

Greetings to my Buddhist monk friend,

January 25, 2008

Thanks for your emails that I received. I greatly appreciate your advice and concern about me and my progress toward Buddhist nirvana. I have actually been thinking a lot about this matter over the last few months, and I really wanted to talk with you more about it when I was in Los Angeles. But then things got so busy with teaching. And especially after I went to the Indian reservations in Arizona and New Mexico, there just was not enough time before I had to return to Thailand.

I really wanted to pursue the ideas that you and I discussed, about us approaching the Cambodian monks there for me to be ordained as a monk. I still like the idea, but there are questions in my mind as a result of seeing how the monkhood actually operates in Thailand that make me feel a bit conflicted about pursuing this option for my life. I continue to love Buddhism, as a philosophy and as an approach to life. And the monkhood could be an ideal way to practice Buddhism. But my observations in Thailand lead me to feel that the monkhood is flawed. Here is the critique that I have come to have, concerning this all-too-human institution.

First, it is sexist. For over twenty years I have been teaching in a Gender Studies Program at USC that is committed to gender equity. How can I, who am committed to gender equality, support an institution which perpetuates male superiority? I am not saying that monks act sexist, since I have always seen monks act equally toward everyone. But the very fact that nuns are considered much lower, while monks are held in highest regard, shows the sexism of the institution as it exists in Thai Buddhism. In other Buddhist countries, like Korea and Taiwan, great progress has been made, and nuns and monks are virtually equal. Nuns can rise as high in the Buddhist hierarchy as monks, and each person is judged on the basis of their capability rather than their sex. Thai Buddhists could accomplish similar equality quite easily, in fact, because Thai culture is much less male-dominant than Korean or Chinese culture. But nothing substantial has been done in Thailand. The reasoning that people always give, that the line of nuns died out in Thailand and so there is no continuous line of authority through the generations, is merely an excuse for inaction. The Buddha taught that different times require different approaches, and one must remain flexible in life. It would be very easy for Buddhist authorities to send nuns for ordination in other countries, and/or for them to bring authorities from other countries to reestablish the nun hierarchy here, so that future generations of nuns could be ordained in Thailand. But until girls are given equal encouragement to become nuns as boys are given to become monks, until equal amounts of money are provided for the education of novice nuns and for the support of nuns as are provided for the education and support of monks, and until nuns can rise to positions of authority over other nuns as leading monks hold positions of authority over other monks, then Thai Buddhism is weakened by its unequal treatment of male monks and female nuns.

Second, Thai Buddhism is not sexually liberated. Unlike what you told me, my observation is that most monks take their vows of being non-sexual quite literally. They do not even think it is right for monks or novices even to masturbate. The minority of

monks who are sexual in their private behavior do so with either shame or hypocrisy. They think what they are doing is wrong, and they are terrified that anyone might find out that they are being sexual. When I was living at a wat, the only reason that some of the gay monks were nervous about my presence in their wat was their intense fear that I would write a book that would talk about monks who are gay and sexually active. Only a few monks are truly sexually liberated, being sexually active and thinking that there is nothing wrong with them for doing so.

In my mind, as we have discussed, sex should be presented by a religion as a good and positive thing. This is the general approach of Thai Buddhism for laypeople, but the prohibition of any kind of eroticism for monks and nuns is in contradiction to this sex-positive message for people in general. As you know, I think there are specific reasons why monks and nuns should not have heterosexual intercourse. If monks and nuns engage in heterosexual intercourse, there is the possibility of pregnancy. If a monk or nun has a child, then that person's attention inevitably has to shift to take care of that child. Monks and nuns should devote themselves wholeheartedly to helping the community as a whole. If they are spending their time taking care of their children, they cannot be an effective monk or nun.

However, I feel that monks and nuns should be able to freely engage in solitary and mutual masturbation, as well as other same-sex erotic activities, which do not result in pregnancy. Perhaps a good rule, to keep it equal for everyone, is to say that monks or nuns should not engage in intercourse (either penile-vaginal or penile-anal), but otherwise they are free to engage in other acts of erotic enjoyment. If monks and nuns were able to be openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered, then that would allow the monasteries to become an attractive resource for sexual minorities. There should be an order of transgender male-to-female nuns, as well as transgender female-to-male monks.

Thai Buddhism is, in its general attitude toward sex for laypeople, remarkably free and open. I just wish it would take a similar attitude toward sexual enjoyment for monks and nuns. This is the approach that we take in the Buddhist Universal Association, but I wish this approach could be adopted by Theravada Buddhism.

My critique of Buddhist attitudes toward sex for monks and nuns is part of a larger critique of the idea of the monkhood. There are so many rigid rules for monks. I have talked with a monk who had a heart attack, and the doctor recommended that he should run every day. The monk felt running was against the rules for monks, so he left the monkhood so he could preserve his health. Thus, an effective and dedicated monk was lost to society. How many other effective monks leave the monkhood because they cannot keep up with all the rules? In my own case, I enjoy dancing. Since dancing is prohibited for monks, I would have to forego this enjoyable activity if I became ordained.

Moreover, there are rules for monks and novices that are downright unhealthy. Medical evidence shows clearly that growing adolescent boys need regular ingestion of food. Yet, the rigid rule that says even novices must avoid eating from noon until morning is not good for their development. Medical evidence shows that regular masturbation and

ejaculation is beneficial for the long-term health of adolescent boys. Buddhist practices that prohibit monks and novices from regular eating, exercise, and masturbation are really unhealthy.

A century ago, when the American radical Emma Goldman went to visit the new Soviet Union, and she was shocked at the rules and prohibitions that the Soviets imposed, she stated: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." In other words, what she was saying is that the enjoyments of life are so important that any institution which tries to prohibit them is flawed.

This long list of prohibited activities for monks is, along with the sexist attitudes toward nuns, the great flaw of Theravada Buddhism. Religion should promote enjoyment and appreciation for all aspects of life, for everyone, including monks and nuns.

This enjoyment of life, that the laypeople engage in, is the reason I think I have become attracted to the daily life of these villagers. I can enjoy dancing, eating whenever I want to, and having sex on a daily basis without the need to hide or feel hypocritical. Where Buddhism is so valuable as an approach toward life is to see the need for The Middle Way. That is, not engaging in any activity to such an extreme that it damages the quality of life in general, but at the same time not feeling the need to prohibit or avoid anything.

The Buddha preached flexibility and moderation as his approach to life. Yet, after his death, the institution of the monkhood that emerged set a slew of rigid rules for monks that violates the very nature of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha taught that he was not a god, yet the way some Thai people bow to his statue and pray for his help seems extremely close to the way Christians do the same thing to the cross. I have seen Thai people bowing to the statue of the Buddha, wearing a Buddha necklace, and treating monks as virtual gods. Yet, they do not follow the teachings of the Buddha in their daily practice. Which do you think the Buddha would more greatly respect, a person who bows to his statue, or a person who follows his teachings?

Right now, there is a controversy going on in this village that personifies the different sides of my interests in Thailand. On the one side are the villagers, who gave their hard-earned money to build a new temple. On the other side is the monk at the village's wat. The monk has taken the people's money and is spending it as he sees fit, with no accounting given to the people. There was a big meeting last week, in which the villagers angrily confronted him. He stubbornly and arrogantly refused to provide them with any receipts or accounting for how he is spending the money. He bought a new car, and hired a driver, leading the villagers to suspect that he is using the money for his own needs rather than for the temple construction. Whether the monk is properly spending the money or not, he should not be arrogant toward the people. The Buddha taught that people should be humble and compassionate toward everyone. In my opinion, this monk is not acting in the model of the Buddha. I take the side of the villagers, and in this incident as in my approach to daily life in general, I find the life of the villagers to be more attractive than the life of the rigid rule-bound authoritarian monks.

Perhaps this is, ultimately, why I chose to live as a layperson, as part of this village rather than to ordain as a monk.

I would like to see Buddhism develop a different model. If it develops monasteries, I want them to be flexible not rule-bound, meek and compassionate not arrogant and rigidly devoted to stupid rules that violate all reason and are slavishly continued just because they were put in place many generations ago.

In March my Thai visa ends, and I have to leave Thailand and then I can reenter later. My plan is to go to Cambodia then. I want to see what the attitudes are toward monks in Cambodia. If they are more in accord with my preferences then I may in fact pursue ordination there. But at this point I feel that my life is better as a lay person living in this village, as part of the village, than as an ordained Thai monk.

My feelings could change, and I do not want to remain unflexible. So, I continue to benefit from your thoughts and suggestions. I would greatly appreciate your reactions to what I have said here. Whether I am a monk or a layperson, I want to continue to follow a Buddhist approach to my life. I am happy here, and want to remain so.

My very best wishes to you, for your good health and happiness,
Walter