

Statement by Jampa Tsedroen, International Conference on Vinaya, CUTS January 2011

Discussion panel "Vinaya and Modernity"

First of all I would like to thank the CUTS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this important and historic conference. I really appreciate it. During an audience, after opening the First Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Nuns in Bodhgaya in 1987, His Holiness the Dalai Lama pointed out, how good it would be to hold a seminar as we are holding one now. It is wonderful that it is now taking place.

Vinaya & Modernity to me poses the question, how to relate the 2500-year old Dharma-Vinaya to the present. Clearly, today neither monks nor nuns live as they did during the Buddha's time. After their full ordination, monks and nuns are taught three or four reliances. We should rely on alms for food (1), on old rags for clothing (2), and on cow's urine for medicine (3). Nuns, different from monks, are not supposed to take shelter under trees. We may stay in a house or hut. However, today's reality is much different. Whether monk or nun, as a senior monastic we usually have a nice single room, from time to time we may even stay in a 5-star-hotel, our robes are made from new cloth, we can see the doctor and take medicine when needed, and hopefully all of us get healthy food. I think every tradition could easily add many more things to this list of deviations from traditions during the Buddha's lifetime. The mobile phone was already mentioned during this conference. Other examples are a suitcase or a personal computer. I am wondering, whether this means that we no longer are keeping the Vinaya or whether this means that

we have changed the Vinaya. Or do we just consider this a reasonable adaptation to recent times? As a Westerner, at a first glance, I would probably say that it is no surprise that over so many centuries the practice of Vinaya has changed on the outside, although the spirit may have remained the same. However, I remember that my Tibetan teacher felt that it can be considered an adaptation to modern circumstances. He taught us that we should think that things such as a personal computer do not belong to ourselves, but belong to the community, to the saṅgha. Fortunately, we have a precedent to better understand every rule and answers to why each and every rule was set up. Nowadays – especially in the West –, but also increasingly in Asia, various Buddhist traditions are present in one country or even in one city. It is interesting to observe that Buddhism was able to accommodate itself with so many different non-Indian cultures. Some experts of religious studies even state that from the outside – as a non-Buddhist – it is hard to even recognize that all these various Buddhist traditions are just different representations of one and the same religion, which is Buddhism.

Personally, I feel that for Buddhism one of the major challenges of the 21st century is, whether it can relate to a world that aims for gender equality. Today, the Buddhist traditions have no choice but to acknowledge that the social roles of women have changed over the millennia. It is not acceptable that in the 21st century Buddhism fails to live up to what the Buddha himself allowed 2500 years ago. So I do not suggest to change the Vinaya, but to go back to the roots of the Vinaya, to the Buddhist canon itself. For modern, well-educated women who want to fully devote their whole life to the study, the meditation

and the daily practice of Buddhism it is important to be granted the same opportunities (*go skabs gcig pa*) men have.

Since the early 1970s not only Western, but also Asian women are striving to revive or to reintroduce the practice of bhikṣuṇī precepts where it is not available. As Ven.

Dhammananda mentioned, Asian women started the movement of revival of the bhikkhunī precepts not Western women. Actually, it was her mother Vormai Kabilsingh who started the movement. In 2007 the German Foundation for Buddhist Studies organized the First International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Saṅgha at the University of Hamburg. A few days ago, here in Sarnath, H.H. the Dalai Lama released „Dignity and Discipline. Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns“ which Dr. Thea Mohr from the University of Frankfurt and I edited. A large part of the proceedings has been published, including the statements by H.H. the Dalai Lama and other leading monks and nuns. The congress brought together specialists in monastic codes from Buddhist communities from over 19 countries and marked the culmination of some 30 years of research into the possibility of establishing full female ordination in the Tibetan tradition. Papers not included in the book can be downloaded from the congress website:

<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/>

On the last day of the Congress and the day after His Holiness stated that in terms of Buddhadharma a country can only be considered to be a "central land" if the four-fold community is complete and that there is no point in discussing whether to revive the bhikṣuṇī ordination. The Buddha himself already decided the issue. The question is how to

do it properly within the context of Vinaya. His Holiness also stressed that decisions regarding community-wide matters should be reached through broad consensus within the monastic community. He suggested another conference in India with 100 Vinaya holders to provide a forum where community-wide discussions can be conducted and such a consensus may be reached. So I just wanted to take this opportunity to draw your attention to this issue and would appreciate your support.

During the forthcoming International Association of Buddhist Studies Congress in Dharma Drum Buddhist College in June, four panels will be dealing with Vinaya, especially the bhikṣuṇī issue. I hope to see you esteemed scholars there again.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.