

The beastly priestly stuff

These days there are many who doubt the necessity of monastic training for practising the Dhamma. Despite being a monk myself I would agree and say that I do not remember meeting anyone, (in over 30 years of Buddhist practice), for whom I saw that his or her life circumstance as being a lay-person was in itself the limiting factor to their progress on the path. A lay-person with enough self-discipline can go a very long way along the path and realise the Dhamma. At the same time this does not make it unskilful for someone with a lot of commitment to find both this discipline and also supportive conditions for meditation by entering the monastic training. Or in other words, even if it is not necessary, it may be very helpful.

There can also be disadvantages, however. In the modern day it may seem in many people's eyes like the only thing that distinguishes monks and nuns from lay people are the ceremonial duties, so that we are seen as priests. This priesthood is something that is then seen to give us status and authority over the laypeople (which they can sometimes accept and sometimes not.) Yet at the end of the day, this priesthood is all based on a wrong perception. Monks and nuns are essentially spiritual practitioners, not priests. We have taken on a spiritual training, a training in renunciation, not a status or position. Our ordination is a commitment to this training, not to a social position.

In some settings a society will give an additional title to a monk or nun that denotes a social role but this does not raise them in any hierarchy (which is just a matter of respecting those who stay longest.) In Thai Buddhism for example monks are called by their ordinary names (rather like the Brother so and so of Christianity) and as they become older by their childhood nicknames as a show of affection. It is only when they are taking on an additional role as a teacher or priest that they are addressed differently and only by the group for whom they serve that function. The monks are only acting in the priestly role at the request of the laity (actually all the monks or nuns I know in the Forest Tradition who take on priestly roles or status relate to this aspect as a burden, in fact most monks and nuns try hard to avoid it) never are they imposing themselves as priests, religious leaders or intermediates between the Buddha and the masses.

This is all important to bear in mind, otherwise we might be drawing unfounded parallels between the Buddhist tradition and other religious traditions. In recent years, especially since the long debate in the Christian tradition about women-priests, people have been questioning the Theravada Buddhist Tradition, looking for women to have equality. Yet talking to Thai Buddhist women they tell me that they do not feel suppressed or disadvantaged in any way – they still have the opportunity to undertake spiritual training on a par with women widely believed to have been Enlightened.

Such opportunities are now available both in Asia and in the West. In fact within our tradition, the Western Ajahn Chah Sangha, there are actually many more monastic dwellings available than there are women coming forward to take up the monastic training and live there. Because it is less usual for women to take up priestly roles in Asia, they come under less pressure to do so from the Asian community in the West. Although in my weaker moments I could see such roles as an easy way to make a living, as a meditating monk I can feel that women have the better situation than I do – but if they wish to seek such priestly status, I certainly have no objection. Quite the opposite, I would be glad to share the burden.

I offer this for your reflection.

Ajahn Kalyāno

<http://www.openthesky.co.uk>