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Western Buddhist Perceptions of Monasticism [1]

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Abstract

This paper explores the contemporary encounters between Western cultures and the Buddhist tradition of monasticism. Investigating attitudes towards this institution in the forms of contemporary Buddhist memoirs, blog websites, interviews, and Dharma talks, this article argues that monasticism in general is not ideal for some Western Buddhists — it is seen by some as too restrictive or anti-modern. While others find value in monasticism, they are aware of those who critique it, and some of these therefore offer instead a model that removes what they see as problematic, anti-modern elements. A particular issue is that of female monasticism. Western Buddhists argue that women of all Buddhist traditions should have the choice to be ordained as nuns at a level equal to that of monks, because this shows that Buddhism is modern. I conclude that Western Buddhists are interested in creating a modern, universal tradition, and this can be seen by analyzing conceptions about monastic life.

Keywords: Monasticism; Western Buddhism; Buddhist female ordination.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism's transition to the West has been compared to the transition of Buddhism from India to China and Tibet.[2] These transitions occurred much earlier, but just as Buddhism developed and indigenized according to the values and cultures of China and Tibet, Buddhism is currently becoming indigenized in the West. In Philip Almond's *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (1998) and Thomas Tweed's *The American Encounter with Buddhism* (1992), both authors argue simi-

1. This article is based on a paper titled 'Center and Periphery in the Construction of Western Buddhism', presented at the Western American Academy of Religion Regional Meeting (WECSOR), March 31, 2008.

2. For reference to this see Baumann (1994), Baumann and Prebish (2002) and Batchelor (1994).

larly in describing the British and American encounter with Buddhism during the Victorian era. Westerners of these countries made Buddhism a less alien space by placing the tradition into familiar categories. Victorians assimilated Buddhism as it compared with their beliefs — selectively accepting aspects of it that were normative to them and affirmed their basic values while rejecting those that were regarded as incompatible. A crucially held value among Victorians was man's call to work. Thus the main critique of Buddhism was directed at the institution of monasticism, which did not coincide with this value (Almond 1988, 119). Reading about this early Western encounter with Buddhism makes one wonder: how different is the Western adaptation and appropriation of Buddhism today? I will explore the contemporary encounter between Western cultures and the Buddhist tradition of monasticism and the implications of this below.

Many contemporary Western Buddhists see Asia as their spiritual home, as the place where their chosen religion began and developed, and where their teachers learned and practised. Some of them adapt and create new teachings and rituals, which is seen as necessary to meet the needs of their communities. Buddhist practices are selectively appropriated and evaluated in light of Western culture's attitudes and orientations.[3] Yet at the same time there is evidence that Western Buddhists are not only adapting the religion to their cultural needs, but also focusing on how Buddhism in the West can create what has been called a 'pure' and 'universal' Buddhism that exists without the traditional cultural constraints of Asian countries. Western Buddhism is depicted as open and untainted by years of cultural accommodations. This is evident in the voices of those Western Buddhists who depict some Asian cultural elements within Buddhism as degenerate but see Western values such as freedom, equality, anti-authority and anti-hierarchy as universal and necessary for Buddhism in the modern world. The institution of monasticism, and by extension the issue of female higher ordination, is the main issue that illuminates this universalizing trend.

In order to understand these perspectives, I have investigated attitudes towards this institution, which Western Buddhists present in their own writings in the forms of contemporary Buddhist memoirs, blog websites, interviews, and Dharma talks. I have also drawn on anthropological works, which analyze but also portray the voices of selected Western Buddhists. These sources characterize a range of some of the most cogent opinions and perspectives on this topic. Of course there are both Asian and Western Buddhists who disagree with critiques of traditional monasticism, but I am focusing on Western Buddhists who do not wholly support the traditional forms for the purposes of this paper. It is also beyond this paper to consider the Asian Buddhist response to Western Buddhists' critiques. But this work would illuminate a variety of interesting perspectives regarding the issues discussed below.

EVALUATIONS OF THE MONASTIC INSTITUTION

Much has been said in the literature on Buddhism in the West, particularly in America, about the primacy of the lay role as compared to that of the monastic

3. See Martin Baumann's articles on Western Buddhism (2006, 1997, 1995, 1994). Also much of the scholarship on Buddhism in the West is focused on adaptations, such as Coleman (2001), Prebish and Tanaka (1998), Williams and Queen (1999), and Spuler (2003).

lifestyle.[4] Although monastics form an influential minority within forms of Asian Buddhism, for Buddhists in Western countries lay teachers and lay organizations comprise the dominant group, and difficulties lie in creating and finding support for monastic institutions: so far there has not been the kind of support of monastic institutions found in Asia that would sustain a large number of monastics in Western countries (Horn, 2007a). Charles Prebish has asserted that monasticism was never the ideal in America as it is in Asia because monastic lifestyles are counter to perceived American ways of life (Prebish 1979, 70). The preference for lay roles shows some Western Buddhists' bias against monasticism. Numrich writes of this:

> For some American Buddhists, in fact, Theravada monasticism epitomizes those aspects of traditional Asian Buddhism that should be abandoned in the construction of a new, non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, and non-sexist Western vehicle of the Buddha's teachings. (Numrich 1996, 150)

As can be seen from this, instead of appropriating an Asian Buddhist model based on the relationship between monastics and laity, some Western Buddhists create their own version of the teachings that is seen as more compatible with Western sensibilities. The laicization trend, as opposed to renouncing the world, is also witnessed in the popular Western lay meditation teachers who have written popular meditation guidebooks[5] — which focus on how to integrate Buddhist practice with daily life.

Some positive attitudes towards the renunciant lifestyle do exist however, over and against those who believe the lay role is more effective in disseminating the Dharma in the West. The success of many long-standing monastic communities in the West attest to the fact that not all Western Buddhists see monasticism as unimportant.[6] For those who do value and/or practise monasticism, there is a reformist and conservative response — a response to adapt the institution to the West and a response to value the existing form(s) of the institution for its own sake. For the reformist response, the West is seen as a new space where monasticism can flourish and where Asian monastic practices can be selectively appropriated. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American nun in the Tibetan tradition and professor at the University of San Diego, writes that the 'aim of creating monasteries in the West is not simply to duplicate Asian monastic structures, but to develop a monasticism appropriate for the West' (Tsomo 2002, 264). Santikaro Bhikkhu, an American monk and student of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, goes further

4. For characterizations of laicization in American Buddhism see: Williams and Queen (1999), Prebish (1999), Numrich (1998), and Coleman (2001).

5. For examples of this see Jack Kornfield's most popular book *A Path With Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life* (1993, New York: Bantam); and Sharon Salzberg's *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (1997, Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications); Sylvia Boorstein is on the cover of the January, 2008 issue of the popular Buddhist magazine, *Shambhala Sun*, with a feature article concerning her life and teachings.

6. See for example Buddhist monasteries in the West such as Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in Hertfordshire, England, begun in 1984 (www.amaravati.org); Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery in Chithurst, England, established in 1979 (www.cittaviveka.org); Gampo Abbey, founded in 1984 in Nova Scotia, Canada (www.gampoabbey.org); City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in California, USA, running since 1974 (http://cttbusa.org); Shasta Abbey near Mount Shasta, California, USA, established in 1970 (www.shastaabbey.org).

than advocating adapting monastic structures to Western ideas, as he believes that Buddhists in the West have a chance to revitalize the ideals of monasticism set out in the *Vinaya* texts. He writes of what he sees as a deterioration of the institution in Asia that has not yet happened in the West (Santikaro 2007, 2–3). Thus such Western Buddhists see an opportunity to adapt the institution to the ideologies and preferences of Western countries and at the same time revive the monastic institution. The conservative response, by contrast, does not discuss adaptation or modifying the institution for the West but rather focuses on the value of monasticism for the Buddhist tradition and modern-day society. I will investigate both pro-monastic arguments, but the writings of both kinds of responses are reacting to the primarily negative evaluation of monasticism that some Western Buddhists express. Thus I will show that these pro-monastic Western Buddhists are arguing for their role and relevance in the Western practice of Buddhism.

Therefore, I will show that many contemporary Western Buddhists are ambivalent about incorporating monasticism into their form of Buddhism. Some conclude the lay role is more important for Buddhism in the West and some argue that monasticism is valuable and necessary for Western Buddhists. I will analyze and give examples of these attitudes, both critical and in favour of monasticism, which are prominent among Western Buddhists. The first group is critical of the institution of monasticism for being 'selfish', 'isolated', and basically serving little purpose for the world. They criticize the artificiality of the monastery and look down upon the hierarchy and authority issues of monasticism, feeling that they don't need monastic robes to spread the Dharma in the West. The second group claims that monasticism is necessary, for both the individual and society. Monasticism is a way to help Buddhism truly take root in the West. Below I will take a look at these groups beginning with the critics of monasticism.

CRITICAL ATTITUDES

Some Western Buddhists criticize monasticism for focusing too narrowly on the individual spiritual quest. Some Western monks have disrobed because they felt they were being too selfish in the monastery, wanting instead to be in the world, growing in relationship with others and being of service. Alan Clements, in his memoir, describes how he chose to leave the Buddhist monastic tradition after many years as a monk in Burma. He decided he needed to be in the world; that being preoccupied with the inner world and being isolated had actually hindered his spiritual growth (Clements 2002). In another memoir, Peter Robinson also describes how he disrobed because he wanted to be of service in the world. His teachers told him that monks' only duty is to increase their personal understanding of Dharma. Robinson felt differently, and now works full-time for the non-profit organization he founded to help young Thai villagers receive education scholarships (Pannapadipo 1997, 372–377). Jack Kornfield decided to disrobe after living as a monk in Thailand because he discovered that meditation had not helped him with human relationships. He found it difficult to reintegrate to the modern Western world — to assimilate what he learned in meditation practice to the life he returned to in America (Kornfield 1993, 6). Here we see that some ordained Westerners feel guilty about their choice to work solely on their own

spiritual progress. For this group, their goals to help others and be more closely connected to the world's suffering are in tension with what they perceive to be the goals of monasticism. Thus they believe the lay role is more effective for themselves as Buddhists.

Another challenge for some Western monks is what they perceive as artificial schedules and routines experienced in the monastery. These ex-monks argue that living in the world is more natural, and gives one opportunities for more spiritual growth. Tim Ward feels that the monastic life he experienced in Thailand is artificial, it doesn't prepare one for growth in the outside world. He writes in his memoir, 'All this talk of the world of samsara as opposed to some *Dhamma* world inside a *wat* [temple], it just creates artificial boundaries' (Ward 1990, 207). Peter Robinson as well found that meditation schedules were not natural enough for him, and began to meditate when he felt was right for him (Pannapadipo 1997, 243). The kind of training these monks are receiving is perceived by them as unnatural and unhelpful in the 'real world'. The monastery is intended to be an ideal place, whereas these Western monks believe it is more important to practise in the everyday world. This is another reason why lay people are seen to have an advantage — they can practise in the ordinary world and be challenged by this. But these Westerners' attempts at monasticism show that there is an interest in this lifestyle for Western Buddhists. When they actually experience monasticism in Asia, however, some have critiques of the institution.

Another group of Westerners who have disrobed did so later in life when they found the lay role to be more practical in spreading the Dharma. Both Richard Randall and Khantipalo Mills decided to disrobe following a period living as monks in Thailand, not because they felt they couldn't adapt as monks after reintegrating to Western countries, but because they felt they were more effective Buddhists within the lay role. As Richard Randall gained experience teaching Buddhism and meditation in England, he came to believe that the Buddha's message could best be taught to Westerners through lay organizations and lay teachers. He found that to convey the essence of Buddhism, one didn't need any kind of distinct 'cultural clothing' (Randall 1990, 198). Khantipalo Mills also concluded that he didn't need a shaven head or special robes to practise the Dharma (Khantipalo 2002, 171–172). They both felt too distant and removed from other Westerners interested in Buddhism because of the trappings of monkhood. This is why they particularly mention their robes — this is the physical sign that separates them from others. The robes were foreign to their audience; they wanted instead to connect with potential converts by teaching them at their own level.

Evidence from blogs and secondary sources also articulate Western Buddhist concerns with monasticism, especially with hierarchy and authority. There is a trend of thinking in the many blogs that constitute the buddho-blogosphere[7] that advocates not becoming overly concerned with the implications and conse-

7. According to the WebRing of Buddhist Blogs there are currently 95 blogs which relate to Buddhism in some way (http://w.webring.com/hub?ring=buddhistblogs). In addition to this, there is a metablog called Blogmandu that posts weekly summaries of interesting entries from Buddhist blogs (www.blogmandu.org). And there are annual awards for different categories of Buddhist blogging success called the Blogisattva Awards (www.blogisattva.blogspot.com). These websites show the interest and culture surrounding Buddhist blogs.

quences of monasticism.[8] These Western Buddhists advise their readers to practise the teachings and evaluate if they are helpful in reaching one's goals. Will Buckingham, in his blog, 'Thinkbuddha', puts this into perspective, 'In the end, there are just people who call themselves Buddhists, there are just the various traditions with their texts and practices' (Buckingham, 2005). Buckingham is saying not to get too caught up in labels and forms of Buddhism. Mike Cross of 'The Middle Way' blog describes his conception of the best kind of Buddhist: a non-Buddhist, non-monk. He writes 'The way of the non-Buddhist, non-monk ... is just about freedom in practicing and experiencing the sitting zen that gets to the bottom of the Buddha's Enlightenment' (Cross, 2007). He too wants to get to what he sees as the basics without concern regarding title, role, or rank. This shows the problem for some Westerners regarding hierarchy — monasticism is depicted as too rigid and structured when their version of Buddhism is focused solely on aspects of the Buddha's teachings which one does not need to be a monastic to follow.

Anti-authoritarian attitudes are also noted in Helen Waterhouse's study of Buddhism in Bath, England. She finds that many Buddhist groups are choosing not to take the monastic institution as authoritative; instead they trust their own judgment regarding what is valuable practice. Thus self-authority and personal experience are praised above other kinds of authority. This trend has also been noted in New Age and American religions.[9] Waterhouse discerned that in The House of Inner Tranquility, in Bradford on Avon, commitment to practice, without a need for monastic status, is thought to help one progress toward enlightenment. Some of the Theravāda groups studied in this book regarded teachers as authoritative because of their charisma, not because of their being monastics (Waterhouse 1997, 216). Thus this attitude toward monasticism shows that the monastic robes are not what give a person authority, but the quality of teachings and the degree to which one embodies them. The idea that monastics should automatically accorded authority is criticized as unhelpful and unnecessary for Western Buddhists.

POSITIVE ATTITUDES

In contrast to the above, another group of Western Buddhists find the monastic tradition unequivocally valuable. They are aware of and argue against those Western Buddhists who claim that the monastic institution is selfish, isolating, patriarchal, anti-modern, hierarchical, irrelevant, and authoritarian. Western monastics find that after ordination they are perceived by some in society as becoming part of a sexist, conservative, and hierarchical tradition. The reformist Western Buddhist response seeks to change this and argue that monastic lifestyles have value and purpose. They try to show Western Buddhists that monasticism is an important part of the Buddhist tradition, and it can be modern, flexible, and progressive in its Western forms. More conservative responses argue for the intrinsic value of monasticism for the individual and society, by helping to combat consumerism and greed. I will show how both trends are responses to those

8. The buddho-blogosphere contains a wide range of opinions on a variety of subjects — so I am not suggesting a certain view is representative, yet popular trends can still be found.

9. For an example see Roof (1999).

laity who are critical of Buddhist monasticism. I call these responses reformist or conservative responses because individuals may belong to both categories depending on the audience they address. Western Buddhist monastics cannot be limited to either category but rather a range of responses are available to be drawn from depending on the situation.

CONSERVATIVE RESPONSES

Ordained and lay Western Buddhists respond to the laicization trend in Western Buddhism by describing monasticism as a valuable expression of the Dharma. Thubten Chodron, an American nun in the Tibetan tradition and founder of Sravasti Abbey in Washington, in her interview on the 'Buddhist Geeks' podcast, argues for the symbolic value of monasteries. She contends that monasteries are important because of the intention to live a simple life of meditation, study, and generosity. In this way they represent for her the conscience of society. Chodron believes that by having monastic institutions, you pose a question to society, 'what is important in life?' (Horn, 2007b). By posing this question, monks and nuns become a source of inspiration for other monastics and the whole of society. Along the same lines, Ajahn Chandasiri, a British nun living at Amaravati, a forest *saṅgha* community in Hertfordshire, England, cites the importance of a monastery as a place 'that reminds us of our aspiration and our potential', and that it functions as an opposite and alternative to materialistic society (Chandasiri 2001, 157). She finds value in the monastic life as it is the basis of a community of people trying to work to overcome their attachment and make changes in their lives. Bhikshuni Tenzin Palmo, a British nun in the Tibetan tradition, also holds that monasticism is a force against the current of the world. Opposed to the sex, violence, and greed in the world, monasticism is based on renunciation, purity, restraint and discipline. Monastic communities serve as living examples and models for an alternative kind of peace and happiness. Tenzin Palmo believes monastics are reminders of freedom one doesn't have with lay life. She addresses criticisms raised by many lay Western Buddhists, acknowledging that monastics are seen as 'escapists, neurotics, and parasites, as people unable to face up to the challenge of intimate relationships'. She responds by saying 'Renunciation is misunderstood and disparaged' (Palmo 1993).

Another argument for the value of this life choice is that Buddhism will lose its force or become watered-down if monastic institutions lose their traditional importance. Phil Stanley, a scholar-practitioner and professor at Naropa University, has asserted that monasticism is needed for Buddhism to truly take root in the West.[10] Also Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American monk ordained in Sri Lanka, has presented this view in a seminar in Sri Lanka:

> Thus, if Theravada is to take hold in the West, it seems it should come about through a monastic transmission, guarded and upheld by lay support. Without this, we would probably wind up with a watered down version of the *Dhamma*. (Bodhi 2000).

10. Compared with Asian societies, the percentage of Buddhists remains relatively low; this is, of course, one of the factors as to why monasticism exists so far on a smaller scale in the Western societies.

Therefore just having monastic institutions exist in the West is important for the complete transmission of Buddhism. It offers inspiration, plants the seed of an alternative lifestyle, and ensures the proper transmission of the Dharma.[11]

Bhikkhu Bodhi also directly responds to critical attitudes towards monasticism in some of his writings. He refutes the idea that there is no fundamental difference between ordained and laity on the path to *nibbāna*. Instead he finds it is the monastic path that leads more effectively to the final goal, writing:

> the fact remains that the monastic life was expressly designed by the Buddha to facilitate complete dedication to the practice of the path ... and thus provides the optimal conditions for spiritual progress. (Bodhi 1998)

He lists all the benefits of monasticism such as having more time for the practice of Dharma and following the monastic rules of simplicity and purity. He also writes:

> If the monks' life did not provide further progress towards the goal, it seems there would have been no compelling reason for the Buddha to have established a monastic order. (Bodhi 1998)

He continues this line of thinking in a talk given to the thirteenth Western Buddhist Monastic Conference. He again argues against the idea that monastic and lay paths are of equal value. He believes this opinion is prevalent because there is not a clear, comprehensive overview of the Dharma in the West, but it has become just a practice of mindfulness for overcoming certain forms of suffering, a therapeutic technique. He places the blame with the laity and the need to educate them further, saying: 'I believe that for monastic Buddhism to take root and become properly established, what is needed is a laity that has an intrinsic respect for monastics' (Bodhi 2006).

REFORMIST RESPONSES

Reformist responses to the critical evaluations of monasticism argue that monasticism as a whole isn't necessarily valuable for the West but could be if adapted. Such responses express the view that Western monastics do not have to follow the Asian model(s), that is seen by some lay critics as authoritarian, hierarchical, and inflexible. They argue that there are 'cultural' practices included in Asian monasticism, and these should be removed, the West being seen as offering an opportunity to purify Buddhist monasticism of such accretions. These cultural accretions of Asia, it is argued, should not be brought to the West and therefore Western monasticism can enact a new vision of authentic Buddhist monastic practice. Thus there is seen to be a tension between an ideal Buddhist institution and its current forms in Asia. Thubten Chodron cites the Tibetan monastic situation for examples of what should and should not be incorporated into the

11. This in accord with what Walpola Rahula (1956, 55) says, citing two Buddhist chronicles of Ceylon, and then the commentary on the Theravāda *Vinaya*:
> The *Dīpavaṃsa* [XIV.21-5] and *Mahāvaṃsa* [XV.180-181] agree that ... Buddhism would be established [in a country] only if a *sīmā* [monastic boundary] for the *uposatha* and other acts of Saṅgha were established according to the teachings of the Buddha. The *Samantapāsādikā* [p.60] records [the view] ... 'When a son born in Ceylon ... of Ceylonese parents, becomes a monk in Ceylon, studies the *Vinaya* in Ceylon, and recites it in Ceylon, then the roots of the *Sāsana* [dispensation of the Buddha] are deep set'.

Western forms. She writes 'Shoes and backpacks are status symbols among the Tibetan monastics. We should not emulate this. We should dress like everyone else and be simple and practical' (Chodron No Date). Here she expresses that monasticism in the West shouldn't create status symbols and hierarchy issues. Thus this response reveals that some Western Buddhists feel they can learn what not to do from Asian countries when creating their new version of Buddhism in this new environment. Bhikkhu Bodhi also writes that aspects of the Asian Buddhist model should not be emulated by Western monastics, as he finds in Asia that there are 'a large number of routinized monastics passing time idly in the temples' (*Insight Journal* 2002). Bhikkhu Bodhi thus sees the need for adaptation, such that monastics will play different roles in the West than in Asia. He believes one needs to be cautionary in making these changes, so as to separate fundamental Dharma from the 'cultural dress in which it is wrapped' (Bodhi 2008, 1).

Karma Lekshe Tsomo also considers the new situation of Buddhism in the West as offering an opportunity for reforming aspects of Buddhist practice. She writes about how Western nuns can revitalize and reaffirm the 'original purity and simplicity of spiritual life', over and against the clergy of various religions in many countries who 'are coming under scrutiny for lavish indulgences and moral transgressions' (Tsomo 1999, 9). She asserts that the monasticism that some criticize as a pre-modern patriarchal institution is based on an Asian model, but that Western monastic institutions, on the contrary, have the opportunity to revitalize the Buddhist monastic situation. Some Western Buddhists, moreover, see themselves creating their own model of monasticism by removing the loss of purity they see arising in Asian countries. Buddhist monastics in the West believe their institutions are 'pure' because they have located the essentials of Buddhism and removed the cultural accretions of Asian Buddhist countries. Chodron warns new monastics: 'Don't always follow the Tibetan monks or nuns as examples. I came to Dharamsala over twenty years ago and have seen the monastic discipline degenerate a lot since then' (Chodron No Date). She wants to preserve the purity of the tradition, and this can be created in the West by learning to avoid the corrupted practices of Asian countries. Thubten Chodron advises that Western Buddhists must reject these cultural elements and bring to the West the Dharma that transcends culture. She seeks to distinguish the Dharma from the Asian cultural practices that are degenerations from the original Asian monastic ideal, and in any case are unhelpful in the West. She asks, 'What is cultural form that we need not bring to the West'? (Chodron 1999). Thus the response to critics of monasticism is that the situation in the West is a chance to start over — to create a reformed vision of Buddhist monasticism. Similarly Ajahn Amaro, a British monk residing in the Abhayagiri forest *saṅgha* community of California, in an interview states that:

> one of the great blessings of Buddhist monasticism in the West is that it becomes free of the formalism, ritualism, and cultural accretions of Asia. In many ways, it is much easier for Westerners to get to the essence of the teachings.
>
> (*Inquiring Mind Magazine* 1995)

Thus the argument is that the Buddhist monasticism that some lay Western Buddhists have reacted against is not the form of this that they have experienced in the West, but that in Asia, with what they see as its limitations and prejudices.

Buddhist monasticism in the West, it is argued, has the possibility to free itself of the perceived problems of Asian models. In this way, Buddhism in the West is perceived as a new space, untainted by the degeneration of practices over time. Western Buddhists of this perspective argue that their versions of monasticism are based solely on the Buddha's teaching, not what they see as cultural accretions that are degenerations from what they perceive as the original Asian ideal of Buddhist monasticism.

Thus there is a range of perspectives regarding the Buddhist institution of monasticism. First, some Western Buddhists note self-absorption and isolation as the main weaknesses of monasticism, and have disrobed because of this. They go so far as to say that the institution is irrelevant because it is not sufficiently connected with the world, but represents an escape from everyday reality. Effective teachings and personal experience matter more to some Western Buddhists, not the maintenance of the traditional institution of monasticism. Western Buddhists want to connect with their audience and these critics see this as done most effectively in the lay role. Thus the critiques of the institution translate into taking the role of the lay Dharma teacher as the most important one for Buddhism in the West. But there is also the view that monasticism is always beneficial to society as a model of simple and contemplative living. This conservative response shows less interest in creating a new monasticism in the West, having more focus on preserving this part of the tradition, though free of any degenerate practices, in the midst of laicization. More reformist responses assert that monasticism in the West can be something new and modified, free of cultural elements that seem inappropriate for the West. Thus the laicization trend and anti-monastic critique, especially in America, is so prevalent that monastics and those who value the institution feel a clear need to respond to this. This can be further demonstrated in Western Buddhist attitudes towards female ordination.

FEMALE ORDINATION

One of the main issues that has caused discussion among Western Buddhists about monasticism is female ordination. Concern with this issue coheres with the reformist response, which seeks to adapt the institution to Western countries and their predominant ideologies.[12]

12. Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese Buddhism have preserved higher ordination for women, as *bhikkhunī/bhikṣuṇī*s, but Tibetan Buddhism has only had nuns following the basic ten monastic precepts of lower ordination. Japanese Buddhism all but abolished monasticism in the late nineteenth century, replacing it with a married clergy. Theravāda Buddhism lost its *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka in the eleventh century, and it seems never to have existed in Thailand and Burma, with all three having had nuns following 8 or ten precepts who have not had the respect or resources accorded to monks. In 1998, the *bhikkhunī* ordination started to be revived in Sri Lanka. There are now around 500 *bhikkhunī*s, there, who are winning respect from the laity, and have been formally recognized by one of the three monastic fraternities there; the monastic hierarchies of Thailand and Burma, though, resist the reinstitution of the *bhikkhunī* ordination. As the ordination ceremony of a *bhikkhunī* must involve the participation of existing *bhikkhunī*s, some see it as impossible to re-start the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination line once it has lapsed. Some do not favour re-establishing Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination even if it were possible in terms of *Vinaya*. Others, especially in Sri Lanka, see an ordination ceremony involving the participation of East Asian *bhikṣuṇī*s, who follow a *Vinaya* that is close to, though not identical to the Theravāda one, as a valid route to re-establish-

Gender inequality and the refusal, in some quarters, to give higher ordination to women has become linked with Asian cultural practices that some Western Buddhists argue should be changed.

I will present two main arguments, among Western Buddhists, for female higher ordination. The first is that a move to gender equality will help modernise the tradition, and thus increase its appeal in the West. The second is that this will in turn help modernize Buddhism in Asia, and thus help Buddhism to sustain itself there in the context of universal influences of modernization. Western Buddhists advocate for female higher ordination in the name of modernizing the tradition — so that it can be seen as up to date to the international community. The ordination of *bhikkhunī/bhikṣuṇī*s is thought to help Buddhism gain converts in the West. The reformist response argues that if Buddhism is perceived as modern and progressive regarding gender issues, then it will be more attractive to Westerners. Western Buddhists see equality and modernization as crucial for the establishment and maintenance of Buddhism in the West.

The monastic reformist response see Western countries as places where shortcomings of current Asian monasticism can be corrected, with Western Buddhists helping Asian Buddhists in overcoming patriarchal practices. Numrich writes of the prediction that the West could help reestablish the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* because it is 'where resistance, both ecclesiastical and popular, seems minimal' (Numrich 1998, 153). Western nuns have been leaders in gaining attention and opportunities for full ordination of nuns in the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions and advocating for poor, uneducated Asian nuns who are seen as not being able to advocate for themselves (Tsomo 2002, 267). I will explore Western Buddhist arguments for gender equality through these discourses of modernization and in the context of universalization below.

MODERNIZATION

The modernization discourse is shown in the anti-authoritarian attitudes and choices of some Western Buddhist nuns. Ordained women, and some ordained men have questioned the hierarchy and ordination rules learned from their Asian teachers. Instead these Western Buddhists follow their own beliefs regarding the right to ordain. Ayya Khema, a German nun in the Theravāda tradition, describes in her memoir how she took full ordination from *bhikkhunī*s of the East Asian tradition at the first *bhikkhunī* ordination in the West, because she could not do so through her own lineage (Khema 1998, 181–182).[13] Western Buddhists also question the traditional belief that only males can become enlightened as Buddhas.[14] Tenzin Palmo's biography describes how she has vowed to be reborn again and

ing Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination. The Dalai Lama favours a similar route for establishing Tibetan higher ordination for women.

13. This first *bhikkhunī* ordination in the West was held in 1987 in Hacienda Heights, California, under sponsorship of the Hsi Lai Temple. This temple is within the tradition of Fo Guang Shan, began in Taiwan, founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun. For more information see http://www.hsilai.org/en/e_hsilai/temple_history/history.htm.

14. Buddhahood being the final goal of Mahāyāna Buddhists, with certain texts seeing this as only attainable in a male body – though Arahatship, the main goal of Theravāda Buddhists, is seen as open to both men and women, albeit with Theravāda currently having only limited opportunities for higher ordination for women.

again as a woman until she reaches enlightenment in female form (Mackenzie 1998, 58). Ayya Medhanandi, a Canadian Buddhist nun in the Theravāda tradition, also expresses in her blog the belief that she is not defined by her gender, and does not have to be a male to become enlightened (Medhanandi 2006). Thus some Western Buddhists argue that they should have the ability to ordain if they choose and that women can be enlightened in female form.

Western Buddhists also advocate for modern ideas regarding gender using their interpretations of early Buddhism. These advocates for equal treatment argue that the cultural context of the Buddha's time was very different from that of the modern world, and therefore the rules the Buddha created can be more flexibly employed in the current era. Female Western Buddhists ask, who knows what the Buddha would have said if he appeared in the twenty-first century? Also, early male Buddhist writers are charged with adding misogynist lines to the Buddha's words.[15] A similar argument about early Buddhism is that women at that time were not accustomed to independence but relied on monks to guide them, thus having no other choice but to take a subordinate role (Tsedroen 1989, 47). These female Buddhists would argue that women and society are different today and Buddhist practices should be modernized to align with the current conditions. Thus they are hoping to update monasticism in order for it to fit in with Western sensibilities, and gender equality is one important way to do that.

Bhikkhu Sujato, an Australian monk ordained in Thailand and abbot of Santi Forest Monastery, has framed the issue of female ordination in terms of the discourse of human rights and gender equality. If Buddhism is seen as promoting equality, the argument is that it will appear more modern to the international community and thus be competitive in the Western spiritual marketplace. Sujato holds that *bhikkhunī* ordination

> is, as some women have reminded us, a human rights issue. It has become embarrassing, and will become an outright disgrace if Buddhism is publicly seen to contravene internationally accepted standards of gender equality. (Sujato 2006, 5)

Here Sujato is concerned that Buddhism is not progressive enough, that it may be seen as pre-modern, not living up to the Western standards of a viable and legitimate tradition. Bhikkhu Bodhi writes similarly that a *bhikkhunī* Saṅgha would

> win for Buddhism the respect of high-minded people in the world, who regard the absence of gender discrimination as the mark of a truly worthy religion in harmony with the noble trends of present-day civilization. (Bodhi 2009, 25).

Karma Lekshe Tsomo echoes this, as she writes that to

> ensure the success of *dharma* in the West, equality in the *sangha* is essential. If Buddhism is to be taken seriously in the long term, women must be granted equal opportunities in Buddhist institutions. (Tsomo 2002, 268).

She also reflects on international opinion when she states 'it will be hard for Buddhism to maintain its credibility as a liberating tradition if it fails to accord equal status to its own female clergy' (Tsomo 2000, xxii). Numrich also notes that Venerable Piyananda, a Sri Lankan monk and former abbot of the Buddhist Vihara

15. For example see: Tsomo (1989a). This trope is also seen in the chapters on Maurine Stuart, Jiyu Kennet, and Karuna Dharma in Friedman (2000).

of Los Angeles, has also advocated for higher ordination of women because of international opinion. He was concerned that the conservative approach might hurt Theravāda's effectiveness in reaching Westerners. He sees Western women turning to the Mahāyāna lineages so they can be ordained, as Theravāda is perceived as backwards and not developed enough (Numrich 1996, 60). Thus in the adaptation of Buddhism to the West, monks, both Asian and Western are realizing that in order to meet the needs of converts, they should cohere with modern standards of gender equality and human rights.

UNIVERSALIZATION

Some Western Buddhists argue that their environment can lead the way for the female Buddhist to flourish because of the West's position as a new Buddhist space. Judith Simmer-Brown, professor at Naropa University and an Acharya in the Shambhala tradition, in her online interview with Vince Horn of 'Buddhist Geeks', argues that over the course of the history of religions, women have had equal opportunities in the first generation of a new religion; however, in succeeding generations patriarchy has reasserted itself. She believes that American Buddhist women can maintain equal opportunities and help bring this equality to Asian Buddhists (Horn 2007c). Thubten Chodron argues similarly, in an interview on the same website, that gender-neutral Buddhist institutions are easier to create in Western countries. She believes that in Asia, Buddhism has existed for so long that it has stagnated (Horn 2007b). In an essay on Western Buddhist nuns, she writes, 'Western nuns are not bound by certain pressures [which exist] within Asian societies' (Chodron 2000, 22–23). Karuna Dharma, American Buddhist nun and student of the Vietnamese monk Ven.Thich Thien-An, looks to the future of gender equality among Buddhist monks and nuns in America in an interview with the popular magazine, *Tricycle*. She states, 'In America, *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* are going to be totally equal to each other' (Tweti 2006, 48). Thus for these Buddhists, the West represents a clean slate where a version of monasticism based on equality can prosper.

Although these Western Buddhists are hoping to lead the way to equality, the goal for these Western Buddhist women, ordained and lay, is gender equality for the whole international Buddhist community, not only for women in the West. Elizabeth Williams has observed that:

> Western women, unable to accept the submissive roles familiar to Southeast Asian women, have spearheaded the campaign to make them aware of their rightful place in monasticism as well as in the social order, resulting in the blossoming of a new, fully ordained female order. (Williams 2005, 13)

In order to bring awareness of the issues facing *bhikkhunīs* to all Buddhist women, Sakhyadhita [Daughters of the Buddha] International was founded in 1987 by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Ayya Khema, and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh.[16] Their mission is described in Karma Lekshe Tsomo's speech at the first Sakhyadhita Conference in 1987, where she stated 'Full ordination is equally as important for Asian nuns as for Western nuns' (Tsomo 1989b, 236), and it has been demonstrated in the international community of Buddhist nuns which has come

16. For more information see http://www.sakyadhita.org.

together for ten of these conferences held all over the world, the last one being in the summer of 2009. Besides conferences, Western women have also created monastic institutions in Asian countries. In 2000, Tenzin Palmo founded a nunnery in India for Tibetan nuns of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. Her purposes are to give nuns more opportunities after many years of neglect, and to attempt to reinstate the *yoginī* tradition.[17] Ayya Khema has also founded nunneries and retreat centres for women in Sri Lanka (Khema 1998, 163–186).[18] Their work clearly shows the international focus of Western Buddhist women.

But perhaps Western nuns are not paying enough attention to the differences between them and their Asian counterparts. The goals of Western Buddhist nuns can provoke tensions, as some Asian Buddhist women are not interested in the same aspirations. Hiroko Kawanami's article on the *bhikkhunī* debate in Burma describes the tensions between international nuns who promote liberal ideologies of gender equality and human rights, while Burmese nuns focus on traditional ideals of community and moral discipline (Kawanami 2007, 226–227). Moreover, Kawanami has found that Burmese women considered the Western Buddhist focus on equal status and power as an affront to their carefully cultivated moral purity and modesty (Kawanami 2007, 238). Here we see that some Western Buddhists are seen to be imposing their own view of authority onto the Buddhist tradition — without the consideration of local women. Barnes also writes that the international community envisions an order of nuns focused on meditation and social engagement, when these are not the ideals of Asian Buddhist women (Barnes 1996, 279). Thus Western Buddhists and Asian Buddhists can have different ideals of monasticism and of the institution's purpose. At the same time, both successful and so-far unsuccessful attempts at *bhikkhunī* revival have occurred in Asian countries;[19] however, the work of Western women in organizations such as Sakyadhita has certainly been able to garner more attention and awareness. Western Buddhists are therefore clearly attempting to create a global modern Buddhism that is reflected in gender equality of monastic institutions for both Western and Asian Buddhists.

CONCLUSION

Western Buddhists, as we have seen, have varying attitudes to and perceptions of monasticism. The institution in general is not ideal for some Western audiences — some feel that it is too restricting, doesn't allow for service in the world, and is anti-modern and patriarchal. But other Western Buddhist responses do find value in monasticism because it poses an alternative way of life to society and provides an ideal and model to strive for. In between these attitudes, the reformist pro-monastic response is more specific and argues for adaptation of the institution. With this response we see the argument that monasticism in the West should not simply be based on the Asian model. Instead it should incorporate familiar

17. For information on the nunnery see: http://www.gatsal.org/dgl_beginnings.html.

18. In Colombo, Sri Lanka, Ayya Khema set up the International Buddhist Women's Centre as a training centre for Sri Lankan nuns, and the Parappuduwa Nun's Island at Dodanduwa as a meditation retreat centre, especially for the training of nuns. See her memoir (1998) and: http://www.buddhanet.net/masters/ayya-khema.htm.

19. For a detailed list of these attempts in Burma and Thailand see Kawanami, 2007, 230, and for an overall survey, see Kieffer-Pülz (2005).

principles of freedom and equality. Both reformist and conservative responses show an awareness of those who critique monasticism, and combat this by arguing for the role of monasticism as a necessary component of Buddhism and its transition of Buddhism to the West.

The issue of female higher ordination further demonstrates the reformist pro-monastic response and the need to modify the institution for the West and the wider Buddhist community — though some reformists see a revival of the traditional *bhikkhunī* role as too restrictive, so that they prefer an adapted model that is also accorded respect equal to that of monks. It is important for Western Buddhists that all women have the choice to be fully ordained because this shows that Buddhism is a modern religion. It is argued that if Buddhism is modern then it can appeal to more Westerners. Once this happens, the Western form of monasticism can help to strengthen moves, in Asia, to improve the place of women monastics. We have seen that many Western Buddhists are concerned about how the international community perceives the tradition. They don't want to be seen as belonging to something that is underdeveloped and pre-modern, so they make arguments as to its flexibility and advocate for equality. In this way, Buddhists in the West argue that Buddhism can become a more global tradition — not bound by the perceived cultural particularities of Asian Buddhist countries.

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