

Editorial

Richard Gombrich

While preparing this volume, I have had the pleasure of being sent the article by “Melody” Tzu-Lung Chiu on how – to what extent and in what spirit – Buddhist nuns in mainland China and in Taiwan are observing the precepts laid down in the ancient *Vinaya* canon which they have vowed to live by. She has personally interviewed face to face 35 nuns, 20 on the Mainland and 15 in Taiwan; they live at one of 7 nunneries on the Mainland and 4 nunneries in Taiwan, and Dr Chiu chose those nunneries to give the widest range of institutional type. (Dr. Chiu has built her knowledge of the *Vinaya* on the distinguished research of the scholar who supervised her doctorate at the University of Ghent, Ann Heirman, whose own thesis was published in 2002 as *The Discipline in Four Parts, Rules for Nuns According to the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*. 3 vols. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; and it gives us great satisfaction that in this same volume we can also publish an article in this area by Prof. Heirman.)

Dr. Chiu’s article is full of interesting information on points of detail; but most interesting of all, to my mind, is the general attitude which the nuns display to living by the rules. Nearly every nun she interviewed spontaneously explained that what was essential was not the letter of the precepts but the spirit. They had learnt that the function of the rules was to achieve nirvana for themselves and all sentient beings. The rules acted as a constant reminder to be alert and so behave that their behaviour could cause no harm or annoyance to others.

Changes in time, place and circumstance could greatly affect how one regarded the letter of the law, but once one had understood the Buddha’s intention when the precept was first promulgated, one could and should use one’s own judgment. One example must here suffice. There is a rule against eating garlic. The Buddha laid it down when nuns and their assistants responded to a donation

of garlic by a layman by digging up his entire crop, leaving nothing. The spirit of the Buddha's ruling, a nun told Dr Chiu, was that monastics should be concerned about their lay supporters' economic condition. Nowadays this would mean, for instance, that if a layman promised to donate \$100 every month for her support, that was acceptable; but she would transgress the precept against eating garlic if she asked the layman to give her \$30,000, leaving him no money for himself.

We students of Buddhism are well aware that when asked by villagers called the Kālāmas how to sort out the variety of advice and instruction they were given on how to behave, the Buddha told them that they should take no teaching on trust, but test it on the touchstone of their own experience. Here, however, we recall another of the Buddha's most basic teachings. In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* the Buddha preached with great emphasis that it was misguided to attach importance to his precise words: what counted was the message those words were intended to convey. (It is an irony that so many people have failed to understand that this is the message of his famous parable of the raft (*kullūpama*), which comes in this text.) Though this *sutta* was long ago translated into Chinese along with the rest of the *Majjhima Nikāya* = *Madhyama Āgama*, it is most unlikely that the Chinese nuns whom Dr Chiu interviewed know of it. But they do not need to know the words of that text, because they are steeped in the message they convey – and, more broadly, in the pragmatism that the Buddha constantly showed.

It happened that I was teaching the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* to a Pali pupil in the same week as I copy-edited Dr Chiu's article, and it struck me how textual study and anthropological fieldwork can complement each other and enhance our understanding of the Buddhist tradition. I suspect that Buddhism (as taught by the Buddha) is the only religion in the world in which every message is accompanied by another (a meta-message?) which says, "Don't rush to take this message literally. Look at how it originated, and use your judgment."

We must be grateful to Dr Chiu and her informants for the reminder.