THE LAITY AND MONASTICS

by Piya Tan

Purpose of monkhood is to attain awakening now

The purpose of monks and nuns is to become arhats in this life itself, or at least attain some level of awakening. This is clear from numerous suttas in the early Buddhist scripture. In fact, the early suttas are records of how men and women meeting the Dharma and becoming arhats and saints. Over the centuries, as Buddhism spread beyond India, the Buddha Word was pushed aside, diluted, and priority was given to local beliefs and rituals. The idea of monkhood was also radically changed because of various difficult social conditions (as my new book, "How Buddhism Became Chinese," SD 40b, shows).

We need to be informed of the true nature and purpose of renunciation, so that we do not become a party to Dharma decline, not to say generating very bad karma for ourselves. The Commentary to the Maha Sunnata Sutta (M 3:118) says that for a religious teacher or student outside the Teaching (a non-Buddhist) to fall from his training, only falls away from a mundane training—like one falling a donkey and is only covered in dust. However, for one who violates the holy life training in the Teaching (with its path, fruit and nirvana), that is, consciously violates the precepts, it is a great loss, like one falling from an elephant, incurring great suffering. (MA 4:165).

The robe is just a piece of cloth that can be easily soiled, and only the wearer can truly by his pure mind keep it clean all the time.

Monastics should be properly trained

As lay Buddhists, we must ensure that we in no way contribute to the worldliness of a monastic (that is, a monk or a nun), by distracting them from their spiritual training or duties in any way. We must never lose sight of the true purpose of Buddhist monasticism, that is, as the Buddha originally intends it to be.

The Vinaya is unequivocal about the importance of monastic training. The Vinaya records the Buddha as stating, "I allow, bhikshus, an experienced and competent monk to live **five years in dependence (*nissaya*)** (on a preceptor or teacher, V 1:45 f, 60 f), but an inexperienced one **all his life**" (V 1:80). In other words, a capable person (such as one being well schooled, knowing the Dharma, elderly, etc) must still spend at least five years under the spiritual tutelage of a qualified preceptor or teacher, so that the "new monk" (*navaka bhikkhu*) truly imbibes the life of a monastic and leaves behind his old worldly ways. Only after at least 5 years of Vinaya, Dharma and meditation training, the competent monk or nun should then seek permission from his preceptor or teacher for leave to go out and teach Dharma.

When we read through the early Vinaya, we often see lay people complaining about monastics' behaviour, and then the Buddha makes the rules. In other words, the laity has a central role in the making of the Vinaya rules, and also in reminding the monastics to be good practitioners, worthy of their almsfood. Buddhaghosa in his Commentaries speaks of monastics living on alms and donations, as follows:

an immoral monk who lives on society's alms is like	a thief;
a good monk who is unreflective of using requisites is like	a debtor;
a saint of the path (short of a full-fledged arhat) is like	an heir;
an arhat (who is self-awakened and liberated) is like	an owner. (MA 5:32; SA 2:199)

Social work and management are best left to the laity

Social work or management training, although "useful," are best avoided by monastics, and best left in the capable hands of the laity. It may even be a convenient excuse for monastics to handle money. In the Maṇi,cūḷaka Sutta, the Buddha declares: "For those who open themselves to the use of money (gold and silver), also open themselves to sensual pleasures. Such people are surely neither holy men nor sons of the Sakya (monks)." (S 4:326, simplified). Those monastics who choose to turn away from the Buddha may even fall into crimes, reports of which are becoming more common in our newspapers today.

The Buddhist monastic system and meditation teachings as taught by the Buddha work very well. They are like original prescription of a good medicine, to be taken as prescribed. If we adulterate the medicine, or do not take it at all, how can our sickness be cured. Or worse, if we fiddle with the medicine labels, or sell the medicine on the black market for personal benefit, what will happen to our health in the end? Before we even talk about reforming Buddhism, we must have a deep understanding and experience of it.

We should not be Buddhist *inventors*; we should be Buddhist discoverers. This is because Buddhism is **the direct understanding of true reality**. We cannot "invent" true reality; we can only discover it. Furthermore, the Buddha has given us an easy plan for the self-awakening of both laity and monastic in this life itself: see Chapter 25 of the Samyutta Nikaya.

© Piya Tan 3rd Sep 2008