

Modern Buddhism: Issues and Challenges

Will Monastic Buddhism Survive?

Historically, monasticism has been a key aspect of Buddhist life and practice. Buddhist monasticism is one of the earliest still surviving forms of organized monasticism in religious history. It is also a fundamental institution within Buddhism. Monks and nuns play a very important role as they are believed to be responsible for preserving and disseminating The Buddha's teachings and guiding the Buddhist lay community. (Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Different schools of Buddhism have differing positions on the role of monks and nuns. Monasticism is most important in Theravada and Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhist traditions. Mahayana Buddhism does not place as much importance on the monk ideal as the two other branches. Therefore, in China and Japan and other places where Mahayana Buddhism dominates, the notion of a monk as an ideal is less important. Nonetheless, monks have traditionally been an important part of religious life in Theravada-dominated countries. For example, in Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Tibet, even today, teenage boys and young men are expected to serve as monks for a period of some months, if not years.

Traditionally, Buddhist monks and nuns are expected to fulfill a variety of roles in the communities in which they live. Most importantly, they are expected to preserve the foundational doctrines and discipline of Buddhism. The disciplinary rules for monks and nuns were intended to create a life that is simple and focused. Celibacy was and still is a key requirement of the monastic

Monastic Tradition in Buddhism

Traditionally, Buddhism placed central importance on the order, the *Sangha*, and the role of monks and nuns in the *Sangha*. In many ways, the heart of the Buddhist movement was and still is centred on the monastic tradition of *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis*. Most monks live in monastic communities. Some join when they are as young as seven, but one can join at any age. A novice is called a *samanera* and a full monk is called a *bikkhu*. Monks (and nuns) are trained for the monastic order and the *Vinaya* which consists of 227 rules (more for nuns). Monks and nuns are expected to be celibate and abstain from any kind of sexual behaviour. This includes suggestive speech or physical contact that has a lustful intent. To avoid misunderstandings, it is a general principle for monks and nuns to refrain from any physical contact with members of the opposite sex.



Figure 67: Meditating monk

discipline, and is a major factor in distinguishing the life of a monastic from that of a lay practitioner. Depending on the specific Buddhist tradition and the requirements of observation, monastics may eat only one meal a day, which must be provided either by direct donations of food from the lay community, or from a monastery kitchen that is supplied by and may be staffed by lay volunteers. (Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Monks and nuns are also expected to be role models or living examples of exemplary Buddhist practice for the lay community. They provide an opportunity for lay followers to earn “merit” by offering gifts to and supporting monks and nuns. In return for the support received from the lay members, monks and nuns are expected to live a simple and austere life: one that is focused on the study of Buddhism, meditation, and propagating a good moral character. (Bhikkhu Bodhi)

As Buddhism has spread throughout the contemporary world, however, there are many who question the need to continue to have monastic Sangha as an essential aspect of modern Buddhism. This is especially true in the West. There are many challenges and difficulties associated with Buddhism in the West, such as forming and sustaining monastic communities, keeping Buddhist precepts, and spreading the *Dharma* in places where most people have no sense of the traditions and requirements of monks and nuns. (Bodhi, Shi Jian Hu, Seager)

For some, monasticism is simply an outdated institution. These people highlight the significant contributions made by lay scholars and the important roles Buddhist teachers have played and continue to play in many temples, meditation centres, and Buddhist communities. Some question whether Buddhist teachings should or can flow solely through a “lay Sangha,” through lay teachers and lay practitioners. Others wonder if monastics are still necessary, and argue that changes are required in their roles and lifestyles to align with current needs and contexts. This is particularly true in the West, where many see a need for changes in lifestyle and orientation to respond to the new conditions imposed by the Western culture in which Buddhism has taken root.

Some schools have attempted to modernize their ordination practices. For example, the New Kadampa Tradition has a simplified process for ordination. It requires ten vows to be taken that are intended to summarize the entire *Vinaya*, and there is a single ordination ceremony. As well, the ten vows in the New Kadampa Tradition ordination are the same for both nuns and monks. In other cases, monks in the West have other jobs to help sustain their roles, as the donating of alms to monks and nuns is new to Western lay Buddhists.

Thus, it is almost inevitable that in Canada, in the West, and to some degree in the East, Buddhist monasticism will evolve and change over time in different ways. Some of these changes will result from Buddhism adapting to the specific cultural and socio-political environment of Western nations, cultures, and modes of understanding, which differ so much from the cultures and world view of traditional Asian cultures and communities.

The push for change is not solely occurring in the West. In the East, in traditionally Buddhist nations, the role and place of Buddhist monks and nuns is increasingly being challenged. In many nations, there has been significant decline in the number of monks and nuns. In an age of consumerism, technology and social media, individual expression, globalization, and social freedom, youth are less motivated to take up a monastic life. In many Buddhist majority nations, the number of people making the choice to become a monk or a nun has declined dramatically. (Dipananda) For example,

- In Taiwan, many monasteries are underpopulated or closed. Due to concern for the future of Buddhism in Taiwan, many Vietnamese monks are being trained in Buddhist colleges in Vietnam and will move to Taiwan to assume a leadership role in its monasteries after completing their studies. (Williamson)
- In Korea, the Jogye Order that was first established in 1395 in Seoul and is the leading order of Zen Buddhism in Korea, has experienced a sharp decline in the number of young males becoming monks. It is estimated that, in the last few decades, the Order has seen a decline of 30% to 50% in the number of young people joining the Order. Generally, Korea's Buddhist monks make a long-term commitment, dedicating decades of their life to being a monk. In contrast, in Thailand, it is customary to become a monk for a much shorter period, even three to six months, and then return to lay society. For many Koreans, they simply do not wish to dedicate a decade or more to monastic life, meditating and learning in a temple, isolated in a mountain or a far away temple. As well, fewer are willing to take on the great responsibility of being a monk or nun. (Zhe)

As a result, the role monastics play in Western Buddhism will likely differ in important ways from the lifestyle and role they traditionally played in Asia. Historically, Buddhism has adapted to the cultures and social contexts of the places where it has taken root. As such, it can be expected that change is not only inevitable but also healthy and normal. As these adaptations and changes occur, they may be seen as evidence of Buddhism's ability to adapt to different cultural and social conditions, and a sign of enduring spiritual strength.

There are several ways that the role of monks and nuns are changing and will change in the West and possibly other parts of the world. Two of these are discussed under the following two sections of this document: Leveling of Roles and Practices and Social Engagement.

Leveling of Roles and Practices

From a traditional Buddhist point of view, the monastic *Sangha* is necessary for the successful dissemination, expansion, and continuity of Buddhism. This is because the monastic *Sangha* ensures the continuity of the Triple Gem or Triceps of Buddhism. (Bodhi, Loy)

Traditionally, one of the governing principles of Buddhist culture is that there are natural differences among people based on family background, social

class, wealth, race, education, and other factors. These differences confer privileges for some but not for others. From a traditionalist understanding, monastics and laity occupy different strata in terms of their positions and duties within Buddhism. Within the monastic community, it is expected that monastics will respect and defer to senior members of the *Sangha*. (Bodhi, Seager)

It is difficult to make generalizations about Buddhist leadership structures. Buddhist organizational structures vary from region to region and from sect to sect. Some are strictly hierarchical while others are not. Likewise, some have central governing bodies while others do not. In some countries, the leadership structures are aligned with the government but in others they are oriented toward the community. Consequently, making generalizations about Buddhist hierarchies is difficult.

A few generalizations can nevertheless be made. In almost all cases, there is some form of hierarchy that may be based on education, experience, or accomplishment. While individual relationships of teacher/student, senior/junior, and preceptor/trainee may be observed among groups of monastics, generally there are no formal positions, nor is there any authority to give orders or commands invested in senior monks.

Generally, monasteries are democratic and non-authoritarian institutions run for monks by monks, who keep the monastery going. In Theravada Buddhism, there has not been an overarching theocratic structure with a leader like the Pope or Dalai Lama. In fact, even the Dalai Lama is not really the leader of Tibetan Buddhism. In reality, he is the highest-ranking monk at Buddhism's main monastery in Tibet and traditionally has been responsible for the governing of Tibet.

The hierarchies tend to exist mostly on the monastery level with abbots or senior monks serving as leaders of the monastery. An abbess or abbot, typically a senior monastic still young enough to be active, is usually responsible for the day-to-day administration of the monastery, and may appoint others to assist with the work. In some traditions, the abbess/abbot is chosen by a vote of the monastics in a monastery. In other traditions (Thailand, for example), the abbot is chosen by the lay community.

Lay people are expected to provide monks and nuns with their material needs, undertake precepts, engage in devotional practices to acquire merit, and practice meditation, usually under the guidance of monks. Monks, in contrast, practice intensive meditation, study the sacred texts, conduct ceremonies, and provide the lay community with teachings and examples of a dedicated Buddhist life.

This stratification within Buddhist communities is typical in the majority of traditional Buddhist cultures and societies. The distinction and differences in roles and practices is based on the belief that the Buddhist person is not yet ready for deeper *Dharma* study and intensive meditative practice, and

will need to work further to gradually achieve a mature understanding of Buddhism through faith, devotion, and accomplishing good deeds.

In Western society and many other modern societies, however, the idea of a stratified society and corresponding privileges is often contested. In many contemporary societies, there are efforts to level such social distinctions. This is an important aspect of contemporary societies that value democracy and human rights principles. Thus, from a contemporary, egalitarian viewpoint, everyone has an equal claim to their fundamental human rights. Everyone is entitled to have the opportunity to participate in any worthwhile social endeavour or institution; everyone's opinions merit consideration; and no one has an intrinsic right to privilege and entitlement. (Bodhi, Seager)

In modern Western Buddhism, the traditional stratification in roles and practice between monastics and the laity has, to a large degree, been disregarded. This has resulted in the overturning of the classical monastic-laity distinction in two ways. First, most lay people do not accept the traditional understanding of a lay person's limitations with respect to role and practice. They seek access to the *Dharma* fully in terms of full depth of understanding and range. Many contemporary lay Buddhists study Buddhist sacred texts, even the most challenging and complex philosophical works that traditional Buddhists regard as the domain of monastics. They undertake intensive meditation, and seek to achieve the higher stages of *samadhi* (stages of meditative absorption) and insight and even achieve the rank of the *ariyans* (Pali term meaning noble ones who have realized one of the four stages of holiness). (Bodhi, Seager)

A second challenge to the traditional monastic-lay distinction is in the growth in the number of lay Buddhists who occupy the position of *Dharma* teachers with authority that historically was usually reserved for monks. There has been a shift away from the traditional nucleus of the Buddhist community, which was a monastery or temple, towards a new institutional body, the Dharma centre. Traditionally, the monastery or temple was a sacred place where monks or nuns resided and where they were the administrators. The monastery or temple was a place removed from the everyday world where lay Buddhists would come to pay respects to the ordained, to make offerings, to hear them preach, to participate in rituals led by monks or to practice meditation guided by monks or nuns. (Bodhi, Murphy, Seager)

In contrast, the nucleus of contemporary Buddhism is often the Dharma centre. Dharma centres are often established, built, and managed by lay Buddhists and staffed with lay teachers. In some cases, resident teachers are monastics who live in the Dharma centre at the request of community leaders, and the programs and administration of the centre are most often managed by lay Buddhists. In the traditional monastery or temple, the locus of attention is a Buddha image or shrine containing sacred relics, which are the focus of worship. Traditionally, monks sit on a *dais* or elevated platform, near The Buddha image. However, in a modern Dharma centre, a statue of The Buddha may not even be present. If there is one, the statue will likely not be

worshipped but will rather serve as a constant reminder of the foundations and source of the teachings. Generally, lay teachers will not sit in an elevated setting from their students. Apart from their roles as teachers, they relate to their students as friends and community members of equal status.

In Winnipeg, one can find examples of both monasteries and temples, as well as a few Dharma or 'modern' Buddhist centres. An example of a more traditional monastery is the Mahamevanawa Buddhist Monastery, while an example of a Dharma or modern Buddhist centre is the Winnipeg Insight Meditation Group, which is a peer-led community organization dedicated to teaching Buddhist insight meditation and other practices as well as exploring Buddha's teachings.

Today, some of the most gifted Buddhist teachers, both with respect to theory and meditation, are lay people, and sometimes female. Thus lay people who wish to learn the *Dharma* are no longer dependent on monastic teachers. While some still prefer to seek a monastic to teach and guide them, others will seek a lay teacher. The choice between the two is largely a preference. Contemporary Buddhists are not obligated to study with a monk, unlike the situation in traditional Buddhism. In the West, one can find training programs lead by lay Buddhists, and lineages of teachers consisting entirely of lay Buddhists.

There will likely, however, always be lay persons who prefer the guidance of the monastic *Sangha*, and thus there is little chance that monasteries and monastic-led *Dharma* centres will disappear. If the size of the lay congregations attached to specific monasteries decline significantly, there is some risk that the donations that sustain the monastery will also decline, and that will jeopardize the monasteries survival. Thus, in the future, the diminution of support for monasteries and nunneries may become a serious challenge to the sustainability of institutional monasticism.

Social Engagement

Another characteristic of contemporary spirituality and religion that challenges traditional Buddhist views and practices concerning monasticism is a focus on social engagement and social justice. Theoretically, traditional Buddhism tends to promote a certain separation and distance from the many, everyday problems that confront humanity as a whole. These may be problems such as poverty, the prevalence of war, the denial of basic human rights, the environment, the widening gap between the rich and the rest, and economic and racial oppression.

In practice, however, Buddhist temples in Asia have not strictly adhered to the traditional views on monastics and social engagement. At times, Buddhist temples in Asia often functioned as community centres where the community gathered to deal with their social and economic problems. Buddhist monks in southern Asia often have been at the front of social action movements and served as the voice of the people in their confrontation with oppressive government regimes. For example in Myanmar (Burma), monks led the

protests against the military dictatorship and the limitations they imposed on society.

More recently and alarmingly, Buddhist monks in Myanmar have also been at the front of advocating for ethnic cleansing and violence against the Muslim minority peoples of the nation, including the Rohingya. When military rule ended in Myanmar in 2011, a wave of ethnic hatred was unleashed in Myanmar. Over the past decade or so, Buddhist monks have played a key role in anti-Muslim rallies and actions. Many monks advocate and support a rapidly growing Buddhist nationalist movement known as “969” that is in part creating much of the problem. (Szep)

Nevertheless, such social engagement activities (whether good or bad) are in conflict with classical Buddhist doctrine. Buddhism emphasizes withdrawal from the everyday concerns of the world, a focus on personal enlightenment, non-attachment, and a certain coolness towards or detachment from the events and developments in the world. In other words, a form of passive acceptance of the flaws of samsara. For many traditional monks, concern with social, political, and economic problems is believed to distract one from what really matters, the quest for personal liberation from the suffering and existence in this world.

Such attitudes of detachment and neutrality towards social injustice does not align well with the contemporary Western religious conscience. In the West, Christianity more recently underwent a profound change in response to the widespread social ills of the time. This response gave birth to a “social gospel” and other developments such as liberation theology that applied Christian ethics of love and responsibility to a host of social problems. These included resisting oppressive and corrupt regimes; eradicating poverty; challenging inequity, racism, and other forms of discrimination; and reducing the damage caused by war.

The social gospel and liberation theology movements propose a systematic and sustained attempt to reform the oppressive power structures that sustained economic inequality, social injustice, exploitation, and the marginalization of the poor and powerless. This activist dimension of social concern led to deep and significant changes among Christians in their understanding of their own religion. Virtually all the major denominations of Christianity have adopted some version of the social gospel. In current Western societies, the clergy have often been at the forefront of social justice causes, preaching for social change, leading demonstrations, and encouraging their congregations to work towards socially transformative action. Rev. Martin Luther King in the United States and Desmond Tutu in South Africa exemplify such religious leaders.

“The advocates of engaged spirituality understand the test of our moral integrity to be our willingness to respond compassionately and effectively to the sufferings of humanity. True morality is not simply a matter of inward purification, a personal and private affair, but of decisive action inspired by compassion and motivated by a keen desire to deliver others from the oppressive conditions that stifle their humanity. Those of true religious faith

might look inward and upward for divine guidance; but the voice that speaks to them, the voice of conscience, says that the divine is to be found in loving one's fellow human beings, and in demonstrating this love by an unflinching commitment to ameliorate their misery and restore their hope and dignity."
(Bodhi, Bhikkhu)

This emphasis on social engagement and advocating for social justice, has had an impact on Buddhism as well. It has led to a form of engaged Buddhism, which has become a defining characteristic of Western Buddhism; one that rejects the idea of Buddhism as a religion of withdrawal from and passivity towards the suffering of humanity. For engaged Buddhists, compassion is about engaging in transformative action. Since classical Buddhist monasticism begins with the act of withdrawal and aspires to detachment, the rise of engaged Buddhism constitutes a challenge to traditional Buddhist monasticism and has the potential to redefine the nature and the shape of monastic life.
(Bodhi, Seager)

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