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Did the Buddha Correct Himself?

Ven. Pandita (Burma)¹

Abstract

In this paper, I look at two related issues in Vinaya, (1) the requirement of parental consent for all candidates wishing to join the Order and (2) the additional requirement of spousal consent for female candidates but no such requirement for male candidates, and I try to prove that both these regulations stemmed from the same principle.

Introduction

After achieving enlightenment, the Buddha began to admit people to the Order based on their own choice so that they could devote their lives to the Path he discovered. This went on for some time until his own father, Suddhodhana, made a request that “in future no boy be admitted to the Order without the permission of his parents” (Gombrich 177). The Buddha granted the request and accordingly made a Vinaya rule to prohibit

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the admission of boys without the consent of their parents (Vin I 82–83; Horner 4: 104).

This rule was against the very acts that the Buddha had been performing himself hitherto, and Gombrich notes: “In doing so, he in fact corrects himself for he decides that what he did to his own father, and what he has just repeated with his own son, should never again be inflicted on any parent” (177). So, according to Gombrich, unlike most of the other Vinaya rules which were prescribed due to an unwise act of a disciple monk or nun, the culprit here was the Buddha himself.

However, I do not agree with Gombrich’s view. If he is correct, we should wonder why the Buddha never insisted that a married man wishing to renounce should seek his wife’s permission in addition to that of his parents, for, whereas a son going forth might break the hearts of non-consenting parents, a husband going forth might ruin the life of his wife for good, especially in those times when women had to live in the households of their in-laws with very few rights of their own. And this appears even more odd because the Buddha *did* insist that married women should seek the permission of both the parents and the husbands to go forth (Vin IV 335; Horner 3: 394). Does it mean that the Buddha did have a bias against the women who wish to enter the Order? And what about the case of young children who lose their parents to the Order?

So, I will attempt in this paper to give a different solution.

Before and After Meeting His Own Father

First of all, I must point out that the Buddha’s father might not have been the first to ask the Buddha to put constraints on the influx of new members into the Order.

According to the Vinaya (Vin I 43; Horner 4: 56), after achieving enlightenment, but before seeing his father again, the Buddha led one thousand ascetic-turned-monks to Rājagaha, and while staying there, he accepted into his Order two hundred and fifty new converts including Sāriputta and Moggallāna, the former disciples of the Sañjaya school. In addition, many well-known young men came to practice the Noble Path under the Buddha's guidance. Then the public started to criticize him, claiming that the ascetic Gotama was working to make people childless, to produce widows, and to break up families. And when the people saw monks, the former openly ridiculed the latter using the following verse:

*āgato kho mahāsamaṇo Magadhānaṃ Giribbajaṃ
sabbe Sañjaye netvāna, kaṃ su dāni nayissatīti.*(Vin I 43)

The great ascetic has come to Giribbaja of the Magadha people.

After taking away all Sañjaya's (followers), whom will now he take away?²

What was the reason for this public attack? Because the people felt threatened. Why did they feel so? Because they had no say in the matter

² Cf.:

The great recluse has come to Giribbaja of the Magadhese Leading all Sañjaya's (followers). Who will now be led by him? (Horner 4: 56)

Here Horner uses the sense "to lead" of the root \sqrt{ni} of *netvāna* and *nayissati*, and treats the clause *sabbe Sañjaye netvāna* as part of the first sentence *āgato kho mahāsamaṇo Giribbajaṃ*. This would mean the Buddha had brought the followers of Sañjaya to Rājagaha from elsewhere. However, it does not agree with the context, which clearly shows that the followers of Sañjaya, i.e., Sāriputta, Moggallāna and others, came to the Buddha and got ordained only after the latter arrived and was staying at Rājagaha (Vin I 42–43; Horner 4: 55–56).

Therefore, I put the clause *sabbe*, etc., together with the last sentence *kaṃ su dāni nayissati* and used the sense "to take away, to carry off" (Apte *nī* s.v.) for the root \sqrt{ni} ; in this version, *netvāna* ("after taking away") means taking Sañjaya's followers from him, and *nayissati* ("will take away") means taking other young men from their families or teachers.

of whether their sons or husbands should go forth. Then why did they not complain directly to the Buddha and ask him to do something about it? They probably did, but the Buddha probably refused to oblige them. Even though Pali sources have no records of such requests nor of the Buddha's refusal, I believe this is the most plausible explanation for why the people of Rājagaha resorted to a public attack on the Buddha and his disciples.

Even though we do not know for certain if, while staying at Rājagaha, the Buddha actually rejected personal requests to return the young men to their families or to refuse them admission to the Order if they were applying without the consent of their parents, he certainly did not give in when he had to face the public criticism. In fact, he taught his followers a verse to be used as the response to these public charges:

*nayanti ve mahāvīrā saddhammena tathāgatā
dhammena nayamānānaṃ kā usūyā vijānataṃ* (Vin I 43)

Indeed, courageous Buddhas take away by true Dhamma.
To those who know (Buddhas) as taking away by Dhamma,
what kind is the jealousy (of Buddhas)? (I.e., how can
there be jealousy projected towards Buddhas?)³

³Cf.:

Verily great heroes, Truthfinders, lead by what is true *dhamma*.
Who would be jealous of the wise, leading by *dhamma*? (Horner 4: 56,
57)

In Horner's version, the sense "to lead" of the verb *nayanti* is contextually improper, as shown in the previous note. And the adjectival pronoun *kā* is in feminine gender only because it is a modifier of *usūyā* ("jealousy"), so it should not be rendered as "who," which refers to a person.

On the other hand, my version is based on Buddhaghosa's following explanation:

*mahāvīrā' ti mahāvīriyavantā. nayamānānaṃ ti nayamānesu. bhūmatthe
sāmivacanaṃ, upayogathe vā. kā ussūyā vijānatan ti dhammena nayanti
'ti evaṃ vijānantānaṃ kā ussūyā.* (Sp V 976–977).

Then why did he relent when his father's request came up? Because, I argue, he knew that he could no longer get away with it, that it would have been too dangerous for himself and for his Order to continue as before. Suddhodana was seemingly a man of power among the Sakyan people; if he did not harm the Buddha or his followers, it must have been only because the Buddha was his own son, and not because he had no power to do so. If another king or man of power were to lose his son or daughter because the latter got admitted to the Order without the permission of the former, the former might end up as a bitter and highly dangerous enemy against the Buddha and the Order. It was to protect the Order from such dangers that the Buddha had to abandon his former recruitment policy and make parental consent compulsory for candidates for the Order.

It was for the same reason that he made spousal consent compulsory for women aspiring to nunhood. Without this constraint, the scenario of a queen renouncing without her husband's consent, and thereby turning her husband, a prince or a king, into a bitter enemy of the Order, could become a reality.

And it is not possible to exaggerate the dangers that await the monks who cross the powers that be:

*atha kho rājā Māgadho Seniyo Bimbisāro vohārike mahāmatte
pucchi: yo bhaṇe rājabhaṭaṃ pabbājeti, kiṃ so pasavatīti.
upajjhāyassa deva sīsaṃ chedetabbaṃ, anussāvakassa jivhā
uddhāritabbā, gaṇassa upaḍḍhaphāsukā bhañjitabbā 'ti. . . . rājā*

The term *mahāvīrā* means: those having great courage. *Nāyamānānaṃ* means: of (those) taking away. This term has the genitive case in the locative sense, or in the accusative sense. The sentence *kā ussūyā vijānataṃ* means: to those who know that (Buddhas) take away by true Dhamma, what kind is the jealousy? In the PTS edition of Sp, the second sentence reads: *nīyamānānaṃ ti nīyamānesu*, which, however, I believe is corrupted. Why? The terms *nīyamānānaṃ* and *nīyamānesu* are passive, referring to those who were taken away. It means: the object of jealousy is those *taken away*, i.e., the newly recruited disciples, which is not contextually proper.

Māgadho Seniyo Bimbisāro bhagavantam etad avoca: santi bhante rājāno assaddhā appasannā, te appamattakena pi bhikkhū vihettheyyum. sādhu bhante ayyā rājabhaṭam na pabbājeyyun ti. (Vin I 74)

Then King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha asked the chief ministers of justice: “Good sirs, what does he who lets one go forth who is in a king’s service engender (for himself)?”

“Sire, a preceptor’s head should be cut off, the tongue should be torn from the announcer of a proclamation, half the ribs of a (member of a) group should be broken.” . . .

King Seniya Bimbisāra spoke thus to the Lord: “There are, Lord, kings who are of no faith, not believing; these might harm monks even for a trifling matter. It were well, Lord, if the masters did not let one in a king’s service go forth.” (Horner 4: 92)

In the account cited above, the monks who granted going forth to royal servants did so only on account of the latter’s request. If even these monks could have faced such terrible punishments, we can only imagine what kinds of terrors would have awaited any monks who dared to admit into the Order a king’s son, daughter, or wife, without the king’s permission. The Buddha might have been safe because he was what he was, but his followers would not have been as fortunate. The need to protect his followers *should* be the exact reason why the Buddha made the spousal consent compulsory for would-be nuns and parental consent for both would-be monks and nuns.⁴

Moreover, the same concept can also explain why the Buddha never bothered to have wives’s permission to recruit their husbands. It

⁴ We can find the same attitude when the Buddha declined to intervene when he was informed that the King Ajātasattu was planning to wage war on Vajjīs (Pandita, “War”).

was simply because he knew that the wives of would-be monks in his time, usually living in the households of their in-laws, were hardly positioned or empowered to harm the Order. In those times, even if it were a queen who lost her husband without her consent to the Order, she was powerless against the Order unless she got support from her in-laws, with whom she most probably lived. And if her in-laws had already given consent to their son for his renunciation, there would be little chance that they would help her with her grudge against the Order.

Here Juo-Hsüeh notes, “Apparently a wife’s voice will never be heard” (358). However, as seen from what happened at Rājagaha (that I have discussed above), wives *did* have the ability to make themselves heard even in those times; rather, what I see here is the Buddha’s disregard for their voices. However, I argue that we should not view it as a bias against women; if he were to be living in a matriarchal society, I believe, he might not have hesitated to do the opposite—demanding spousal consent from married male candidates but not from female ones.

This theory has brought us to a very serious question which I will consider in the next section. I will base my argument on my theory of Buddhist karma elaborated elsewhere (Pandita, “Intention”), so if my solution here is satisfactory, it would be further proof that validates the aforesaid theory.

Why Did the Buddha Ignore the Suffering of Women?

The fact that women had little power or few rights was a defect, not a merit, of the Buddha’s contemporary society. It is understandable that he could not remedy it, for he was only an ascetic living outside his society. But how could he take advantage of a defect in the society for the sake of his own mission? In other words, was it appropriate for him, a man popularly deemed as possessing great wisdom and compassion, to

ignore the suffering of women who lost their husbands unwillingly and were powerless to do anything about it?

My answer is that when he did not bother to consider wives in the business of their husbands's renunciation, he was not abusing society but merely implementing his ideals where and when he could.

Let us consider a scenario. Suppose there is a married young man whose will to seek liberation is strong enough to make him get parental consent and renounce. Suppose also that his wife and children strongly disagree with his decision (but cannot do anything about it), and that his renunciation leads his family into a life of want and deprivation because he was the sole bread-winner in the family before his renunciation.

In this case, to seek liberation by renouncing and devoting one's life to the Noble Path represents a good intention on the young man's part. As the Buddha defined karma as intention (AN III 415; Gombrich 7), a good intention represents a good karma, that is, a morally righteous act in the Buddhist karmic law. And this righteousness of his action does not change despite the consequent suffering of his family, for, "even if an act done with a good intention has evil consequences in practice, that act is still a positive step towards liberation" (Pandita, "Intention" 22).

If so, the Buddha himself and monks, i.e., those responsible for taking him away from his wife and family, are also morally blameless. Indeed, the Buddha's own actions were consistent with this principle when he decided, while still a prince,⁵ to leave the palace and seek enlightenment, quite contrary to his parents's plans, and when, after achieving enlightenment himself, he started to permit people to join his Order without accounting for their families or for their societies, and

⁵ The term "prince" is the closest rendering of *rājaputta* ("son of *rāja*"). The term *rāja* is used not only for kings but also for members of ruling classes in republics. For example, *sakyaṛājā*, *sakyaṛājānaṃ* (Vin II 181-182).

continued to do so for as long as possible. And if we extrapolate from these activities based on the same principle, we can infer that the Buddha would have preferred, if possible, to ignore external conditions, even parental consent, in the matter of any candidate genuinely wishing to seek liberation.

On the other hand, if he did later insist on accounting for external constraints, these limitations were mere concessions that he had to make to avoid collision with his society or with the authorities thereof. The requirement of parental consent for all candidates and spousal consent for female candidates are only some of the concessions the Buddha made to his society; we can find similar compromises in other rules that refuse admission to seriously sick people, royal servants, notorious thieves, jail breakers, thieves with outstanding warrants, debtors, and slaves (Vin I 71–76; Horner 4: 89–96). After all, as the leader of a community that relies for its survival on the lay society, the Buddha certainly could not afford to clash with the society.

Therefore, it is not fair to accuse him of abusing a flaw in his society because he denied women a say in the matter of their husbands' going forth; he merely declined to make a particular concession for women in his time, who were too weak to force his hand.

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