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DISCUSSION ARTICLE

//VINAYA// IN THERAVAADA TEMPLES IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

//Vinaya// (the monastic discipline) plays an essential role in
defining traditional Theravaada Buddhism. This article examines the
current state of //vinaya// recitation and practice in the nearly 150
immigrant Theravaada Buddhist temples in the United States, and also
speculates on the prospect of traditional Theravaada's firm
establishment in this country. Specific //vinaya// issues discussed
include the //paatimokkha// ceremony, the discussion about //vinaya//
adaptation to the American context, adaptations in the areas of
monastic attire and relations with women, and principles of adaptation
at work in Theravaada temples in the United States.

TEXT

Various passages in the Theravaada literature recount a
conversation between the Thera Mahinda and King Devaanampiya-Tissa of
Ceylon concerning the progress of Buddhism's establishment on the
island. "When, Venerable Sir, will the (religion's) roots indeed be
deep?" the King asks. Ven. Mahinda replies: "When a young man, born of
Ceylonese parents on the island of Ceylon, having gone forth on the
island of Ceylon and learned the monastic discipline in this same
island of Ceylon, when he will recite that discipline on the island of
Ceylon--then, Great King, will the roots of the religion indeed be
deep." [1] In other words, Buddhism's firm establishment in a country
requires indigenous monks (//bhikkhu-sangha//) who uphold the monastic
discipline (//vinaya//) through recitation of its precepts
(//paatimokkha sikkhaapada//) (see W. Rahula 1966:56; 1978:55, 65;

Gombrich 1988:150-1). As Michael Carrithers (1984:133) succinctly puts it, "no Buddhism without the Sangha, and no Sangha without the Discipline."

With nearly 150 immigrant Theravaada temples and perhaps as many as 600 resident Theravaada //bhikkhus// in the United States today, we do well to examine the current state of //vinaya// recitation and practice in this country. Traditional Theravaada's survival here depends upon this among other factors.[2]

As the ancient conversation between Mahinda and Devaanampiya-Tissa indicates, the firm establishment of Theravaada Buddhism in a country requires //bhikkhus// who recite the 227 precepts.[3] Traditionally, the recitation ceremony takes place twice monthly as the Theravaada monks within a given geographical area (usually a village) gather together at a temple with //baddha siimaa//, that is, sacred boundaries consecrated by specific ritual action of the //bhikkhu-sangha//. In lieu of such a temple, monks may recite the //paatimokkha// within //abaddha siimaa//, viz., "areas whose boundaries have been established by the government [e.g., a municipality] or by ancient usage [e.g., a body of water]" (Wells 1975:179). A minimum of four //bhikkhus// is required for a legitimate //paatimokkha// ceremony,[4] which reveals "the truly communal dimension of the //paatimokkha// institution," as Gombrich (1988:109) observes. The bi-monthly corporate recitation serves as both a "solidarity ritual" (Gombrich 1988:108) and "a kind of 'quality control'" (Wijayaratna 1990:124) for the //bhikkhu-sangha//.

The situation in America today makes it difficult for many Theravaada monks to perform the //paatimokkha// ceremony in the traditionally prescribed ways. For instance, a temple with fewer than four monks may be the only Theravaada temple in the immediate metropolitan area, as in Fort Smith, Arkansas, or Anchorage, Alaska. Even in cities with several Theravaada temples, like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., distances between temples and differences in ethnic identity can mitigate against frequent joint //paatimokkha// ceremonies. Moreover, only a few temples in the country have consecrated //baddha siimaa//.[5] Although Theravaada monks in America find ways of adjusting to these constraints--carrying out informal confessions, gathering together for the formal //paatimokkha// ceremony less frequently than bi-monthly--their sense of communal solidarity and institutional strength may necessarily suffer thereby.

Wijayaratna's comment above about "quality control" within the //bhikkhu-sangha// raises an important practical consideration--the difficulty in holding to certain ancient //vinaya// requirements in a modern Western society. Of course, adaptation of the //vinaya// to new circumstances occurred almost from the beginning of the Buddha's movement: "The Master did not hesitate to modify the rules to make the life of monks and nuns easier in different climatic and social conditions" (Wijayaratna 1990:53). Before the Buddha died, he granted the //bhikkhu-sangha// permission to make necessary modifications of minor //vinaya// rules, but the //bhikkhu-sangha// has never been able

to determine just which rules the Buddha considered "minor." [6] Consequently, the Theravaada tradition devised a paradoxical hermeneutic of //vinaya// adaptation which included, on the one hand, strict adherence to the ancient disciplinary code, and, on the other hand, a set of "amendments" or "new rules" standing outside the ancient texts (//paalimuttaka-vinicchaya//) and reached through

consensual agreement among the monks (//katikaavata//). In this way, "without changing the letter of the law, monks discovered ways and means of overcoming the difficulty [of following some rules in their original form] by interpreting the law without compromising themselves" (W. Rahula 1978:63; cf. Wimalaratna 1991). The key here, as in any hermeneutical enterprise, has to do with the point at which the line of "compromise" is crossed.

In America, that line of compromise has been the subject of considerable discussion among both ethnic-Asian and American-convert Theravaada //bhikkhus//. The topic took center stage at the 1987 Conference on World Buddhism in North America, held in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara, Patron Monk of Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara, Los Angeles, who later that year was named Executive President of the newly-formed American Buddhist Congress, summarized the social realities of //vinaya// adaptation.[7] "[//Vinaya//] is not a static thing," he observed, "because [it concerns] a living group of persons. Living persons will have to adjust to the changing conditions of the society. Monks are not like stones. . .they are living creatures, they have to face changing conditions in the society. So, according to certain conditions, things are changing." [8] Furthermore, Ven. Dr. Ratanasara asserted, the contemporary //bhikkhu-sangha// must take up the challenge of //vinaya// adaptation in America. "Who can go and make a petition to the Buddha these days?" he asked the Conference rhetorically. "Buddha has given permission to the Sangha. . .therefore, it is with the Sangha this problem to tackle."

On the other side of the issue however, several Conference participants spoke against any tampering with the //vinaya// at all. By pointing out that the //bhikkhus// at the First Buddhist Council considered only a Buddha's wisdom capable of distinguishing "minor" from "major" //vinaya// rules, Ven. U Silananda, Abbot of the Burmese Dhammananda Vihara, Daly City, California, implicitly challenged today's //bhikkhu-sangha// to show cause that its wisdom matches the Buddha's before tackling this problem. To change the //vinaya// is to change the //bhikkhu-sangha's// identity, Ven. Silananda explicitly warned. Ven. Walpola Piyananda, Abbot of Dharma Vijaya, Los Angeles, shared his fear that, by cutting up the //vinaya//, the monks would be "dismembering" the Buddha, since the Buddha had appointed the //vinaya// as Teacher after his physical death. Another Conference participant, Samaneri Sunanda, cautioned against a slippery slope effect: better to keep all the rules, even strict and inconvenient ones, since breaking a few so-called "minor" rules now will lead to breaking more rules later and eventually to having no rules at all.

My discussions with American-convert Theravaada //bhikkhus// have uncovered a clear strain of conservatism on //vinaya// matters that

may characterize this group.[9] One told me straightforwardly that ethnic-Asian monks in America, not American-convert monks, are behind the push to modify the //vinaya// to suit the American context. Another agreed that American-convert monks do not wish to change any //vinaya// requirements, since the discipline provided by the //vinaya// remains crucial to a viable monastic expression of Buddhism. "The Vinaya is something that requires a lot of time to appreciate," one of the monks wrote me. "When I first was ordained, the prospect of memorizing and having to live by a lot of picayune rules was the least appealing part of the training. And yet I came to realize, after living several years in the [monastic] community, that most all of the issues that created friction within the community came

from people breaking the rules." Since the scandals of leadership improprieties within larger American Buddhism in the 1980s (see Fields 1992; Butler 1990), the value of what one respected American-convert monk calls "the protective envelope that the Vinaya provides for monastics" has drawn renewed appreciation.[10]

To get a fix on the present state of Theravaada //vinaya// adaptation in the United States, let us briefly examine two key, practical areas--monastic attire and relations with women.[11]

The Buddha allowed his monks three robes--an undergarment, a loose-fitting top piece, and a double-layered cloak.[12] Triple-robed Theravaada monks in America face two challenges. First, the climate poses a real health concern. The possibility of hypothermia so troubled the director of security services for one Midwestern Thai temple that he circulated a letter through the Council of Thai Bhikkhus in the United States suggesting adoption of a "proper winter uniform for Monks," with yellow clerical collar and Buddhist lapel pin to identify the wearer as legitimate clergy.[13] Second, beyond the climatic incompatibility of robes and the harsh North American environment lies the more disturbing incompatibility of robes and American cultural prejudices. Often mistaken for "Hare Krishnas," Theravaada monks have endured "cat calls or rude comments, and in rare cases [have been] assaulted by religious bigots" while out in public (Y. Rahula 1987:16).

To date, among Theravaada monks in United States temples, adaptation of the three-robes requirement has entailed donning certain items of protective clothing, for instance, saffron-colored T-shirts under the upper robe in Southern California, sweaters over the robes in the Midwest, the latter practice having received approval from the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand according to one Thai monastic consultant from Chicago. Suggestions that monks adopt a "proper winter uniform" or perhaps confine the wearing of robes to ritual occasions have fallen on deaf ears. The "absence of robes," the reasoning goes, creates more problems than it solves: Buddhist laypeople would be deprived of an object of reverence, "for it is the robe which is honored rather than the person," and non-Buddhist Americans would no longer find their interest piqued by a distinctive monastic symbol that might "stimulate thoughtful conversation." [14] When I questioned one Sinhalese monk about wearing civilian clothes in order to avoid confrontations on the streets of Los Angeles, he responded that,

Numrich.txt

Page:27

although it might spare him some abuse, he might also forget he was a monk and be emptied to act in un-monkly ways.

Another important area of Theravaada //vinaya// adaptation in America concerns monks' relations with women. The tradition sees absolute celibacy as essential to the monastic lifestyle. The //paatimokkha// lists sexual intercourse as the first offense, a //paaraajika//, literally a "defeat" or "setting aside (from the //bhikkhu-sangha//)" (see Gombrich 1988:104), commission of which makes one //ipso facto// no longer a //bhikkhu//.[15] Moreover, in a fashion analogous to Judaism's "building a fence around the Torah," the //paatimokkha// prohibits a monk from being alone with or traveling with a woman, while the tradition forbids a monk's physical touching of a woman.

The dilemma in this for Theravaada monks in America runs along two levels. Strict adherence to traditional etiquette can embarrass and even offend American women visiting a temple or seeking individual

counseling or instruction from a monk. One monastic consultant predicted that monks in America will slowly adopt the practices of shaking hands with and hugging women as normal, cultural expressions of courtesy and friendship. As to the second level of the dilemma, while Theravaada monks in America may recognize the stumbling-block to monastic recruitment presented by the celibacy rule,[16] none would advocate setting aside the rule. Instead, it appears that efforts will be directed toward ways of cultivating a non-monastic leadership in United States temples (see Numrich 1994, [1996]).

In United States temples where //vinaya// adaptation has occurred, three principles seem to be at work. First, only minor modifications have been implemented, or, to put it differently, only "minor" //vinaya// rules have been modified. Clearly "major" rules like triple robing and celibacy stand unchallenged, though accessories to the robes have appeared and social relations with women may be more flexible.[17] Secondly, practicality comes into play--where //vinaya// restrictions become impractical, adaptation occurs. This principle depends on the first principle, however, for no matter how impractical a "major" //vinaya// rule seemingly becomes (e.g., wearing robes in public or requiring a celibate monastic community), modification of it has not yet occurred. Lastly, //vinaya// adaptation relies on a consensual process, among monks certainly, but also between monks and laity in a temple. Without the approval of its lay constituency, a United States temple's //bhikkhu-sangha// finds it difficult if not impossible to enact even "minor" modifications in the most "impractical" rules. Summing up the frustrations sometimes felt by progressive Asian monks in immigrant temples, Ven. Dr. Ratanasara of Dharma Vijaya, Los Angeles, observed that "they often are trapped by their congregation members who wish them to remain 'old country' in order to preserve a nostalgia for their old home life, while they themselves pursue the new American dream" (Dart 1989:7).[18]

It is still early in the historical development of immigrant Theravaada Buddhism in the United States.[19] If immigration trends hold steady or increase, we should see the continued proliferation and

consolidation of temples in coming decades. Barring a tightening of United States visa restrictions,[20] and assuming a constant source of monks in the home countries, these temples can import their monastic staff from Asia indefinitely. Communal recitation of the //paatimokkha// will become easier, minimal adaptation of //vinaya// requirements will continue. However, unless these imported monks can speak to the offspring of Asian immigrants in culturally and spiritually meaningful ways, a native-born //bhikkhu-sangha// will not likely arise among this group. Moreover, even though we may be seeing a renewed appreciation for the value of the monastic path among American converts, it seems unlikely that such appreciation alone will overcome the strong cultural sentiments favoring lay-oriented religiosity in this country.[21] Without indigenous American //bhikkhus//, whether ethnic-Asian or American-convert, Theravaada Buddhist monasticism will remain a perpetually replenished green growing garden, rather than becoming a deeply-rooted, natural outgrowth of the Theravaada experience in the United States.[22]

NOTES

[1] Samantapaasaadikaa I, 102; cf. Mahaava.msa 126; Diipava.msa chapter. 14, vss. 20-4; Vinaya-nidaana 103.

[2] The bulk of the present essay comes from a larger paper on this topic

(Numrich 1994).

[3] On the 227 //paatimokkha sikkhaapada//, see ~Naa.namoli Thera 1969; Vajira~naa.navarorasa 1971:5-31.

[4] More informal procedures (//paarisuddhi//, "purity") are followed with less than four monks; see Vinaya I, 124-5.

[5] For instance, according to my monastic respondents, 1 of the 8 Sinhalese temples and 2 of the 20 Dhammayuttika Thai temples in the United States have //baddha siimaa//.

[6] The Theravaada texts tell us that the Buddha's beloved disciple, Aaanda, neglected to query the Buddha about the "minor" rules and that the First Buddhist Council could not make a determination thereupon (see Diigha Nikaaya II, 154; Vinaya II, 287-8).

[7] Quotes from World Buddhism in North America, a video documentary of Conference proceedings.

[8] Ven. Dr. Ratanasara immediately nuanced his statement, perhaps with the notion of //paalimuttaka-vinicchaya// in mind: "if certain practices are to be altered, if you don't like to use 'alteration' or 'change,' we may call it 'to add'."

[9] I suggest elsewhere (Numrich [1996]) that Theravaada Buddhism may hold a particular attraction for American converts from fundamentalist religious backgrounds.

Numrich.txt

Page:29

[10] Bhikkhu Bodhi (1992), now living in Sri Lanka, contributed his "open letter" to a forum discussion in the now- defunct newspaper Dharma Gate. Two other American-convert monks whom I interviewed stressed the need for a monastic presence in American Buddhism. One spoke of a group in the Boston area that may soon take concrete steps in this direction. Several respondents pointed to the Bhavana Society's (High View, West Virginia) efforts as well.

[11] A more detailed examination of these and other areas may be found in Numrich 1992.

[12] Vinaya I, 289. The three robes requirement is assumed in the //paatimokkha sikkhaapada//, the 227 precepts recited bi- monthly by Theravaada monks. Specific precepts in the //paatimokkha// prescribe proper reception, possession, and wearing of the three robes.

[13] Fodde correspondence.

[14] Dharma Vijaya Newsletter February, 1982:3.

[15] Vinaya III, 109. The other //paaraajika// offenses are taking something (above a certain value) not given, murder, and false claims of attaining superhuman states.

[16] As some observers point out, the monastic lifestyle simply goes against the grain of mainstream American culture. In contrast to Asian Buddhist countries, monasticism is not portrayed as a viable option in this society, much less as a spiritual ideal. The perpetual, spiritually-motivated chastity of the monastic calling must appear odd to the average American who, as a Sinhalese monk put it to me, seems to consider sex as much a human necessity as food and water.

[17] Interestingly, I received slightly different opinions from two monks on the question of where to draw the line between the "major" (i.e., non-modifiable) and the "minor" (i.e., modifiable) rules in the 227 //paatimokkha sikkhaapada//. One monk, an ethnic Asian, considers the first 19 rules "major"--the 4 //paaraajika//, the 13 //sanghaadisesa//, and the 2 //aniyata// (these last forbidding a monk to be alone with a woman). The other monk, an American convert, draws the line at the first 17 rules only. An example of a "minor," modifiable rule in both of these interpretations would be the prohibition of traveling alone with a woman, one of the 92 //paacittiya//.

[18] My written survey of two such temples revealed less resistance among adult immigrants to modification of "minor" //vinaya// rules than to modification of the "major" rules on monastic robes and celibacy. Second-generation immigrant survey respondents showed significantly more openness to modification of "major" rules than the adult generation (see Numrich 1992:270-2).

[19] All but one of the approximately 150 temples were established after 1970, the exception being the Washington, D.C., Buddhist Vihara (est. 1966).

Numrich.txt

Page:30

[20] One Sinhalese monastic consultant keeps reminding me of the situation in Malaysia, where the government apparently shut off the supply of monks from Sri Lanka, resulting in the closing of the Sri Lankan //vihaaras// there.

[21] Cf. Prebish's (1988:677) prediction: "It appears that, for the immediate future, Buddhism will remain an almost exclusively lay community in America."

[22] Cf. W. Rahula 1978:66-7. The vast majority of the monks in Theravaada temples in the United States are Asian nationals, often possessing only minimal English-language proficiency and passing acquaintance with American culture. My monastic respondents (from within Thai and Sinhalese circles) report no new permanent monks from the ranks of the American born and/or raised immigrant second generation, and can identify only about ten non-Asian monks (one African-American, the rest Caucasian) in United States temples.

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Numrich.txt

Page:31

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Numrich.txt

Page:32

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