



Shifting the Attitude -

Embracing Community

Don robes – and you are making a public statement.

Although the majority of the millions of Buddhists are lay people, it is taught that the ordained Sangha are crucial: The existence of the Buddhadharmā in any one place depends upon the presence there of at least four ordained Sangha practicing the full extent of the Vinaya, Buddha's guidelines on moral conduct. Lord Buddha himself said, "Wherever there is a bhikkhu observing the Vinaya, that place is luminous, is radiant. I see that place as not empty: I myself abide there peacefully." [*Mandala*, October 1996.]

About a month after I took over as Director of IMI, the community of Buddhist monks and nuns in the FPMT mandala, I was reading a Sunday news magazine and the feature story caught my eye. The article was about a small community of Catholic nuns in the Bay Area, and how they were surviving in a more secular society. Seeking to understand the parallels to the difficulties faced by the modern Buddhist monk or nun, I had to read the article, especially in light of Lama Yeshe's early advice for our community to look at the Catholic community as models for our own.

Ven. Losang Monlam, director of the International Mahayana Institute (IMI), introduced the importance of the FPMT Sangha community in *Mandala* December 2007/January 2008. Now he reveals the need for a fundamental shift in attitude towards and by those people who have committed themselves to the ordained life.

The Catholic nuns' community had similar difficulties to those that our community faces today – a more secular society, an aging population, etc. – but the one sentence that captured my attention and intrigued me more than anything was ever so simple: Each of the nuns who were out working (for the diocese) in teaching positions, etc., were supporting 2.7 members of their community.

I have often noted that Lama Zopa works in mysterious (and sometimes very unconventional) ways, and I believe it was due to his kindness that I happened to read this particular article on this particular day. This singular simple fact of community opened my mind to propel a tremendous shift that could help the community of monks and nuns whom I was asked by Rinpoche, only a few weeks before, to serve. The insight has given focus to the main task as the path begins to take shape.

Having some experience as a monk living in a residential center in the West, I had already formulated thoughts on the vulnerability we face in a culture that does not value (i.e.

support) the decision we make in becoming monks and nuns. But I also needed to hear from the rest of the monks and nuns in the larger world community about their experiences and their situations: the difficulties and the priorities. A survey was compiled, providing an in-depth look at the individual situations for members of the community: those living in community and those on their own. With a fifty percent response rate, the results seemed credible.

By chance, in serving my teacher Ven. Geshe Ngawang Dakpa I also had the opportunity to travel to many parts of the world and meet with my fellow Sangha members; to talk to them in person and listen to their stories. I have also taken the time to discuss the Sangha with staff at FPMT international office, teachers (and abbots) within the FPMT mandala of centers, my predecessors who served the IMI community, as well as Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

And I went back to the beginning! What did Lama Yeshe say when he started this IMI thing? What did he really envision for the community of monks and nuns?

Of course I also had to review my understanding of the Vinaya, the code of conduct for monks and nuns. My time spent in a Tibetan monastic community (Sera Je Monastery) every year for the last five years has also provided tremendous insight into the unraveling story of where do we go from here.

It is not always a good thing to air dirty laundry for everyone to discuss; however, in some cases, it also helps to provide an understanding of the underlying current, and thus can be helpful in shifting our awareness.

It is easy to ordain – staying ordained is difficult. Many monks and nuns are expected to find their own way of surviving in the world, with little or no training in the vows they have taken.

On the one hand, we tend to support monks and nuns in Tibetan monastic communities. On the other hand, support for monks and nuns, within our own communities, is not considered as important. While most of the IMI monks and nuns are provided housing and food, over half of the sangha surveyed are expected to cover all of the costs.

When ordaining in every other Buddhist tradition (including the Tibetan), one joins a monastic community, which becomes the basis for one's practice, and one's community for life. We are the only group of monks and nuns where we do not join a community when ordaining.

A young nun's experience

After I took ordination as a Western nun, I felt like I had taken on a foreign identity within my own culture. Strangers rarely say anything positive to me, unlike Ven. Lobsang Kelden's heartwarming experience [*Mandala* August/September 2007]. Maybe it's my age [the writer is in her early 30s], but I often get cat-calls. It's as if people feel affronted that I have this religious dress on. When I am with others of my age, who are not Buddhist, I often feel like I am an alien.

Before I was a nun, I was familiar with relating to men in a certain way. After ordination I had to completely change. I didn't understand this aspect properly until after ordination, so for my first years as a nun it was quite confusing. One day you are viewed as an object of attraction, the next as an object of ridicule. Normally when we learn or experience things, the change is gradual, but when you become a nun it's very sudden, literally from one day to the next – like growing old in one day, rather than gradually over a lifetime. I sometimes feel serious identity confusion when I have to deal with normal householder requirements in the West – banking, shopping and so on – while wearing robes.

My experience is that people, even complete strangers, impute a lot on what I should be doing and how I should be. By donning the robes I am making a public statement, and thus become public property. This can bring stress. But although the unexpected challenges I have experienced took me by surprise, of course there have been incredible benefits as well, and I feel so fortunate to still be a nun. I think the biggest thing I have learnt is trying to be honest with myself in all aspects and a little gentle, rather than to try and be something that I am not.

Often families can feel deserted when one of them gets ordained (although this is not my experience, thankfully) and so there can be no support coming from loved ones, or comments like, "Oh, you won't have children!!" Or, "It's just a passing fad."

The number of FPMT sangha has stayed pretty constant at around 300 in the last fifteen years – about the same number ordain as disrobe. This is a sign that it is not growing: why? Many Sangha who ordained in the early 1970s have stayed ordained, and possibly that could be because of the foundation they received in the lam-rim, and by living together at the "Injie Gompa".

One of my teachers recently said to me, "Just wake up each day and say, 'Today I will be a nun.'" In this way I am taking it one day at a time.

On the one hand, we need the support (and practice) of a community; on the other hand, we are raised in a culture that focuses on the individual; many of us find it difficult to join a community.

The lay community often does not understand the commitment involved in trying to maintain (and practice) the vows in a very secular world.

We live in a culture where it is typically believed that one must produce tangible results in order to earn one's support; thus the idea of supporting the Sangha who do not produce tangible results is not readily accepted. There must be a perceived "value" in order for an exchange (support) to take place.

Although members of the monastic community have served for over thirty years as teachers, retreat leaders, counselors, administrators, program directors, center directors, etc., there is very little in place as they reach the vulnerable end stages of life.

Many centers have had to take responsibility in caring for the Sangha at the local level. However, they are limited in resources and often cannot provide training for the monks and nuns on how to live within the Vinaya.

Many of the monks and nuns are isolated from any support system to help protect their ordination. There are few communities where they can live, study, practice and serve.

There is no program in place for aspiring Buddhist practitioners to train and understand what it means to be a monk and nun before taking vows.

Without understanding or support, many monastics

Excerpts from the IMI Survey

- Counseling for sangha, especially newly ordained sangha, seems to be lacking. For example: "...counseling opportunity for members of sangha who may be facing difficulties, i.e. very personal difficulties that may affect their ordination. It is actually quite lonely out there, not having someone who can lend his/her ear to them, and at the same time understand their problems without being judgmental."
- While most of the IMI monks and nuns are provided housing and food, over **half** of the sangha surveyed are expected to cover all of the costs.
- With respect to community, 88% agreed that they were willing to live in a community if their basic needs were met.
- Healthcare options suggest that greater awareness should be given to this aspect of living. Only 36% received support from their communities for healthcare.



A strong Sangha is like a family.

are unable to maintain their vows – and disrobe (give their vows back).

Having taken our cue from the Tibetan tradition, where offerings are made to the individual monks (and sometimes nuns), our center communities often have a disposition to support individual monks and nuns, but not the community.

It's enough to turn your head inside out! Where to begin?

And this is where it all seems to fall into place! The emphasis on the individual does not benefit the lay community, the organization, or the monks or nuns. The only alternative we have is community – it can work! But it will take a tremendous shift in attitude on the part of FPMT, the center communities, and the monks and nuns of IMI.

Let's take a closer look.

While from an individual point of view it certainly is not our ideal scenario, in all other Buddhist traditions one joins a community when one ordains. This community then serves as one's family, as one begins one's journey as a monastic and at various stages of one's life. Learning to live in community is not always easy; in fact, it is a major part of practice as a monk or nun seeking to put the Buddha's teachings on selflessness into action.

Lama Yeshe stressed the importance of communities in his first talk: "My feeling is that it would be much better if the Sangha were to stay together, communicating with each other, rather than people getting ordained and then going off on their own. If you do go off on your own, worldly conditions will make your life difficult; it will be much harder for you to practice Dharma."

As Lama Zopa puts it, we need "different flavors, like ice cream" for our communities to suit the various temperaments and capacities of the monks and nuns. Over ten years ago, Lama Zopa Rinpoche indicated that he would like

newly-ordained monks and nuns to commit themselves to living in a Sangha community, or similarly conducive environment that supports subduing the mind: five years for a monk and four years for a nun. There needs to be balanced education available, not just philosophical study, to produce good monks and nuns. Rinpoche has said, time and again, that the main protection for one's ordination is the study and meditation of lam-rim, to generate some experience.

Again Lama Yeshe states, "If monks and nuns have difficulty just keeping their physical lives together, how will they ever get the chance to study and retreat? The strength of the Sangha community is that it ensures that everybody has a chance to take teachings and retreat; it makes sure that everybody is okay, and minimizes the external conditions that cause one to lose mental discipline. I think this is really worthwhile. It helps a lot. There's a Sangha vibration, you see; when you look at each other, there's a vibration that automatically helps you control your energy. You should check this for yourselves."

And no, not everyone is expected to go off and live in a community for the rest of their life. Rather, we shift our attitude and recognize the importance of community, the responsibility we have to support and nurture each other as monks and nuns. This was so clearly stated by Geshe Lama

Konchog: "... only if the individual members of the Sangha community start looking after each other and take responsibility to provide for the community financially, will substantial help come from the lay community."

And this idea of community is very subtle, from the offerings made to the teacher, who in turn gives back to his/her community, to the center director who respects and values the service offered by the individual monk and nun, and commits not only to the basic needs of here and now, but also their future. Even the support offered by the Lama Yeshe Sangha Fund must embrace the concept of taking care of community, and not individuals.

It's difficult to change our way of thinking, and challenges lie ahead. And to be sure, it will take on many forms: the development of actual communities, education and training, communication, and attention to isolated members of the community.

In Praise of Vinaya states: "As long as the complete Vinaya, the supreme treasure, abides, the lamp of the Dharma will shine." The "complete Vinaya" refers to all the rules of moral conduct, from those for lay people to those for fully ordained monks and nuns. In other words, if the laws of moral conduct of fully ordained monks and nuns are no longer held by anyone, the Dharma itself would no longer exist. ❁

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For over 30 years, the monks and nuns of International Mahayana Institute have tirelessly helped bring the Buddha's teachings to the far corners of this planet. Today, over 300 monks and nuns continue to serve as teachers, retreat leaders, directors, program coordinators, editors and counselors in FPMT centers worldwide.

Supporting the IMI helps these monks and nuns continue to study, to practice and to live a life in the Buddha's footsteps.

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