

Should Monks Be Involved in Politics and/or Flaunt Their Credentials?

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Introduction

A Buddhist monk is supposed to be a renunciant practising the path to Enlightenment taught by the Buddha. This is a path for the elimination of the self or ego. Thus the Buddha and his disciples went on daily almsround (pindacara) to beg for their food as a practise to cultivate humility, in addition to giving lay devotees the chance to practise generosity. So humility is the mark of a renunciant, and you can say that a benchmark of a monk's progress is the measure of his humility.

In Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 8.53, the Buddha instructed the first nun, Mahapajapati Gotami as follows:

“Gotami, those states of which you may know: ‘These states lead to

- (1) passion, not to dispassion;
- (2) to being fettered, not to being unfettered;
- (3) to accumulating, not to reducing;
- (4) to much desires, not to fewness of desires;
- (5) to discontent, not to contentment;
- (6) to sociability, not to solitude;
- (7) to indolence, not to arousal of energy;
- (8) to being difficult to support, not to being easy to support;

you should definitely know:

‘This is not Dhamma, this is not Vinaya, this is not the teaching of the Teacher (Buddha)!’

The above sutta states concisely the principles on which a monk or nun should base his/her life. The Buddha instructed his monk disciples to live in seclusion and to arouse energy in practising the Noble Eightfold Path. Sociability and involvement with lay people and worldly matters were definitely discouraged by the Buddha. In fact, just when the Buddha was about to pass away, Ven. Ananda enquired about the funeral arrangements for the Buddha. The Buddha replied: “Do not worry yourselves about the funeral arrangements, Ananda. You should strive for the highest goal, devote yourselves to the highest goal, and dwell with your mind tirelessly, zealously devoted to the highest goal. There are wise nobles, Brahmins and merchants who are devoted to the Tathagata (Buddha); they will take care of the funeral.” (Digha Nikaya, Sutta 16)

A monk who is a fraud is one defined in Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 5 and Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 5.167 as follows: ‘There are persons devoid of faith who have gone forth from the home life into homelessness not out of faith but in seeking a livelihood; they are fraudulent, deceitful, restless, hollow, vain, rough-tongued, talkative, unguarded in their sense faculties, immoderate in eating, not devoted to wakefulness, indifferent to the ascetic life, not respectful of the training, luxurious, lax, taking the lead in backsliding, neglectful of seclusion, lazy, wanting in energy, unmindful, lacking clear comprehension, unconcentrated, with wandering minds, unwise, stupid.’ Basically this means a monk is fraudulent when he does not sincerely practise the holy path taught by the Buddha.

Active Involvement in Politics

From all the above, we can see very clearly that a monk should not be actively involved in partisan politics, which is within the sphere of lay people. At the most a monk may exercise his citizen's right to vote wisely in the General Elections.

If monks actively engage in partisan politics, it will endanger the Sangha (community of monks). We have seen reports that monks actively involved in politics in Sri Lanka some years ago were rounded up at night for questioning and some were never seen again. Then in Myanmar several years ago, newspapers showed photos of corpses of monks in the river due to similar reasons. Curfews were also imposed on the monasteries. On the other hand, during the political unrest in Bangkok many years ago, I remember seeing a striking front page photo of monks going on almsround in the morning unobstructed by soldiers guarding the streets during curfew hours. So when monks are not involved actively in politics, they pose no threat to any political party and hence face no obstacles or danger in their daily life.

There are ten contemplations a monk is instructed by the Buddha to consider thoughtfully every day in Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 10.48. The first one is "I am now come to the state of being an outcaste (vevanniya)." The third contemplation is "I must now behave differently (from a lay person)." So a monk should remind himself that he has gone out from society to live a completely different lifestyle from a lay person. To remind his monastic disciples of their low-calling the Buddha purposely called his monks 'bhikkhu', literally 'beggar'. It is only because of his renunciation of worldly possessions and affairs that a monk receives veneration and homage from the laity. If he behaves like a lay person what can he expect other than to be treated like a lay person? In Digha Nikaya Sutta 1 various lay professions are not allowed for a monk. It is considered wrong livelihood for a monk to engage in them.

Flaunting One's Credentials

As mentioned above, the spiritual path is all about eliminating the self or ego. Thus in the Vinaya, a monk is not allowed to declare his spiritual attainments. As for mundane attainments, it is alright for a monk to use commonly accepted titles like Thera, Mahathera, Nayaka Mahathera, Chaokhoon, Agga Maha Pandita, etc. but he should not flaunt it. Monks who possess the Ph.D. degree may want to practise humility and not want to use "Ven. Dr. so and so", like Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi. The late Acharn Buddhadasa had to be persuaded to accept the Chaokhoon title. He also had five honorary Doctorate degrees which he humbly kept silent about.

In the Labhasakkara Samyutta the Buddha warned of the great danger of fame and material gains, which can cause the downfall of a monk.

In the Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 8.86 the Buddha said:

"I have naught to do with fame, Nagita, nor has fame anything to do with me. Whosoever cannot obtain at will, easily and without difficulty this happiness of renunciation, this happiness of seclusion, this happiness of calm, this happiness of enlightenment (i.e. meditative bliss of jhana), which I can obtain at will, easily and without difficulty, let him enjoy that rubbish heap of happiness, that dung-like happiness, that happiness got from gains, fame and praise.....

Nagita, when you are assembled and meet together and live enjoying company, I think thus: 'Surely these reverends cannot obtain at will, easily and without difficulty this happiness of renunciation, this happiness

of seclusion, this happiness of calm, this happiness of enlightenment, which I can obtain at will, easily and without difficulty, that is why these reverends meet and come together and live enjoying company'.....”

Lay people should know that there is no single Sangha now as in the time of the Buddha. Buddhism has split into Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana, each with their different sects, sub sects, etc. So in Malaysia where there are many different sects of Buddhism, there is no 'Chief Monk of Malaysia'. A title like "Chief Sangha Nayaka of Malaysia" (Amarapura sect) means the Chief Monk of only the Amarapura sect of the Sri Lankan monks in Malaysia, which presently comprises not more than a handful of monks. Sri Lankan monks belong to either the Siam sect, Amarapura sect, Ramanna sect, or other smaller sects of Sri Lanka.

The largest Theravada Sangha in Malaysia comprises monks who are members of the Thai Sangha. Monks of ethnic Thai descent mostly ordain into the Sangha which comes under The Malaysian Siamese Sangha Association. Other Malaysian monks ordained in the Thai tradition generally do not come under any umbrella body.

Conclusion

Some people say the teaching of the Buddha is outdated and we have to follow the times. But the Buddha said his Dhamma is 'timeless' (akaliko), or not dependent on time. The Buddha did say the minor rules can be rescinded by the Sangha if it deemed fit. Nonetheless, the Buddha was certainly aware that the rules he had laid down could not cover every situation at all times. Therefore, he gave a set of guidelines—called the Four Great Standards (cattaro mahapadesa) by the ancient compilers of the Vinaya texts—in order to apply to circumstances not directly covered by the rules. In addition to this, we can be guided by two other standards that the Buddha gave. An action can be done if (1) it does not harm oneself or others, (2) it leads to an increase in wholesome states or decrease in unwholesome states.

Some monks consider that going on almsround is outdated. But we can see in busy metropolitan modern Bangkok with its teeming noisy traffic the beauty of monks walking serenely on almsround every morning. Even before daybreak faithful devotees have set up their table of food packets patiently waiting for monks to make their rounds. I have also personally witnessed the eighty plus years old (at that time) highly revered Sangharaja of Thailand humbly walking through the market place, barefoot and with almsbowl in hand (and myself in similar fashion). It is such practice "that makes the faithful even more faithful, and the faithless develop faith" in the monks.

In Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 150 the Buddha said that monks who are not rid of lust, hate, and delusion, or who are not practicing to get rid of lust, hate, and delusion, should not be honored, revered and venerated.