

Young Buddhist Monastic Members and the Modern Society

Ven.Shi Yuande (Liu Yaoping) (*)

One of the objectives of the Buddha in establishing the Buddhist Monastic Order was to make members of the Order convey his message to mankind for its wellbeing and happiness. Therefore it is certain that service to mankind in compliance with the message of the Buddha is an inherited responsibility of the members of the monastic order. The intention of this article is to examine how young members of the monastic order can carry out their duty to serve mankind and discuss how they should face modern problems in the globalized society.

There is no doubt that young members of the Order have a great responsibility to become well-equipped religious advisors to mankind. The Buddha presented his teachings for the wellbeing and happiness of human beings so that they are free of all sorts of individual and social miseries and sufferings. Buddhism is not only a philosophy of life but also a way of life that should be adopted by people for their happiness. Therefore, as potential religious advisors, it is the first responsibility of

(*) Master of Arts in Buddhist Studies, International Buddhist College, Thailand
<shiyuande@outlook.com>

young members of the order to adhere to the teachings of the Buddha and become an example themselves for others to follow.

It is without a doubt that modern society is gradually becoming so corrupted that people can no longer live peacefully and happily. Therefore, the other responsibility of young members of the Order is to be well aware of all the social problems of the modern and globalized world and how to resolve the problems encountered by modern society. This article is designed to discuss all these matters in relation to the role of young monastic members in modern society.

It is an unquestionable and accepted fact that the Buddha should be given the honor and credit of establishing the oldest social welfare organization in the world. More than two thousand five hundred years ago the Buddha started his monastic order as the first social welfare organization in the history of Mankind consisting of sixty worthy ones (arahants) with the sole intention of serving mankind¹. Though it started with a small number of monks, it grew into a massive organization consisting of thousands of members spreading all over the world today in the course of time. Therefore, as members of the oldest social organization of the world, which has the unbroken history of more than two thousand five hundred years, it is an accepted fact that young members of the order have a great responsibility to serve mankind continuously as expected by the Buddha, our greatest master.

As young monastic members have a traditional heritage to serve mankind, they have to be sincere enough to think about whether they engaged wholeheartedly in their duty to work for the benefit of the many. Today we cannot deny that the monastic members are subjected to criticism even from Buddhist devotees who think that their monastic members are slowly deviating from their traditional path. As the Buddha pointed out, the monastic members are bound by mainly two responsibilities namely: one is to place oneself in a proper position, and the other is to serve others for their wellbeing. It is to be noted here that in order to fulfill the second responsibility it is necessary that one complete the first responsibility.

1. VinayaMahāvagga, abhisambodhikathā

The Buddha proposed these responsibilities in one of the *Dhammapada* verses. It says that “*one should first establish oneself in what is proper; then only one should advise others. Then the wise man cannot be getting defiled*”². This statement of the Buddha in the *Dhammapada* appears to imply an important message to members of the monastic order in general and the young members in particular. The message implied that one who is interested in serving or advising others should be well versed himself. Another significant implication that can be derived from the statement of the Buddha is the definition of the service attached to the members of the Order.

Both factors are especially significant for young members of the order because they are new to the Order and are still in the probationary period, undergoing training to render service to mankind as expected by the Buddha. Being responsible for the wellbeing of others can really be interpreted as working for one’s own benefit. Buddhism recognizes two types of benefits, namely one’s own benefit (*attadattha*) and other’s benefit (*parattha*). It is impossible for one to work for the benefit of others if one is not committed to fulfill one’s own benefit. That is the reason why the Buddha advised as such: “*for the sake of another’s benefit, however great it may be, do not neglect one’s own (moral) benefit. Clearly perceiving one’s own benefit one should make every effort to attain it*”³. It should empathetically be mentioned here that one’s own benefit should not be misunderstood as one’s own selfish motivated expectations. Buddhism does not recommend anything which does not affect others constructively. A Buddhist scholar observes:

*“Early Buddhist teachings based on relativism never accepted individual welfare only without considering the needs of society. It always emphasizes the wellbeing of both society and the individual”*⁴

In the Buddhist context, committing for one’s own benefit means none

2.Dhammapada, verse 158

3.Ibid 166

4.Two Political Perspectives, AnandaWijeratne, Ñānaprabhā, Felicitation volume in Honour of Venerable Dr. PategamaGnanaramaMahāThera, Ti- Sarana Buddhist Association, Singapore, 2011, p. 157

other than one's dedication to obtain understanding of the Dharma or the teachings of the Buddha and practice the Dharma accordingly. This is really one of the challenges encountered by young Buddhist monastic members. They have to face this challenge before they could face challenges arising from modern society. Only then will they understand the real nature of the challenges of modern society so that they can face them satisfactorily and successfully. In this respect, a comprehensive knowledge of Buddhism is a must for young members of the Monastic Order if they are interested in benefiting from the teachings of the Buddha and to share the benefits received through the Dharma with the rest of the world. But, it is regrettable to mention that many have their own purposes for practicing Buddhism, rather than using it for the sake of self-discipline. Self-discipline makes a person an exemplary to others and only then can one be able to contribute greatly for the wellbeing of others.

One of the purposes for establishing the monastic order was to enable Buddhism to exist as long as possible and to reach out to as many as possible, with the intention of helping mankind to attain happiness by overcoming individual and social miseries. Therefore it is the foremost duty of members of the order to continuously carry out their responsibility entrusted upon them by the Buddha. This can only be achieved satisfactorily when the disciples of the Buddha are “wise, well disciplined, apt and learned, preservers of the Dharma, living according to the Dharma, abiding by appropriate conduct and, having learned the Buddha's word, are able to expound it, preach it, proclaim it, establish it, reveal it, explain it in details, and make it clear; especially when adverse opinions arise, they shall be able to refute them thoroughly and well, and to preach this convincing and liberating Dharma⁵” These characteristics as described by the Buddha in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* are considered to be factors for the thorough establishment of Buddhism. The same characteristics have been enumerated by the Buddha in a slightly different way in the *Pāsādika-sutta* as the factors that lead to the establishment of the Dharma.⁶ Establishment of Buddhism means none other than increasing the amount of beneficiaries of Buddhism. That is the greatest service that can be done

5. Mahāparinibbāna-sutta.

6. See. Pāsādika-sutta, D. No. 29

by Buddhist monastic members to mankind. Therefore, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the characteristics referred above.

In the above statement, the Buddha mentioned that there are two important parts to which attention must be paid. The first part directly refers to the aspect of the conduct of the disciples. It emphasizes the characteristics or qualities such as “*wisdom, well disciplined, apt and learned as well as behaviors such as persevering the Dharma, living in accordance with the Dharma and abiding by appropriate conduct*”. When the members of the Order are endowed with these qualities they can be considered as those who fulfilled their own benefit (*attadattha*). It should be emphasized here that one cannot expect members of the Monastic Order in the present world to have fulfilled their own benefit in the absolute sense because of the fact that the Buddhist ideal changed due to many reasons. Anyway, it is compulsory that at least they are working towards the ideal of Buddhism. Otherwise, they cannot be said to have carried out their responsibility properly and would not be able to face the challenges of modern society and to bring about the expected results of their attempts as they would not be able to win the confidence of the people.

It is quite evident that the Buddha is very concerned about the conducts of members in the order as each and every member represents the order as a whole. If the conduct of a member is blemished so is the image of the entire Buddhist Monastic Order. The bad conduct of a member is not only harmful to the person himself but also harmful to the entire order because people will generalize that all the members of the order to share the same conduct. The Order is not meant for the good and welfare of its members but that of mankind. If the image of the order is tarnished due to the conduct of an individual, then people would be reluctant to seek the advice of its members. It is very important to have the confidence of the people for the continued existence of the order. This was why the Buddha was so particular regarding the conduct of monks. He always insisted that monks maintain good conduct, not only to increase the faith of people who already have faith, but also to gain the faith of those people who have yet to have faith in the order⁷.

7. See off recurrent statement in the Vinaya-“*appasannānamvāpasādāyapasannān*

When drawing attention to the second part of the statement in the *Parinibbāna-sutta* referred to above there is another important aspect that is especially significant for young monastic members. It reads as follows:

“Having learned the Master’s word, are able to expound it, preach it, proclaim it, establish it, reveal it, explain it in detail, and make it clear; until, when adverse opinions arise, they shall be able to refute them thoroughly and well, and to preach this convincing and liberating Dharma”

When discussing the role of young Buddhist monastic members in the modern society, it cannot be denied that they have an important role in helping to solve the social problems of modern society as they are young, energetic, not yet corrupted, and are altruistically motivated to help mankind. They will thus win the confidence of the people. The youth of a religious person is considered as one of the important factors to win the confidence of the people. This is evident in Buddhist scriptures describing Siddhartha Gautama who entered the homelessness life in his youth. It was one of the charming factors for the popularity of the Buddha. The following praises about to the Buddha can be found recurrently in the many discourses.

“The ascetic Gautama, while youthful, a black-haired youth, in the prime of his young days, in the first stage of life went forth from the household life into homelessness.”⁸

Though youth or young age is a favored quality of a monk, it should be emphasized here that he must possess the virtues and qualities enumerated in the second part of the statement in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, as pointed out earlier, to successfully carry out his responsibilities. It is obvious that the monks have limited activities from the social aspect. However, they can show the public the correct way to solve existing social problems, guide them to behave in the ways that will not give rise to such problems in the future and encourage them to work for mutual wellbeing. All of these activities can be done by young monks who have a thorough

amvābhiyobhāvāya”

8. D. Sonadanda-sutta

knowledge of Buddha's teaching. The discourses in the *Parinibbāna-sutta* and *Pāsādika-sutta* of *Digha-nikāya* clearly showed without a doubt that this is how Buddha wants his Dhamma to be established in the world. Evidently, the Buddha placed a high esteem on the knowledge of monks. In several discourses, we see that Buddha singled out several monks and praised them for being foremost in various capacities of preaching the Dhamma. According to *Etadagga-pāli* of the *Anguttara-nikāya*, the Buddha ranked Ven. Mahā Kaccāna to the uppermost position for his ability to explain the Dhamma in details, Ven. Punna Mantāniputta in preaching the Dhamma, Ven. Sona Kutikanna for polite speech, Ven. Vangisa in explaining the Teaching, Ven. Mahakoṭṭita for his analytical knowledge of the Dhamma, Ven. Kumārakassapa for his charming preaching of the Dhamma, and Ven. Rādhā for explaining the Teaching⁹.

It is important for young monks who are studying Buddhism to know the teachings of the Buddha analytically, critically, and comparatively so that they are better equipped to face the challenges of modern society. The Buddha, when presenting his teaching to living beings in the world, did not talk much about the next world, as his main concern was relieving human beings living in this very world of sufferings. He had an incomparable knowledge of the human society. He really understood the burning fundamental problems in the society of the people. Therefore he addressed all those problems in his teachings. Thus his teachings include all the necessary aspects of human life including ethical philosophy, social philosophy, philosophy of economy, philosophy of politics, and so on. It should be the first priority of young monastic members who are interested in social service to be well versed in all these teachings of the Buddha.

Another challenge faced by young monastic members is the lack of opportunity to study secular subjects such as sociology, social philosophy, anthropology, natural sciences, ecology, legal philosophy, and others which are directly related to the problems of modern society. Knowledge of these subjects is very important to the monastic members, so that they are able to understand properly the prevalent social problems. Without proper understanding of the real nature and root causes of the problems

9. Anguttara-nikā, Etadagga-pāli

they would be unable to make use of the Buddha's teachings in a practical way to meet the requirements of the modern world. Fortunately, many religious universities acknowledged this necessity and have taken steps to include these subjects in the Buddhist studies programs. It should be mentioned here that the National Buddhist University of Vietnam, in which I used to study, is one of them.

Thus far, the primary requirements for young Buddhist monastic members in relation to their role and capacity to serve in modern society have been discussed in this paper. There is no doubt that they are empowered and entrusted to be involved in social service by the Buddha. The Buddha has made a great service during his forty-five years of teaching for the benefit and happiness of the mass. He achieved this by preaching and sending his message to the all walk of life through his disciples. Young monastic members, as the disciples of the Buddha, must deviate from the path shown by the Buddha. Thus, the main role of the monastic members irrespective of their traditions is to promote Buddhism in every possible way. One of the ways, for example, is the enhancement of Buddhist education. As young and energetic members of the order they could work hard for the development of Buddhist education by encouraging the people at large or at the least their devotees to raise support either by raising funds or to contribute their services in Buddhist educational institutions which are facing financial or management difficulties. Meanwhile Buddhist missionaries could be sent to countries that lack access to Buddhism. Buddhism is immensely important to the whole world as it has all the necessary teaching that can satisfactorily addresses almost all the modern social problems. The social problems faced by society in the modern world is but caused by society itself. The Buddha taught the law of cause and effect that is our deeds and actions determines our fate, while modern society can change or bring an end to their miseries by not planting causes that will give rise to the problems they are experiencing.

Another important role, which can be played by young members of the Order, is active participation in social welfare services. A problem that needs immediate attention is poverty. Poverty is the mother of many

social ills. Poverty not only deprived the poor ones of social privileges such as the primary requisites, education and good health, but pushes them to engage in illegal and unrighteous activities¹⁰. Young monks can help in this area by organizing social welfare groups even in a small scale to reach out to the poor and encourage those who endow the capacities to participate actively in helping to relieve or eliminate poverty altogether.

Perhaps the fact that disunity among members of the order themselves is an obstruction to the success of a monks' role in the society should be addressed first. It is a known fact that the Buddha has taken every possible action to promote unity amongst his disciples. The Buddha expected two main things from his disciples, namely unity and purity, as both are factors that are immensely conducive to the wellbeing of not only the order but also that of human society. This can be seen in the verse of the *Dhammapada* that states: *happy is the harmony amongst the Sangha (sukhā sanghassa sāmaggī)*¹¹. It should not be forgotten that this statement has been delivered by the Buddha and is given the same weight as that of the statement that states: *happiness is the arising of a Buddha (sukho buddhānam uppādo)*¹². What is emphasized here is the fact that unity and harmony of the Sangha is as useful to the mankind as the arising of the Buddha. When there is a true unity amongst members of the Sangha, there is no doubt that they can do a lot for the wellbeing of mankind. In such case the monastics have to look upon themselves and determine if there is true harmony amongst themselves or not. Following different Buddhist traditions should not lead to disharmony or disunity. Monks belonging to different traditions had lived together as brothers in the same monastery in ancient India. Though there is no rivalry amongst Buddhist traditions, it can be seen that each tradition inclines thinking that their tradition is superior to that of others which really harmful to the true harmony of the Buddhist brotherhood. Thus, fostering a strong and harmonious brotherhood amongst members of the monastic order is the upmost challenge to young monastic members of today in the interest of peace, prosperity and unity of mankind.

10. Dīgha-nikāya, Cakkavatti-sīhanāda-sutta

11. Dhammapada verse 194

12. Ibid