

## A Few Recollections of Freda

by Paul Trafford

I first met Freda in Cornwall in the mid to late 1970s when my family started spending the annual summer holiday at Resugga farmhouse, the home of Ian and Jane Browne. I was about 8 years old at the time and Freda and Shiva were staying in the flat at the other end of the building. I don't recall very much beyond her calling out "Shiva!" as she seemed to keep a careful eye on her grandson. However, I did experience her driving - at that time of a blue Saab - when we went as a group to the beach at Porth Joke. I wondered why she drove so slowly, even compared to my father in his Volkswagen Beetle.

It was somewhat later when I was 15 that I had my first meaningful encounter. My family were visiting Oxford for the day and Freda took us out for lunch. Afterwards we returned to her home in Park Town. It was warm and sunny and so we sat down in the back garden. I was just settling nicely when Freda roused me from my reverie with a question along the lines of: "Does mathematics exist as an independent reality 'out there' in nature or is it a mental fabrication?" After recovering a bit of composure (and perhaps thinking I should not have divulged any interest in this subject) I reflected on the precise symmetry I could observe in nature, but knew there was more to it than that. Hesitatingly I suggested there was mathematics somehow inherent in nature and shared this observation.

Freda remarked that my response was "mystical" - even though she had not dismissed my view, I could tell that she saw things differently. However, it was only many years later - during an evening session at her Oxford Dhamma group - that I learnt what 'mystical' meant to Freda. Ostensibly quoting someone else, but with more than a hint of approbation, she declared: "The trouble with mysticism is that it starts in mist, has 'I' in the middle, and ends with 'schism'!"

I joined the group in around 2000 shortly after Freda had interviewed me over a cup of tea. From then on I would make my way on foot to Park Town on Friday evenings and quietly enter the meeting in her room overlooking the garden. It was a small group, whose regular members at that time included Hugh, Leah and Cordula. I found a warm welcome and a strong commitment to meditation and study, which seemed completely fitting. Freda was very kind to allow me to join such a supportive environment, but she had expectations of all of us. I soon got to know that once the candle was lit on the mantelpiece, then a strict discipline needed to be maintained in body, speech and mind - even during our tea break - so that in accordance with the teachings of the Brahmajāla Sutta: The All-embracing Net of Views [Dīgha Nikāya 1.17], we wouldn't descend into talk of kings and wells and whatever was not conducive to the holy life. Freda took this to heart, which I appreciated but found challenging, especially when meetings that had started at 7.30pm would often continue until close to midnight.

Freda's understanding of the Buddha's teachings was grounded in a thorough study of the Tipitaka underpinned by her considerable knowledge of Pali. During the course of discussions in a flowing movement she would lean back on her sofa, scan the bookshelves behind her, stretch out an arm and pluck a volume; very quickly she would home in on a specific reference. She was generous in her sharing and would often provide photocopies of key texts; it was easy to see those she most

valued as they were heavily annotated, with the translations - sometimes of every word - receiving close scrutiny. After a while, when I expressed an interest in learning some Pali, Freda gave me a copy of Nyanatiloka's Buddhist Dictionary on condition that I always bring it along to meetings.

Whilst Freda devoted most of her energies to her own study of primary sources, she also drew from scholars, notably Richard Gombrich, encouraged by his emphasis on how the Buddha ethicized *karma* so as to highlight the importance of intention in our actions. When it came to philology, Freda's approach to discerning the meaning of texts embraced a deep interest in how culture influenced interpretation. She would vividly depict scenes from the society at that time and place, the various groups of wanderers, their dispositions and points of view and how the Buddha adapted the way he presented his teachings to them. She also knew the personalities of the various characters to the extent that when recalling a particular episode she had a fair idea of the players before any names were mentioned.

Always seeking the transcendent and deathless, the *amata dhamma*, Freda became very animated by talk of the *pabhassara citta*, the luminous mind that is free of defilements [Pabhassara Sutta, Anguttara Nikāya 1.49-52]. She drew inspiration from Luang Ta Maha Boowa and Luang Phor Chah, masters of the Thai Forest tradition. From the latter she shared an abiding image of the citta released conveyed to her by Luang Phor Chah. Repeating what he had shown her, she took an imaginary cup: the cup had become dirty and then she started cleaning it, as she was doing so it became cleaner and cleaner and until it was raised aloft, spotless.

Whilst I soon got to know Freda's sharpness, it took me a while to appreciate that she was at the same time very accommodating in her more general dealings and used various means to build bridges of understanding in dialogue with followers of other spiritual paths. Among Christian friends who were tied to notions of a creator God she quoted the Nibbāna Sutta (Udāna 80), about the "unborn, the unbecome, uncreated, unmade, and unconditioned", knowing well how such language would resonate with them.

Although having a very distinct and unusual personality, Freda always sought what is mainstream in Buddhist tradition and was keen to uphold it in her life as a lay follower of the Buddha. She saw the group as an important vehicle for this and did everything she could to maintain its faithfulness to that vision. I only came to really appreciate this approach when I read accounts about meetings of the Hampshire Buddhist Society, written in the late 1960s by my mother, Fuengsin Trafford. The format of the evening was almost identical - it consisted of taking refuges and precepts, practising meditation and spreading metta, sutta discussion, and the quintessential cup of tea.

And so the work continues.

*Handa'dāni bhikkhave āmantayāmi vo:  
Vayadhammā saṅkhārā appamādena sampādehā'ti*

"Behold now, bhikkhus, I exhort you:  
All compounded things are subject to decay.  
Strive on [to completion] with heedfulness!"

[Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 16]