

Accessibility

One of the qualities of the Dharma is that it is “accessible” (one of the senses of *opanayika*). The Dharma, in itself, does nothing, so to speak, it is what we do with it, how we see, study, practise or teach it. In other words, a good teacher, when he teaches the Dharma, embodies it. He speaks as an example of what he teaches, and points to the accessibility of growth and awakening – even to the path of awakening, of streamwinning, if not arhathood, in this life itself.

When such a teacher is a renunciant – whether a monk or a nun – and this teacher is able to present the Dharma clearly and to anyone who truly seeks it, that renunciant, that teacher, is also said to be “accessible.” An accessible teacher who is rooted in the Vinaya and moved by the Dharma is a great blessing to anyone who seeks personal growth and awakening in this life – or simply, to understand the Buddha Word. To be “accessible” also means to be “available” in times of our need.

As Buddhism gains currency and popularity, many monastics (if they lack proper training or lack spiritual maturity – wisdom and compassion in right measure) would be caught up in the busyness and conceit that Māra hands to them. They begin to be intoxicated by the respect, generosity and servility that others show them, deluded by the notion that they actually have all the good qualities that others project onto them. If we are defined by the crowd, we may have no life apart from it.¹

The purpose of monastic “robes” and a clean-shaven head is to remind the renunciant of renunciation. The early monks’ mode of dressing was very much like any other bona fide renunciant of the day. It would be difficult to recognize the difference just by looks alone – it was difficult for many to recognize even the Buddha himself.² However, we can see in later Buddhism, especially ethnic and race-based Buddhisms, the robes look rather imposing, even regal, meant to be a “meme” – to attract others to itself and to swallow those attractions and grown on them.³

Such a world can only get heavier and more crowded, and move with greater difficulty, losing its gravity so that we fall off into the underworlds like ripe and rotten fruits to be devoured by prowling beasts and bugs. The safest robes, then, are those of the early Buddhist monastics: simple, comfortable and good reminders of the task before us – to be free of the world so that we can free the world.

When monastics are busy, it means that they are selective or handicapped in who can have access to them. Or, whom they would or dare to respond to with truth and ruth. Such an exclusive bias only betrays latent lust in the monastic: liking some, hence, disliking some. Bias is always rooted in lust, hate, delusion or fear. So, we need to constantly look mindfully at the early monastic robes and remind ourselves that the Buddha and the arhats have worn them, too.

Monastics today have access to the Internet and social media. Often enough, we can see that the Internet – like money – is a leveler of the good and the bad, of the monastic and the laity. When a monastic goes online, he has come down to the level

¹ On religion and the crowd, see Reflections: “Non-sectarian,” R391, 2015; “Right moves,” R395, 2015; “Pious fiction,” R406, 2015.

² See Reflection, “What the Buddha really looks like,” R135b 2010.

³ On memes, see Reflection, “Mental slavery,” R118 2010.

of the laity, especially when he forms intimate connections with the laity, or gets caught up in the Net itself with all the temptations that the mind can only imagine. However, if he is wise and prudent with the time he spends online and that it has only and directly to do with the Dharma – and never surfs the Net without a wise chaperon – then, he does not fall into the sub-sangha world that he has vowed to leave behind.

On the other hand, when we use the Internet for Dharma learning, we can access any good monastic anywhere in the world – that is, if those monastics love the Dharma and, hence, care for our well-being in the Dharma, too. I have just completed working on SD 50 (Sutta Discovery volume 50), themed on the Buddha's life. While translating and annotating one of its last suttas, I had to explain the context of women and *brahma, cariya*, which usually means “the holy life,” or more narrowly, simply, “celibacy.”

I also had to explain why the Buddha is unequivocal in forbidding sex amongst monastics and the position of women in regard to them. I had to look up the Pātimokkha (the monastic code) and the Sutta Vibhaṅga (the rules section of the Vinaya). When I looked up the PTS edition of “The Patimokkha” (edited by William Pruitt and translated by K R Norman, 2001), I thought they had erred in listing the first Pārājika (the defeat rule regarding sexuality) by stating them as being identical for both the monks and the nuns. Obviously, the rules should show differences for men and for women.

When I looked up the English translation of the Vinaya (translated by I B Horner and revised by Ajahn Brahmali) I was even more sure that the PTS scholars have erred in their listing. The case-history of the Nun's first Pārājika actually gives a longer definition of the Nun's first Pārājika rule – I was right, or was I? The next thing is for me to be sure that there IS an error. This is when I had to mentally survey the world and seek which monastic will be compassionate and wise enough to assist me to clear my doubt. Which monastic do I have access to in such a moment of Dharma need?

On such a matter, it is clear, I must write to Ajahn Brahmali, who is working on the Vinaya even as I write. And so I did: I emailed the problem to him, and the very next day, he replied. As I recall, he had always been prompt with my inquiries on such matters. He replied, saying that he was on a Dharma teaching-tour of Indonesia and did not have a copy of the PTS “Pātimokkha.” However, he has internet access to the Burmese Tipitaka. What he told me next, along with the Pali quotes, cleared all my doubts.

Essentially, he said that there is the Dve-Māṭikā Pāli (the dual-rubric text) of the Patimokkha for the monks and the nuns, and he attached the relevant section. Just one look at the quotes cleared my mind regarding how I had myself erred. I have mistaken the “Old Commentary” of the monastic rules for the rule itself. Obviously, the commentarial statement would be longer, as it explains the rule itself. Everything is clear: Dharma joy, peace and gratitude! A great relief, too, that the scholars have not erred in their work. Sadhu.

Surely the wise reader will know by now that this reflection is not about Vinaya rules or even my translation work. It is about the ACCESSIBILITY to a wise monastic, a

teacher, a spiritual friend, when we need to straighten our views. A true renunciant is always accessible to us whenever we need help in the Dharma; even the Internet becomes a hallowed channel for Dharma communication and learning.

That is why we never remember or represent the Buddha as having run a monastery or temple; then, he will be too busy to see anyone. It is Ānanda who sometimes tried to regulate the Buddha's visitors so that he could rest. But for the Buddha, he is ready to receive visitors and seekers from the time of the great awakening to the moment of great passing away. He is the true embodiment of the Dharma which is still accessible to us. Sadhu.

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