditation, and making friends with spiritually like-minded people. The specific purpose of the residential spiritual community is to provide a positive alternative to the family, whether nuclear or extended. It is to provide a situation in which spiritually like-minded people can live together in a way that is expressive of Buddhist values. In living together they can intensify their friendships and deepen their experience of the Dharma, especially their experience of Going for Refuge. The specific purpose of the team-based Right Livelihood business is to enable people to support themselves in an ethical manner, to help them to develop spiritually through the experience of working together, and to make profit that can be given to the Movement as dana.

We need these institutions because we need other people, and because other people need us. As all those who have attempted it seriously know, it is not easy to lead the spiritual life, that best life of which the Buddha spoke. It is not easy to develop as an individual, not easy to be a true Buddhist; we need the help and co-operation of others who are trying to do the same thing. We need to meet with one another in our centres, to live with one another in our communities, and to work with one another in our team-based Right Livelihood businesses. In a sense we have no choice. We are not free to live in institutions or not, just as we please. The only choice we have is whether to live more in mundane institutions or more in spiritual institutions. If we want to develop as individuals, we will choose to live in spiritual institutions as much as we possibly can. If we choose, whether consciously or by default, not to live in spiritual institutions, we shall unavoidably live in mundane institutions, and be influenced and conditioned by them. So let us not listen to those for whom institution is necessarily a dirty word. Let us live in and rejoice in centres, communities, and Right Livelihood businesses as much as we can. Let us appreciate them and take pride in them; let us realize that spiritual institutions are one of the pillars of the FWBO.

4. The pillar of experiment

We live in a changing world. The FWBO itself is changing and developing all the time, and we are constantly confronted by changing conditions. We meet different kinds of people, and come in contact with different kinds of cultures, especially when the FWBO happens to spread to a country where there was previously no FWBO presence, or even when the FWBO spreads to a different part of the same country, or to a different social group. When that happens, we may find that the existing way of doing things in the FWBO is not quite appropriate to the new conditions, and feel the need to adapt, to develop new approaches, new methods of presentation, and modes of communication. In order to do this, we shall have to experiment; otherwise the FWBO may not succeed in establishing itself in the new environment, and may not even survive in the old environment.



According to the dictionary, an experiment is a test or investigation, especially one planned to provide evidence for or against a hypothesis. There are two points to note here. First,

an experiment is something planned; in other words, it is not done at random, but has a definite purpose. It is the result of serious thinking, not something done in a whimsical, irresponsible way just to see what will happen. Second, in order to conduct an experiment we need a working hypothesis, which the dictionary defines as a suggested explanation for a group of facts or phenomena accepted as a basis for further investigation.

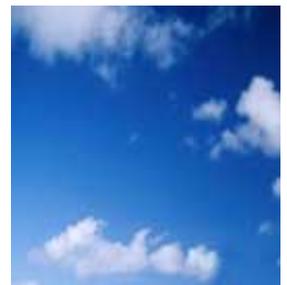
To take a concrete example, suppose that at an FWBO centre somewhere in Britain, Pujas(11) are conducted as one of the regular activities, but very few people come to them. The Order members running the centre study the situation carefully, and ascertain the facts of the case, something which is often neglected when hypotheses are made. They make allowances for any fortuitous circumstances, such as, for instance, the fact that it happened to rain on those days when Pujas were held, which meant that people did not come. Having ascertained the facts and discounted fortuitous circumstances, the Order members concerned frame a hypothesis. Let us suppose that in this case the hypothesis is that people don't come to Pujas because the Pujas are not colourful enough. The Order members then proceed to test their hypothesis, not theoretically, which is only too easy to do, but practically. In other words, they carry out a planned experiment, organizing a whole series of much more colourful Pujas. If more people attend, and keep on attending, the hypothesis can be taken as verified, and much more colourful Pujas then become part of that centre's activities. If more people do not attend, the hypothesis is not verified, and the Order members concerned have to think again.

As this example shows, experiment as one of the pillars of the FWBO is a very serious matter, not something to be conducted in a frivolous or irresponsible way. Experiments should be properly monitored — week by week people should notice what is going on, and records should be kept. Experiments without monitoring are obviously useless, for only with records can real comparisons be made; without them, one is left with vague personal impressions which are of no real use. Furthermore, results of the experiments, negative or positive, should be communicated to the rest of the Movement through the suitable channels.

Experiments should be made by a number of experienced people working together, normally by a number of Order members, and they should be planned to test such hypotheses as are in accordance with the spirit of the Movement. For instance, one should not test the hypothesis 'Would more people come to Pujas if beer was served afterwards?', because that is not in accordance with the spirit of the Movement. The hypotheses which are tested should also represent an organic development of the spirit of the Movement; there must be a continuity between the old way of doing things and the new, not an abrupt break. Experiments should not be sprung on people, especially if they are accustomed to doing things in a particular way. In the case of a Puja, for instance, if you are sitting in the shrine room expecting the Sevenfold Puja, it is very disconcerting if someone starts leading you in a completely different sort of Puja which he or she may have thought up overnight. Finally, and very importantly, one should not have recourse to experiment out of restlessness.

5. The pillar of imagination

It is obviously difficult to describe imagination in the same way as the four other pillars. Perhaps 'imagination' is not even the best word. Another possibility could be 'the pillar of vision', but that could be confused with vision in the sense of Perfect Vision or Insight,(12) which is not quite appropriate. Other possibilities might be 'the pillar of magic', or 'the pillar of mystery', or 'the pillar of myth'. Imagination seems to fit best, although even this is not really very satisfactory. I could give the dictionary definition of imagination, or even quote Coleridge, but this would not help very much, so instead, I will ask you to do something that I should perhaps ask you to do rather more often. I will ask you to use your own imagination. Your own imagination should be able to tell you what imagination is, and whereabouts in the temple to look for it. Let me give you just a few hints. You should look for this particular pillar of the FWBO in the realm of myth, especially in the myth of the Order, the myth of the Movement. You should look for it in archetypes and ideals, and in poetry in the broadest sense



of the term. More concretely, you should look for it in ritual and ceremony, in meditation, in the scriptures, especially in some of the great Mahayana sutras, and in the fine arts. You should look for imagination in all these places, and in many others. If you do this, you will see, or at least glimpse, that imagination is one of the pillars of the FWBO.

These then are the five pillars of the FWBO: ideas, practices, institutions, experiment, and imagination. These are the five mighty pillars of our temple, a temple that is still very much in the process of construction, a temple in which we live, or at least in which we gather from time to time. So let us learn to recognize these five pillars of the FWBO for what they are. Let us familiarize ourselves with them. Let us know our temple; let us know our Movement; let us know ourselves. Let us realize that ultimately it is our ideas, our practices, our institutions, our experiment, our imagination, that are the five pillars of the FWBO.

Notes

6) Thucydides, the great Athenian historian, was born about 460 BCE. His account of the war between Athens and Sparta was the first historical work in which events were traced to their cause and their political lessons brought out.

7) Stream-entry marks that stage of spiritual development at which progress towards the goal of Enlightenment becomes irreversible. For more details, see *Mitrata 57*, The Bodhisattva Ideal, Series no.2, Windhorse, Glasgow 1985, Glossary, pp.54-5.

The law of conditionality is that whatever comes into existence does so in dependence on conditions, and in the absence of those conditions ceases to exist. See Sangharakshita, *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*, Windhorse, Birmingham 1996, pp.71-2. 

9) The 37 bodhipakkhiya-dhamma (Skt bodhipaksya-dharma) comprise:

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness; see Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Windhorse, Glasgow 1993, p.244.

The Four Right Efforts; see *ibid.*, p.158.

The Four Bases of Psychic Power; see *The Book of Analysis*, trans. U.Thittila, Pali Text Society, London 1969, pp.282ff.

The Five Spiritual Faculties; see Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, pp.309ff.

The Five Spiritual Powers; the term used for the Five Spiritual Faculties when they have become so strong that they can no longer be crushed by the Passions; see above.

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment; see Sangharakshita, *Mind Reactive and Creative*, Windhorse, Glasgow 1989, pp.14ff.

The Noble Eightfold Path; see Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, pp.157-9; and Sangharakshita, *Vision and Transformation*, Windhorse, Glasgow 1991.

10) The Dhammapada is an early Buddhist text consisting of aphoristic verses; it is available in many translations.

11) Puja is the Sanskrit word for 'worship'; in this context it is used to refer to the devotional rituals commonly practised at FWBO centres. See *The FWBO Puja Book*, Windhorse, Glasgow 1990.

12) Perfect Vision is the first limb of the Noble Eightfold Path. In linking the term with Insight here, Sangharakshita is referring to the Transcendental Eightfold Path, in which each limb of the mundane Eightfold Path is perfected through the experience of Insight, which corresponds to the point of Stream-entry (see Note 7 above). See Sangharakshita, *Vision and Transformation*, Windhorse,

