

The FWBO European Chairs Assembly meeting

a report by Lokabandhu for FWBO News

January 2009

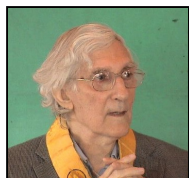


This is a report on the main features of the recent meeting of the FWBO's European Chairs Assembly, which came together recently for a week at Taraloka. Some 40 people from Centres and FWBO projects from across Europe were present during the week. Further details of many of the topics are available on-line, hyperlinks are included wherever possible.

It was a packed week – but one with, I think, a general mood of excitement and optimism underlying it – Dhammaketu arrived celebrating the Ghent centre's moving to new and larger premises; Amoghavajra Ipswich's; there was news of Metta Vihara's imminent purchase of a retreat centre for the Low Countries; Karuna's new strategy, plans for growth, ideas for involving more young people and more... A few details of all these are given below. Of course lots of other stuff happened as well as the formal meeting sessions: Dhammagita was there to offer daily workouts (promising (rumour had it) 'bums of steel' to attendees), and late-night cinema audiences seemed to work their way through a series of Wallace and Gromit movies. So it wasn't all hard work...

There are always some new faces and some farewells at ECA meetings: this time we welcomed Aryaka, new chair of the Stockholm centre, also Samudraghosa from Southampton and Vajrahridaya from Edinburgh. Jnanadhara came as a guest from Dublin, and Parami from the Preceptors' College – and we marked Dhammaloka's stepping down from his post as Dharma Teaching Coordinator (though he will continue to attend the meetings on behalf of Dharmapala College).

Visit by Sangharakshita



The meeting started with a talk by Bhante on the "Teachers of the Past" on the Refuge Tree, with Bhante explaining why he'd chosen to include some of them – mostly it turned out, for the example of their lives more than their specific teachings. Points from the talk (and other matters) were explored in a Question and Answer session, the meeting then said farewell to Bhante by chanting the White Tara mantra for him as he departed. Coincidentally, Wisdom's new publication 'The Essential Sangharakshita' had just been launched, and Bhante was able to bring some copies with him for the Chairs to browse – this has been reviewed on FWBO News – see www.fwbo-news.org/2009/01/essential-sangharakshita-launched.html.

Windhorse:Evolution

Early in the meeting, Ratnaghosa updated everyone on the difficulties faced by Windhorse:Evolution which – like the rest of the UK retail sector – is facing very tough times in the year ahead. Nonetheless they are planning to open three new shops in 2009. Most of the points he made were reproduced in a piece on Windhorse in FWBO News – see www.fwbo-news.org/2009/01/windhorseevolution-faces-credit-crunch.html.

Young People

□ An evening was given over to a talk on '[Inspiring Young People with the Dharma](#)'. It was given by Lindsay, at 28 the youngest member (by 20 years!) of Taraloka's community. She had a lot to say about how "vibe" of the FWBO is increasingly unlikely to attract young people. (The statistics also show that this has very serious implications for the long term survival of the FWBO – for more information, see the Order Survey at www.freebuddhistaudio.com/ordersurvey and also the talk by Vajragupta, mentioned below.)

Lindsay's talk was packed with suggestions for what we could and should do, and is available at FreeBuddhistAudio – see www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC70. Some of these are already beginning to happen – among them a Facebook group created to serve as a 'one-stop-shop' for anyone wanting to know what's available for young people in the FWBO – see www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=49821059114.

Strategic Priorities

After Bhante had left, the themes to be addressed by the meeting began to unfold. This process was initiated by Vajragupta, the Development Team's Director, who offered a personal, detailed, and fascinating overview of the FWBO's evolution over the last couple of decades and the broad issues currently facing the meeting. Vajragupta had recently finished first draft of a new 'history' of the FWBO, so was well-placed to comment. A more general review of the meeting's 'strategic priorities' followed, these were originally drawn up in early 2007 and were due for review. Perhaps not surprisingly, 'Inspiring Young People with the Dharma' got large numbers of votes, with 'Money'; 'Right Livelihood', 'Decision-Making Processes' and 'Growth' all featuring strongly.

Multi-media collaboration

We had a morning hearing updates from FWBO media projects - Windhorse Publications, Clear Vision, and Lights in the Sky – they are all beginning to explore ways in which Centres could collaborate with them more fully.

Dana Economy

Siddhisambhava, the 'FWBO Fundraiser' led a Dana Economy Workshop, and presented her paper on "Understanding money, understanding ourselves, and bringing money into our practice" – appearing shortly as part of a series on Money on FWBO News. A lot of centres were interested in this, both because Dana Economies are so good for the Sangha, and because they can be good for Centres' 'bottom lines' too.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions

A morning session looked at 'mindfulness-based interventions' (MBI), such as MBCT ('mindfulness-based cognitive therapy') or Breathworks' work on the relief of chronic pain, and their relationship to FWBO Buddhist Centres. Under the heading 'Opportunities or Dangers?' Paramabandhu (chair of the London Buddhist Centre and a consultant psychiatrist) introduced the subject and the 'landscape' surrounding it, followed by two presentations from Vidyamala and Sona on their work at Breathworks. The general conclusion was that 'mindfulness-based interventions' were likely to be a lasting influence that Buddhism bequeaths to western psychological thought and treatment.

Karuna



There was an evening presentation from Santavajri on the Karuna Trust, the Chairs being asked to comment on a preliminary version of Karuna's next five-year strategy. This is currently in the final stages of drafting before being circulated for widespread comment from Karuna's many stakeholders: it includes ambitious targets for growth and professionalism as well as a much clearer perspective on the role the Dharma can play in Karuna's work and in its relationships with its project partners of all sorts.

Resources for Chairs

A morning was spent looking at "What is a Centre Chair?" After the inevitable jokes ("it's something everyone sits on haha..."), there were two very moving short talks on "Being a Chair as a spiritual practice", by Saddhanandi and Dhammarati, rich with both personal experience and spiritual teaching. Updated versions of the FWBO Chairs Handbook and FWBO Trustees Handbook were also presented.

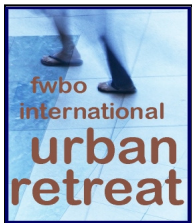
Germany and Holland

One evening was given over to the traditional Centre Presentations, which on this occasion were more ambitious than usual with both speakers deciding to present an overview of FWBO activities in their country - Gunabhadri looking at Holland and Jnanacandra Germany. Given that the FWBO has been present in both countries for over 20 years there was a lot of ground to cover! Both speakers had brought slides, and as a result there are many new photographs of the FWBO in both countries available on [FWBO Photos](#) – see www.flickr.com/photos/fwbo/sets.

Growth

A morning was given over to reports and proposals from the FWBO Development Team – Vajragupta reporting on developments in the FWBO's system of Centre Presidents; Lokabandhu on ideas for encouraging growth in the numbers and range of FWBO centres and groups – especially groups. All present were asked to list the FWBO groups they were aware of, as a result it became apparent that there were quite a lot scattered across Europe no-one else had known about – proof, if any were needed, of the FWBO's decentralised approach! Details of these have been added to the main [contacts page](#) of fwbo.org – see www.fwbo.org/contacts/addresses.html.

Urban Retreat



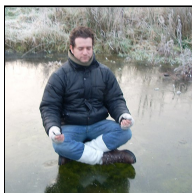
June 2009 will see the first ever International FWBO Urban Retreat, and plans for how this may run were outlined and discussed. Participating Centres will basically run their own simultaneous Urban Retreats, with an [on-line version](#) being offered via Facebook for those not living near Centres. This feels exciting; a great way to give us all a sense of common practice. Just after the ECA meeting ended, another group convened at Taraloka to discuss the next FWBO International Retreat, penciled in at Taraloka for 2010 – another great 'means of unification' for the

Movement. A website introducing the Urban Retreat has been created at www.theurbanretreat.org.

fwbo.com

The new FWBO website (to be called fwbo.com) was very much in the background throughout the week, with Candradasa making about 8 informal presentations to groups of Chairs; also pointing out how the new site would be able to contribute to many of the topics being discussed. It will be very much a 'web 2.0' site, with centres and individuals from all over the world able to contribute content - centering on a planned "Great Stream of Practice" which will aggregate contributions from sangha members all over the world. Expect it to start appearing around the end of 2009...

And finally...



Intense cold led to the Taraloka pond freezing, and one morning some intrepid folk were seen meditating on the ice – while others played frisbee on every possible occasion... Happily noone drowned!

All in all it was a great meeting, packed full but with enough time and space that noone exploded - and with a remarkable degree of harmony throughout. Big themes were discussed, some big new developments are in process. Economically, 2009 looks set to be a tough year, but spiritually the FWBO Chairs and the FWBO itself seemed to be in good shape.