

## Rites of Passage, Liminality and *Communitas* in Chinese Buddhist ‘Triple Platform Ordination’

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### Abstract:

Van Gennep’s theories of ‘rites of passage’ and ‘liminality,’ together with Turner’s expansion on these theories into ‘*communitas*,’ offer an insightful anthropological lens through which to analyze the Triple Platform Ordination in Chinese Buddhism. Departing from the traditional focus on textual and historical aspects, this paper delves into the actual ordination process through an emic participant-observer perspective, along with ordination manuals, and records of preceptees who have undertaken the ordination platform rites themselves. We find strong evidence for all three of van Gennep’s phases: the pre-liminal, the liminal, and the post-liminal reintegrative phase. Turner’s notion of liminal *communitas*, particularly normative *communitas*, is observable among preceptees, although spontaneous or existential *communitas* is less evident. The ordination process mirrors profound personal transformation, symbolizing a death to the secular world and a rebirth into the monastic community—a cross-cultural metaphor akin to life and death rites of passage.

**Keywords:** Triple Platform Ordination, rites of passage, liminality, *communitas*, Chinese Buddhism

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# 漢傳佛教「三壇大戒」中之通過儀式、 闕限性以及共同體

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## 摘要：

范·根尼普 (Van Gennep) 的「通過儀式」(rites of passage) 和「闕限性」(liminality) 理論，以及特納 (Turner) 對這些理論而擴展的「共同體」(communitas) 概念，都提供了一個深入洞察的人類學視角，可用來分析中國佛教的「三壇大戒」。本文超越對文本和歷史方面的傳統研究關注，通過一種參與內觀者視角，以及對戒律儀軌和已經過戒壇儀式的戒子的戒壇記錄，深入探討了實際的受戒過程。我們發現了強有力的證據，證明了范·根尼普的三個階段：前闕限、闕限和後闕限的再整合階段。特納對闕限共同體的概念，尤其是規範性共同體 (normative communitas)，在戒子群中是可觀察到的，儘管自發性或存在性共同體並不明顯。戒壇過程反映了深刻的個人轉變，象徵著從世俗世界的死亡到僧團的重生，是一個跨文化類似於生死通過儀式的隱喻。

**關鍵詞：** 三壇大戒、通過儀式、闕限性、共同體、漢傳佛教

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## Chinese Buddhist ordination traditions

The last few decades have seen a surge in English-language studies on the *Vinaya* traditions and ordinations of Chinese Buddhism. The majority of these have focused on either the *bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* and lineages as a source for the revival of women's ordinations in other Buddhist traditions,<sup>1</sup> or on the changes that have taken place through the upheaval of Chinese Buddhism from the late Qing into the Republican period during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Little work has been done on either the rituals included with these traditions or the anthropological role of such rituals within Chinese Buddhist monastic communities. That the rites themselves are not public, and the popular misperception of Buddhism in the West as a non-ritualistic religion, can only account for some of this lacuna. In Chinese-language studies, there are also few studies on the ordination process itself, its rituals, liturgy, and so forth.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Bianchi, Ester, “Yi Jie Wei Shi 以戒為師: Theory and Practice of Monastic Discipline in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Buddhism”, *Studies in Chinese Religions*, 3(2), 2017, pp.111-141; and “Transmitting the Precepts in Conformity with the Dharma”, *Buddhism after Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions*, 2020, pp.152-170; Campo, Daniela, “A Different Buddhist Revival: The Promotion of Vinaya (jielü 戒律) in Republican China”, *Journal Of Global Buddhism*, 18, 2017, pp.129-154; Chiu, Tzu-Lung and Heirman, Ann, “The Gurudharmas in Taiwanese Buddhist Nunneries”, *Buddhist Studies Review*, 29(2), 2012, pp.279-300; and DeVido, Elise Anne, *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns*, SUNY Press, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Heirman, Ann, “Some Remarks on the Rise of the bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha and on the Ordination Ceremony for Bhikṣuṇīs According to the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1997, pp.33-85; and “Buddhist Nuns: Between Past and Present”, *Numen-International Review for the History of Religions*, 58, 2011, pp.603-631; Kawanami, Hiroko, “The Bhikkhūnī Ordination Debate: Global Aspirations, Local Concerns, with Special Emphasis on the Views of the Monastic Community in Burma”, *Buddhist Studies Review*, 24(2), 2007, pp.226-244; and Seeger, Martin, “The Bhikkhūnī-ordination Controversy in Thailand”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 2006, pp.155-183.

Though the work that has been done is rich and detailed, with monastics taking the lead.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I shall look at the Chinese Buddhist ‘Triple Platform Ordination’ 三壇大戒 through the lens of Arnold van Gennep’s notion of ‘rites of passage’ and associated ‘liminality,’ in addition to Victor Turner’s development of liminality into the idea of ‘*communitas*.’

The actual practices of the Triple Platform Ordination are the result of over a millennium of evolution. Various *Vinayas* were brought to China from India and translated from Sanskrit to classical Buddhist Chinese. Through the exegeses of scholars such as Daoxuan 道玄 of the Tang, the Dharmagupta *Sifen Lu* 四分律 (*Fourfold Discipline*) was soon selected as the standard *Vinaya* for the Chinese *Saṅgha*, and concrete procedures for the rites were established under the Nan Shan *Vinaya* tradition 南山律宗 and used by all lineages. All of this underwent further reform centuries later by Jianyue Duti 見月讀體 in the Ming. By the Qing and early Republic, Baohua Monastery 寶華山 in Jiangsu was the exemplar in ordination practices,<sup>4</sup> which formed the basis for those practices brought over to Taiwan in the middle of the twentieth century at the latter stages of the civil war.

It is the ordination rites of one of the largest modern Taiwanese monastic orders that informs the current study, that of Fo Guang Shan Monastery 佛光山寺 (hereafter FGS). Founded in 1967 by Venerable Master Hsing Yun [Xingyun] 星雲 (1927-2023), it is one of few monastic orders in Taiwan large enough to be completely self-sufficient in terms of hosting a Triple

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<sup>3</sup> An excellent example is that of Hsieh Ming-jui (Ven. Jianrong), *Taiwan santan dajie shoujie yishi yu fanbai zhi yanjiu*, which focuses on ritual liturgies for the ordination period. In some quarters, there is still the presence of a conservative attitude in Chinese scholarship toward viewing *Vinaya* research as the province of monastic scholars. Most scholarship is on the *Vinaya* for the sake of normative *Vinaya* practices, including ordinations and precept holding, rather than taking descriptive or theoretical sociological or anthropological perspectives.

<sup>4</sup> Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, pp.286-301.

Platform Ordination, as the required resources of people, space, and so forth, of this long and demanding event force most other individual monasteries or smaller orders to coordinate together in order to carry it out effectively. The founder himself not only received his own ordination at Baohua Monastery, but later assisted in ordinations as he studied at the nearby Qixia Monastery Vinaya College 棲霞寺律學院 in Nanjing.<sup>5</sup> As such, we can infer a clear lineage of both theory and practice from the classical to modern procedures at FGS hosted Triple Platform Ordinations.<sup>6</sup>

### Retrospective fieldwork as method

I must state clearly at this point that my own ‘study’ of these ordinations was not via the expected role of an anthropologist of religion, but rather as a preceptee. This was during my own ordination at FGS’s southern hemisphere branch, Nan Tian Temple 南天寺, located in Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia, in November 2004. Such ‘retrospective fieldwork’ will raise concerns for some scholars, I am sure, to which I shall respond below, but I must simply point out that Buddhist ordinations, whether ancient or modern, Indian or Chinese, prohibit anyone other than the preceptors and preceptees from the ordination site. Such a difficulty was acknowledged by none other than Welch, in his well-known exploration of the lived experience of Chinese Buddhism:<sup>7</sup>

Whereas the other parts of the ordination could be witnessed by outsiders, these vows were administered on the secluded ordination platform (*chieh-t'ai* [jietai 戒台]) and all outsiders were barred. Prip-Møller, one of the few foreigners who has witnessed it, writes: “That

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<sup>5</sup> Fu, *Handing Down the Light*, pp.20, 29-31. Welch also notes that Qixia was also a “reputable monastery” of similar significance to Baohua Shan (pg.296).

<sup>6</sup> Hsieh, *Taiwan santan dajie shoujie yishi yu fanbei zhi yanjiu*, indicates that the same basic ordination practices are in place throughout Taiwan as a general rule, pg.8.

<sup>7</sup> Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, pg.291.

which was seen here is probably the most solemn ceremony with the Buddhist ritual, conducted in a spirit of devotion on the part of all the participants which is so wholehearted as to be seldom seen in the temples.”

The errors of Prip-Møller, Reichelt and De Groot, which render their testimony quite useless, have been discussed elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> For this reason the role of a direct participant provides an invaluable perspective on the ordination process. In addition, the ordination ritual manuals 界壇儀軌, based on the traditional forms with some minor modifications made by Ven. Master Hsing Yun himself, the translation of which I was also involved in preceding the ordination, are critical sources.<sup>9</sup> As scripts, they indicate liturgical content, doctrinal teaching giving during the ordination, and various ritual actions such as prostrations, offering of incense, and so forth. Last, but not least, we have the *Ordination Records*, published by FGS and distributed to participants only as a memorial keepsake without public release, which include such material as personal accounts from preceptees ordination diaries.<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned, retrospective fieldwork is based on personal recollection rather than field notes from observations and interviews, with my participant observer role leading to an emic perspective. Buswell's *The Zen Monastic Experience* (1992), based on his time as a monk in the Korean Son (Zen) tradition, and Dreyfus', *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (2003), from his experiences in traditional Tibetan scholasticism, are already excellent studies on Buddhist as a lived religion. I

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<sup>8</sup> Orsborn, “Śrāvaka Ordination in a Mahāyāna Embrace: Triple Platform Ordination in Chinese Buddhism”, pp.132-134, vis-à-vis Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, pg.286.

<sup>9</sup> Fo Guang Shan Board of Religious Affairs, *First Altar—Śramaṇera and Śramaṇerika Ordination*, *Second Altar—Upasampada Ordination (Full Ordination)*, and *Third Altar—Bodhisattva Ordination*.

<sup>10</sup> Fo Guang Shan Board of Religious Affairs, *Fo Guang Shan Nan Tien Temple, Full Ordination Records*.

have elsewhere outlined many of the arguments that Buswell and Dreyfus give for the validity of this approach,<sup>11</sup> but will give but two brief statements here. Firstly, Buswell's claim that: 'I would even go so far as to say that only by living together with the monks as a monk does the researcher have much hope of gaining an accurate picture of the monks' lives and the motivations that underlie it.'<sup>12</sup> Secondly, Dreyfus' defense that though 'I have made no pretense of being objective,' neither do I wish to act as an apologist to paint a 'rosy picture' of monastic life.<sup>13</sup> Hsieh's study on Triple Platform Ordination in Taiwan was also undertaken in the capacity of one of senior monastics supervising the preceptees.<sup>14</sup>

The main advantage of this method is in access. The paucity of studies on the rites themselves within studies on modern Chinese Buddhist monasticism and *Vinaya* is testament to the difficulty in even directly observing the events that take place. For instance, Bianchi and Campo have provided an excellent account of the revival of *Vinaya* and ordination traditions in 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century People's Republic of China.<sup>15</sup> It highlights the discontinuity these traditions experienced due to war and the Cultural Revolution, followed by a strong revival in recent years. While their historical (including political) studies focused on a critical period for modern Chinese Buddhism, there is no examination of ordination procedures, rituals, doctrinal content, or the experiences of preceptees during the Triple Platform ordination. Scholars focusing on developments in Taiwan, such as the work of DeVido and Cheng, have mostly investigated the phenomena of *bhikṣuṇī*

<sup>11</sup> Orsborn, "Śrāvaka Ordination in a Mahāyāna Embrace", pp.134-136.

<sup>12</sup> Buswell, *The Zen monastic experience*, pp.15-16.

<sup>13</sup> Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*, pp.3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Hsieh, *Taiwan santan dajie shoujie yishi yu fanbei zhi yanjiu*, pp.8-9. Unstated is that she would also have participated as a preceptee herself during her own ordination as Ven. Jianrong.

<sup>15</sup> Bianchi, "Yi Jie Wei Shi 以戒為師" and "Transmitting the Precepts"; and Campo, "A Different Buddhist Revival".

traditions, and the transplanting of nuns' ordination from Taiwan to South Asian Theravādin and Tibetan-Himalayan Buddhist communities.<sup>16</sup> But again they do not explore the rites undergone by these *bhikṣuṇīs* (and *bhikṣus*). Our present study is a response to this, taking these studies which outline the broader movements in history, across political change and between cultures, and turning inward to what happens at the ordination itself, a personal juncture of great import for the preceptees in their monastic careers.

### Rites of passage

Our study here first examines the Triple Platform ordination as a 'rite of passage.' This term, now in common usage throughout the English language from the French 'rites de passage,' was coined by the German-Dutch ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957). While influenced by James Frazier's taxonomies of myth and ritual, van Gennep averred from viewing decontextualized ritual, arguing that rituals must not only be seen in their native social context. To this, he applied a 'sequential method' of examining ritual 'in relation to what precedes and what follows it.'<sup>17</sup> As an anthropological concept we can consider analysis of a ritual through the rites of passage theory to be etic in nature, contrasting with the emic observer-participant perspective discussed earlier. That is, van Gennep and Turner, for example, did not participant in the rites they studied.

Van Gennep analyzed various rites of passage, including those pertaining to initiation, pregnancy and birth, marriage, and funerals, via a tripartite division, stating:<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> DeVido, *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns*; Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka: A Critique of the Feminist Perspective*.

<sup>17</sup> Bell, *Ritual*, pp.35-36; citing van Gennep, "On the Method to Be Followed in the Study of Rites and Myths" [1910], in Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches*, vol. 1, pp.298-99.

<sup>18</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pg.21.

I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal* (or *threshold*) *rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *post-liminal rites*.

We can portray this schematically in the following *Figure 1* from Penner, in his discussion of how a Buddhist householder becomes a renunciant monastic:<sup>19</sup>

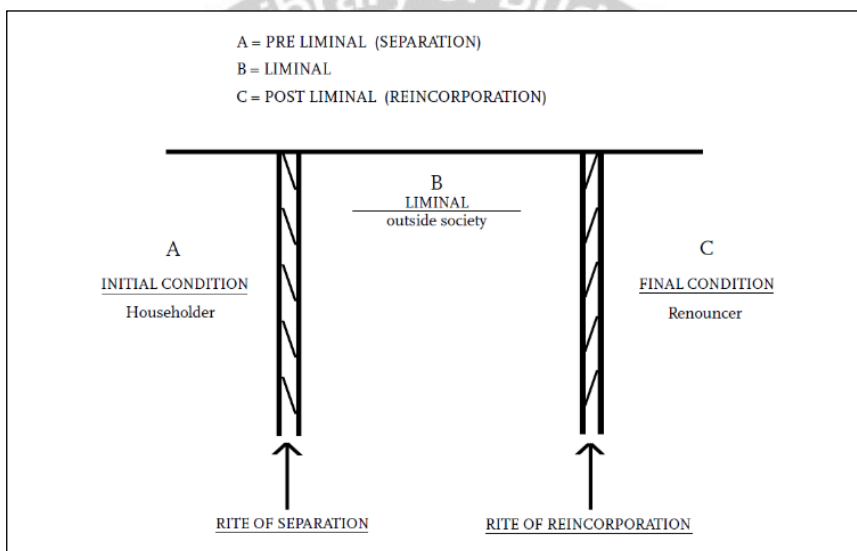


Figure 1: Tripartite Structure of Rites of Passage

In van Gennep's analysis, the individual or group of individuals undergoing the rite of passage pass between two stable social states, i.e., the initial and final conditions. For example, for a coming-of-age rite of passage, the social roles of a child and adult, respectively. In the middle is the 'liminal state,' from the Latin '*limen*,' meaning threshold or doorway, the border or barrier between two rooms or inside and outside. This is a 'betwixt and between' state, which should be mistaken to be half of each of the initial and

<sup>19</sup> Penner, *Rediscovering the Buddha*, pg.162.

final conditions, or a blended combination or mesh of the two. It is, rather, outside of these social states and in many ways outside of the norms of the sociocultural order itself, decidedly ‘other.’

Van Gennep’s theories on rites of passage were not widely received in his own time, but subsequently had a profound influence upon many anthropologists and scholars of ritual. Among them was the American anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983), who focused particularly on initiation rites among the Ndembu tribe of Zambia. Turner combined the temporal aspects of social change in the model with what Bell calls a ‘fundamental dialectic between the social order (structure) and a period of social disorder and liminality (antistructure) ... termed *communitas*,’<sup>20</sup> which we shall return to, below. Turner explained van Gennep’s rites as follows:<sup>21</sup>

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both. During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.

The most well-known adaptation of van Gennep’s rites of passage structure, however, is perhaps that seen in Joseph Campbell’s popular hero

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<sup>20</sup> Bell, *Ritual*, pg.40.

<sup>21</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process*, pg.95.

‘monomyth.’ Naming the three phases ‘separation,’ ‘initiation’ and ‘return,’ he succinctly described the hero’s journey as:<sup>22</sup>

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

After outlining this structure, the first detailed classical example he refers to is the ‘Great Struggle of the Buddha,’<sup>23</sup> with a particular focus on the passage from renunciation as a prince to the attainment of awakening. This, of course, served and still serves as the exemplar and template for Buddhist monastic ordination.

### **Is Triple Platform Ordination a ‘rite of passage’?**

Considering ordinations as a form of initiation within Buddhist society, the Triple Platform Ordination appears to be a good candidate for examination through van Gennep’s and Turner’s frameworks. At first glance we can easily see how the Triple Platform Ordination<sup>24</sup> largely conforms to this analysis: (1) The preceptee begins in an un-ordained state, with the general social norms of a lay Buddhist. (2) They then enter the ordination process with its rites of the ordination platforms, no longer a lay person, but also not yet a full member of the *Saṅgha*. (3) After the last rite they finally leave as a consummated fully ordained *bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī* with bodhisattva ordination as well, into the clearly defined and structured monastic community with its norms and *Vinaya* ethical standards. The elements of each phase need to be looked at in greater detail, however, to identify the specific characteristics uncovered by van Gennep, Douglas and Turner in their fieldwork.

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<sup>22</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp.24-25.

<sup>23</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pg.25.

<sup>24</sup> Or perhaps any Buddhist ordination rites.

In Taiwan, the majority of preceptees at an ordination are students at Buddhist seminaries (more commonly known as ‘colleges’) 佛學院. Most have received tonsure before the ordination, either recently or up to several years before, and are technically ‘*śramaṇera* / *śramaṇerikā* in name only’ 名字沙彌(尼), as they have not yet received that ordination proper. In this sense, it could be argued that the pre-liminal rite of separation is that of tonsure, before the Triple Platform Ordination, or even entry into the life of a Buddhist College student. However, neither of these states is on a guaranteed track toward exit as a fully ordained monastic.

Physically, the ordination space that the preceptee enters is doubly marked as a sacred space for the process.<sup>25</sup> Not only does it take place within a monastery, already known as distinct from secular society, there are further restrictions on access to this space as the ‘ordination platform’ 戒壇 itself. In early and Theravāda Buddhism, this space is the ‘*sīmā*,’ the space in which all ecclesiastical rites take place. It may be marked with boundary stones, or some other natural features such as rivers, etc. In van Gennepe’s terms, the preceptees are ‘removed from the common mass of humanity,’<sup>26</sup> i.e., separated, from their former social space. For many monasteries, the ‘platform’ is a temporary designation given to the main (or other) shrine hall, designated as such through a separate set of rites. These include ‘water purification’ 灑淨 practices, where the preceptors circumambulate the boundaries of the designated area while chanting the *Great Compassion Dhāraṇī* 大悲咒 of the *bodhisattva* Guanyin 觀音.<sup>27</sup> After the ordination, this space will return to its usual function as a site for daily and other calendrical liturgical rites, worship, and so forth, accessible to at least the local monastic community, but also often

<sup>25</sup> See Hsieh, *Taiwan santan dajie shoujie yishi yu fanbei zhi yanjiu*, pp.61-63, for descriptions of the space and locations utilized.

<sup>26</sup> Van Gennepe, *Rites of Passage*, pg.71; also pp.74. Hsieh, *Taiwan santan dajie shoujie yishi yu fanbei zhi yanjiu*, explains how the preceptees are heavily restrained within this space in terms of their activities and discipline.

<sup>27</sup> See Hsieh, *Taiwan santan dajie shoujie yishi yu fanbai zhi yanjiu*, pp.78-84.

open to the public. Some monasteries in Taiwan with a particular *Vinaya* focus, such as Yide Monastery 義德寺 in Jiayi, have separate ordination platforms built and used solely for this purpose, but they will also be purified for the ordination rites.

Tonsure 剃度, shaving the head, as seen in the ordination process, is also emblematic of rites of passage.<sup>28</sup> In ancient times, the hair would be shaved during the ceremony itself, but in modern Chinese tradition, where many preceptees are tonsured before the Triple Platform Ordination, they will once again shave at the start of the event. There are verses for the occasion, which begin: ‘The golden blade cuts out the hair of affliction’ 金刀剃除煩惱髮, showing the symbolic relationship between tonsure and the afflictive mental states that bind one to the cycle of life and death. Responding to earlier sociological and psychological theories of the symbolism of hair, Leach argued that hair (and the head in general) stands for libidinal energies. Therefore, he says, the removal of hair in public ritual is an act of aggression against such energies, enabling them to be put aside but without repression.<sup>29</sup> We could say that tonsure, as the starting point of entry into celibate life, is a public declaration of a new, celibate, social status. Synnott’s ‘theory of opposites’ with regards hair, shows in stark terms the contrasts between long hair for women and short hair for men.<sup>30</sup> A shaved head is thus a typically

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<sup>28</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pp.83, 105, 113.

<sup>29</sup> Leach, “Magical Hair”, pp.159-162. Leach is responding to claims of universal significance, and thus interpretation, by anthropologists. Fortunately for us, he does include Buddhist and Hindu rites in his paper. I feel his comments on the Buddha’s hair in iconography (pg.159), however, overlook other factors, such as representation of the Buddha’s curly hair as one of his thirty-two “marks of a great man” (*mahāpuruṣa-lakṣaṇa*).

<sup>30</sup> Though Synnott focused mainly on European and North American cultures, these distinctions may also apply to most contemporary Asian cultures, too. However, the idea of short hair as a masculine marker would not be appropriate for older cultures, such as India at the time of the Buddha, or medieval China.

masculine marker,<sup>31</sup> but one in which sexual potency is removed by Leach's analysis. Innes describes the shaved head as giving the appearance of a 'new-born,' with and ambiguous gender and lack of sexuality.<sup>32</sup>

Another form of physical external marking is the clothing worn, wherein all preceptees have identical robes, sitting mats, and bowls received in the first two platforms, and a staff from the third ordination.<sup>33</sup> While each of these is taken up with verses, the symbolism is more as directly poignant as that for tonsure. The robes, implements and shaved heads are traditionally clear markers of the social renunciant. While the male and female preceptees are clearly separated from each other throughout the entire process,<sup>34</sup> the shaved heads and identical robes also effect an elimination of gender distinctions. However, rather than making them genderless, this tends toward making the female preceptees masculine, as 'great men' 大丈夫, in the vocabulary of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>35</sup> Nuns also are encouraged to appear as such 'great men.'

Together, these physical markers of hair, robes and externals are akin to Turner's idea of showing a 'symbolism both of androgyny and sexlessness.'<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Synnott, "Hair: Shame and Glory", pp.103-112. Synnott also discusses facial hair, in addition to head hair, but there is almost no mention of this in the Triple Platform Ordination. My own thought is that this may simply reflect the fact that most young male Chinese monastics have little facial hair.

<sup>32</sup> Innes, *Religious Hair Display and its Meanings*, pg.191. Innes gives a very broad overview of hair in Buddhism, including the Buddha's own hair, from almost exclusively secondary literature, in his chapter 8, pp.171-202. Hershman, "Hair, Sex and Dirt," is a fascinating study on hair and shaving in Punjabi culture, but while it looks at an aspect of Indian culture, we cannot necessarily argue that its findings are applicable to a Buddhist attitude.

<sup>33</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pp.105-106.

<sup>34</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pg.189.

<sup>35</sup> 'Da zhangfu' 大丈夫 is a Chinese translation of the Sanskrit 'Mahāpuruṣa,' meaning 'great man,' one of the many epithets of the Buddha. The traditional thirty-two physical marks of the 'mahāpuruṣa' are external signs of an awakened being or wheel-turning sovereign king.

<sup>36</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, pg.98.

Turner states that: ‘often their very names are taken from them and each is called solely by the generic term for “neophyte” or “initiant.”’<sup>37</sup> This is precisely seen during the Triple Platform Ordination when the preceptees are referred to merely as ‘new preceptees’ 新戒, throughout the ordination period, rather than by their names, whether lay or monastic.<sup>38</sup> (We will return to names again, below.) During the period, the preceptees also follow strict dietary regulations, including the vegetarianism of Chinese Buddhism and not eating after noon.<sup>39</sup> Though this, of course, continues after the ordination, into monastic life in general.

After the third rite for bodhisattva ordination, Chinese Buddhist tradition has long upheld the practice of making ‘precept scars’ 戒疤.<sup>40</sup> Traditionally, this involved three burns from incense cones placed in a horizontal line behind the hairline, though many in the older generation have three or more sets of such lines. Severe as they may sound, precept scars are in fact a tamed version of the broader practice of various forms of self-immolation, the historical roots of which have been studied extensively by Benn, in his *Burning for the Buddha*. Chinese Buddhists were presented with descriptions of a range of self-sacrificial actions in Indian works, from *Jātakas* to Mahāyāna sutras, including offering one’s whole physical body or parts thereof as gifts, and burning one’s whole body or fingers as votive candles. The connection with *Vinaya* and ordination practices seems largely through the *Brahmajāla Sūtra* 梵網經,<sup>41</sup> which became the primary East Asian source for the bodhisattva

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<sup>37</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, pg.96; also pg.102. Turner, ‘Variations on a Theme of Liminality’, pg.47.

<sup>38</sup> Fo Guang Shan, *Altar One, Altar Two, and Altar Three*. There are, however, several places throughout the three rites when the preceptees read their own Dharma names into the liturgy.

<sup>39</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pp.74, 90, 96,

<sup>40</sup> Photos can be found in Hsieh, *Taiwan santan dajie shoujie yishi yu fanbai zhi yanjiu*, pg.104.

<sup>41</sup> Benn, *Burning for the Buddha*, pp.112-118.

precepts, i.e., during the Third Platform.<sup>42</sup> Now, however, this practice has been banned in the mainland, and seems to be trending out in Taiwan as well where it is often presented as an optional act, due to health concerns over deep burns on the skull near the brain. Instruction from the preceptors on this matter is elided in the Fo Guang Shan *Third Altar—Bodhisattva Ordination* manual. It appears there is a modern trend away from self-violence. As a form of ritual mutilation, precept scars are well attested in a wide range of rites of passage, where ‘cutting off, splitting, or mutilating any part of the body modify the personality of the individual in a manner visible to all,’<sup>43</sup> becomes one of the markers of the initiates’ newly acquired social status on reincorporation.

On reincorporation, many rites of passage involve the giving of a new name to the initiate.<sup>44</sup> In Chinese Buddhism, a number of religious names are used, from ‘refuge names’ (for laity) 戒名, to ‘Dharma names’ 法名 and ‘sobriquets’ (lit. ‘inner names’) 內號, and further names for lineage transmission, if granted, later in their monastic careers. For preceptees, Dharma names and sobriquets may have already been given at tonsure, rather than during or after the ordination process. These names are not only to be used by other monastics or lay devotees, but in all circumstances,<sup>45</sup> including by their own lay parents, siblings and family members. When visiting the monastery, even the parents will sometimes be addressed in terms of being the father or mother of that monastic rather than by their own lay names. Thus, effectively, not only do the preceptees leave lay life, these naming practices in a sense bring their parents with them. Unlike the shaved head and robes,

<sup>42</sup> The *Brahmajāla Sūtra* states that: ‘if one does not burn one’s body, arm, or finger as an offering to the Buddhas, they are not a renunciant bodhisattva.’ *Fanwang Jing (Brahmajāla Sūtra)* 《梵網經》卷 2：「若不燒身臂指供養諸佛，非出家菩薩。」 (CBETA, T24, no. 1484, p. 1006, a19-20)

<sup>43</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pg.71.

<sup>44</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pp.73, 85, 101, 105, 112.

<sup>45</sup> Though, curiously enough, in Taiwan at least, most monastics do *not* change their legal names, which will continue to be used for purposes such as national identity cards, passports, health insurance, and so forth.

which are identical for both genders, the Fo Guang Shan system uses distinctly different generational names for *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*. Though this is not always the case in Taiwan. For example, two other large monastic orders, Dharma Drum Mountain and Chung Tai Mountain, use the same generational character for male and female ordinands.

Also signifying reincorporation, the alms-rounds that are often organized by Taiwanese monasteries after the Triple Platform Ordination are another direct example of reintroducing the newly ordained *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* to the local Buddhist community. With their new social status, engaging in such an activity that is considered archetypically monastics, despite it seldom being practiced in East Asian Buddhism on a regular basis, clearly marks the beginning of the post-liminal phase.

We can see that the aforementioned content of the Triple Platform Ordination clearly displays numerous features referred to in van Gennep's and Turner's notions of rites of passage. The liminal state of the preceptees during ordination and their entry back into the stable social state of a fully ordained monastic are very clear. However, the exact point of entry into the liminal state is not so clear. This is because tonsure and the donning of monastic robes, as well as receiving and using a new monastic name, often take place before the preceptee starts the formal period of the ordination rites.

An argument could be made that the entirety of the 'student monastic' 學僧 period at the modern Taiwanese Buddhist college is in fact the liminal state, irrespective of the student's formal lay or monastic status. That is to say, lay students have an entirely different set of social and ethical expectations to lay Buddhists in society, and monastic students also do not receive the same respect and other privileges as those monastics who have already graduated and moved into taking up various roles of responsibility within the monastic community.

I believe that the primary reason for this ambiguity is that these are two distinct cycles of rites of passage that have not been integrated. The first cycle is the traditional Triple Platform Ordination with its roots in ancient India, and

the second rite is the modern institution of the Buddhist college with a history of a little over a century in China. There is a general overlap between these two rites in that for most monastics their ordination takes place during their time as student, it being an intense highlight of their student time. But for others, particularly those who ordain later in life, they may either never study at a college or have already left the college before their ordination. Or for some younger students who retain a lay status throughout their college life, they may choose to ordain at some time after graduation. At present, the slight discrepancy between the traditional ordination system and modern college education also aids in allaying conservative concerns about over-modernization, while bringing in adaptation that may be necessary for today's society. However, a full analysis and discussion of the relationship between these two sets of rites of passage is beyond the scope of our study here.

### **Do liminal preceptee cohorts display ‘*communitas*’?**

Let us now turn to the matter of preceptees’ ‘*communitas*’ while in their liminal state. According to Turner,<sup>46</sup> ‘*communitas* is a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals,’ who ‘confront one another ... in the manner of Martin Buber’s “I and Thou”,’ i.e., a relationship in which oneself and other are not separated by discrete bounds. ‘Along with this direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities, there tends to go a model of society as a homogeneous, unstructured *communitas*, whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species.’ Turner believes, however, that such *communitas* cannot be maintained for long in this pure state, and ‘soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae.’ We shall return to this point, later. Turner sees examples of *communitas* in several liminal groups, particularly religious communities, such as the Catholic Franciscans and the Hindu tradition of Caitanya’s

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<sup>46</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp.131-132.

Vaiṣṇava Sahajīyā movement.<sup>47</sup> Given these other examples in religious communities, the question of *communitas* in the Triple Platform Ordination preceptee cohorts is worthy of examination here.

Let us first talk about degrees of equality and hierarchical distinctions during the ordination. There are complex multiple levels of such distinctions in Chinese Buddhist monasticism connected with individual names and honorifics. Preceptees of the same ordination cohort refer to one another by the term ‘precept elder brother’ 戒兄. The character ‘*xiong*’ 兄 alone in most other contexts literally means ‘elder brother,’ but as there is no Chinese term to refer to a sibling without indicating gender as male or female, or without indicating relative rank as either older or younger, we must reflect before assuming this to automatically indicate masculine seniority in its actual usage. Given that the term is used between both *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*, that all refer to each other by this term irrespective of physical age, and that as fellows within the same cohort they have no monastic seniority over one another, we could say that the literal ‘precept elder-brother’ can also be understood as ‘precept sibling,’ with the gender and seniority of ‘*xiong*’ implying an honorific. In this way, it is strongly akin to another important monastic term ‘teacher elder brother’ 師兄, also used by all monastics of the same generation to refer to one another, again irrespective of gender or seniority. Turner also refers to such differences between liminal siblings and those of blood relations, with the latter always implying hierarchy whereas the former does not.<sup>48</sup> All Chinese Buddhist monastics also change their family name to ‘Shi’ 釋, a contraction of the phoneticization of ‘Śākya,’ i.e., ‘*Shijia*’ 釋迦, in modern pronunciation. ‘Shi’ becomes the first of a common three-character Chinese monastic name. This is in line with the notion that all pre-monastic clan and family affiliations, along with their associated social statuses, are dropped when becoming equal in the *Saṅgha* religious community, a concept seen since the early days of Indian Buddhism. There are also monastic

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<sup>47</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, chapter 4.

<sup>48</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, pg.100.

generational names for given lineages, mimicking Chinese traditional secular naming patterns within a given patriarchal family line. All the monastics of the same generation, i.e., under the same master, will have the same generational name character. The generational name character is the second character of the three-character monastic name. Only the third (last) character of the name is unique to the individual monastic within the generation. For example, a venerable Shi Xuanzang 釋玄奘 is a Buddhist monastic – ‘Shi,’ of the generation ‘Xuan,’ and personal name ‘Zang.’ We can thus see how naming is a powerful sign of very strong communal ties and relations in Chinese Buddhist culture.

Despite the equality between liminal preceptees of the same cohort, the preceptors and associated elders who run and supervise the ordination, such as the ‘master of the hall’ 開堂和尚 and ‘discipline officer’ 糾察, have complete authority over them. As Turner states, ‘between instructors and neophytes there is often complete authority and complete submission; among neophytes there is often complete equality.’<sup>49</sup> At the very start of the Triple Platform Ordination, the abbot or abbess of the hosting monastery passes the discipline officer a bundle of willow switches that are to be used to discipline infringing preceptees. In present day Taiwan, while the passing of the willow switches remains as a tradition, they are not used at all. In fact, no corporeal violence is used within the ordination process or the Buddhist colleges. By comparison, when Venerable Chen-hua describes the discipline at Baohua Monastery, he states that it ‘was known far and wide for its severity.’<sup>50</sup> Beatings and verbal abuse rained down, and ‘If anyone dares not to do as he is told, don’t blame your instructor if he loses his compassion and beats you to death with a billy club.’<sup>51</sup> Similar accounts are found in the biography of Venerable Hsing Yun: ‘The willow twigs banished arrogance and obstinacy;

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<sup>49</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, pg.99.

<sup>50</sup> Chen-hua, *In Search of the Dharma*, pg.49.

<sup>51</sup> Chen-hua, *In Search of the Dharma*, pg.51.

the beatings transformed one's attachment to ego, to the absence of it.'<sup>52</sup> Shocking as this may sound to modern sensibilities and the prevalent notion of Buddhism as an entirely pacifist religion, these were apparently no mere idle threats, and did occur. Such beatings and submission to authority are common throughout a range of rites of passage.<sup>53</sup>

This difference between actual enforced violence and symbolic yet unused willow switches may again show legacies of the older rites within their modern practice. Religious anthropologist Mary Douglas talks about the rituals of segregation as 'the most dangerous phase of the rites,' where initiands' families 'fear for their safety' when told that 'they used in the old days to die from hardship or fright.' Despite a discrepancy between such talk and a far less violent reality, she notes that this expresses an important symbolism of marginality, that is, 'to enter the margins is to be exposed to power that is enough to kill them or make their manhood.'<sup>54</sup> We could perhaps substitute sainthood or the like in our case, as her original context is coming of age rites.

Leaving the question of the ethics of Buddhist non-violence aside, Turner describes such submission as: 'The passivity of neophytes to their instructors, their malleability, which is increased by submission to ordeal, their reduction to a uniform condition, are signs of the process whereby they are ground down to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life.'<sup>55</sup>

Turner makes distinctions between three types of *communitas*:<sup>56</sup> '(1) existential or spontaneous *communitas*'; '(2) normative *communitas*, where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources, and

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<sup>52</sup> Fu, *Handing Down the Light*, pg.25.

<sup>53</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pp.60, 78-79 and 109 for 'striking' and 'whipping'; pg.82, 'beating'.

<sup>54</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 97.

<sup>55</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, pg.101.

<sup>56</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pg.132.

the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these goals, the existential *communitas* is organized into a perduring social system'; and '(3) ideological *communitas*,' which 'one can apply to a variety of utopian models of societies based on existential *communitas*.' Within the spontaneous or ideological, he emphasizes the notion of 'anti-structure,' the breaking away from the social structures of the pre- and post-liminal states. While he does not use the term 'anarchic,' there are hints of this within his examples of hippy 'happenings'<sup>57</sup> and his application of Buber's 'I and Thou,' in the sense of direct and unmediated interaction between the liminal participants as individuals.

I strongly feel that *neither* of these two forms of *communitas* are at all appropriate to describe the state of preceptees within the Triple Platform Ordination. 'Normative *communitas*,' on the other hand, does seem appropriate. The rules enforced upon the preceptees are very similar to those of fully ordained monastics, or rather, they are the same rules but even more strictly applied. This normative community has no doubt formed after a long history of spontaneous and ideological communities, the former invoking the days of ordination via '*Ehi bhikkhave*' 善來比丘, and the latter with the *Vinaya* rules, all with the influence of Chinese (most likely Confucian-inspired) notions about what constitutes proper 'rites' 禮. There is, however, 'the persisting adhesion between equality and absence of property' among the preceptees, which is otherwise an enduring quality of spontaneous and ideological *communitas*.<sup>58</sup> This is despite Triple Platform Ordinations typically involving several hundred preceptees, while Turner notes that *communitas* is more apparent in smaller groups, tending to break-down when larger size usual entails bureaucracy.<sup>59</sup> Even within the iconoclastic rhetoric

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<sup>57</sup> Explained as 'the spontaneous, the fluid, unstructured, unsequential quality to experience' in Hall, "The Hippies: An American 'Moment' ", pg.158.

<sup>58</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pg.134.

<sup>59</sup> Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', pp.46-47; *The Ritual Process*, pg.142 on St. Francis.

of the Chan traditions, to which the vast majority of modern Taiwanese monasteries are the heirs, Chinese Buddhism has seldom shied away from bureaucracy and tight social ordering. Perhaps an explanation can be found in Douglas' group and grid theory. Use of ritual corresponds to the group, i.e., the degree of common shared identity and lack of individualism. Therefore, the modern *Saṅgha* with its tightly bound sense of community is strongly ritualistic. However, by also having a tight grid, meaning hierarchy imposes and prescribes order at all times, there is little room for spontaneous *communitas*.<sup>60</sup>

### **Liminal metaphors for death and (re)birth**

The term 'liminality' itself, from the Latin '*limen*' for threshold or doorframe, is, of course, a metaphor, a useful conceptual model for understanding the neither-here-nor-there state of one between different states in life during the rites of passage. Above, the preceptees were described by Turner as being 'ground down to be fashioned anew' in the liminal process. This brings us to another important metaphor which shapes our understanding of the process of monastic ordination, that of death and (re)birth, the boundaries of life itself. Douglas also says that 'the initiates die to old life and are reborn to the new.'<sup>61</sup> This shaping of the new post-liminal identity often takes the form of a 'birth' into that status, and with birth, the entrance into a new spiritual family. At the very start of the novice ordination platform, the novices declare that: 'We are sons and daughters of Śākyamuni in name only,' as they beseech the preceptors to grant them the precepts, i.e., to become children of the Buddha. For *bhikṣu* / *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, when the preceptees are taught the serious precepts that involve defeat (meaning expulsion from the order if transgressed), it is stated that: 'If a *bhikṣu* / *bhikṣuṇī* transgresses any one of these rules, he is no longer a *bhikṣu* / *bhikṣuṇī* and no longer a son / daughter of Śākyamuni.' Bodhisattva ordination, which is the last of the three

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<sup>60</sup> Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, pp.32-33.

<sup>61</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pg.97.

platforms, also frequently refers to the preceptees as ‘sons and daughters of the Buddhas.’ For example, after the preceptees have received the bodhisattva precepts and take up the staff as a symbol of office, it is said that: ‘Now that you have received the Bodhisattva Precepts [you] are considered the true sons and daughters of the Buddha.’ We can see the pairing of being sons and daughter ‘in name only’ at the start of the three ordination platforms with their becoming ‘true’ sons and daughters at end, as a culmination of the liminal ordination process. This metaphor directly connects the preceptees receiving of the precepts as being a transition from the state of being a child of a secular family to becoming a spiritual son or daughter of the Buddhas, and taking up a new transcendent state. Ordination is the birth of the child into the family of the Buddhas.

In the Buddhist world view of cyclic existence, wherein death follows birth and birth follows death, to be born as a child of the Buddhas, the preceptees must die to their former, mundane lives. As such, a parallel complementary metaphor for ordination is that of death. In Strong’s description of *upasampadā* ordination in early Indian Buddhism (corresponding to the Second Platform), he points out the features of ordination that equate the body of the preceptee with a corpse, and meditations upon ‘the impure and corpselike nature of the body.’<sup>62</sup> While Strong contrasts his insights *against* van Gennep’s description of Buddhist ordination as a rite of passage, or Eliade’s initiation with ‘death and rebirth symbolism,’ these are not necessarily contradictory. Whether described or enacted as birth or death, both are critical transitional (hence liminal) states within all human lives, and therefore powerful metaphors to describe the change in status. Strong’s newly ordained *bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī* is akin to a walking corpse, neither alive nor dead, no longer lay, but also not yet attained to sanctity. Novice and *bhikṣu* / *bhikṣuṇī* ordination status end at physical death<sup>63</sup> or breaking of the serious

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<sup>62</sup> Strong, *Legend and Cult of Upagupta*, pg.89.

<sup>63</sup> It is worth noting that the bodhisattva precepts are not considered to end at physical death, but continue through into the practitioner’s future lives.

precepts, literally ‘defeat by another’ (波羅夷; *pārājika*). In the Chinese *Vinaya* translation of the Dharmagupta *Vinaya*, the category of ‘defeat by another’ is glossed as ‘decapitation’ (斷頭),<sup>64</sup> using the metaphor of ‘death’ as the end of ordination and monastic status.

In broader cultural terms, this symbolic death also seen elsewhere in Indian religious culture, particularly in the initiation of a Brahmin youth and that of a renunciant. Penner describes the young initiate ‘twice-born’ (*dvija*) male as a ‘newborn,’ who now as an adult ‘has all the responsibilities and values of an adult male Hindu.’ Unlike Buddhist ordination, however, his next rite of passage will be marriage and the creation of his own family.<sup>65</sup> From this day on they wear a sacred thread as a mark of their status. For Hinduism, renunciation, in the sense of abandoning householder lifestyle and family, typically only takes place during one’s later years. Not only are family and career abandoned, even the external ritual life of a householder Brahmin is given up. Entrance into the life of a renunciant (*sannyasin*) is marked by the enactment of their own funeral, complete with the purification to be carried out on a corpse such as shaving the head, clipping of nails, and bathing. After carrying out ritual obligations as a householder one last time, the ritual implements are also burned and the sacred fire, externally extinguished, is taken up internally, with the sacred thread they received in youth being also burned.<sup>66</sup> The social birth of the young Brahmin has ended with their social death, a religious lifecycle within their biological lifespan. The metaphor is the same in Buddhism, and appears to be found throughout the Dharmic religious traditions.

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<sup>64</sup> *Sifen lu* 《四分律》卷 22 : 「波羅夷者，譬如人斷頭不可復起。」 (CBETA, T22, no. 1428, p. 714, a22-23) ‘“*Pārājika*”: just as when a person is decapitated, they will no longer live.’

<sup>65</sup> Penner, *Rediscovering the Buddha*, pg.163-4.

<sup>66</sup> Bell, *Ritual*, pg.100; van der Velde, ‘Over My Dead Buddha!’ pg. 240. See also Olivelle, *The Āśrama System*, pp.122-23.

## Conclusion

Van Gennep's 'rites of passage' and 'liminality,' and the development of these ideas by Turner, along with his notion of '*communitas*,' provide us with a valuable anthropological perspective on the Triple Platform Ordination in Chinese Buddhism. Taking us out of the scope of textual, historical and normative scholarship which marks most studies on contemporary Chinese Buddhist *Vinaya*, we are brought into the process of ordination itself. Features of all three phases of van Gennep's rites of passage are clearly seen through all three phases of the process, i.e., from the pre-liminal, through liminality itself, and back into the reintegrative post-liminal state. There is some ambiguity with regards when the first phase takes place. Is it at tonsure before the ordination? Or is it during ordination itself. If we just applied van Gennep's three-fold system, this may appear as an ambiguity or anomaly. Why are there two candidates for the role? Given that tonsure usually takes place during time as a student at a Buddhist seminary / college, this situation may in turn reflect an incomplete integration of two distinct models of early monastic life. The first is what we may call the 'traditional model for entry into the *Saṅgha*, being undertaking Triple Platform Ordination proper, and the second model is that of modern Buddhist seminary / college education. Certain, but not all, elements of a broader horizon of older monastic training systems have effectively moved to become part of contemporary seminary / college life. Rather than seeing this split structure as an ambiguity or anomaly, it may instead cause us some reflection on other possible variations within van Gennep's original tripartite liminal structure.

In terms of Turner's liminal *communitas* of the cohort of preceptees, at the very most we see what he calls normative *communitas*. There seems to be little if anything of spontaneous or existential *communitas* among the preceptees, though the aspiration toward an ideal society still underlies the formalized normative form. In the ordination process, we see a model for the changes that take place within the preceptees as they transition from lay or tonsured students to becoming fully fledged members of the monastic

community, i.e., the metaphor of life and death itself. The preceptees die to their social identities in the mundane secular world and are reborn as holy children of the Śākyan Buddha. There is a shift from death and birth (and naming of the child) as important life-cycle rites of passage for secular societies to a new religious status.

Together, the influence of modern Buddhist colleges for monastic education on the liminal structures found within traditional training for young monastics during ordination, along with the presence of only normative *communitas* among colleagues for Triple Platform Ordination, suggests that there are two distinct, but tightly inter-linked, Taiwanese monastic induction systems that train young student monastics in the normative ideals of monasticism. While our study here has only focused on the Chinese tradition Triple Platform Ordination as found in Taiwan-based monastic orders, further studies on ordination rites in Theravādin and Tibetan traditions may shed more light on Buddhist monastic ordination as a ‘rite of passage,’ what transformative significance they hold for those who undertake this path, and the relationship between traditional ordination systems and modern Buddhist seminary education.

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