

The Challenge to the Sangha in the 21st Century

By Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi

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The Sangha – the order of fully ordained monks and nuns – is the visible representation of the Buddha in the world; for twenty-five centuries, it has sustained the continuity of the Dharma among humankind; by its procedures of ordination and transmission it ensures that the Buddha's legacy remains alive. The presence of the Triple Gem thus depends upon the Sangha, which symbolizes the Third Gem, the ariyan Sangha or community of noble sages who have realized the ultimate, world-transcending truth. The Sangha has survived for some 2500 years: that's longer than the Roman Empire, longer than all the dynasties of the Chinese emperors, longer than the British Empire. And it has survived without weapons, without financial resources, without armies, merely through the power of wisdom and virtue. However, there is no guarantee that it will continue to survive or that it will continue to make vital and important contributions to human life. This is a task that depends on the members of the Sangha themselves, on each new generation of monks and nuns, and this is an extremely important task, because the future of Buddhism depends on the future of the Sangha.

As we know, the Sangha has always existed in close interaction with the Buddhist lay community. The relationship between the two is one of interdependence and collaboration. In traditional Buddhism, the laity provides the members of the Sangha with their material requisites – robes, food, dwellings, medicines, and other material supports – while the

Sangha provides the lay community with teachings and with examples of those who lead lives fully dedicated to the Dharma. For the Sangha to continue, this relationship must be maintained in some form, but the changes taking place in society may well place this relationship on a new footing.

The most weighty factor affecting the Sangha-laity relationship has been the transition, first, from a traditional social order to a modern social order, and then to a technological social order. Now the distinctive mark of this change is the shift from an emphasis on industrial production to the acquisition and distribution of information. This shift has already taken place throughout the West and in the most advanced social strata in all countries around the world. It is sometimes characterized by saying that we are moving from the Industrial Era to the Information Era, from a production-based civilization to a knowledge-based civilization. The transition to an “information-intensive” society will alter the nature of the Sangha-laity relationship in radical ways, and these will challenge the Sangha to come forth with novel solutions to preserve the relevance

(continued on page 2)

PLEASE NOTE:

- Bodhi Monastery will be closed to the public from July 1st through July 7th for the Dharma Retreat.
- Note that on July 8th, the Saturday after the Dharma Retreat, there will be no formal discourses.

The Challenge (*continued from page 1*)

of the Dharma. I make no claim to be a prophet, and I can't foretell the future in detail, but judging from present trends, I will try to sketch some of the more important challenges facing the Sangha as I see them.

1. The role of higher education. In the Information Era, a high percentage of a country's population has acquired a university education. People have access to much greater stores of knowledge and information

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than they ever had in the past, and their understanding of mundane realities, and even of Buddhism, is much more sophisticated than in previous epochs. They will expect the Dharma to measure up to the standards they have acquired through their academic training and won't simply accept the teachings presented by monastic teachers out of reverence and unquestioning trust in an age-old tradition. They have been trained to question and inquire, and they will apply the same approach when they come to the study of Buddhism. Hence the monks and nuns have to be ready to answer questions. They can't expect to receive humble deference from the laity; they have to earn respect by clearly explaining the Dharma, and by explaining it accurately and convincingly. The monks and nuns themselves

will need to have received higher education, primarily in Buddhism but also in subjects indirectly related to the Dharma, such as modern philosophy and psychology and other relevant areas. Exactly how to integrate such mundane knowledge into a monastic curriculum is a difficult issue; the solution would have to be worked out by those responsible for monastic education.

2. The role of publishing. Closely related to the opportunities for higher education among the laity is the role of publishing. The use of writing transformed Buddhism sometime around the second century B.C.; and so beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, the printing press and commercial publication have transformed Buddhism. There are now hundreds of books available in English on all aspects of Buddhism, both popular and scholarly, and many books are available in other languages. Thus any diligent student of the Dharma can acquire an extensive knowledge of Buddhism based on books. The micro-computer has further revolutionized Buddhist Studies. Any diligent person with a notebook computer can store an entire Buddhist library, including several Tripitakas, on his or her hard disk. Through the internet they can access vast resources on Buddhism and engage in discussion groups on virtually every topic related to Buddhism. Thus book knowledge of the Dharma isn't a special privilege of monks, and for a knowledge of Buddhist scriptures and commentaries one is no longer dependent on the monastery, as one would have been in a traditional Buddhist culture. Buddhist Studies is also offered as a subject in universities and there are many outstanding lay scholars who are doing research in highly specialized areas of Buddhist Studies.

For us, this raises the question what we as monks will have to offer. I would say that our task will not be to compete with lay Buddhist scholars. We should certainly seek to acquire scholarly knowledge of Buddhism, from as many reliable sources as possible, and we should learn from lay scholars when necessary. But what the Buddhist monastic life offers is an opportunity to put Buddhism into practice; it gives the opportunity to combine study of the texts with the living application of their principles in a life based on faith, devotion, and commitment to the Triple Gem. We have to unite scholarly knowledge with practice, intellectual understanding with faith and commitment. We cannot settle for mere knowledge without practice; nor can we have blind practice without clear intellectual understanding.

3. Shifting populations. With higher education, more and more people migrate from the countryside to the cities, and we thus see the cities expand, both outwards and upwards. Urban life brings increased

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stress and tension, so people will need the Dharma even more urgently than in the past, just as a sick man needs medicine more urgently than a healthy man. It is therefore essential that the Sangha can offer teachings that help people deal with the problems of everyday life, and deal with them in a clear, realistic way, based on realistic insights into human psychology and an understanding of the true facts of existence. But I also want to make it clear that we must not dilute or revise the Dharma to make it more "digestible" for people. We should adapt the Dharma to the dispositions and capacities for understanding of the people of today, emphasizing those aspects that resonate with their immediate experience. This will generate trust in those aspects of the Dharma that go beyond an ordinary person's experience. Once this trust is generated, we should be ready to lead people to ever deeper levels of understanding.

4. The role of mental training. The Dharma will convince people not only by its intellectual appeal, not only by its practical ethics, *but particularly by its system of mental cultivation*. This is what distinguishes Buddhism from virtually all other religious systems: its emphasis on the central role of the mind in determining our happiness or suffering, and the practical methods it offers for training the mind. So a very important "door of entrance" to the Dharma for many people is the practice of meditation. This is the special "door" for those who come from non-Buddhist backgrounds, as has been particularly the case in the West. But meditation has also been a "door" for traditional Buddhists who approach the Dharma from scientific backgrounds and bring along skeptical, inquisitive minds. I don't think meditation alone is the answer, and in this respect I am critical of those teachers in the West who want to extract meditation from Buddhism, rejecting Buddhist doctrine and religious faith. I think a balanced approach is necessary: a triple balance between faith-and-devotion, the study of Buddhist teachings, and the practice of meditation. Faith transforms the emotions, study brings right view, and meditation brings tranquility and insight. Many people today are first attracted to the Dharma through meditation. Once they gain concrete benefits through meditation, their interest in the Dharma will be awakened and then they can be gradually led to an understanding of Buddhist doctrine, to the study of Buddhist texts, and then to faith, devotion, and even the monastic life.

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5. The Sangha as offering challenges. I've spoken about some of the ways the Sangha should meet the challenge of the new century. But one additional point I want to make is that the Sangha's crucial mission *is not only to meet challenges but to offer challenges*. The Sangha must stand up to the modern age and present its own challenges. The modern world is being spun around in circles by the blind pursuit of sensual pleasures; the Sangha is a community of men and women who have devoted their lives to the renunciation of sensual pleasures. By their peaceful manner and inner happiness, the monks and nuns *challenge others* to see that the way to happiness lies in mastery of sensual desires, not in their indulgence. The modern world is based on the conviction that happiness is to be won by wealth and power; the Sangha is founded on the conviction that happiness is to be won through simplicity, voluntary poverty, and inner development. In this way, monks and nuns *challenge others* to see that happiness lies in simplifying their lives, in reducing their craving for wealth and power; they present them with the powerful challenge of turning inwards to find true happiness and peace. The modern world seeks endlessly for satisfaction in technological innovations, always assuming that new things are better things. The Sangha seeks to preserve and honor ancient traditions, and to live without being encumbered by an excessive number of conveniences. In this way, the Sangha *challenges others* to adopt a frugal lifestyle, to respect what is ancient, to honor and revere the natural environment. In the modern world violence is exploding between people of different ethnic and religious groups, who are convinced they can solve their problems by the use of force. The Sangha is based on the principle of non-violence,

(continued on page 4)

The Challenge (*continued from page 3*)

on the conviction that patience, discussion, and compromise is essential to harmony between human beings. Thus the Sangha *challenges people* to solve their problems through mutual understanding, tolerance, and loving-kindness. By upholding the world-transcending Dharma, the Sangha *challenges all our attempts to settle down* and find a comfortable place in the world; it challenges people to understand that the supreme wisdom, our ultimate freedom, lies beyond the boundaries of the world.

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6. A voice of conscience. This leads me to speak about one other major challenge facing the Sangha in today's world. Today vast, terrible problems are crushing the lives of millions of people and threatening untold harm to countless others. I have in mind such problems as raging ethnic conflicts and destructive wars that take dreadful death tolls among innocent civilians, including women and children. I think of oppressive governments that imprison their citizens without just cause, torture and torment them, and hold even the free citizens in a constant state of fear. I think of the gap between the rich and the poor, and between the rich nations and the poor nations. I think of the ravenous illnesses that claim millions of lives among poor people around the world, illnesses that could be easily eliminated at minimal costs. I think of the degradation faced by millions of women forced into lives of prostitution, often by their own families, on account of their poverty. I think of the hundreds of billions of dollars squandered each year, all around the world, on weapons of enormously destructive power, while perhaps half the people in the world barely obtain enough nutritious food to sustain them each day. And finally I think of the reckless ways in which we are degrading our environment – our air, our water, our soil, our food – without any concern for future generations. In my view, it is a task for the Sangha to serve as the voice of Buddhist conscience in the world. That is, the Sangha – at least its most prominent members – should be capable of giving expression to Buddhist ethical values in dealing with these vast, overwhelming problems that confront humanity today.

We cannot just enjoy our good fortune in being able to live the monastic life in comfort. We must become the voice of great compassion for suffering humanity, for those billions of people voiceless and helpless against the cruel, powerful forces that are victimizing so many human lives, and so many other forms of life, all over this planet. We must speak the truth before it is too late, before human greed, hatred, and delusion destroy all life on earth. Without being swept away by the passions of partisan politics, we must challenge injustice with justice, falsity with truth, cruelty with compassion, and ignorance with understanding. This may well turn out to be the greatest challenge facing the Sangha in the twenty-first century.

*(Condensed version of a talk given to the monks at Fuyen Buddhist Institute,
Hsinchu, Taiwan, March 2002)*

JULY/AUGUST 2006 NEWS BRIEFS

BODHI BULLETIN

Our Teachers Return

A little past midnight on May 26th Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi returned to Bodhi Monastery after three and a half months abroad. He spent two and a half months in Taiwan, where he gave teachings at Xiang-guang Monastery, Chia Yi, and its branches in Taipei and Kaohsiung; Fuyen Buddhist Institute and Fayuan Monastery, Hsinchu; Dharma Drum Mountain University; and Nanlin Bhikshuni Ashram, Yuchih. He was in Sri Lanka for almost three weeks, where he gave teachings in Kandy

and Colombo. While in Sri Lanka, he received an honorary title from Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa for his many years' service in promoting and propagating Theravada Buddhism. A small group from Bodhi Monastery visited Sri Lanka at this time and toured the sacred Buddhist sites of this ancient island.

On June 5th Master Jen-chun, accompanied by Ven. Guo-ching, returned from his visit to Asia. Shifu had gone to attend the World Buddhist Forum in China, held from

April 13th to 17th, where he presented a speech (the text appeared as the cover essay of the May/June Bulletin). Soon after the forum, Shifu contracted pneumonia and had to cancel much of his lecture tour. He then went to Taiwan to convalesce and was well looked after at the Tzuchi Hospital in Hua-lien. We are happy he has made a full recovery and is now back at Bodhi Monastery, in good health and good spirits.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 12TH:

Ullambana Day – Expressing Gratitude to Our Parents

For the first time Bodhi Monastery will celebrate Ullambana with a special program. The Ullambana celebration emphasizes respect and love for parents. It signifies the importance of performing "good deeds" to accumulate spiritual merit and sharing them with one's departed relatives, especially one's parents and grandparents, to help them emerge from suffering and obtain rebirth in happy realms.

The Ullambana Sutra, a Mahayana sutra, consists of a brief discourse by the Buddha to the monk Moggallana on the practice of filial piety. The

Buddha taught Moggallana that he could rescue his mother from a miserable rebirth by making offerings to the Sangha and then dedicating the merit to her.

So on Ullambana, please bring basic requisites (not monetary gifts) to offer to the Sangha. These can include daily toiletry items like: soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, mouth-wash; canned or packaged foodstuffs (nuts, dried fruit such as raisins, oatmeal, dried beans such as lentils and garbanzo, noodles, brown rice).

We will hold a devotional service

from 9:50 to 10:20. This will be followed by a formal offering of the items to the Sangha, then a dedication of the merits to one's parents and grandparents of seven generations. One of the monks will then give a short discourse on the value of sharing merits with one's parents.

We encourage everyone to bring your parents and children on this day so that we can express our filial gratitude together, but please come and participate without your family as well.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 19TH: One-day Meditation Retreat

The retreat will begin at 8:30 a.m. and end at 5:30 p.m. Participants must attend the entire retreat from start to finish. The main subject of practice will be mindfulness of breathing. There will be periods of sitting meditation alternating with walking meditation throughout the

day. Retreatants are welcome to stay over at the monastery on the Friday evening prior to the retreat. We will provide more details and registration information in mid-July by e-mail and on our website.

We also hope that some people will offer to help do tasks to sup-

port this meditation retreat. The required tasks will be posted in a future e-mail. Please consider "taking your turn" and helping in some way with this retreat so that we can keep the Bodhi Monastery meditation program going.

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JULY/AUGUST 2006 NEWS BRIEFS *(continued from front)*

Special Announcements:

Venerable Dhammadipa to Visit and Give Lectures in August

Ven. Dhammadipa (Xing-kong) will be visiting Bodhi Monastery from August 3rd through 10th. Ven. Dhammadipa was born in Czechoslovakia and has been a monk for 18 years. During his stay he will give two lectures; the Saturday afternoon lecture on August 5th at 12:40 p.m. and a lecture on Tuesday evening, August 8th at 8:00 pm. Topics will be announced.

Six-Week Introduction to Buddhism Course in September

We will be conducting a six-week course entitled "An Introduction to Buddhism and Meditation," on six consecutive Saturday mornings, September 9th through October 14th, from 9:00 – 11:00 am. This course is designed for those relatively unfamiliar with Buddhism who wish to know more about it. More information and how to register will be provided in a future e-mail notice.

Tuesday Evening Dharma:

Study of Majjhima Nikaya

Tuesdays, 7:00 - 8:15 pm (English)

While Bhante's Tuesday evening sutta study class is on hiatus, we are running a study group for the students being facilitated by two of our classmates, Janet and Peter Rabinowitz. Bhante will resume his class on September 5th with discourses on the Chachaka Sutta (MN 148). Newcomers are welcome to attend.

Saturday Dharma:

Morning Study Groups

Saturdays, 9:50 - 10:40 am

English Group: Ven. Xin-xing and Ven. Bodhi are facilitating a discussion of the *Dhammapada*, widely considered the most succinct expression of the Buddha's teaching found in Pali.

Chinese Group: Our nuns, Ven. Jian-dao and Ven. Jian-xun, had been doing an excellent job with this group and their efforts were much appreciated. Now Shifu has resumed, continuing with the study of the history of Indian Buddhism, based on Master Yin-shun's work, *Yindu Fojiao Sixiangshi*.

Afternoon Dharma Talks

On alternate Saturday afternoons, 12:40-1:30 pm, Bhante continues his Dharma talks based on the *Suttanipata*, while Ven. Xin-xing lectures topics taken from Ven. Yin-shun's *The Way to Buddhahood*. Every Saturday now, Ven. Jen-chun is again giving Dharma talks in Chinese, with English translation by Ven. Xin-xing, from 1:45 to 2:30 p.m.

Bodhi Youth Program

Saturdays, July 29th and August 26th, 9:50 - 11:00 am

This class for kids ages 9 - 13 years old is taught by William Bertolotti. For more information contact William at 516.314.0306 or by email, wiliambertolotti@yahoo.com.

JULY/AUGUST DHARMA SCHEDULE

SATURDAYS:

9:50 - 10:40 am	Study Groups in English & Chinese
10:50 - 11:10 pm	Devotional Service
11:15 - 12:15 pm	Lunch and cleanup
12:40 - 1:30 pm	Dharma Talk by Ven. Bodhi, Ven. Xin-xing, or guest lecturer (English)
1:45 - 2:30 pm	Dharma Talk by Ven. Jen-chun (Chinese with English translation)
2:45 - 4:45 pm	Pali class

SUNDAYS:

9:30 - 10:45 am	Meditation Group guided by resident monks
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FIRST SUNDAY OF EACH MONTH:

9:00 - 9:30 am	Beginners instruction in meditation
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TUESDAYS:

7:00 - 8:15 pm	Sutta Study Class with Ven. Bodhi (Class starts on Sept. 5th)
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DAILY:

4:30 - 5:00 pm	Chanting Liturgy
5:05 - 6:00 pm	Sitting meditation

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