

Monasticism and Lay-life

Outside of a Buddhist culture there can be some misunderstanding as to the place of Dhamma practice within marriage or family life. Sometimes people can need reassurance that the practise of Dhamma is not a threat to their families. Firstly it is far from the case that everyone who gets interested in Buddhism will eventually want to join the monastic order, (indeed, those with such a wish are very, very few.) Rather, it is very much a possibility to maintain a family life; and then, from that foundation, form a wholesome relationship with the monastic order and make this into a wellspring of Dhamma for your family.

Secondly, in terms of sexuality it is not essential to give up sexual relations and become a monk or nun in order to practice the Dhamma, this is for the most dedicated few. A Dhamma practitioner may choose periods of sexual abstinence, however, in order avoid the distractions of desire and to deepen their meditation practise. Moreover, it is also common for monks and nuns to remain in contact with their families, and in many ways continue to fulfil the role of a parent if they have children.

For me personally it has been very revealing when reflecting on how to relate to religious institutions, to compare my different attitudes towards different religions. What I found was that I could accept the one I had grown up with – see it as a natural part of everyday life. I would accept it much more than anything unusual and foreign. Actually, there is not a bigger reason to worry if your partner gets involved in Buddhism than if he or she is a Christian – how many people worry, going to church together, that their partner might renounce the world and become a monk or nun?

Also in Buddhism I was sharply on the lookout for any kind of cultist phenomena in a way that I wasn't suspicious about Christianity. Now I realise that if a mature spiritual individual is to enter into any religious community – be it of their native culture, or something foreign – they must do so with their eyes open and remain vigilant to possible corruption. It is the duty of all of us to try to take our part in keeping our own spiritual tradition as pure as we can, yet on the other hand also recognising that true perfection will always remain only inside the heart and that its expression in the world can never reach that perfection.

If the idealism that carries such expectations is one pitfall, its closely related companion is the tendency for people to dream about an idealised monastic option as an answer to their disenchantment with their present situation in lay life. This neglects a middle path in which a renunciant choice can be made within the existing situation, we can let go of the desire for whatever we are disenchanted with and see where that takes us in our life, step by step. Each such step then takes one a little further towards the real monastery. Each choice of renunciation is like the birth of a little monk or nun inside. This inner process is the real thing formed by a positive step in the spiritual direction, not the fake-renunciation that negative disenchantment creates in the heart. There is also a very important principle within Dhamma practise that we can forget in the face of discontent – to practise Dhamma in line with Dhamma. This principle means that all practice is peaceful, both in its goal and its method. In other words, we let go of things, we don't try to push them away.

I offer this for your reflection.

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