

Buddhist Monasticism in Modern Western Society

It can be difficult for people from a modern egalitarian society to understand the way a Buddhist Monastery operates. It was difficult for me at the beginning. Right from people's first impression it can seem like there is a hierarchy demanding total submission, indicated by people bowing to the monks. Crikey! But this gesture, like bowing to the Buddha Statue, is voluntary. In showing respect to something we are part of, however, we raise up ourselves as well as everyone else in the group. Try seeing it like this – the monks and nuns train to do their best to understand and represent the teachings of the Buddha, they wear the robe like carrying the banner of this teaching. In paying their respects to them the laity are bowing to the robe not to the person.

They bow to the teaching and training that they are also undertaking while they are in the Monastery. This training is one in which people are very much free to follow their own path, rather than the Monastery forming the people, the people form the Monastery. The moral precepts are there to keep our minds free of the regret and desire that takes our mind into past or future and away from our Refuge in the present moment. We are all looking for freedom, actually real freedom is freedom from desire. The training is defined not by any individual but by a long tradition. Furthermore, this is a tradition in which there is clearly seen to be no place for any priestly pride in the truly enlightened mind.

There is also no hierarchy in the sense that anyone has more right to the offerings of goods or property owned by the Monastery than anyone else. The Buddhist monastic community is modelled on the extended family where everything is shared according to people's needs. It could seem like the monastics are the bosses and yet they are not allowed to ask for anything (goods or services) without an invitation to do so.

Worst of all, perhaps, it could seem like when it comes to food that the monks insist on being waited on, hand and foot. Actually this is a sad one. Monks in Buddhist countries traditionally go alms round in the local town or village. They collect any excess food from anyone who offers it and return to the Monastery to share it with anyone who comes there. In this way the monks are not a burden and there is also a system of accountability where the laity can choose to support monks who seem worthy. Also anyone who is hungry can go to the Monastery for a share of the alms so the monastery serves an important humanitarian function. This is a very beautiful way to live. In the West it has not yet been possible for Monasteries to survive like this. So supporters bring food and offer it to the monks to keep the tradition going. The fact that people are willing to go to considerable effort to make this happen is inspiring.

Most of the other special things about Monastic life come around to look after the high moral standard that makes for a safe spiritual refuge. One of these is the practice of celibacy. This prevents any possibility of sexual exploitation. Also, although there is nothing wrong with sex, sensual desire is an obstacle to the meditation process. Those who are most committed will therefore have spiritual reasons to opt for periods of celibacy in order to deepen their meditation.

And where does this leave us? I would hope that if following the teaching of the Buddha is foremost in our minds this way of operating is both clear and loving. Then it is only if we do not understand what is happening or we are relating out of habit that we may find this confronting or confusing.

I offer this for your reflection.

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