

Free-Lunch

THE VIEW FROM
DIAMOND HILL

Monastery

BY ROBERT A. F. THURMAN

One of the most interesting aspects of Zen Master Seung Sahn's transmission to the West has been his promotion of a traditional celibate monastic order. While modifying many out-dated Asian cultural forms and styles that have accrued to the teaching of the Dharma, encouraging lay practice, and even modifying the day-to-day expressions of monasticism to some extent, Zen Master Seung Sahn's maintenance of the traditional bikkhu/bikkhuni ordination becomes ever more noteworthy, especially nowadays as many discuss how to somehow "Americanize" Buddhism. From time to time Primary Point will present a section of views on the monastic experience in the Kwan Um School of Zen. Our first offering comes from the esteemed Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, Robert A. F. Thurman, recently designated (in Vogue, of all journals, in an article about his daughter, the actress Uma Thurman!) as "the most famous American Buddhist". It is a talk which he delivered at the first conference of Western Buddhist teachers with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in Dharamsala, India, March 1993.

Hyon Gak Sunim



I was the first monk that His Holiness ordained. I was his first experiment and, of course, I was a failure because I resigned my vows about a year and a half after I was ordained, although I had lived several years before that as a celibate. I therefore have about three and a half years of monk-time logged, but only one and a half of formal ordination. Then, being an ex-monk, I became a kind of “anti-monk” intellectually; I decided that the New Age had dawned—it was the late ’60s—and there was no more need for monks and nuns or monasteries or any of that. Shambhala was just around the corner and all these monolithic institutions could be swept away... I then had a long time of studying different things, thinking about engaged Buddhism and teaching things over and over again, as a Buddhist academic does.

In the process of studying the history of Buddhism, I discovered, in the early ’80s, that monastic institutions were to me the most revolutionary and the most important of institutions. When I reported this to His Holiness he just laughed and laughed. “What is this?” he said. “An ex-monk is now going on and on about monasteries? You can afford to do that now. You know, with your beloved wife and your four children, that now you’re safe—you’ll never be back! You can go and promote them as much as you want, knowing you won’t have to go there—ha, ha, ha...” He thought that was very funny.

It is our typical Western thing to think, “Oh well, yes, meditation, we’ve got that from Buddhism but we’re Westerners and so we know about organizations, and of course about intellectual matters.” We may find that Buddhist civilization has a lot to contribute to us on both of those other levels, just as it did on the meditational level.

Shakyamuni Buddha was an engaged Buddhist—there cannot be any question. He was “unengaged” for about a week or two under the trees in the Bodhi forest. In the Tibetan tradition they have him saying this thing about “How profound, deep, peaceful, untroubled... clear light... how neat, I love this... like an elixir of immortality... I’m totally stoned out here in the woods.” And then he says, “Oh, I don’t think I should tell this to anybody because whoever I tell it to certainly won’t understand it.” That was his unengaged Buddhism; he had about five minutes of it. Then Brahma and Indra showed up and said, “Hey, come on, get down there.” So he walks to Saranath to found a monastery—this is engaged Buddhism. We think of a monastery as a place for dead people. We have to realize that our culture is formed by Protestantism. Martin Luther slammed the monasteries, saying, “Shut down all the monasteries in northern Europe.” So you shut down the counter-

force against militarism on the planet in those countries of northern Europe and what happens? The planet gets conquered by a bunch of berserk militarists. That is what we have been doing, and America is the most rabidly berserk militarist country in history; even with our ideals of liberty, we have the biggest army and defense system and the most nuclear weapons. It’s totally unbelievable. Look at the business in Iraq.

I admit it’s a weird analysis (and my sociological colleagues blink when I tell them about it) but if you remove monasticism from a social mix, what happens is that all the productive energy of people has nowhere to go but into over-production of everything. So they go out and conquer the whole world. No one wants to produce a spiritual state to invert and internalize the energy, to produce a different, higher world, so they just transform this world and they wreck the whole place—it is within an inch of being wrecked, as we know.

Therefore, the Buddha was like the founder of a Peace Corps. We have to stop seeing him as some pious person in the hills, just speaking in dulcet tones. The Buddha was founding a Peace Corps and was risking being burnt at the stake. He said, “Hey, go out and tell everyone that the gates to Nirvana are OPEN. Tell people from any caste.” Don’t forget that the Buddha was a West Point-er. He was 29 years old; he was a military cadet in a palace. Princes in India studied in the army, in warfare; they were Kshatriya—the warrior-nobles. So naturally when he wanted to conquer the world for the Dharma he wanted an army.

Remember how one was originally ordained by the Buddha—the Buddha just said, “*Ehi bhikkhu*”—that’s all. “Come here, beggar. Come here, mendicant.” Now, enlightenment is the deconstruction of identity. If you attain enlightenment, in a way you don’t even know who you are any more, much less “where am I going to wash the dishes?” You might even wonder “what is my name?” If you have no idea of what your name is, you might as well have no hair and wear a weird robe because you don’t even know who you are.

If the Buddha is going to teach you something that will give you the realization of the total deconstruction of identity, he has to take care of you and reconstruct some sort of useful pattern within your own relativities—because otherwise he is not fulfilling his responsibility.

This is the purpose of the Vinaya [the code of monastic precepts established by the Buddha]. He can’t just deconstruct your identity and leave you standing in the middle of the traffic. So he would say, “*Ehi bhikkhu*,” and your hair flew off and your robes would change. There you were, floating around happily living your life as a monk, and

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people would give you a free lunch.

So we have to go back to the primary thing and forget all that nonsense about hierarchy and who is the big boss—that is all nonsense. The Buddha was deconstructing the serious Brahmanical family/father/patriarch/serious authority/guru business and was liberating people. He was not putting them under rules and authorities at all. In all of the cultures where it has become like that—if you feel that the Buddhist monastic orders are solely trying to prop up the culture—I am sure that we are just seeing corruption in the tradition. Essentially, the monastic orders are all trying to unravel the culture they are in.

My appeal to you is, in the process of your work, please try at least to entertain what is, I grant you, this slightly demented vision: that the most activist thing the peace movement, the engaged movement, in the west could do would be if one group of Westerners could crank up the generosity to provide a permanent free lunch to any group of people who want to take serious ordination—even if they're not that brilliant, not that great a yogi, not a great intellectual scholar. Remember that the key to monasticism is that you can be useless. You can be honored and supported for simply restraining certain negativities. By [supporting] that, you represent a channel to Nirvana for other people and the generosity they devote to you is an essential practice for them—it is not just some side thing they do now, and then later they do real practice. *Dana* [giving] is the first *paramita*; it is practice.

If you build a monastery, I hope it will be called “Free Lunch Monastery.” There is almost no such thing in the West. Everyone in a monastery is justifying their existence—“We are offering services; we are going to do ‘Dying’; we will help you; we will have therapy...” It is always the production thing of our barbaric Protestant civilization. Everyone has to work and justify themselves because there is no source of Dharmakaya anywhere—that’s “elsewhere,” out there with Jehovah, some place outside. You have to “do” something all the time—so if you are going to be a monk, [people believe] you have got to “do” something and produce.

But the beautiful thing about Buddhist monasticism is the acknowledgment by people that any human being is like a flower and of total value in itself. Even if they do not do anything positive but just genuinely and sincerely restrain their negativities—put the iron wall of the monk’s robe of corpse cloth around themselves—they will be developing and they will represent a point of positive development for the whole community.

That is a deep, foundational vision, not a superficial, social vision, and I hope that you will all work with His Holiness over the next 40 years of conferences and we will develop one free-lunch monastery in the Protestant West. That would be a turning point for this battle between monasticism and militarism which monasticism, at the moment, has lost—the planet is totally devoted to militarism.

[As a monk] your life is on the line, you are not going to produce anything but a spiritual state and therefore people will feed you. That way they recognize the value of you as an individual achieving a spiritual state. That is the foundation of real individualism, real generosity and social Dharma practice, to which individual Dharma practice must lead in order for it to have any positive result.

The role of modern lay people is just as it is—go straight ahead, gung ho. But they are also empowered by having monastics. They can move back and forth between them and they are empowered by that.

Lay people are ready to meditate, to live differently, be eccentric and non-conformist in their Western countries. They are ready to challenge their own mind and go into their unconscious. Why can they not explore the *paramita* of *Dana* and try to break out of the mold of the Protestant culture where you never give anybody something for nothing? You give them something for nothing—just let them wear a rag or two, that’s something. Shave their hair and look grubby and then give them something. There are a lot of homeless people in Western countries and the monastics can be like honored homeless people. That kind of generosity will enrich the Western people immeasurably.

“I” am not IT—“I” am not the center of my community. Why are we supposed to be the center? In Buddhism we are learning not to be the center of everything. We are learning to de-centrify ourselves. Even to have a person who is an idiot and support them with a free lunch because they are doing some minimal, exemplary self-restraint activities and cutting down on the usual reactionaryism of people, is of tremendous benefit to us. To proclaim “I wish to be useless” in the world of samsara is the beginning of liberation. To allow people to do nothing—in a society that is collectivist and demands production and obedience from all of its members in some rigid type of control system—is a kind of total liberation.