

Whatever Happened to the Monastic Sangha?

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

A talk given at the 13th Western Buddhist Monastic Conference
June 2006, Bhavana Society, West Virginia

First I should say, not as an excuse but by way of explanation, that I learned that I was to be a presenter only two days ago. I was a bit disoriented when I learned this, for I hadn't prepared anything to speak about in advance. At first, I decided to make it easy for myself and give a presentation based on a paper that I already had on hand. But one statement that Venerable Heng Liang made yesterday, at the end of her talk, kept on ringing through my mind. It was the statement: "If a monastic Sangha doesn't become well established in America, I don't see much hope for the Dharma here." Today I woke up long before dawn and those words immediately popped into my mind. I felt that I had somehow to address this topic in my talk. Suddenly ideas started to come together in my mind, at that very early hour. I sat down and started jotting down notes, and before long the draft of a paper was taking shape. Due to this morning's activities, I could type out my notes only after lunch, and I just managed to print out a version to refer to during my talk ten minutes ago. The ideas aren't well organized, but I will present them anyway. Please don't mind if they are a bit out of sequence.

In my talk I want to consider how we can move in a direction whereby the Sangha assumes its special role as the "torch-bearer" of the Buddha's message, yet does so in a way that doesn't alienate lay people, but on the contrary can win their trust, confidence, and devotion. Here in the United States, and maybe more broadly in the West, we have a rather unusual situation, matched perhaps only by Japan, where the most prominent teaching roles in several Buddhist traditions have been taken over by the laity, and not seldom this has been done with the blessings of members of the monastic Sangha. Sometimes, in fact, lay teachers train and even certify monastic Sangha members as teachers. It seems to me that the training in the Sangha should prepare monks and nuns to serve as Dharma teachers, for they have dedicated their lives to this purpose; yet in today's world, we also have to prepare earnest lay people to understand, practice, and teach the Dharma, which implies a respect for their potentials as practitioners and teachers. Yet this should be done within a system that recognizes the monastic Sangha as the custodian of the Dharma as well as the field of merit for the lay community.

Now, in a traditional Buddhist country like Sri Lanka, it isn't unusual for lay people to become Dharma teachers. They give discourses, they conduct classes, they give meditation instructions, and sometimes conduct meditation courses and retreats; but when they do so, they're almost always nested within a system that gives priority to the monastic order. Usually they will have studied and trained under monastic teachers, and they'll continue to pay homage to the monastic Sangha as such, not merely to individual monastic teachers. If any lay teacher turns against the monastic Sangha, those lay devotees who have faith in the Sangha will steer clear of them. Such teachers – and there are a sprinkling of them nowadays in Sri Lanka – are usually recognizable by the idiosyncratic character of their teaching.

In traditional pre-modern Buddhism, the roles for laity and monastics are clearly defined, and there is also a clearly defined version of the Dharma for each. This structure, though, can be

rigid and limiting. The laity see their primary task to be that of acquiring merit, which will ensure them a favorable rebirth in their next existence and provide supporting conditions for the attainment of the ultimate Buddhist goal, *nibbāna*. The practice for the laypeople that goes along with this task is primarily giving (*dāna*), which usually means giving food to monks, observing precepts, undertaking devotional practices, and practicing short periods of meditation, usually on special observance days. The meditation practiced is primarily recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Sangha, and loving-kindness meditation. Asian lay Buddhists who have been subject to modern influences emanating from the West have developed a new understanding of their roles, and so, while they continue to support the monastic order and look up to the monks as the custodians of the Dharma, they are also intent on learning the Dharma in depth and on practicing intensive insight meditation.

The roles of monastic persons in theory are intensive study of the Dharma and meditation, as well as performing services for the laity. What happens in practice, however, in most temples in Asian Theravada countries, is that the role of performing services for the laity gains the upper hand; it has even become the major function of temple monks. Even intensive, in-depth study of the Dharma has faded out, and the practice of meditation has almost vanished, so that it is reduced to just five or ten minutes of quiet sitting in the daily devotional service. Forest monks often place more emphasis on meditation in the hope of reaching true attainment.

For all its shortcomings, in traditional Asian Buddhism, these activities take place against a long-standing background that includes trust and confidence in the Three Jewels as objects of devotion and a world view that is determined largely by the teachings of the suttas and the commentaries. It is built upon solid trust in the law of karma and rebirth and upon an aspiration for *nibbāna* as a state of world-transcending realization.

Modern Westerners, in contrast, come to the Dharma from an entirely different stance of consciousness. They generally have a much higher level of education than traditional village Buddhists. Many Westerners will have read widely in psychology and in fields that might be grouped under the heading of “spirituality” and “higher consciousness.” They also approach the Dharma with different problems in mind and they therefore naturally seek different solutions.

When Westerners come to Buddhism, they bring to their encounter with the Dharma an acute sense of what I shall call “existential suffering.” By this expression, I'm not referring to clinical depression, or a disposition to morbid states of mind, or any type of psychopathology. What I mean is a gnawing sense of lack, a feeling of incompleteness or inadequacy, that can't be filled by any of the ordinary sources of enjoyment. This sense of existential suffering can coexist with a personality that is, by all other criteria, quite sound and healthy. Sometimes existential suffering takes the form of a feeling of loneliness that can't be eliminated by any number of social contacts or human relationships; sometimes it's a feeling that “my life is empty, devoid of meaning and purpose”; or sometimes it's just a conviction that there has to be more to life than acquiring rewards and trophies in the great American success story. For those who come from a deeply religious background and have lost their faith, it can manifest as a feeling of infinite absence, the absence of God that has to be filled with something else to give an ultimate meaning to life, an objective source of meaning or purpose without which life seems pointless and absurd.

This sense of existential suffering, or “fundamental lack,” is the primary motive that drives most Westerners to seek the Dharma. People troubled by existential suffering come to the Dharma in search of what I would call “radical therapy.” Since they generally aren't psychopathological, they aren't using the Dharma as a psychotherapy. Though some have criticized them for doing so, in my observation this isn't the case. But they are approaching it as what we might call an

“existential therapy.” They are trying to fill a hole at the bottom of their existence. They are seeking above all a *practice* that they can integrate into their daily lives in order to transform the felt quality of their lives. They aren’t seeking explanations; they aren’t seeking a new religion; and generally, they aren’t seeking a new system of beliefs.

They come to the Dharma seeking a radical therapy, a method that will provide them with concrete, tangible, and immediate changes in the way they experience their worlds. And most Buddhist teachers – or rather, let me say, most *Dharma* teachers – are presenting the Dharma as exactly that. They are presenting the Dharma as a practice, a way, a path, that will help ameliorate this disturbing sense of existential suffering. They are presenting it as a radical, pragmatic, existential therapy that does not require any beliefs, that does not ask for any more faith than a readiness to apply the method and see what kind of results one can get from it. What is being given is something that is ably captured by the title of an extremely popular book on Buddhism, a title and a book that encapsulate very well the nature of this lay Dharma practice. The title of the book is *Buddhism Without Beliefs*.

Why did this sense of existential suffering start to set in so dramatically in the United States and Western Europe right at the time that they reached the height of their technological and industrial power? Why did it set in among the well-educated, affluent middle and upper middle classes? To raise and address these questions is not irrelevant to our concerns, because to do so will help us to understand the transformation that Buddhism has been undergoing in its passage from Asia to the West. In my view, this sense of existential suffering set in just at that time, and just here, because the technological revolution that we underwent during that period was bought at a price – a steep price that we are still being forced to pay. The price is the alienation of human beings from themselves, from nature, and from each other. It is generally the well educated and affluent who feel the pain of this alienation most acutely, and thus the sense of anomie hits them hardest. This alienation leads to an overwhelming sense of purposelessness that pervades all aspects of our life. It infects our human relations, which become mechanical and competitive. It infects our relations with nature, as we turn natural wonders into national parks and dream worlds into Disney-worlds. It invades our relations with ourselves, haunting us in our most private moments of solitude. Even religion becomes a matter of Tel-evangelical campaigns aimed at boosting membership figures or lobbying around issues that are considered important by the so-called Religious Right.

Underlying this project aimed at achieving the technological conquest of nature or the technological conquest of the world, is another project occurring at a deeper level. This is the project of bringing concrete actuality under the control and domination of our conceptually constructed pictures of actuality. However, when we attempt to do this, there is inevitably a gulf, a gap, between the conceptual constructs that we create and the concrete actuality that they are intended to represent. The conceptual constructs can never successfully capture the concrete actuality as it is in itself and adequately represent it; then, at some level, this inadequacy of conceptualization becomes felt as painful. Through conceptualization we aim to manipulate things, to bend things to our wills, to make them subservient to our human purposes, and the conceptualization often serves this purpose well. But this project of manipulation is inevitably driven from deep within by a desire to dominate reality, to make reality completely amenable to the dictates of our will; this project turns actuality into a set of tools to be used by a self. However, the more we do this, the further removed things become from us, the more they escape our attempts to dominate them, and this then generates that deep feeling of inner anguish that I call “existential suffering.”

Now those Americans – and Westerners in general – who turn to Buddhism or to Dharma practice because they are oppressed, either consciously or unconsciously, by the sense of existential suffering see the Dharma as a means of restoring a sense of meaning and purpose to their lives. Not only do they see it in this way, but *it works in this way*. It helps them to overcome this bitter feeling of alienation from themselves, from others, and from the natural world. In the Theravada tradition, or the "Vipassana movement," the practice of mindfulness serves this purpose by helping one to cut through the net of conceptualization and obtain a fresh and direct encounter with immediate experience. It helps one to make a fresh and direct contact with one's experience through the senses, to come back into the present moment, to make more direct contact with the workings of one's own mind, and thereby to have fresher and more vital, more dynamic, more enriching human relationships. And so mindfulness meditation is seen as the technique that takes us back to the concrete experience of actuality, to actuality which is always fresh at every moment. For most people this is quite a startling revelation.

Now this function of mindfulness is common both to classical Buddhism and to meditation practice as taught within the lay Vipassana movement.¹ Given that this function of mindfulness is common to the two, we can raise the questions: "Why does the lay Vipassana movement *remain* primarily a lay Vipassana movement? Why doesn't it evolve towards a monastic Sangha? Why doesn't it look towards a monastic Sangha as a 'polestar' providing the ideal towards which its members should be striving?" And we can ask: "Is there a significant difference between the style of mindfulness meditation as taught within the lay Vipassana movement and mindfulness meditation as taught within a classical monastic-based system?"

As a way of answering this question, I want to go back and take another look at the type of suffering that Dharma practice is intended to address, at what I have called existential suffering, the sense of lack, the sense of meaninglessness, the feeling of alienation. Now, from the perspective of classical Buddhism, this sense of lack or voidness of meaning would be seen as *emblematic*, that is it would be seen as *pointing beyond itself* to the intrinsic and ever-present unsatisfactory nature of samsaric existence itself. And when *this* is seen, when *this* is recognized, a practitioner's natural response would be to head in the direction of renunciation, to leave behind the home life and to set out for the homeless life, seeking to solve the great problem of birth and death. If, however, one doesn't yet have the strength to go forth into homelessness, or if one's conditions aren't suitable for taking this step, one would practice at home with a mind that *slants* in the direction of renunciation, that *inclines* in the direction of renunciation, and looks towards renunciation as a worthy goal. And if one cannot practice at home with a mind that slants to renunciation, one would still naturally respect and revere those who have left the household life and taken up the homeless life; one would be full of admiration for those who have exchanged the garments of the householder for the ochre-brown-maroon robe of the Buddhist monk or nun. One would recognize these virtuous and dedicated monks and nuns as the ones who represent the ideals and aspirations of Buddhism; one would see them as people who have fulfilled one's own inner ideals and aspirations. One would revere them as bearing the lifeblood of the Buddha in their veins. One would regard them, as the ancient expression puts it, as truly "a field of merit for the world."

¹ Naturally I'm speaking from the standpoint of the form of Buddhism with which I'm most familiar. In doing so I don't want to marginalize those who are coming from other Buddhist traditions, but I actually want you to relate what I'm saying here to your own traditions, because I'm sure the same transformation that is affecting the Theravada tradition is affecting other Buddhist traditions. I believe the Zen tradition has been strongly affected by this trend, and I believe the same trend can be observed in the presentations of Tibetan Buddhism that use Dzogchen and Mahamudra as their main meditation vehicles. It seems the Gelug tradition has been somewhat immune from this because they generally stress the need to obtain a comprehensive view of the Dharma beginning from the fundamentals.

However, for the sense of existential suffering to give rise to this perception of what I call the "intrinsic and ever-existing unsatisfactory nature of samsaric existence," two additional factors are needed. What are these two additional factors? One of these is *faith*. In Pali, it's called *saddhā*. And what does *saddhā* mean? It means faith in the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. It means faith in the Buddha as the fully enlightened teacher; faith in the Dharma as the Buddha's teaching – the *full* teaching, *not* just a selection of sayings, cleverly arranged and organized and quoted on occasion, often *misquoted* according to one's convenience; and faith in the Sangha. This last doesn't mean faith in the community of those who are practicing together (which is not the meaning of the word "Sangha"); it means faith, first in the *ariyan Sangha*, the invisible spiritual community of those who have attained realization of the world-transcending Dharma – and then it's also faith in the *monastic Sangha* as a community (though not every monk and nun!)--a community that abides here in this world as the visible, human, embodied representation of the ariyan Sangha.

I have to emphasize that the word *saddhā* as used in the Buddhist texts--the word we translate as faith--is specifically tied to the Buddha Dharma. It has become fashionable amongst lay Dharma teachers, while knocking down "beliefs," to extol faith. Faith, however, is then explained in such a way that its link to the Triple Gem is either eroded or fully broken, so that one could have faith in almost anything that's considered good, sacred, and holy, and it's still acceptable.

Faith has various aspects; it isn't synonymous with belief, but one of its aspects is cognitive, and that involves holding certain beliefs. Among them is the belief that the historical Buddha, Gotama of the Sakyan clan, was *the* fully enlightened Buddha of this historical period; and the belief that *his* teaching is the teaching that leads to enlightenment and liberation; and the belief that those who have followed and practiced *his* teaching with a high degree of success have gained world-transcending realization. That is, for classical Buddhism faith is uniquely rooted in the Triple Gem, and rooted in them partly by way of certain beliefs.

Faith also involves an emotional component. It involves devotion, and in this case it is devotion directed towards the Triple Gem, above all love and devotion directed towards the Buddha as the human being who has perfectly realized all the noble qualities and ideals expressive of the Dharma; also, as the one who, out of great compassion, has taken up the burden of teaching and transforming obtuse sentient beings like ourselves. I find that this aspect of devotion is conspicuously lacking in the contemporary lay Buddhist scene here in the U.S. With a few exceptions, we hardly see traces of devotion and reverence for the Buddha in any of the popular Western Buddhist journals.

So one factor necessary for this sense of existential suffering to lead to renunciation and the step into the monastic life is faith. The other factor is "right view" (*sammā ditthi*), and this is a factor on which I want to place a great deal of emphasis. In the classical teachings, there are many levels of right view, but for convenience's sake we can speak of two kinds. The *foundational level* is the right view of karma and its fruits, and to properly understand the working of karma and its fruits, one has to consider them in connection with the capacity of our actions to bring forth their results *through a sequence of many lives*; that is, the right view of karma and its fruit means an understanding, at least in principle, of how karma generates "rebirth linking." Many Americans (and Westerners) are hesitant to accept the teaching of karma and rebirth because they aren't part of Western culture. Some even boldly proclaim that this is part of the "cultural baggage" of Asian Buddhism that we have to drop in order to forge a new "American (or Western) Buddhism" that will be meaningful to people here in the West. Again, they sometimes argue that such teachings as those on karma and rebirth are just shackles of dogma and belief with which the Buddhists of Asia

have bound themselves. Today, it's said, we have outgrown religious dogmas and beliefs; we want to become totally free, in the present, and this means we must become free of all those Asian Buddhist dogmas and beliefs.

My response to this is to offer an analogy. Suppose in India a new university were being founded and they would plan to open a physics department. Would the physics professors start to debate among themselves whether they should be teaching the Newtonian laws of motion, or the laws of thermodynamics, or Einsteinian relativity theory? Suppose some professor among them would stand up and say, "These laws and theories come from the West. They aren't part of *our* cultural heritage. We shouldn't be obliged to teach them in our university. They are part of the cultural baggage of the West that we have to drop when we teach physics in Asia." The other professors would look at him and think he's gone mad. Before they dropped the teaching of these physical laws, they would certainly drop *him* from the department. Why so? Because the laws of physics aren't taught just because they are part of someone's cultural heritage. They are taught because they explain phenomena that are universally true, because they are just as valid in Beijing, Calcutta, Nairobi, and Istanbul as they are in London, New York, or Buenos Aires. And that is the meaning of physics.

So too, the teachings of karma and rebirth are intended to explain the universal laws of the moral life; they explain laws that are vitally important to us, since they are the laws that govern our future destiny from life to life, the laws that underlie our movements through beginningless samsara and that govern the whole process by which one progresses from the state of a deluded worldling to that of a liberated arahant or a perfectly enlightened Buddha. These teachings (at least the oldest versions of them) come from the Buddha himself. They were part of the content of his enlightenment, and he taught them to human beings for a good reason. These laws teach us how to make basic ethical decisions in our daily lives; they steer us away from evil and guide us towards the good; they form the backbone of Buddhist spirituality. They are intrinsic to the very meaning of the Dharma. Without gaining some insight into these laws, thinking, "Just by being mindful of the present I can attain the highest realizations," one will be like a man who goes to a lake with a sieve, thinking to use it to collect water and fill his bucket. In the end, he will go back home with an empty bucket.

Therefore, the right view of karma and rebirth -- of karma as a force that generates repeated existence in the round of birth and death -- is the *fundamental background* right view against which the second type of right view derives its full meaning. The second type of right view -- the higher right view that leads to liberation -- is the right view of the Four Noble Truths. And now I'm going to make a statement that might again sound a little bold, but I'll make it all the same: The Four Noble Truths cannot be taught properly, cannot be understood properly, unless they are taught and understood against the background of the right view of karma and its fruits, against the background of an understanding of how karma brings renewed existence, against the background of a comprehensive understanding of our samsaric predicament. I would add, though, as an aside, that when introducing the Buddha's teaching to people relatively new to Buddhism, one has to make adjustments. One can't lay the teaching of karma and rebirth on novice students as a necessary article of belief as soon as they enter the door for a first talk on Buddhism. Thus, I believe, as a general principle one can give -- and indeed, one should give -- what I would call an "adaptive" or "accommodative" presentation of the Four Noble Truths, as the Buddha himself did on occasion, without bringing in rebirth; one doesn't have to frighten people away at once by bringing in teachings they aren't prepared to accept. So one can give a psychological presentation of the four truths, showing how experiential suffering arises and ceases in relation to our craving and clinging.

This will enable people to get a grip on the Buddha's teachings as something that can be verified, at least in part, within their present experience. But once their confidence becomes established in the teaching, one should lead them on to a wider, more complete understanding of the Dharma.

Therefore, I would say, if one wants to give a truly *comprehensive*, fully *adequate* explanation of the Four Noble Truths, a presentation that treats them *in depth*, one has to bring in the right view of karma and its fruits as the background and to treat the Four Noble Truths as a diagnosis of our samsaric predicament. If one wants to clearly explain how the five aggregates of clinging are *dukkha* in the deepest sense, one has to explain how these five aggregates are "acquired" again and again through our craving for new existence. If one wants to explain, again in the deepest sense, how craving functions as the second noble truth, the cause of *dukkha*, one has to explain how craving (*tanhā*) is *ponobhavika*, productive of renewed existence. And if one wants to make it clear how the elimination of craving brings about the cessation of *dukkha*, of suffering, again one has to explain how the removal of craving brings the round of repeated existence to an end, leading to the unconditioned peace and freedom of *nibbāna*. If one *doesn't* do this for people who are *ready* for it, whose minds are ripe, then one is not leading them to an adequate understanding of the Dharma. If one keeps on feeding them adaptive presentations of the Dharma, feeding them teachings and practices that are designed to enrich their lives, but does not steer them towards the ultimate truth that transcends life and death, steer them towards a vision of the face of the Deathless, then one is not serving as a fully responsible transmitter of the Dharma.

What is happening today, within what is broadly called "the Theravada tradition," is that the Dharma is being taught primarily on the basis of the equation: "Dharma equals mindfulness meditation equals bare attention." Mindfulness meditation is thus being taken *out* of its original context, the context of the *full* Noble Eightfold Path--which includes right view as I explained it above, and also right intention as including the intention of renunciation, and right morality as including various factors of restraint over bodily and verbal behavior, and right effort as an endeavor to transform the mind through the abandoning of unwholesome qualities and the development of wholesome qualities--and it is instead being taught as a means for the *heightening* and *intensification* of experience simply through being attentive to what is occurring in the present moment. This is the way that the sense of existential malaise that I spoke of earlier is being ameliorated; this is how the alienation from direct experience is being overcome, namely, by using mindfulness meditation as a bridge to take us back to the living experience of the present moment. So because we in the West have become trapped in our conceptual constructs, because our society and civilization have become overwhelmed by our own project of trying to master the world by schemes of conceptual interpretation, we seek refuge in the non-conceptuality of bare mindfulness practice as a means to greater peace and inner fulfillment. We come back into direct contact with our own experience by paying attention to what is happening on each occasion of experience, which leads to what I call "the heightening and intensification of experience." This mode of practice, I say, does lead to greater peace and inner freedom. What is in question, though, is whether it can intrinsically lead to the ultimate peace and perfect freedom that the practice of the Dharma is intended to bring. And the answer that I have come to, based on my own understanding, is that on its own it can't. Right mindfulness, which is more than just bare attention, occurs in the full context of the Noble Eightfold Path, and presupposes faith, right understanding, right intentions, right conduct, and various other factors.

From the fact that the practice of mindfulness meditation brings what I call "a deeper and clearer appreciation of direct experience," I want to draw what might strike you as a startling conclusion: as long as mindfulness meditation is being taught in this way, monasticism will

necessarily appear to be just one option among others. The monastic life and the household life will appear to be equally viable options; the celibate life and the life of one engaged in an ethical sexual relationship will seem equally valid ways of living in accordance with the Dharma. In fact, it might even be argued that for a Dharma practitioner the household life is actually *more* challenging, and therefore richer and *more* rewarding. Why so? Because the monastic life creates artificial boundaries between the sacred and the secular; it erects walls between the worldly and the world-transcending; it cuts one off from possibilities of new experience; it prevents one from finding new opportunities to apply mindfulness to daily life. And thus, the argument goes, it is therefore a narrower, more constricted, more constricting, more impoverished lifestyle, a more *disempowering* lifestyle than that of the earnest lay practitioner.

If this were true, though, there would have been no reason for the Buddha to establish a monastic order of celibate monks and nuns. To see why he did so, let us take another metaphor. Now, if one doesn't present a broad and clear overview of the Dharma, the celibate life and the life of marital commitment within the bounds of the precepts will seem just like alternative stepping stones leading across the stream. But if one *does* present a broad and clear overview of the Dharma, then they *won't* appear simply as alternative stepping stones. Within a comprehensive picture of the Dharma, if one knows what the "near shore" is, and what the "far shore" is, and how the different stepping stones fit together to lead from the near shore to the far shore, it will then become perfectly evident that the life of marital commitment within the bounds of the precepts is a stepping stone that is necessarily closer to the "near shore" than the celibate life, which is necessarily closer to the "far shore." This is not to make judgments about the spiritual stature of the people involved in these lifestyles; for it is certainly the case that a person involved in a marital relationship guided by the precepts might be spiritually more advanced than a celibate person. I'm speaking not about individual cases, but about the lifestyles themselves: about celibacy vs. the ethical non-celibate life. Given that the cause of our bondage to *samsāra* is craving, and that craving for sensual pleasures is one type of craving, and that sexual passion is one of the most powerful manifestations of sensual craving--perhaps the most powerful--it follows that to indulge in sexual passion is to bind oneself to "this shore," the cycle of birth and death, with one of the most powerful bonds conceivable. Given that the "far shore," or *nibbāna*, is dispassion (*virāga*), and that the observance of celibacy is a means to curb lust or passion (*rāga*), it follows that the celibate life is potentially a more effective means towards the realization of the ultimate goal. Since monasticism is grounded upon celibacy, it therefore follows that monasticism is in principle more conducive to the ultimate goal of the Dharma than a lay life guided by the precepts. Again, this is not to make judgments about particular individuals, but simply about the broad contours of lifestyles. It might still happen that a lay person might be far more diligent than a monk or nun; it could even happen that at any time lay Buddhists as a whole are living more admirable spiritual lives than the members of the monastic Sangha. But this still does not negate my general principle.

It seems to me that what has happened in the Theravada tradition--with perhaps parallel developments in other traditions--is that a particular Buddhist practice, namely the practice of mindfulness meditation, has been uprooted from its classical context and then taught against a different background. It is taught to people who, though they might have rejected the mechanistic world view of modern science, have minds that are still largely shaped by that same world view. It is taught to people who, though they may say that they don't adopt any new "ism" including Buddhism, are still largely subscribing to the world view of *materialism*, even if they don't want to admit it. At any rate, they often take an attitude of agnosticism, which is still an "ism." And this is going to shape their experience of Buddhist meditation, to shape the way they appropriate Buddhist

meditation, so that meditation will no longer be functioning as a liberative discipline in the traditional sense, but as a therapeutic technique. It may not be a psychotherapy narrowly conceived, but it will still be *an existential therapy* intended to reconcile the individual to conditioned existence by opening up greater prospects of fulfillment within conditioned existence; it won't transform itself into a path to emancipation from the limitations, the finitude, the flaws and faults of conditioned existence itself. It will be serving as a therapy for the sense of meaninglessness, the feeling of existential emptiness, that modern civilization has left as its legacy. It won't be a way that transcends all therapeutic functions, a way that obliterates the *kilesas*, the defilements and delusions, at their root; a way that leads altogether beyond the vicious round of birth and death.

I want to briefly give one example of this. It concerns the contemplation of impermanence. Now for both the lay Vipassana teachers and for monastic Theravada Buddhism based on the Pali Canon, impermanence implies: "Don't cling. If you cling to anything, you will undergo suffering." But the two draw different conclusions from this thesis, indeed, almost contrary conclusions. For canonical Buddhism, impermanence is the passageway to a radical understanding of the *dukkha-lakkhana*, the mark of suffering. "Whatever is impermanent is *dukkha*; whatever is impermanent, *dukkha*, and subject to change, that should be seen thus: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self." Therefore, whatever there is among the five aggregates, the noble disciple sees this all as "not mine, not I, not my self." Seeing it thus, one becomes disenchanted with it. Being disenchanted, there comes dispassion. Through dispassion, there is liberation. And liberation (*vimutti*) here means the release of the mind from the primordial defilements, the *āsavas* and *samyojanas*, and release from the cycle of rebirths. But many lay Vipassana meditators see the fact of impermanence as a fact imbued with positive significance. True, to cling to what is impermanent brings suffering. But, it is said, one can immerse oneself fully in the impermanent without clinging to anything, and this is the lesson that is often drawn. So the fact that clinging to the impermanent brings suffering means that one should live in the world and experience everything with awe and wonder, "dancing with the ten thousand things without clinging to them." Once again, we are led through the practice of mindfulness to a new affirmation and appreciation of the world. From the standpoint of classical Buddhism, this turns out to be a subtle *re-affirmation of samsāra*.

Wisdom and compassion are the two "wings" of Buddhism, the two most excellent virtues, wisdom being the crowning intellectual virtue, compassion the crowning virtue of our affective nature. I want to hold that deep faith and right view are also necessary conditions for compassion to be brought to its fulfillment. Now compassion has many degrees and kinds, but for compassion to reach fullness and depth of development, it has to be grounded upon right view as a keen perception of the dangers and inherent unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence. Without this perception, one can develop compassion towards those who are subject to the manifold types of experiential suffering -- and of course there are countless numbers of beings undergoing such types of suffering all the time, so we are never deprived of opportunities to practice compassion -- but our compassion still won't reach its fullest and deepest dimensions. This only becomes possible when we take into account the boundless extent of samsaric suffering, the subtle fetters that keep beings tied to the round of becoming, and the hidden dangers that ever lurk before these beings (who, we are told, may well have been our mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters in countless past lives) as they move from life to life.

I believe that for monastic Buddhism to take root and become properly established, what is needed is a laity that has an intrinsic respect for monastics, and for lay people to develop this respect, two themes that must be emphasized again and again in the teaching of the Dharma are faith and right view. Perhaps we shouldn't begin with heavy doses of Buddhism pietism and

teachings on the intricacies of Buddhist cosmology; but when the time is right to do so, we also have to be straightforward and unabashed in teaching people. Otherwise we will just become robed and shaven-headed teachers of mindfulness meditation, similar to our lay colleagues, and then the main difference will be that lay people will find greater affinity with the lay teachers, who can speak to them at a more intimate level of shared experience of the household life.

Another theme we have to emphasize, without any fear or hesitation, is the contributions that monastics have made to the survival of the Dharma. We shouldn't hesitate to speak about how the Buddha Dharma has survived down the centuries through the self-sacrificing efforts of *monks and nuns*, who had the courage and earnestness to give up the pleasures of mundane life and dedicate themselves fully to the cause of Buddhism, surrendering their very persons to the Triple Gem. And we have to draw the inevitable corollary: If the proper Dharma is to take root and flourish here in America, we need Americans to come forward and make that courageous move. Not just because it is "more conducive to their practice," but because they truly have been swept off their feet by the Dharma and want to offer their lives to the Dharma in every respect. It is when lay people encounter monks and nuns leading lives of selfless dedication that they can appreciate the beauty and value of the monastic life, revere it, and bring forth a mind of generosity to support those who have entered its fold.

I also want to add some concluding observations regarding the situation of lay Buddhists here in America. I don't think that we should expect lay people today to revert to the roles of lay people in a traditional Buddhist culture, that is, to see their roles to be simply devout supporters of the monastic Sangha, providing their material necessities as a way of earning merit for a future birth; nor do I think this is desirable. I think in today's world, lay people have much richer opportunities to lead a fuller Dharma life, and as monks and nuns we have to rejoice in this opportunity and try to encourage them. We should be of service to help them to realize their full potential as Dharma practitioners and teachers. We live at a time when people want and need to experience the concrete benefits to which the Dharma can lead, and they should have every chance to do so. This is a time when lay people will have more leisure and opportunity to participate in long-term meditation retreats, to study the Dharma in depth, and to live lifestyles that will approximate to those of monastics. This is also a time when there will be lay people who have the knowledge, experience, and communicative skills needed to teach the Dharma.

Much thought has to be given to the task of establishing roles for lay Buddhists that can tap their talents, and we will have to adjust the social forms of Buddhism to the new conditions we find ourselves in today. We simply can't expect Western Buddhism to imitate Asian Buddhism. And yet, I feel, for the true Dharma to flourish as the Buddha himself had envisaged it, a healthy development of Western Buddhism will have to preserve the position of the monastic Sangha as the torch-bearers of the Dharma. I say this, of course, not to try to reserve certain privileges for ourselves, so that we can sit up on high seats and wield fans with our names inscribed on them and get addressed with elegant and polite terms, but because I'm convinced that it was the Buddha's intention that the full monastic ordination with the opportunities and responsibilities it offers are necessary for the true Dharma to survive in the world. And this means that, in each major Buddhist tradition, we will need more people of talent and dedication to come forth, take ordination, receive proper training, and then reach a point where they can give training to the next generation of monks and nuns. In this way, the Dharma will be able to reproduce itself from one generation to the next.