

The Challenge of the Future How Will the Sangha Fare in North American Buddhism?

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I will begin with some questions: If Buddhism is to be successfully transplanted in the U.S., does it need a monastic Sangha as its cornerstone? Must there be a monastic Sangha at all, or is Buddhist monasticism an outdated institution? Can the teachings flow entirely through a “lay Sangha,” through lay teachers and communities of lay practitioners? If monastics are necessary, what should their role be? What their duties? What changes in lifestyle and orientation, if any, are required by the new conditions imposed by the Western culture in which Buddhism has taken root?

My personal belief is that for Buddhism to successfully flourish in the West, a monastic Sangha is necessary. At the same time, I think it almost inevitable that as Buddhism evolves here, monasticism will change in many ways, that it will adapt to the peculiar environment impressed upon it by Western culture and modes of understanding, which differ so much from the culture and worldview of traditional Asian Buddhism. As a result, I believe, the role monastics play in Western Buddhism will also differ in important ways from the role they play in Asia. I do not think this is something that we need lament or look upon with dread. In some respects, I believe, such a development is not only inevitable but also wholesome, that it can be seen as a sign of Buddhism’s ability to adapt to different cultural conditions, which is also a sign of spiritual strength. At the same time, I also think we need to exercise caution about making adaptation. It would certainly be counterproductive to be in a hurry to make changes uncritically, without taking the long-standing pillars of our Buddhist heritage as our reference point. If we are too hasty, we might also be careless, and then we might discard fundamental principles of the Dharma along with the adventitious cultural dressing in which it is wrapped.

I first want to examine the traditionalist understanding of this issue, even though--and I stress this--the position to which I incline is not a strictly traditionalist one. From a traditionalist point of view, the monastic Sangha is necessary for the successful transmission of Buddhism to occur because the monastic Sangha sustains the continuity of the Triple Gem. We can briefly consider how this is so with regard to each of the Three Jewels individually.

(1) *The Buddha*: When the Buddha decided to embark on the quest for enlightenment, his first step was to become a *samana*, an ascetic. On the one hand, by adopting the lifestyle of an ascetic, the future Buddha was conforming to an ancient Indian paradigm of the spiritual life, a paradigm that might well have gone back centuries before his own time. But by taking up this mode of life, and continuing to adhere to it *even after* his enlightenment, the Buddha did something more than simply conform to the prevailing Indian convention. He conveyed a message, namely, that the renunciant way of life was an essential step on the path to the ultimate goal, to the state of transcendent liberation from birth and death, the ideal shared by many of the old Indian schools of spiritual culture. Even more: he indicated that renunciation is itself an aspect of the goal. Renunciation of sensual pleasures and cyclic existence is not merely a means to liberation; it is also integral to the goal itself. The goal *is* renunciation, and thus the act of renunciation with

which the monastic life begins is not simply a step in the direction of the goal but also partly the realization of the goal, an embodiment of liberation, even if only symbolically so.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha created a monastic Sangha on the model of the lifestyle that he had adopted during his quest for enlightenment. The monks (and later nuns) were to live in a state of voluntary poverty, without personal wealth and with minimal possessions. They were to shave their heads and wear simple dyed robes, to gather their meals by going on alms round, to live out in the open, in caves, or in simple huts. They were governed by a disciplinary code that minutely regulated their behavior, and were to undertake a training that directed their energies towards the same path that the Buddha had embarked on when he discovered the way to enlightenment.

Even though aspects of the monastic lifestyle have changed over the ages, in Asian Buddhist tradition the figure of the monk (and less often, I have to say, reluctantly but candidly, the nun) has functioned as the symbol for the Buddha's continuing presence in the world. By his robes, deportment, and lifestyle, the monk represents the Buddha. He enables the Buddha, vanished from the stage of human events, to continue to shed his blessing power upon the earth. He draws down the Buddha's past historical reality and sends it out into the world, so that the Buddha can continue to serve the world as a teacher, an image of human perfection, and a spiritual force—a force of grace that acts within and upon those who go to him for refuge.

(2) *The Dharma*. In a well-known passage in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha tells Mara, the Evil One, that his followers comprise monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen who are “capable, well trained, confident, learned, and upholders of the Dhamma.” These four groups are known as the four assemblies. If we take this passage in isolation, it might seem as if the Buddha is assigning the four groups to a level of parity with respect to the Dharma, for they are described in the same way. However, another sutta in the Sāmyutta Nikāya (42:7), sheds a different light on their relationship. Here the Buddha illustrates the three kinds of recipients of his teaching with a simile of three fields: the superior field, the middling field, and the inferior field. The three kinds of recipients—compared respectively to the superior, middling, and inferior fields—are the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis (taken jointly), the male and female lay disciples (taken jointly), and the monks and ascetics of other schools. This statement doesn't imply that monks and nuns, individually, are invariably superior to lay disciples. Often sincere lay disciples are more serious and diligent in practice and more knowledgeable about the Dharma than many monastics. But the Buddha's statement does suggest that, as a group, monastics constitute a more fertile field for the Dharma to flourish than lay persons, and that is so because they have adopted the lifestyle that the Buddha designed for those who wish to fully devote themselves to the practice and advance thereby towards the goal of the spiritual life.

Traditionally, monastics have not only been charged with the intensive practice of the Dharma, but also with the responsibility of preserving it and teaching it to others. This implies that there must be monastics who have thoroughly learned the Buddhist scriptures and mastered the body of Buddhist doctrine. In all Buddhist traditions, parallel with the exemplary practitioner, there stands the figure of the learned monk, the *pandita*, the dharma-master, the *geshe*—those who have acquired expertise in the doctrine and can skillfully teach others. In this way, too, the monastic person becomes a channel for the preservation and transmission of the Dharma.

(3) *The Sangha*. The monastic Sangha also serves as a conduit for the transmission of the third Jewel, the Sangha itself, in the world. The Buddha did not merely confer monastic ordination on his disciples, permitting them to “go forth” from the home life. Going beyond this, he created a *monastic order*, a community of monks and nuns bound together by a common code of discipline, the Vinaya, and by other guidelines intended to ensure that they serve the well-being of the community that they have joined. He also established a number of communal monastic observances that bind the members of the Sangha together, the most important being the ceremonies of ordination, recitation of the monastic code, the rains retreat, and the ending of the rains retreat: *upasampada*, *uposatha*, *vassa*, and *pavarana*. Buddhist tradition—at least Theravada tradition—says that the performance of these ceremonies is the criterion for the continued existence of the Sasana, that is, for Buddhism to survive as a social and historical institution. I’m not sure whether there is any canonical basis for this idea; it might come from the commentaries or later tradition, but it is a well-established belief.

Thus, to sum up: From a traditional point of view, a monastic Sangha is essential for the continuing presence of all three Jewels in the world. The renunciant monks and nuns symbolically represent *the Buddha*; they learn, practice, and teach *the Dharma*; they observe the guidelines, regulations, and rites *of the Sangha*; and they practice in such a way that they themselves might become enlightened beings themselves, fulfilling the ultimate intention of the Buddha.

This is the traditionalist perspective, but I question whether this traditionalist view of the Sangha’s role is completely viable in today’s world. Is it sufficient simply to insist on the traditional understanding of the Sangha’s task and mission, or are there forces at work compelling us to stake out new ways of understanding the role of the Sangha? Do we face new challenges, never foreseen by the tradition, that compel us to renew our understanding of Buddhism and revitalize our monastic lifestyle in order to ensure greater durability for monasticism as an institution and a way of life? Are there forces at work that might actually undermine the survival of Buddhist monasticism?

Interestingly, while the Buddha speaks of forces threatening the future long life of the Dharma, we find nothing to indicate that he foresaw the kind of transformations that are taking place today. When the early texts speak about the future, they generally predict decline and degeneration—what they call future perils (*anagatabhaya*)—and the remedy they propose is simply to strive diligently in the present, so that one attains liberation before the dark ages arrive. The oldest collections of texts, the Nikayas and Agamas, consistently set the factors making for decline against the background of the social order that prevailed in the Buddha’s time. There is no recognition that society might undergo major social, cultural, and intellectual transformations that could *stimulate* the emergence of positive developments within Buddhism. There is no recognition that Buddhism might migrate to countries and continents remote from ancient India, lands where different material conditions and modes of thinking might allow the Dharma to develop in different directions from that it was to take in its Indian homeland. In general, from the standpoint of the early texts, the revolving Wheel of Time draws us ever closer to the end of the proper Dharma, and the best we can do is resist the tide sweeping over us. Change is subversive, and we must preserve the proper Dharma against its corrosive influence.

I do not like to take issue with the early Buddhist canon, but I have often asked myself whether it is necessary to take such a dark view of change or to see it as inevitable that Buddhism slides ever more rapidly down a slippery slope. I wonder whether we might not instead adopt an evolutionary perspective on the development of Buddhism, a perspective that does not oblige us to regard change in the doctrinal and institutional expressions of Buddhism as invariably a sign of degeneration. Perhaps we can see such change instead as a catalyst able to bring about a process of natural, organic growth in Buddhism. Perhaps we can consider changing social, intellectual, and cultural conditions as providing an opportunity for Buddhism to respond creatively, and thus to re-envision and re-embody the Dharma in the world, bringing to manifestation many aspects implicit in the original teaching but unable to appear until the requisite conditions bring them forth.

The history of Buddhism might be viewed as the record of an interplay between two factors, challenge and response. Time and again, change takes place—a seismic shift in cultural or intellectual conditions—that strikes at the core of Buddhist tradition, setting off a crisis. Initially, the new development might seem threatening. But often there will arise Buddhist thinkers who are acute enough to understand the challenge and resourceful enough to respond in creative ways that tap into hidden potentials of the Dharma. Their responses lead to adaptations that not only enable the Sasana to weather the storm, but which embody new insights, new ways of understanding the Dharma, that could never have appeared until the appropriate conditions called them forth, until unforeseen historical, social, cultural, and philosophical challenges made them possible and even necessary. At times these responses may veer off the proper track into the wilderness of subjective interpretations and deviant practices; but often enough they reveal the creative viability of Buddhism, its ability to adapt and assume new expressions in response to new needs and new modes of understanding implanted in people by new social and cultural conditions.

In facing the new challenges, creative adaptation has to be balanced by an effort to maintain continuity with the roots and past legacy of Buddhism. This double task points to a certain struggle between two factors in the unfolding of Buddhist history: one is the need to respond effectively to the challenges presented by new circumstances, new ways of thinking, new standards of behavior; the other is the need to remain faithful to the original insights at the heart of the Dharma, to its long heritage of practice and experience. The weight that is assigned to these two competing forces establishes a tension between conservative and innovative tendencies within Buddhism. Inevitably, different people will gravitate towards one or another of these poles, and such differences often bring conflict between those who wish to preserve familiar forms and those who think change and reformulation are necessary to maintain the vitality and relevance of the Dharma. This same tension is still very much with us today, as we will see.

In the early centuries of Buddhist history, the architects of the evolving Buddhist tradition preferred to ascribe these newly emergent dimensions of the Dharma to the Buddha himself. This, however, was just a mythical way of conferring the mantle of authority upon new formulations of the teaching. Such is the characteristic Indian way of thinking. It is an open question whether these masters actually believed that these new teachings had sprung from the Buddha himself or

instead used this device as a symbolic way of indicating that such teachings brought to light previously unexpressed aspects of the enlightenment realized by the Buddha.

Let us take a few examples of this: Several generations after the passing of the Buddha, the Vedic philosophical schools took to compiling complex, systematized lists of all the components of the universe. This tendency is particularly evident in the Sankhya school, which may have already arisen before the time of the Buddha and must have been evolving parallel with early Buddhism. This fashion of the age presented the Buddhists with the challenge of applying the same style of fine analysis to their own heritage. Consequently, Buddhist thinkers set out to systematize the various groups of elements recorded in the Buddha's discourses, and over time what emerged from this exercise was the body of learning known as the Abhidharma. This trend cut clear across the early Buddhist schools, and the result was the creation of at least three different (but related) schools of Abhidharma: the Theravada, the Sarvastivada, and the Dharmaguptaka. Perhaps to give a competitive edge to their own system, the Theravadin commentators ascribed their Abhidharma to the Buddha, claiming that he taught it to the deities in a deva world; all the evidence, however, indicates that the Abhidharma resulted from a process of historical evolution extending over several centuries.

On this basis, one who adheres to a strict conservative stance, a position that I call "sutta purism," might reject the value of the Abhidharma, holding that the only teachings worth studying are those that can be ascribed, with a fair degree of accuracy, to the Buddha himself. This position assumes that because the Abhidharma treatises were not actually taught by the Buddha, they are useless and fruitless, a lamentable deviation from the proper Dharma. However, by taking an evolutionary perspective, we can view the Abhidharma schools as responses to intellectual challenges faced by the Buddhist community in an early stage of Buddhist intellectual history. From this point of view, they then appear as impressive attempts to incorporate all the elements of the teaching into a systematic structure governed by the broad principles of the original teaching. The Abhidharma then emerges as a bold project that proposed to establish nothing less than a comprehensive inventory of all known phenomena and their relations, subordinated to the governing concepts of the Dharma and the project of transcendent liberation.

Similar considerations apply to the Mahayana sutras, which introduce far more radical re-assessments of Buddhist doctrine and spiritual ideals than the Abhidharma. Again, if one takes the conservative stance of "sutta purism," one might dismiss these texts as deviations from the true Dharma and even as marking a step towards the decline of the Sasana. This, in fact, is a view that many conservative monks in Theravada countries take of the Mahayana sutras, even when they are completely unfamiliar with them. However, by looking at the history of Buddhism as a process governed by the law of "challenge-and-response," we can see the emergence of the Mahayana sutras as a result of new challenges faced by Buddhism beginning in the post-Asokan landscape. Some of these challenges might have been internal to the Buddhist community, such as a disenchantment with the rigidity of the Abhidharma systems and a narrow interpretation of the arahant ideal; also, an interest in elaborating upon the path that a bodhisattva must travel over countless eons to arrive at Buddhahood. Other challenges may have been external, particularly the mingling in the Indian subcontinent of new peoples of different ethnicities, speaking different languages, and holding different worldviews. This would have challenged Buddhism to break out

of the mold imposed upon it by its Indian origins and draw out, from its own inner resources, a new conception of the universal ethical ideal already articulated in archaic Buddhism.

At this point I want to consider some of the peculiar challenges that Buddhist monasticism is facing *today*, in our contemporary world, especially those that arise out of the unique intellectual, cultural, and social landscape of modern Western culture. Such challenges, I have to emphasize, are already at work; they have brought about remarkable changes in the contemporary manifestation of Buddhism as a whole. It is likely, too, that they will accelerate in the future and have a significant impact on Buddhist monasticism over the next few decades.

I believe the present era confronts us with far different challenges than any Buddhism has ever faced before. These challenges are more radical, more profound, and more difficult to address using traditional modes of understanding. Yet for Buddhist monasticism to survive and thrive, they demand fitting responses—responses, I believe, that do not merely echo positions coming down from the past, but tackle the new challenges on their own terms while remaining faithful to the spirit of the teaching. In particular, we have to deal with them in ways that are meaningful against the background of our own epoch and our own culture, offering creative, perceptive, innovative solutions to the problems they pose.

On what grounds do I say that the present era confronts Buddhist monasticism with far different challenges than any it has faced in the past? I believe there are two broad reasons why our present-day situation is so different from anything Buddhist monasticism has encountered in the past. The first is simply that Buddhist monasticism has taken root in North America, and most of us involved in the project of establishing Buddhist monasticism here are Westerners. When, as Westerners, we take up Buddhism as our spiritual path, we inevitably bring along the deep background of our Western cultural and intellectual conditioning. I don't think we can reject this background or put it in brackets, nor do I think doing so would be a healthy approach. We cannot alienate ourselves from our Western heritage, for that heritage is what we are and thus determines how we assimilate Buddhism, just as much as a brain that processes objects in terms of three dimensions determines the way we see them.

The second reason is partly related to the first, namely, that we are living not in fifth century B.C. India, or in Tang dynasty China, or in fourteenth century Japan or Tibet, but in 21st century America, and thus we are denizens of the modern age, perhaps the postmodern age. As people of the 21st century, whether we are indigenous Americans or Asians, we are heirs to the entire experience of modernity, and as such we inevitably approach the Dharma, understand it, practice it, and embody it in the light of the intellectual and cultural achievements of the modern era. In particular, we inherit not only the heritage of enlightenment stemming from the Buddha and the wisdom of the Buddhist tradition, but also another heritage deriving from the 18th century European Enlightenment. The 18th century cut a sharp dividing line between traditional culture and modernity, a dividing line that cannot be erased; it marked a turning point that cannot be reversed.

The transformations in thought ushered in by the great thinkers of the Western Enlightenment—including the Founding Fathers of the U.S.—dramatically revolutionized our understanding of what it means to be a human being existing in a world community. The concept of universal human rights, of the inherent dignity of humankind; the ideals of liberty and equality, of the brotherhood of man; the demand for equal justice under the law and comprehensive economic security; the rejection of external authorities and trust in the capacity of human reason to arrive at truth; the critical attitude towards dogmatism, the stress on direct experience—all derive from this period and all influence the way we appropriate Buddhism. I have seen some Western Buddhists take a dismissive attitude towards this heritage (and I include with them myself during my first years as a monk), devaluing it against the standards of traditional pre-modern Asian Buddhism. But in my opinion, such an attitude could become psychologically divisive, alienating us from what is of most value in our own heritage. I believe a more wholesome approach would aim at a “fusion of horizons,” a merging of our Western, modernist modes of understanding with the wisdom of the Buddhist tradition.

I would now like to briefly sketch several intellectual and cultural issues with which Buddhism has to grapple here in the U.S. I won't presume to lay down in categorical terms fixed ways that we should respond to this situation; for the plain fact is that I don't have definitive solutions to these problems. I believe the problems have to be faced and discussed honestly, but I don't pretend to be one who has the answers. In the end, the shape Buddhist monasticism takes might not be determined so much by decisions we make through discussion and deliberation as by a gradual process of experimentation, by trial and error. In fact, it seems to me unlikely that there will be any simple uniform solutions. Rather, I foresee a wide spectrum of responses, leading to an increasing diversification in modern American/Western Buddhism, including monasticism. I don't see this diversity as problematic. But I also believe it is helpful to bring the challenges we face out into the light, so that we can explore them in detail and weigh different solutions.

I will briefly sketch *four* major challenges that we, as Buddhist monastics, face in shaping the development of Buddhism in this country.

1. “*The leveling of distinctions*”: One important contemporary premise rooted in our democratic heritage might be called “*the leveling of distinctions*.” This holds that in all matters relating to fundamental rights, everyone has an equal claim: everyone is entitled to participate in any worthy projects; all opinions are worthy of consideration; no one has an intrinsic claim to privilege and entitlement. This attitude is staunchly opposed to the governing principle of traditionalist culture, namely, that there are natural gradations among people based on family background, social class, wealth, race, education, and so on, which confer privileges on some that do not accrue to others. In the traditionalist understanding, monastics and laity are *stratified* as to their positions and duties. Lay people provide monks and nuns with their material requisites, undertake precepts, engage in devotional practices to acquire merit, and occasionally practice meditation, usually under the guidance of monks; monastic persons practice intensive meditation, study the texts, conduct blessing ceremonies, and provide the lay community with teachings and examples of a dedicated life. This stratification of the Buddhist community is typical of most traditional Buddhist cultures. The distinction presupposes that the Buddhist lay devotee is not yet ready for deep Dharma study and intensive meditation practice but still needs gradual maturation based on faith, devotion, and good deeds.

In modern Western Buddhism, such a dichotomy has hardly even been challenged; rather, it has simply been disregarded. There are two ways that the classical monastic-lay distinction has been quietly overturned. First, lay people are not prepared to accept the traditionalist understanding of a lay person's limitations but seek access to the Dharma in its full depth and range. They study Buddhist texts, even the most abstruse philosophical works that traditional Buddhism regards as the domain of monastics. They take up intensive meditation, seeking the higher stages of samadhi and insight and even the ranks of the ariyans, the noble ones.

The second way the monastic-lay distinction is being erased is in the elevation of lay people to the position of Dharma teachers who can teach with an authority normally reserved for monks. Some of the most gifted teachers of Buddhism today, whether of theory or meditation, are lay people. Thus, when lay people want to learn the Dharma, they are no longer dependent on monastics. Whether or not a lay person seeks teachings from a monastic or a lay teacher has become largely a matter of circumstance and preference. Some will want to study with monks; others will prefer to study with lay teachers. Whatever their choice, they can easily fulfill it. To study under a monk is not, as is mostly the case in traditional Buddhism, a matter of necessity. There are already training programs in the hands of lay Buddhists, and lineages of teachers consisting entirely of lay people.

Indeed, in some circles there is even a distrust of the monk. Some months ago I saw an ad in *Buddhadharma* magazine for a Zen lineage called "Open Mind Zen." Its catch phrase was: "No monks, no magic, no mumbo-jumbo." The three are called "crutches" that the real Zen student must discard in order to succeed in the practice. I was struck by the cavalier way that the monks are grouped with magic and mumbo-jumbo and all three together banished to the dugout.

I think it likely there will always be laypeople who look to the monastic Sangha for guidance, and thus there is little chance that our monasteries and Dharma centers will become empty. For another, the fact that many laypeople have been establishing independent, non-monastic communities with their own centers and teachers may have a partly liberating effect on the Sangha. Relieved to some extent of the need to serve as "fields of merit" and teachers for the laity, we will have more time for our own personal practice and spiritual growth. In this respect, we might actually be able to recapture the original function of the homeless person in archaic Buddhist monasticism, before popular, devotional Buddhism pushed monastics into a largely priestly role in relation to the wider Buddhist community. Of course, if the size of the lay congregation attached to a given monastery tapers off, there is some risk that the donations that sustain the monastery will also decline, and that could threaten the survival of the monastery. Thus the loss of material support can become a serious challenge to the sustainability of institutional monasticism.

2. *The secularization of life.* Since the late eighteenth century we have been living in an increasingly secularized world; in the U.S. and Western Europe, this process of secularization is quite close to completion. Religion is certainly not dead. In mainstream America, particularly the "heartland," it may be more alive today than it was forty years ago. But a secularist outlook now shapes almost all aspects of our lives, including our religious lives.

Before I go further, I should clarify what I mean by the secularization of life. By this expression, I do not mean that people today have become non-religious, fully engulfed by worldly concerns. Of course, many people today invest all their interest in the things of this world—in family, personal relations, work, politics, sports, the enjoyment of the arts. But that is not what I mean by “the secularization of life.” The meaning of this phrase is best understood by contrasting a traditionalist culture with modern Western culture. In a traditionalist culture, religion provides people with their fundamental sense of identity; it colors almost every aspect of their lives and serves as their deepest source of values. In present-day Western culture, our sense of personal identity is determined largely by mundane points of reference, and the things we value most tend to be rooted in this visible, present world rather than in our hopes and fears regarding some future life. Once the traditional supports of faith have eroded, religion in the West has also undergone a drastic change in orientation. Its primary purpose now is no longer to direct our gaze towards some future life, towards some transcendent realm beyond the here and now. Its primary function, rather, is to guide us in the proper conduct of life, to direct our steps in this present world rather than to point us towards some other world.

Just about every religion has had to grapple with the challenge of agnosticism, atheism, humanism, as well as simple indifference to religion due to the easy availability of sensual pleasures. Some religions have reacted to this by falling back upon a claim to dogmatic certainty. Thus we witness the rise of fundamentalism, which does not necessarily espouse religious violence; that is only an incidental feature of some kinds of fundamentalism. Its basic characteristic is a quest for absolute certainty, freedom from doubt and ambiguity, to be achieved through unquestioning faith in teachers taken to be divinely inspired and in scriptures taken to be unerring even when interpreted as literally true.

But fundamentalism is not the only religious response to the modernist critique of religion. An alternative response accepts the constructive criticisms of the agnostics, skeptics, and humanists, and admits that religion in the past has been deeply flawed. But rather than reject religion, it seeks a new understanding of what it means to be religious. Those who take this route, the liberal religious wing, come to understand religion as primarily a way to find a proper orientation in life, as a guide in our struggles with the crises, conflicts, and insecurities that haunt our lives, including our awareness of our inevitable mortality. We undertake the religious quest, not to pass from this world to a transcendent realm beyond, but to discover a transcendent dimension of life—a superior light, a platform of ultimate meaning—amidst the turmoil of everyday existence.

One way that religion has responded to the secularist challenge is by seeking a rapprochement with its old nemesis of secularism in a synthesis that might be called “spiritual secularity” or “secular spirituality.” From this perspective, the secular becomes charged with a deep spiritual potential, and the spiritual finds its fulfillment in the low lands of the secular. The apparently mundane events of our everyday lives—both at a personal and communal level—are no longer seen as bland and ordinary but as the field in which we encounter divine reality. The aim of religious life is then to help us discover this spiritual meaning, to extract it from the mine of the ordinary. Our everyday life becomes a means to encounter the divine, to catch a glimpse of ultimate goodness and beauty. We too partake of this divine potential. With all our human frailties, we are capable of indomitable spiritual strength; our confusion is the basis for recovering a basic sanity; ever-available within us there is a deep core of wisdom.

This secularization of life of which I have been speaking has already affected the way Buddhism is being presented today. For one thing, we can note that there is a de-emphasis on the teachings of karma, rebirth, and samsara, and on nirvana as liberation from the round of rebirths. Buddhism is taught as a pragmatic, existential therapy, with the four noble truths construed as a spiritual medical formula guiding us to psychological health. The path leads not so much to release from the round of rebirths as to perfect peace and happiness. Some teachers say they teach “buddhism with a small ‘b’,” a Buddhism that does not make any claims to the exalted status of religion. Other teachers, after long training in classical Buddhism, even renounce the label of “Buddhism” altogether, preferring to think of themselves as following a non-religious practice.

Mindfulness meditation is understood to be a means of “being here and now,” “of coming to our senses,” of acquiring a fresh sense of wonder. We practice the Dharma to better understand our own minds, to find greater happiness and peace in the moment, to tap our creativity, to be more efficient in work, more loving in our relationships, more compassionate in our dealings with others. We practice not to leave this world behind but to participate in the world more joyfully, with greater spontaneity. We stand back from life in order to plunge into life, to dance with the ever-shifting flow of events.

One striking indication of this secularized transformation of Buddhism is the shift away from the traditional nucleus of the Buddhist community towards a new institutional form. The “traditional nucleus of the Buddhist community” is the monastery or temple, a sacred place where monks or nuns reside, a place under the management of monastics. The monastery or temple is a place set apart from the everyday world where laypeople come to pay respects to the ordained, to make offerings, to hear them preach, to participate in rituals led by monks or practice meditation guided by nuns. In contrast, the institutional heart of contemporary secularized Buddhism is the *Dharma center*: a place often established by lay people, run by lay people, with lay teachers. If the resident teachers are monastic persons, they live there at the request of lay people, and the programs and administration are often managed by lay people. In the monastery or temple, the focus of attention is the Buddha image or shrine containing sacred relics, which are worshipped and regarded as the body of the Buddha himself. The monks sit on an elevated platform, near the Buddha image. The modern Dharma center may not even have a Buddha image. If it does, the image will usually not be worshipped but serve simply as a reminder of the source of the teaching. The lay teachers will generally sit at the same level as the students and apart from their teaching role will relate to them largely as friends.

These are some of the features of the Western—or specifically American—appropriation of Buddhism that give it a distinctly “secularized” flavor. Though such an approach to Buddhism is not traditional, I do not think it can be easily dismissed as a trivialization of the Dharma. Nor should we regard those drawn to this way of “doing Buddhism” as settling for “Dharma lite” in place of the real thing. Many of the people who follow the secularized version of Buddhism have practiced with great earnestness and persistency; some have studied the Dharma deeply under traditional teachers and have a keen understanding of classical Buddhist doctrine. They are drawn to such an approach to Buddhism precisely because it squares best with the secularization of life pervasive in Western culture, and because it addresses concerns that arise out of this

situation—how to find happiness, peace, and meaning in a confused and congested world. However, since classical Buddhism is basically directed towards a world-transcendent goal—however differently understood, whether as in Early Buddhism or in Mahayana Buddhism—this becomes another challenge facing Buddhist monasticism in our country today. Looking to what lies beyond the stars, beyond life and death, rather than at the ground before our feet, we can cut a somewhat strange figure.

3. *The challenge of social engagement.* The third characteristic of contemporary spirituality that presents a challenge to traditional Buddhist monasticism is its focus on *social engagement*. In theory, traditional Buddhism tends to encourage aloofness from the mundane problems that confront humanity as a whole: such problems as crushing poverty, the specter of war, the denial of human rights, widening class distinctions, economic and racial oppression. I use the word “in theory,” because in practice Buddhist temples in Asia have often functioned as communal centers where people gather to resolve their social and economic problems. For centuries Buddhist monks in southern Asia have been at the vanguard of social action movements, serving as the voice of the people in their confrontation with oppressive government authorities. We saw this recently in Burma, when the monks led the protests against the military dictatorship there. However, such activities subsist in a certain tension with classical Buddhist doctrine, which emphasizes withdrawal from the concerns of the world, inward purification, a quest for non-attachment, equanimity towards the flux of worldly events, a kind of passive acceptance of the flaws of samsara. In my early life as a monk in Sri Lanka, I was sometimes told by senior monks that concern with social, political, and economic problems is a distraction from “what really matters,” the quest for personal liberation from the *dukkha* of worldly existence. Even the elder monks who served as social and political advisors were guided more by the idea of preserving Sinhalese Buddhist culture than of striving for social justice and equity.

However, an attitude of detached neutrality towards social injustice does not square well with the Western religious conscience. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Christianity underwent a profound change in response to the widespread social ills of the time. It gave birth to a “social gospel,” a movement that applied Christian ethics of love and responsibility to such problems as poverty, inequality, crime, racial tensions, poor schools, and the danger of war. The social gospel proposed not merely the doing of deeds of charity in line with the original teachings of Jesus, but a systematic attempt to reform the oppressive power structures that sustained economic inequality, social injustice, exploitation, and the debasement of the poor and powerless. This radically new dimension of social concern brought deep-seated changes among Christians in their understanding of their own religion. Virtually all the major denominations of Christianity, Protestant and Catholic alike, came to subscribe to some version of the social gospel. Often, priests and ministers were at the forefront, preaching social change, leading demonstrations, spurring their congregations on to socially transformative action. Perhaps in our own time the person who best symbolizes this social dimension of modern Christianity is Rev. Martin Luther King, who, during his life, came to be known as “the moral voice of America”—not merely for his civil-rights campaigns but also because of his eloquent opposition to the Vietnam War and his commitment to the abolition of poverty.

The advocates of engaged spirituality understand the test of our moral integrity to be our willingness to respond compassionately and effectively to the sufferings of humanity. True

morality is not simply a matter of inward purification, a personal and private affair, but of decisive action inspired by compassion and motivated by a keen desire to deliver others from the oppressive conditions that stifle their humanity. Those of true religious faith might look inward and upward for divine guidance; but the voice that speaks to them, the voice of conscience, says that the divine is to be found in loving one's fellow human beings, and in demonstrating this love by an unflinching commitment to ameliorate their misery and restore their hope and dignity.

The prominence of the social gospel in contemporary Christianity has already had a far-reaching impact on Buddhism. It has been one catalyst behind the rise of "Engaged Buddhism," which has become an integral part of the Western Buddhist scene. But behind both lies the European Enlightenment emphasis upon righting social wrongs and establishing a reign of justice. In the West, Engaged Buddhism has taken on a life of its own, assuming many new expressions. It deliberately sets itself against the common image of Buddhism as a religion of withdrawal and quiescence, looking on at the plight of suffering beings with merely passive pity. For Engaged Buddhism, compassion is not just a matter of cultivating sublime emotions but of engaging in transformative action. Since classical Buddhist monasticism does in fact begin with an act of withdrawal and aims at detachment, the rise of Engaged Buddhism constitutes a new challenge to Buddhist monasticism with the potential to redefine the shape of our monastic life.

4. *Religious pluralism.* A fourth factor working to change the shape of Buddhism in the West is the rise of what has been called "*religious pluralism.*" For the most part, traditional religions claim, implicitly or explicitly, to possess exclusive access to the ultimate means of salvation, to the liberating truth, to the supreme goal. For orthodox Christians, Christ is the truth, the way, and the life, and no one comes to God the Father except through him. For Muslims, Muhammad is the last of the prophets, who offers the final revelation of the divine will for humanity. Hindus appear more tolerant because of their capacity for syncretism, but almost all the classical Hindu schools claim final status for their own distinctive teachings. Buddhism too claims to have the unique path to the sole imperishable state of liberation and ultimate bliss, nirvana. Not only do traditional religions make such claims for their own creeds and practices, but their relations are competitive and often bitter if not aggressive. Usually, at the mildest, they propose negative evaluations of other faiths.

Within Buddhism, too, the relations between the different schools have not always been cordial. Theravadin traditionalists often regard Mahayanists as apostates from the proper Dharma; Mahayanist texts describe the followers of the early schools with the derogatory term "Hinayana," though this has gone out of fashion. Even within the Theravada, followers of one approach to meditation might dispute the validity of different approaches. Within the Mahayana, despite the doctrine of "skillful means," proponents of different schools might devalue the teachings of other schools, so that the "skillful means" are all within one's own school, while the means adopted in other schools are decidedly "unskillful."

In the present-day world, an alternative has appeared to this competitive way in which different religions relate to one another. This alternative is religious pluralism. It is based on two parallel convictions. One relates to a subjective factor: as human beings we have an ingrained tendency to take our own viewpoint to be uniquely correct and then use it to dismiss and devalue alternative viewpoints. Recognizing this disposition, religious pluralists say that we have to be

humble regarding any claims to possess privileged access to spiritual truth. When we make such audacious claims, they hold, this is more indicative of our self-inflation than of genuine insight into spiritual truth.

The second conviction on which religious pluralism is based is that the different views and practices possessed by the different religious traditions need not be seen as mutually exclusive. They can instead be considered partly as complementary, as mutually illuminating; they may be regarded as giving us different perspectives on the ultimate reality, on the goal of the spiritual quest, on methods of approaching that goal. Thus, their differences can be seen to highlight aspects of the goal, of the human situation, of spiritual practice, etc., that are valid but unknown or under-emphasized in one's own religion or school of affiliation.

Perhaps the most curious sign of religious pluralism in the Buddhist fold is the attempt made by some people to adopt two religions at the same time. We hear of people who consider themselves Jewish Buddhists, who claim to be able to practice both Judaism and Buddhism, assigning each to a different sphere of their lives. I have also heard of Christian Buddhists; perhaps too there are Muslim Buddhists, though I have not heard of any. To accept religious pluralism, however, one need not go to this extreme, which to me seems dubious. A religious pluralist will generally remain uniquely committed to a single religion, yet at the same time be ready to admit the possibility that different religions can possess access to spiritual truth. Such a person would be disposed to enter into respectful and friendly dialogue with those of other faiths. They have no intention of engaging in a contest aimed at proving the superiority of their own spiritual path, but want to learn from the other, to enrich their understanding of human existence by tentatively adopting an alternative point of view and even a different practice.

The religious pluralist can be deeply devoted to his or her own religion, yet be willing to temporarily suspend their familiar perspective in order to adopt another frame of reference. Such attempts might then allow one to discover counterparts of this different view within one's own religious tradition. This tendency has already had a strong impact on Buddhism. There have been numerous Christian-Buddhist dialogues, seminars at which Christians and Buddhist thinkers come together to explore common themes, and there is a journal of Christian and Buddhist studies. Monasticism too has been affected by this trend. Journals are published on inter-monastic dialogue, and Tibetan Buddhist monks have even gone to live at Christian monasteries and Christian monks gone to live at Buddhist monasteries.

Among Buddhists it is not unusual, here in the West, for followers of one Buddhist tradition to study under a master of another tradition and to take courses and retreats in meditation systems different from the one with which they are primarily affiliated. As Westerners, this seems quite natural and normal to us. However, until recent times, for an Asian Buddhist, at least for a traditionalist, it would have been almost unthinkable, a reckless experiment.

Let me now sum up the territory I have covered. I have briefly sketched four characteristics of contemporary spirituality, ushered in by the transformation from a traditional to a modern or even post-modern culture. These characteristics have had a profound influence on mainstream

religion in the West and have already started to alter the shape of Buddhist spirituality. The four are:

(1) The “leveling of distinctions,” so that the sharp distinctions between the ordained religious person and the lay person are being blurred or even abolished.

(2) The rise of “secular spirituality” or “spiritual secularity,” marked by a shift in the orientation of religion away from the quest for some transcendent state, a dimension beyond life in the world, towards a deep, enriching experience of the human condition and a transformative way of living within the world.

(3) The conviction that the mark of authentic religious faith is a readiness to engage in compassionate action, especially to challenge social and political structures that sustain injustice, inequality, violence, and environmental despoliation.

(4) Religious pluralism: abandoning the claim to exclusive religious truth and adopting a pluralistic outlook that can allow the possibility of complementary, mutually illuminating perspectives on religious truth and practice. This applies both to the relations of Buddhists with followers of other religions, and to the internal relations between followers of different Buddhist schools and traditions..

I now want to suggest that all four of these factors are going to present powerful challenges to Buddhist monasticism in the future, forcing us to rethink and re-evaluate traditional attitudes and structures that have sustained monastic life for centuries right up to the present. Indeed, these challenges have already been recognized in many quarters and the task of reshaping monasticism in response to them has already started.

As I said at the beginning of my talk, I am not going to advocate a fixed response to these challenges which I think is uniquely correct; for, as I said, I don’t have an unambiguous conviction about the best response. But to help us grapple with them, I want to posit, in relation to each of these four challenges, a spectrum of possible responses. These range from the conservative and traditionalist at one end to the liberal and accommodative on the other.

(1) Thus, with respect to “the leveling of distinctions,” we have at one end the traditionalist insistence on the sharp stratification of monastics and lay person. The monastic person is a field of merits, an object of veneration, alone entitled to claim the position of Dharma teacher; the lay person is essentially a supporter and devotee, a practitioner and perhaps an assistant in teaching activities, but always in a subordinate role. At the other end, the distinction between the two is almost erased: the monk and lay person are simply friends; the lay person might teach meditation and give Dharma talks, perhaps even conduct religious rites. Towards the middle we would have a situation in which the distinction between monastic and lay person is preserved, in which lay people accord the monastics traditional forms of respect, but the capacity for lay people to study and practice the Dharma extensively and in depth is well acknowledged. From this point of view, those who have fulfilled the requisite training, whether monastics or laypeople, can function as Dharma teachers, and independent lineages of lay teachers, not dependent on monastics, can be accepted and honored.

(2) Again, among the responses to the secularist challenge, we can see a spectrum. At one end is a traditionalist monasticism that emphasizes the classical teachings of karma, rebirth, the different realms of existence, etc., and sees the goal of monastic life to be the total ending of cyclic existence and the attainment of transcendent liberation. At the other end is a monasticism influenced by secularizing tendencies, which emphasizes the enrichment and deepening of immediate experience as sufficient in itself, perhaps even as “nibbana here and now” or the actualization of our Buddha-nature. Such an approach, it seems to me, is already found among some Western presentations of Soto Zen, and also seems to have gained currency in the way Vipassana meditation is taught in lay meditation circles. Between these two extremes, a centrist approach might recognize the mundane benefits of the Dharma and stress the value of acquiring a richer, deeper experience of the present, but still uphold the classical Buddhist framework of karma, rebirth, renunciation, etc., and the ideal of liberation from rebirth and attainment of world-transcendent realization. Again, whether this be understood from a Theravadin or Mahayanist point of view, a common stratum unites them and supports their respective monastic projects.

(3) With regard to engaged spirituality, at the conservative end of the spectrum we find those who look critically at engaged Buddhist practices for monastics, holding that a proper monastic life requires a radical withdrawal from mundane activities, including all direct involvement in social, political, and economic action. The monastic can teach lay people the ethical values that conduce to greater social justice but should not become tainted by involvement with projects aimed at social and political transformations. At the other end are those who believe that monastics should be actively engaged in such activities, indeed that they should be at the forefront of the struggle for peace and social, economic, and political justice. A middle position might recognize the importance of developing a Buddhism that engages more fully with the world, but holds that monastics should serve as guides, sources of inspiration, and educators in programs of social engagement, while the hands-on work of dealing with governments, policy makers, and institutions should generally be entrusted to lay Buddhists.

(4) Finally, with respect to religious pluralism, we find, at the conservative end of the spectrum, monastics who believe that Buddhism alone has the ultimate truth and the unique path to spiritual liberation. Since those following other religions are immersed in wrong views, we have nothing to learn from them and would do best to avoid religious discussions with them except to persuade them of their errors. We can cooperate on projects aimed at worthy ends, such as world peace and environmental awareness, but there is no point exploring our religious differences, for such discussions lead nowhere. Conservative followers of a particular school of Buddhism might bring forth similar considerations in relation to Buddhists belonging to other schools. At the liberal end of the spectrum are monastics who believe that all religions teach essentially the same thing, and that it does not particularly matter which path one follows, for they all lead to the same goal. In the middle, we might find those who, while upholding the uniqueness of the Buddha’s teaching, also believe in the value of inter-religious dialogue, who recognize elements of truth and value in other religions, and who might be willing to live for periods in monasteries of another religion, or in monasteries belonging to a school of Buddhism different from that in which they have been trained.

It should be noted that while I designate certain positions as conservative and others as liberal, it is not necessary that the four conservative positions constitute an inseparable cluster and the four liberal and four middling positions other inseparable clusters. It is quite possible for one who takes a conservative position on one, two, or three of these issues to take a liberal or middling position on the fourth. Someone might take a conservative position on two issues and a middling or liberal stance on the other two. And conversely, taking the liberal and middling position as our basis, we can posit numerous combinations between them and conservative positions on the four issues. Thus a great number of permutations is possible.

In considering the different positions, the approach that seems to me most wholesome is one that conforms to the spirit of the middle way: on the one hand, avoiding rigidly clinging to long-established conventions and attitudes simply because they are familiar to us and give us a sense of security; on the other hand, exercising care not to lose sight of the basic principles of the Dharma, especially those that derive from the Buddha himself, just to accommodate new social and cultural conditions. In the end, it might be best that new forms evolve gradually in response to the new conditions we meet here in the West rather than through hasty decisions. Monasticism is, in any case, generally a fairly conservative force. This may be partly due to the temperament of those who ordain, partly due to the fact that Buddhist monasticism is an ancient institution—older than all the empires and kingdoms that have risen upon the face of the earth—and thus has acquired a weight that discourages random experimentation. In any case, the good Dharma flourishes to the extent that we remain firm in our commitment to the core principles of Buddhism as a whole and those that define our respective traditions while at the same time remaining open to the challenges, insights, and values of contemporary civilization.

But one point is certain: To preserve relevance, the Sangha must allow the forms and expressions of Buddhist monasticism to respond effectively to the new and unique challenges we face today. Our response should be marked by faith, flexibility and resiliency. Faith roots us in the Dharma, but it should not stiffen us. Flexibility allows us to adapt and thereby to keep in touch with the concerns of ordinary people; it is not a mark of weakness. To the contrary, with firm roots, we can bend with the wind without breaking and collapsing.

The challenges we face today can be seen, not as threats and dangers, but as calls to discover more deeply and authentically what it means to be a monastic in the contemporary world, which is so different from the world in which Buddhism was born. Changes in forms and structures, in roles and ways of conducting our monastic lives, can be positive and healthy, a sign of the inner vitality of Buddhism and of our own confidence in the spiritual quest. We can look upon the changes that occur in response to the new challenges as the next step in the onward evolution of Buddhist monasticism, as the next bend in the river of the Dharma as it flows onwards from its ancient Asian homelands into the uncharted frontiers of the global 21st century.