

Massimo: *At the time of the Buddha, and in Tibet, the lay community supported and respected the sangha in an incredible way, with alms and so on. It was not strange to see monks going around in robes like it is in our world. Many people interviewed for this feature said that they feel the center of attention when wearing robes. Should we train the lay community in order to sustain the nuns and monks in a proper way?*



Ribur Rinpoche: When I was in Palermo I noticed people paid their respect when I was strolling along the street, but I also noticed the sharp and confused glances. That's natural because Buddhism is new in the West.

It depends on the type of behavior and attitude of the sangha community itself. If they keep abiding with morality and contentment, then slowly people with faith and devotion will come and support them.

Where the leader of the sangha community is a very learned geshe, he can impart the instructions based on the specific conduct of the Vinaya. That alone instills a practice and behavior which naturally subdues the mind, imbuing it with contentment and satisfaction which is the actual outlook of ordained people. With this outlook, lay communities will naturally help and sustain the sangha without the need to train the lay community.

A community of Chinese monks and nuns [living in New Mexico] came here to see me with their abbot. Their outlook is extremely subdued, a very clean and pure outlook that is dictated by Vinaya training. That's what our people should look like. We can learn from them, we can take from them things that are good for us and discard what we don't think is beneficial for us. Their behavioral outlook

is extremely important.

There are places of retreat where only monks and nuns are allowed to go, like Land of Calm Abiding [California], a place of great hopes and expectations run on the basis of Buddhist teachings; people who stay there are achieving results.

For people who cannot actually engage in ascetic practice, [it is good to] support people who can do so. Milarepa said that by sponsoring a meditator, due to that perfect condition of interdependent origination, the sponsor and meditator will achieve enlightenment together.

Massimo: *What advice do you have for a new nun working on an FPMT project who feels she is having to teach herself how to be a nun?*

Ribur Rinpoche: Sangha who live in monasteries and sangha who have decided to work or live in the modern

world are exclusively making their own choices. Westerners live in a democratic social structure where you have the freedom of doing whatever you want. You can be free to choose to meditate, or take a dip in the river. This does not accord very much with the rules and regulations of the Vinaya, of the dharma practice. The moment you mix the dharma and society and politics, you get into this kind of dichotomy.

Yet once the rules, regulations – and benefits – of living in a dharma environment are explained, and the people take them up spontaneously, not feeling it is imposed on them from outside, it should be a natural process of understanding.

Fabrizio: *His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that he does not understand why, when he gives initiations, many people will take bodhisattva and tantric vows without a problem; yet when it comes to taking ordination, they shy away. It is actually much easier to keep the vows of individual liberation (for external behavior which is much easier to control) than the bodhisattva and tantric vows, which are much more difficult because they are mainly of the mind.*

Massimo: *That makes me think that we don't have the faintest idea of what it really means to keep the tantric vows and bodhisattva vows pure. The only hope we have is to constantly purify our mind stream.* ☸

a vehicle for realization

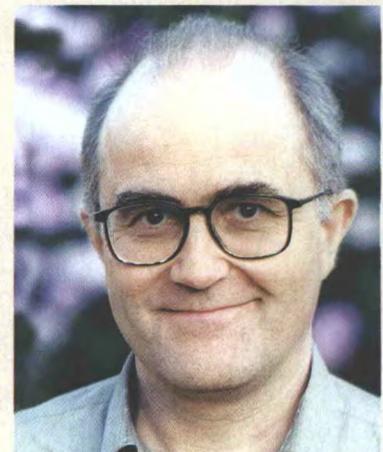
STEPHEN BATCHELOR, former monk in both the Zen and Tibetan traditions, now lectures and leads retreats worldwide. His books include *Buddhism without Beliefs*, *Alone With Others* and *The Awakening of the West*. He spoke to **NANCY PATTON**.

For me the Buddhist tradition is founded in one of the longest living human institutions – the *bhikshu* [monks] and the *bhikshuni* [nuns] of the Buddha. This is an institution that provides a

framework of training that has managed to survive throughout an enormously diverse range of cultures.

My time as a monk was effectively when I received all my intellectual and contemplative training. It is a well-tested framework. One might argue that some of the minor vows are anachronistic, dating back to 500BC India, and they haven't been updated to contemporary circumstances, but to me that's a fairly minor issue.

The core issue is the ongoing commitment to a way of life, which is completely dedicated to the realization of the Buddhist



Stephen Batchelor

MONASTICISM

path. As long as there are people who wish to devote themselves to that path, the monastic vehicle will serve. I am convinced of that.

The way I sense that the Dharma is unfolding in the modern world (and I might be wrong) is that we are moving towards a plurality of different sanghas. Not only monastic and lay, but representing different traditions, some of which have created non-celibate priesthoods [in Japan] and all manner of experimentation in how to create Buddhist community. I see monasticism, not as the defining model of Buddhist community, but one of many possibilities that people can aspire to.

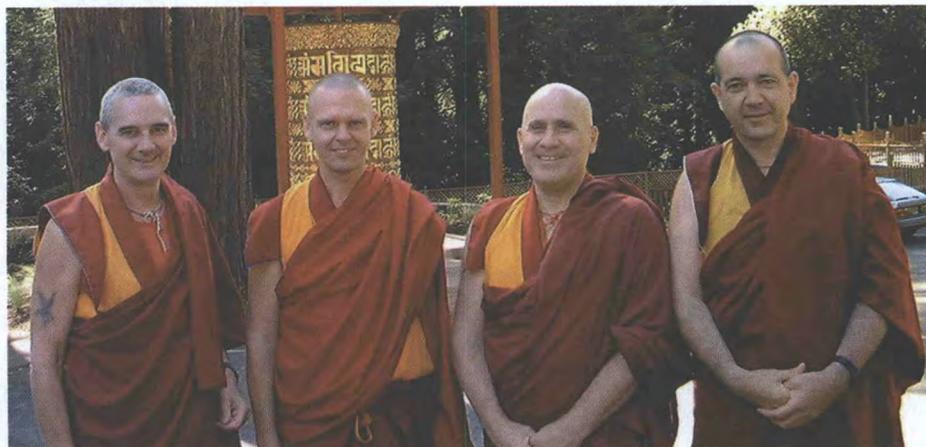
I see there is a certain human temperament that is suited to monasticism.

My own story is that I became a monk and was ordained both as a *getsul* and a *gelong*, i.e., as a *shramanera* and a *bhikshu*. For me, monasticism was a means to an end, a framework within which to practice and study and achieve certain goals. But I could not feel myself to be a monk by vocation. Some monks and nuns have it the other way round. They feel an inner calling. The monastic form is simply natural to them.

I'm in favor of short-term monastic ordination as a form of training. I'd love a society where young people had the opportunity to go to a 'monastic university' for three to five years. I think society desperately needs [a place where students can develop] a kind of spiritual depth,

understanding and maturity that they may then take into any other form of work, be it therapist or counselor or meditation teacher or whatever.

So my own sense is that the traditional monastic form needs to question itself and allow maybe more possibilities. The reality is that people become monks and they take this vow in theory at least for life but of course everyone knows that you can disrobe. That creates a slightly ambiguous situation, whereby ex-monks feel a certain level of failure and I don't see why that should be. In my own case, my time as a monk was one of the most fruitful periods of my life and I think it is a pity to have to present myself as 'Monk (Failed)'. The tradition



long-term companions of morality

From left, Ven. Roger Kunsang, Ven. Rene Feusi, Ven. George Churinoff and Ven. Thubten Dondrub.

Ven. Roger Kunsang, Australian, has been Lama Zopa Rinpoche's attendant for 15 years. He was ordained 26 years ago.

I can't remember having regretted [my ordination], even for a minute. I have gone through difficulties and hardships as a monk but I can only see the very deep benefit; no realizations, but inner stability and contentment. I feel extremely grateful to my teachers who have given me this priceless opportunity.

I always remember Lama Zopa Rinpoche saying: "If in your heart your goal is samsara, then the vows appear like a prison. When the goal in your heart is liberation, then your vows are like beautiful ornaments – a great blessing."

Some people may think taking ordination is escapism. Yet the whole point is

to subdue your mind and practice virtue, in essence to cultivate the good heart, to have less greed, less anger, less jealousy, less pride, etc. So I certainly don't consider this as running away from what is meaningful or useful. If you live your life without attempting to subdue your mind then when death comes, you look back on your life and see it as meaningless.

Ven. George Churinoff, American, has been a monk for 25 years and a long-time dharma teacher.

The name 'sangha' expresses a lot of what I feel. It means community, living with those of like mind, and being protected. Not so much whether you are actually physically with other sangha, but reminding you to not get so involved with the worldly community.

Some people think being a monk means being able to study. I don't think we've had the chance to study more than laypeople! There are other advantages though: we are constantly creating some kind of virtue by just having resolved not to engage in certain activities during our life.

As someone who has an interest in study and sharing it with others, I see my taking of the vows to be almost as much benefit to others as myself sometimes. It is a symbol to others that there is another kind of life style. A lot of lay people are affected by that.

To a certain extent, whether the dharma is preserved or not depends on whether the base of the Hinayana path – renunciation – is preserved. Even the base of the Mahayana path depends on renunciation.

tolerates and accepts it, but there is still a certain stigma attached to disrobing.

Short term ordination does happen in Thailand and Burma, but I'd like to see that structured into a three- to five-year program – maybe 10 years – where you commit yourself in such a way that you wouldn't feel that, having undergone that training and left, you had failed.

ROLE OF COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE

When you become a monk in Asia today, you actually become anonymous. You melt into a body of other people and you paradoxically lose your individuality.

In the West the very opposite happens: you stand out in a crowd. That is probably inevitable given the transi-

tional nature of where we are with Buddhism in the West. Monks and nuns are going to look like a fish out of water and also they are dressed up in ethnically alien dress. You not only stand out as a monk or nun, you stand out as a monk or nun dressed in a red skirt. If you were a Franciscan there'd be less of a perceived difference.

This brings up the question of adapting the robes perhaps to a Western style, which is beginning to happen in some places. We should not be too attached to the form of dress. The Tibetan robes are peculiar to Tibet and there's no intrinsic reason why we could not find a form of dress that is less ostentatious.

But the need for community as a

monk or nun is essential. It's extremely difficult to live as an isolate monk or nun, particularly if you are not a hermit or living in retreat. If you have to work in a big city or whatever, you need the support of like-monks who have made similar commitments. This is very clear from the Vinaya, the monastic training. When the Buddha ordained people they would be required to spend five years with a teacher in a community before going out on their own.

Developing Buddhist monasticism in the West entails commitment to financing, supporting and creating environments in which monastic communities can live and practice, otherwise it isn't going to work. ☸

The bodhisattvas, for their own benefit, have to practice renunciation in order to be able to teach others. They have to know about all the teachings of all the different levels of the path.

Lama Yeshe used to say, we were fortunate that our gurus could still appear as ordained monks; that there will come a time in the future when there are no ordained monks left. The Buddha himself said that the *bhikshu* sangha existed so that the basis of morality could be seen. Monks wear signs of morality, and it acts as a reminder to others.

Ven. Rene Feusi, Swiss, has been a monk for 16 years. He has done a number of retreats including one for two and a half years in O.Sel Ling, Spain.



One of the benefits of tak-

ing ordination is the protection that comes from taking the vows, a kind of blessing, which makes it easier to be aware of karma. When one is ordained, one is steadier. As a layperson, most of the time one practices well, but there is no boundary to stop you going over the top for a few days.

The three higher trainings [wisdom which is based on concentration which in turn is based on morality] start with morality because the less you have worldly distraction the more you can focus on your study and practice, and the more you have

the chance to develop concentration. Without concentration there is no chance to get any stable realization, so it all comes down to basic morality.

Many lay people study dharma. They know a lot, they do retreats, but then they put distractions in their mind, so it is very hard for them to get any stable experience of anything. I became a monk because for six months of the year I would study and practice and be quite together, and then for the next six months I would go back to work and have other types of behavior which would harm whatever I had acquired. I became a monk to get the discipline to be more consistent with my efforts on a spiritual path, and it has proved worthwhile in that sense.

In terms of many lifetimes, I think the imprint of being a monk is very profound, creating a deep imprint in the mind for the next life – if one can keep on being a monk with a happy mind. I think that imprint allows you to see the drawbacks of cyclic existence and ordinary life, and you will aspire again to get free of the entanglement of life.

In order to stay a monk you have to always work with renunciation to realize that ordinary life is suffering, and the purpose of becoming ordained is to get out of

suffering altogether. We have to work every day to stay a monk, reminding ourselves why we ordained. We want the imprint to manifest again in future lives, where we will again meet a spiritual teacher, and receive the blessings of the spiritual path.

Ven. Neil Huston (Thubten Don-drub), Australian, was ordained 22 years ago, and has been teaching for many years. He is a former director of Nalanda Monastery.

I think it is relevant and beneficial to be ordained and have monastic communities. Renunciation is always relevant, and so is protecting karma. As a monk or nun that is how you are able to do it best.

From the very beginning, when I became a monk at Chenrezig, I was involved in the organization and somehow from then on I was always doing things, like being with Rinpoche for three years, then in Taiwan starting a center and teaching. But somehow I got very little teachings myself or, when I did get teachings, there was no time to study. When I was at Nalanda, I ended up being the director just when I wanted to study! But I felt that whatever I was doing was karmically worthwhile, and it wasn't just for me. It has some dharma purpose. In society a lot of jobs you do are just completely hopeless, and often harmful, just a perpetuation of a system of greed and so on. ☸