Bridging the Gulf between Monastics and Laypeople

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僧伽和居士，體性本空，非恆非實。如果人執有多深，疑惑便有多深。若執有多深，「我是修行的比丘尼，或修行僧尼也」，疑惑也就有多深。但，若法執卻是離執之母，令人趣向究竟證悟。佛說：
「是故不應取法，不應取非法。以是義故，如來常說汝等比丘，知說法如筏喻者，法尚應捨，何況非法。」

抓住佛法的船筏，可免於沉淪內心煩惱大海。在我們未捨一切執著之前，我們須要以未開悟的角度來面對眼前的問題，此時對我們而言，我之別還非常重要。這就是佛為四眾之間的關係設立規範的原因。

要消除什麼隔閡呢？長部經說：
「居家如樊籠，受廛勞累；出家則自在如風。聖道生活，瑩潔如珠貝，居家則難以圓滿。」

在家執來到廟中，必須時時努力防止將世俗的染污習氣帶進來。出家人到世間，也一定不要怕它不清淨。記住「心淨佛土淨」，要依慈悲心處事，不要怕心靈被染污，或不要自我貶高。

在傳統寺廟中，往往還要消除文化的隔閡。比如我們都應覺察到沙文主義問題：大男人、大文化、大組織的主張。講究等級的中國傳統社會與佛世的印度社會，和講究平等的西方社會大不相同。

The monastic and the layperson are both individuals whose individuality is empty of essential, permanent reality. To the extent that they hold to individual identity, they are deluded. To the extent that they grasp dharmas, such as, 'I am a nun or laywoman on the Path,' they are also deluded, but that is an attachment that can lead to non-attachment, and ultimately to enlightenment. The Buddha said,

You should neither cling to Dharma nor cling to what is not Dharma. In light of this principle, the Thus Come One often says, "Bhikshus, you should know that the Dharma I speak is like a raft. Even the Dharma must be relinquished, how much more should that which is not Dharma be relinquished!"

It is holding on to the raft of dhharma that keeps us from drowning in the sea of the afflictions of our own minds. Until we finally let go of all of our attachments, we have to deal with the present topic from our unenlightened perspective, within which self and other are still important to us. That is why the Buddha established guidelines for relationships among the four assemblies.

What is the gulf to be bridged? The Long Discourses of the Buddha states:

The household life is close and dusty, the homeless life is free as air. It is not easy, living the household life, to live the fully-perfected holy life, purified and polished like a conch shell.

When a layperson comes to a monastery, he or she must make a constant effort not to bring the polluting habits of the lay life along. When the monastic enters the lay world, he or she must not be afraid of its impurities. Remembering that "when the mind is purified the Buddhahood is purified," one can act out of compassion rather than out of fear of mental pollution or out of egoistic superiority.

When entering traditional monasteries, there are often also cultural guls to be bridged. For instance, we should be aware of the problem of chauvinisms: male, cultural, and organizational. Traditional Chinese
hierarchical society was very different from the original Indian society in
which Buddhism was born and also very different from the egalitarian
ideals of Western society. In ancient India, society placed the monk out-
side of the obligations of the social hierarchy. The monastic community
in India may have been the oldest direct democracy in the world, yet it
flourished in the midst of Indian caste feudalism. In China and most of
East Asia, the hierarchical patterns of ancient Confucian society were
imported into Buddhist monasteries, and much of the original demo-
ocratic model disappeared. The Buddha's attempt at the spiritual liber-
ation of women was also strongly opposed both in Indian and in Chi-
inese societies.

As part of the successful transplantation of Buddhism to the West, it
will be necessary to figure out which patterns of relationship in Bud-
hist communities are based on dharma and which are cultural. Because
of the disjunction between democratic patterns of modern Western
society and the authoritarian patterns of most traditional Asian societies,
it is particularly important that the authoritarian patterns not be repre-
sented in the West as based on dharma. When leaving modern interna-
tional culture and entering the realms of contemporary monastic life,
we need to look carefully at what aspects of the gulf are dharma-based
and what aspects are cultural. If one is somewhat dizzyed by the dif-
culties of these prospects, one need only return to the roots of Bud-
hist teachings. They instruct us to leave behind our ego-attachments
in our dealings with others, whether monastic or layperson. Respect for
the Buddha nature within every one should be unconditional. If one can
respect everyone on this level, no other consideration of respect should
be necessary. If one is not yet at that level, then people should be re-
spected for their commitments, their practice, and their good intentions
and good qualities.

In addition, laypeople should remember that the Sangha, the com-
menity of fully ordained monks (bhikshu) and nuns (bhikshuni), is a field
of merit. That is, supporting the Sangha with good deeds and dona-
tions is an important method of creating merit (i.e., blessings, good
karma) for laypeople. The Buddha explained,

The Sangha of the Blessed One’s disciples is practicing the true
way, practicing the proper way...; this Sangha of the Blessed
One’s disciples is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy
of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, the unsurpassed
field of merit for the world.4

The Sangha as a field of merit refers to the bhikshus and
bhikshunis, who have received and uphold the moral prohibitions
and are learned and wise; they, like the wish-granting trees in the
heavens, are able to succor living beings. Moreover, meeting the
Sangha is like, when one is parched with thirst and in need of
In order to bridge the gulf between laypeople and monastics, laypeople should be aware of the benefit of the Sangha to the world, to their communities, and to themselves. They should want to nourish and support those who have committed themselves full-time to the enlightenment of both themselves and others. They should want to protect the institutions that are the foundations of the monastic life, so that its aims and lifestyles can flourish.

In order to bridge the gulf between monastics and laypeople, monastics should realize that they and their communities are dependent on the lay community for the essentials of daily life. The Buddha instructed:

Monks, householders are very helpful to you, as they provide you with the requisites of robes, almsfood, lodgings, and medicine. And you, monks, are very helpful to householders, as you teach them the Dhamma admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, and admirable in the end, as you expound the holy life both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely complete, surpassingly pure. In this way the holy life is lived in mutual dependence, for the purpose of crossing over the flood, for making a right end to suffering and stress.

Thus the bridge across the gulf between the two communities, lay and monastic, is the interdependency of mutual aid. And that interdependency should be cherished and strengthened by a flow of loving compassion in both directions.

1 This essay is based on a talk given at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in April, 2002.
2 Vajra (Diamond) Sutra.
3 The Long Discourses of the Buddha, p. 99.
4 The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, p. 119.
5 Six Pāramitās Sutra, [T869a27-869b04].
6 Itivuttaka: This Was Said by the Buddha, 107.