

Revisioning Buddhism

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

Modern monastics?

There is no such thing as a “modern” monastic, if we accept Buddhist monks or nuns as renunciants (those who “have left home”). A monastic with the Singapore dreams of the 5 C's (cash, credit cards, cars, condominiums and country club membership) is clearly a contradiction in terms.

The Vinaya not only forbids monastics from buying and selling but also from what we today call “social work” (see the “Moralties” section of the first 13 Suttas of the Digha Nikaya). In the Maha Parinibbana Sutta (D 16), the Buddha even declares that monastics should have nothing to do with his funeral. There are wise and capable lay followers who can do that.

If monastics become good meditators and Dharma teachers, and are fine examples of those who have mastered inner stillness and simplicity, they can teach and inspire wise lay people to run the temples, centres and social work. In fact, this is quietly happening right now in some with the more truly caring groups of lay Buddhists inspired by the forest monastics of today.

In other words, a Buddhist monastic is not a priest. A monastic by definition is a celibate, single person, with no dealings with money. He is regularly engaged in spiritual training and meditation to gain awakening in this life itself. If the monastic ideal were any less than this, there would be no need for the Buddha to arise in the world.

Examine closely the monastic or lay person who says anything like “Society is changing. So we cannot stick with tradition,” or “Buddhism must change with the times,” you will invariably find that he or she has little or no training in Buddhism, and is steeped in worldly affairs and moneytheism of some form. This is business talk, not Dharma talk.

The Buddha's Buddhism arose as an antithesis to society. Society moves fast and tires us; Buddhism slows us down and rests us. Society wears us down, even sickens us; Buddhism builds, heals and energizes us. It is the mind-healing methods of the Buddha, preserved in his meditation training that are healing and awakening.

The external forms of Buddhism, especially religious rituals are often exploitative and materialistic. They are recidivist: they bring us back to the very problems that the Buddha speaks and acts against: the exploitative priestcraft of the brahmins. The modernized monastics are invariably Buddhist “brahmins”!

The Buddha and the early monastics all alike dress in simple rag-robles, live on almsfood, stay at the foot of trees and in simple dwellings, and use simple medicine. They wander about teaching the Dharma or live quietly meditating alone in the forests and mountains, For the three months of the rains, they stay together in a suitable place, supported by the laity, to whom they give Dharma and meditation instructions.

In due course, such rains retreats have become rituals, used even by those who do not really observe them, by holding kathina and other ceremonies to raise funds for themselves. Many “modernized” Buddhisms have even forgotten about the rains retreat and the robe-offerings.

But how did the “modernizing” start? It clearly began after the Buddha’s death, when the monasteries became more settled, larger, more wealthy, and started owning property, mostly through support of kings, and the rich and powerful. While the wandering forest monks quietly continued with their meditation practices, the settled monastics (like those of the Nalanda University in India and the Mahavihara fraternity in Sri Lanka) became more scholastic and worldly, turning more to ritualism, and “modernizing” Buddhism.

The Buddhism of the Nalanda period (for example), copied brahminical practices like mantras, fire puja, and myths. They became successful as “modernized” tantric forms of Buddhism, but it was a far cry from what the Buddha had taught. In fact, the monasteries became so wealthy, that they caught the attention of the Turkish Muslim marauders who plundered and completely annihilated Indian Buddhism by the early 13th century.

Those who are ignorant of early Buddhism, or have little information about it, or who try to fit Buddhism into their own ideas, easily find this modernized Buddhism very attractive because they promise various kinds of power, purification, ego-stroking, and entertainment. In fact, one of the attractive qualities of such modernized Buddhism is their virtuoso rituals and performances, complete with exotic paraphernalia (ritual implements). They are like sophisticated religious choirs, orchestras or magic shows; some are more like popular pop groups that cater to immediate religious and social needs in a magical or entertaining way. For a high fee, of course.

Modernized Buddhism externalize and ritualize the healing process. They try to help us without telling us how the healing works, or whether it works at all. Modernized Buddhism works like a life-saving service at a swimming pool complex: when you are in danger of the waters, they try to help you. But the life-guards cannot be there all the time.

Early Buddhism teaches us how the mind works, how to heal ourselves and how not be lost in worldliness. The Buddha teaches us how to swim, how to avoid dangers in water, and stay safe.

Buddhism is often represented by a wheel: we need not reinvent the wheel. Please choose your Buddhism wisely.

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