

Cherish the Nuns

After his awakening the Buddha made a return visit to his home town of Kapilavastu. An influential Sakyan chief (and cousin to Siddhartha) named Mahanama had the thought that, since many young men of good families had gone forth to join his growing monastic community, it would be good if some youths from the Buddha's own family joined also. So before long a contingent of six Sakyan princes, including the well-known cousins Baddhiya, Anuruddha, Ananda and Devadatta, snuck away from town and met up with the Buddha at a place called Anupiya. They were accompanied by their barber Upali, who was initially sent home with all their valuables, but who then decided that he too wanted to go forth into the life of the wandering mendicant. At this point the princes made a remarkable and generous gesture.

They knew that the Sangha of monks was organized entirely on a system of seniority, wherein people of all castes and all socioeconomic backgrounds would defer to one another solely on the basis of the order in which they joined the community. They addressed the Buddha, saying, "We, Lord, are Sakyans, we are proud. This barber has been our attendant for a long time. May the Lord let him go forth first. We will greet him, rise up before him, salute him with joined palms, and do the proper duties. Thus will the Sakyan pride be humbled in us Sakyans."

It was done as they wished, and Upali went on to become one of the most important members of the community, the one who memorized all the monastic laws and led the recitation of the Vinaya at the first council. It was a tribute to the Sakyan princes' integrity and commitment to the ideals of the movement that they were willing to humble themselves in this simple but highly symbolic way.

Some time later Pajapati, the Buddha's aunt and adoptive mother (taking over all maternal duties after the death in childbirth of her sister Maya), also asked to join the monastic community, which up to that time had monks but no nuns. The Buddha at first hesitated, but then publically and officially said two very important things. When asked if women were capable of the same attainments as men, including complete awakening, if they practiced diligently, he declared clearly and without equivocation that they were. Soon after, in the proclamation founding the order of nuns, he made the formal statement "I allow nuns to be ordained by monks."

Pajapati and all the nuns who followed her had to agree to a set of special rules, and these had much to do with the protocols of respectful treatment between the two communities. Thus, for example, all monks have seniority over all nuns, and the order of ordination is reckoned separately within each group. Other rules ensured that the two communities were intertwined in much of their official functioning, but always preserving the priority and nominal seniority of the monks.

Over the years these special accommodations have been read differently by different groups. Some hold that the distinctions are minor, and are not intended to disrespect the nuns but merely to integrate them into the Sangha in a way that was acceptable to the mores of ancient India. Others consider the symbolism enshrined in the disparity to be far from minor, and in light of the many ways one group has discriminated against another throughout history the discrepancy is a relic with no place in the modern expression of the Buddhist tradition.

The issue has come to the forefront in recent years, as the order of nuns is becoming reinstated after a breakdown of its continuity. Almost everyone involved recognizes that some changes need to be made, but considerable disagreement exists about how to go about making such changes and what the finished product should look like. As with every human movement, both religious and secular, there are conservatives, progressives, and every shade in between. How the issue is ultimately handled will reveal a lot about the nature of the people participating in the process, and will inevitably demonstrate something important to all who look on about the values and customs of Buddhism itself.

Along these lines, I find myself wondering if we might all be inspired by the attitude of the Sakyan princes. Sooner or later, in one way or another, there will be monks and nuns living side by side in harmony, striving diligently to purify their minds of toxins and serving as an inspiration to all of us—as was the Buddha's original intention. What might it look like if, as a gesture of respect and conciliation, the monks requested that the seniority system be modified such that all nuns are considered senior to all monks?

If the effect of the distinction really is minor, then it will not greatly inconvenience the monks to assume a position of respect toward the nuns. And if the symbolism is significant it would send a powerful message to all, not only that the nuns are held in great esteem, but that the monks are gracious enough to make such an offer as an expression of their wisdom. I cannot think of any essential Dharma teachings that would be disrupted by this gesture. And if the patriarchal systems of contemporary society are shaken up, East and West, then perhaps the karmic re-balancing that would ensue might contribute to greater overall health.

Every generation of Buddhist has faced the challenge of integrating what it understands as the core values of the tradition into a new and changing modern context, and each has no doubt faced its own set of daunting challenges. Might this not be an excellent opportunity to rise up to greet our sisters in the holy life, salute them with joined palms, and 'let them go first'?

—Andrew Olendzki