

The cart before the horse

What is your opinion of the development of Buddhism in the West?

"Maybe I've got it all wrong, maybe I have misunderstood everything, but a letter I received from a layman in Germany some time ago made me ponder. I sometimes get the impression that Buddhism in Germany proceeds in a different way from Buddhism in Thailand. In Germany, laypeople seem to have claimed ownership of the Dhamma Vinaya, and seem to think they are authorities on the matter.

I often hear them say, "this is the Dhamma and that is not" or "monks must behave like this and not like that". They claim that a Buddhist monk should not teach the Dhamma, as his main role is to do the practice and clean himself of the kilesas (defilements). In a sense, this is understandable because the Dhamma was brought from Asia to Europe by laypeople, through their translations of the scriptures. Thus, the situation in the West is completely the reverse of the situation in Asia, where monks are the carriers of the Dhamma Vinaya and are authorities on the teachings. In Asia, monks carried the teachings from one country to another during the spread of Buddhism.

Of course, maybe the Asian world has misunderstood the situation all these years! Maybe the Lord Buddha himself was not a monk at all, but a layman who taught the Dhamma only to those laypeople with 'a little dust in their eyes', so it could be preserved in that way. And maybe the remaining laypeople with 'a little more dust in their eyes' had to become monks to cleanse themselves rigorously before being able to receive the Dhamma and become laypersons full of wisdom! This may be the view of some Western scholars, who knows? If so, it might explain why some Buddhist laypeople, who look after monks and provide them with the four requisites, feel free to criticise and to tell monks what they are and are not allowed to do – just like the beautiful old German saying that as long as you have your feet under our table, you have to behave yourself and do what we think is right. If the Buddha was not a monk and was primarily teaching laypeople, then this all makes sense; a layperson is allowed to criticise because he already has an exalted status, whereas a monk is not allowed to criticise because he still has to cleanse himself of the 'little more dust' that remains in his eyes'!

This raises an interesting question for me as a monk. Why do people in the West feel the need for a monastic sangha if they think they are so better informed about the Dhamma Vinaya? Personally, it makes me feel like a cheap replica or a Buddhist statue which exists simply to complete the Buddhist picture. Interestingly, you can come across this kind of 'relief-like' monk in smaller Thai Buddhist temples in Germany; they must not say 'boo' but instead sit quietly so that laypeople can give gifts to obtain merit (which, apparently, cannot be obtained unless there are monks sitting there) or sit and chant blessings to bring good luck to people, their homes or their cars.

For me, this is evidence that things are the wrong way round. But, as I said, maybe I am not seeing things correctly; perhaps the majority of laypeople do not act like this. For me, the Lord Buddha was the first Buddhist monk, and his Sangha was the communion of realised Noble Ones, along with ordinary monks and nuns. The Lord Buddha taught the Dhamma and Vinaya to monks and nuns, the monks themselves recited it and preserved it orally, and later it was written down. It was the Lord Buddha and his monks who passed the Dhamma on to the laity. In fact, the Lord Buddha allowed only monks who had finished their work, i.e.

become Arahants, to carry his Dhamma to other regions to teach the people there. The Lord Buddha did not impose the monastic Vinaya on the laity, but he made it the duty of monks to recite the Vinaya rules every two weeks to ensure that the Vinaya was respected by them. He also advised monks not stay in regions where they would be unable to comply with Dhamma Vinaya, as the people in these places would not have enough merit for the Dhamma to flourish.

In the West, the teachings arrived in the opposite way; Dhamma Vinaya was not brought to the West by Buddhist monks but by laypeople, so the laity today sees itself as the guardian of the Dhamma Vinaya and as the teacher of the Dhamma. To me, it seems like the Western world has started off on the wrong foot. Whether this can be changed, or whether it is desirable to change it, is a matter for western Buddhist laypeople themselves to decide.

According to the Lord Buddha, Buddhism helps laypeople to improve their lives and their societies, but does not lead to the end of dukkha. Only celibacy and asceticism, in accord with the practice of sila, samadhi and panna (exemplified by monastic Buddhism), leads to the realization of the supreme goal: the freedom from dukkha and the attainment of nibbana.

Please forgive my critical view of these things, but this is my deepest conviction. Every one of you is free to choose what to do with your life – whether to improve or deteriorate, to continue going round in samsara (the cycle of rebirth) or to try to break out in this lifetime. Everyone has to decide, and take responsibility for his own life."