

Report on the 16th Annual Western Buddhist Monastic Conference November 8-12, 2010

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Monastic Gathering 2011

In the early nineties, American nuns from the Tibetan tradition conceived the idea of a Western Buddhist monastic gathering. They planned to invite Western monks and nuns of different traditions to talk, to enjoy each other's company, to find out more about each other, and strengthen connections among the greater Western Sangha. This evolved into a four-day conference, limited to forty participants, with the hosting center providing lodging and meals as Dana.

The 2010 conference was the 16th Annual Western Buddhist Monastic Conference. The theme was "Reflections on Renunciation: the Practice of Vinaya in the 21st Century." The Vinaya is described by I. B. Horner as "the discipline governing and regulating the outward life of the monks and nuns who had entered the monastic Orders." The Patimokkha contains the training guidelines that are recited on Uposatha days which occur approximately every two weeks on the new and full moon.

This past year the conference was held at Vajrapani Institute, a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center located in the Santa Cruz Mountains in Boulder Creek, California. The speakers and their topics were: Bhikkhu Bodhi—Continuity and Transformation: The Challenge of Monastic Discipline in an Age of Moral

Relativism; Ajahn Anandabodhi—Picking Up the Threads; Ven. Thubten Chodron—Vinaya as Practice at Sravasti Abbey: Practical Applications in Modern Times; Rev. Seikai Leubk—The Relationship Between the OBC and the Vinaya; Ven. Jian Hu—What to Preserve and What to Change? (Regarding the Monastic Tradition in the West); Ven. Thubten Saldon—The challenges of living the monastic life when such communities are rare.

The goal of the organizers was to encourage lively discussion, promote mingling and harmony, ensure that the people who normally would not talk be heard, and that wisdom and kindness prevail. For this reason, small groups were formed after each main speaker's presentation. At mealtime, the participants were encouraged to sit with people they haven't met yet. This strategy for social interaction helped make the conference a success. Several participants commented that the small group forums were helpful and appreciated.

The first day a Pali meal blessing was given and the evening chanting was Pali. The second day, the meal blessing and evening chanting were from the Chinese tradition. The third day, these were conducted as in the Tibetan tradition.

Three versions of Vinaya are in use today. Three others are available to scholars for research but are not in use. The variety derives from geographical location and school of emphasis. Those in the Theravada tradition from Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, or Sri Lanka use the Theravada or Pali Vinaya. The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya is used by those in or from China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan. The Mulasarvastivada Vinaya is used by those in or from Tibet and Mongolia. Today in the Western hemisphere, the Vinaya used is related to the culture and tradition of the individual or community. All three versions are similar in content.

Some differences among the Vinaya versions occur in how the Patimokkha rules are presented. For instance, a paragraph that is considered one rule in one version might be broken down into several rules in another version. Other differences occur in the detail and explanation of the guideline. The Vinaya is more than just the training guidelines; it contains

illuminating background and commentary on behavior that is wholesome or unwholesome, on what will benefit the Sangha and what will not.

Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Patimokkhas vary in length, contain similar as well as different rules, and are not recited together. For example, the Theravada Bhikkhuni Patimokkha has 311 rules and the Bhikkhu Patimokkha has 227 rules, some of which spell out how bhikkhus should treat bhikkhunis. Most of the rules are believed to have been made as incidents arose and were brought to the attention of the Buddha to address. If a complaint was brought against an ordained Sangha member, the Buddha created a training guideline.

Scholars are sifting through the Pali canon, first written in Sinhalese on palm leaves. They are considering the provenance of the texts, the culture of the translators, and location of the materials and other aspects to decipher what fits and what may have been added or changed. It is generally acknowledged that when an individual reports what he or she has heard, they will present the report based on their own point of view and so may introduce something not present in the original telling. However, it is also accepted that the oral tradition in use at the time of the Buddha and afterward reproduced what was heard with striking accuracy. Scholars continue to inform us what may or may not have been given by the Buddha.

At least thirty-seven out of forty participants were in accord that literal translation of the Vinaya is not always appropriate. Differences in interpretation are subject to myriad influences. We all benefit by remaining flexible and charitable in our interpretation and application. If one monk interprets the training guideline on “not handling gold or silver” as not touching any kind of currency, and another understands that one is not to spend money for personal gain and uses currency, both are right for themselves at that time. If one monk is able to remain in seclusion as a homeless person and is supported by laity for all their requisites, they are fulfilling Vinaya guidelines. Another monk may need to get a job, go to school, and live in ways that require one to use money to support oneself. That person is also fulfilling Vinaya as long as they are not using money for personal gain. One way is not better than the other as long as both continue to grow in virtue, kindness, and wisdom.

The Korwat (Manual of Monastic Etiquette) of Wat Pah Nanachat addresses how to view variety in application of Vinaya very succinctly by quoting an education in loving kindness from Luang Por Chah. He said: “It’s not right to watch others with a fault finding mind. This won’t help your practice at all. If you feel annoyed, observe that annoyance in your heart. If other people’s sila is not perfect or they do not behave like good monks, it is not your job to be judgmental. You won’t become wise by watching and blaming others. The

Vinaya is a tool to assist you in developing Samadhi Bhavana. It is not a weapon for finding fault or judging who’s good and who’s bad. No one can practice for you, and you can’t practice for anyone else. So be mindful of your own behavior, this is the path of practice.” This reflects the attitude of the monks and nuns at this gathering.

Many people cherish the Vinaya. The practice of discipline teaches through mind and body awareness. It is not separate from dhamma. The application of the Vinaya in the modern Western

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world can be confusing so it was very helpful to discuss issues such as travel and funding for requisites. Many came away from the conference with greater confidence, happiness, and relief from the clarification that the Vinaya Patimokkha contains training guidelines, not commandments. Adherence to the training guidelines as a standard of conduct ensures wholesome behavior, benefits all beings, and encourages interest in the Buddha Dhamma. Heartfelt wholesome conduct shines like gold. It was agreed at the conference that the Vinaya should not and cannot be changed, but that there are times when certain rules can be set aside by individuals or communities to be re-examined at a later date. It is important to look at the stories explaining the guideline to glean the spirit of the training guideline.

Among the presentations, one of the most touching was given by a nun who in the past said she had looked down on all renunciates that didn’t live by what she then called “strict Vinaya.” She thought she was better than they were. Then her circumstances altered and she had to use money, among other changes, and was totally humbled. She was not humbled because of having to adapt and vary the “strict Vinaya” she had previously observed but because she now had insight into the lack of compassion and loving kindness she had shown others.

It can be unclear what is Vinaya and what is etiquette derived from the culture or tradition. For instance, the Vinaya states that the robe of a renunciate should be a certain size but some of those that claim to abide by “strict Vinaya” use a larger size. That is actu-

ally against the guidelines but because it became a cultural norm to have a six-foot by nine-foot robe, it is allowed and persists. The guideline states that one should cut down the robe to appropriate size, which is about six by three and half feet. Those also claiming to hold to “strict Vinaya” would not be able to use a modern flush toilet as the guideline stipulates one must not urinate in water. Some deal with this “problem” by “confessing” the offense and turning around and repeating the offense over and over again. Others don’t “confess” the offense because they feel that confessing and then repeating the offense is not a true “confession.” These may sound like trivial examples to some but keep in mind that those who claim “strict Vinaya” are usually the ones who criticize and rebuke those who don’t keep a “strict Vinaya.”

Another example brought up at the conference is the timing of the Rains Retreat. It usually runs through the summer for three months, beginning in late June or early July. During the rainy season in India, the monsoon made travel difficult. Monastics could easily ruin crops and kill living beings by walk-

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ing on them during this time. That reasoning does not apply to the same time period here in the States. Our most difficult time to travel in the States is usually December through March, but many are unwilling to change the time of the Rains Retreat here.

We also talked about what is not covered in any Vinaya. How do you use the spirit of the Vinaya to make guidelines for modern circumstances such as Internet usage? A nun or monk could claim to be abiding by “strict Vinaya” and still spend eighteen hours a day on the Internet because there are no training guidelines in the Vinaya forbidding it. Other topics discussed were cell phone and computer use.

The term “strict Vinaya” was deemed objectionable by the majority at the conference due to its inherent divisiveness, elevation of self and denigration of others, judgment, measuring, and comparing. As the numbers of people drawn to Buddhism grow in the West, renunciates representing the Buddha must take great care to develop and promote wisdom and kindness and not try for “one-upmanship” or competition by comparing different individuals, traditions, or ways of applying the Vinaya. Westerners are trained by the media, by our culture, by our history to be critical, judgmental, and competitive. This is a big drawback to overcome. It is one where we can make an enormous difference in this culture and in the world.

Another issue discussed was to whom these guidelines apply. We have federal, state, county, and city laws, even neighborhood laws. A neighborhood law can legislate what color you paint your house because the majority of residents want the neighborhood to look a certain way. These neighbors have agreed to abide by these laws in order to live harmoniously. The neighborhood across the river may have different laws. The Patimokkha is like neighborhood law. It says there must be at least four fully ordained monks or four fully ordained nuns comprising a local community (neighborhood) in order to recite the rules on Uposatha days (full and new moon days). It is debated how to determine what even this means. Four fully ordained renunciates living in proximity may choose to come together to recite the Patimokkha but can also choose not to gather together for this.

Interpretation of Vinaya is decided by individuals and communities alike and varies widely. So many factors affect translation. Because of this, it is sometimes easier to rely on tradition rather than to investigate thoroughly what the rule is and apply that understanding sincerely. It can also be difficult to go against tradition. Buddhist renunciates in some situations may know what they are doing does not follow Vinaya guidelines, but they adhere to tradition over Vinaya out of fear of repercussion from others. They may face judgment, ridicule, and ostracism by other renunciates and even laity.

Translation of the Dhamma Vinaya should not be attempted simply through scholarship but needs insight developed through meditation and reflection as well. Each situation as it arises must be treated according to what is discerned in that moment with all the wisdom the individual has attained. That’s a lot of mindfulness! So practice comes to the fore as a leading element in accurate translation. Sometimes this is overlooked. That is where the value of an experienced and practicing teacher comes in.

Buddhism in the West has been filtered through Asian culture. The flavor, customs, and etiquette of the fostering culture or tradition took root here and are often assumed to be integral to Vinaya. We have a responsibility to clarify the

difference. The hazards of comparing, judging, and attachment to personal preferences were discussed. The fetter of fixation on rules and ritual was also examined.

Renouncing worldly pursuits of family, fame, and fortune are not generally well regarded in the West. This culture works hard to deny any association of family, fame, and fortune with greed, hatred and delusion. In the West, work is expected from everyone. Supporting oneself and one's family is a primary factor in evaluating an individual or group's function in society. A beggar is regarded as a pariah. Bowing is done only to royalty; prostrations might be used in an abject plea for life. In Asian cultures, bowing is de rigeur and children do prostrations of respect and love for their parents, grandparents, and teachers. To give without expecting something in return is actively taught to children in the East, however that is not the case in the West. What is acceptable for

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those from Asian cultures may not be acceptable to Westerners. The benefit of change in either case should to be evaluated on a situational basis while remaining open-minded and flexible at the same time.

It is a challenge to stand your ground, support your own decision making process, and be confident that you are doing the best you can. As the Buddha taught near the time of his death and is preserved for us in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta: "Rely on yourself, you are the light, don't rely on anyone else. The dhamma is the light, rely on the dhamma, don't rely on anything else." Networking with others in similar circumstances at events such as this conference helps to sustain the practice by validating or illuminating the paths we tread.

Support for living as a Buddhist monastic is extremely difficult to obtain in this culture, especially for women. Because of this, many ordained renunciates have to work for a living. Some drive cars, handle money, go to school, and pay taxes. Many have no health insurance or must work to obtain it. Those who are supported generally have a Laity Sangha of Asian culture that is accustomed to providing requisites for monastics. The attainment a renunciate can reach in seclusion or in the monastic environment is not apparent to the casual Western eye. There is little under-

standing of the life of a renunciate. Ordained Western Buddhists benefit themselves as well as lay practitioners if they become involved in their communities and explore various avenues of outreach, including directing centers and offering educational programs. We are generating and nurturing an embryonic Laity Sangha, not serving one already extant. Recently a highly respected lay Buddhist teacher, considered a master by many, told a Theravada nun that she "doesn't want an arahant (at her center) because they are useless." That's the sort of thinking we are struggling with.

We believe that we should allow each individual to practice the Vinaya as they see fit. We are not to judge each other by "our" standards. We need to agree to disagree and focus on our own practice. Living dhamma is what is important. The dhamma came before the Vinaya and that needs to happen here.

Let's end with a verse from the Pali Canon:

"Renunciates, more than 150 training rules come up for recitation every fortnight, in reference to which young people desiring the goal train themselves. There are these three trainings in which they (the training rules) are all contained. What three? The training in heightened virtue, the training in heightened mind, the training in heightened discernment. These are the three trainings in which they are all contained..."

"There is the case, renunciates, where a renunciate is fully accomplished in Virtue, Stillness, and Discernment. With reference to the lesser and minor training rules, offenses are committed and then redeemed. Why is that? Because it happens. But as for the training rules that are basic to renunciation and proper to renunciation, Virtue is steadfast and firm. Having undertaken them, one trains in reference to the training rules. Because of the ending of (mental) effluents, one dwells in the awareness-release and discernment-release that are free from effluent, having known and made them manifest for oneself right in the present..."

"Those who are partially accomplished attain a part; those who are wholly accomplished, the whole. The training guidelines, I say, are not in vain." (AN III.87-88)

"If you want to end suffering, drop your story, that's what it boils down to...How do you do that? I'll show you." Raised a fundamentalist Christian, daughter of a preacher in the Closed Plymouth Brethren, in the American Midwest, Ven. Madika has survived and learned a great deal to come to her present incarnation as a Western Theravada nun. Incorporating techniques and tools that have helped her, she regularly offers a workshop entitled "Freedom from Disturbing Emotions" that is both entertaining and empowering. She also teaches a form of Qigong called "Awakening Stillness."

