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Tradition and Adaptation: Discussion

Roger J. Corless, Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Rev. Kusala, Jack Milan, Scott Rains, Judith Simmer-Brown, Garth M. Stanton, Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Ven. Yifa

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Patrick Henry: Thank you Columba. I especially appreciate your alerting us to the antiphonal character of the Rule itself, that the Rule is in some senses not consistent and that is one of its most glorious features, that there is life within those differences. Thank you very much for that.

David Steindl-Rast: Thank you Father Columba for this very interesting talk. It might be interesting to know that Victor Turner at Cornell has made a very good case that St. Benedict's making the abbot subject to the Rule had an enormous influence on the development of constitutional monarchy and eventually as the next step to the democracy of modern times. I don't know whether he has written about it, but he comes occasionally to the monastery and gives his talks so it's probably somewhere in his writings too.

Ven. Heng Sure: I haven't thought long and hard about, this so these remarks might be a bit disjointed but certainly apropos Brother David's comment. In terms of succession, Buddhism has been in Asia for 2500 years, and has now been in the West officially for 100 plus. We pretty much document that the first Buddhist community was the Jodo Shinshu coming to San Francisco 101 years ago, establishing the Buddhist Church of America. The San Francisco branch celebrated their centennial last year. That's kind of the beginning. So one century of something identifiably Buddhist here in this country. So we don't have precedence to look to figure out how the transmission happens from

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Patrick Henry, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

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the pioneer pilgrims who bring the Dharma here to the West and their indigenous Dharma heirs who will carry on. We have Tibetan monks who've come, Naropa is an example. We have Suzuki Roshi establishing the Zen Center and monks in Los Angeles and other places in California.

So the question is, with our bone-deep, one man, one woman, one vote, democratic independent spirit here in the West—"I have an opinion about that. Let me tell you what I think about that."—and the Asian tradition which is much different, there's a clan orientation. You look to the elder to speak for all those surnamed Wong or Lee. And it's not for sure that I have an opinion as an individual, much less do I want you all to know what I think about that issue. So the question is, that's fine in a secular or in a mundane context, but how about when it comes to matters of wisdom? There is definitely a difference in someone who has cultivated their nature by following the Rule, developing samadhi and opening insight. That person who has wisdom is qualitatively and quantitatively different in a religious community, and traditionally those were the folks who would be named to lead the monastery in an Asian tradition—the one who was enlightened, or had this special quality of wisdom was the one chosen. That was usually the standard.

My question is, and this is how I sum this up and I want to toss it out and open it up maybe: How do you identify wisdom in a culture where Buddhism is so new we haven't had a sage with blue eyes and you know, a Texas accent [laughter], or Boston? Traditionally the Dharma was transmitted from sage to sage, one who knew, recognized the new one, who knew and passed on the Dharma, and often that was an illiterate peasant from the south, the Sixth Patriarch for instance. How is that going to jump now, in a culture where my vote is as good as the next person's? Is there going to be some adaptation of paradigm of whose got the wisdom, who's a vessel of the Dharma, who is one who can carry the Dharma? So that's a major issue and I think we may have to wait a couple of decades to find the answer to that.

Yifa: I'd like to follow Ven. Heng Sure. I remember when the Buddha was dying and his disciple Ananda asked him, "Who will be your successor?" And the Buddha answered, "I have no successor. The Dharma will be my successor." And now, even though in history



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Buddhism do have patriarchs, I think if you go back to the early Buddhist teaching, it's the Dharma which is the successor. Now here, I think we should rather focus on the education of monastics as a whole community. I think I'll try to wrap up today what was said last night. There were certain issues. For example, people were talking about lay people searching for spirituality and my young dyad partner asked me, "How about education for monastics?" Then this gentleman was talking about practicing God and the Dharma in our daily life. And now I want to somehow wrap up those issues and bring everybody to focus on the education of monastics or the education for young monastics.

I think that nowadays in our monastic tradition, including Buddhism, we find the monastic community is aging. That means that we face the problem of bringing more young people to the monastery. I think there are many reasons for this, but one is that, traditionally, we think that after we step into the monastery we are isolated from society and that monastics tend to be naïve about the world or maybe less educated. That has also happened in the Buddhist community and it's something we are facing. So when I talk about practice, either God or the Dharma in our everyday lives, I believe that spirituality is not just something you find in the monastery, the temple, or the church, but in the secular world.

I think monastics also need to realize that practicing Dharma or the message of God is not just something you do in the monastery, but you can find it in the society. I remember the Christian saying, "We are in the world but not of the world." In my monastery, right now, we have 1500 monks and nuns, and 1200 are nuns and 300 are monks and the average age of those monks and nuns is 35. I'm 42 years old but I'm considered a senior in our monastery. The reason is because the temple advocates "humanistic Buddhism." The idea is to bring Buddhist values into your daily life and not be isolated from society but work in society with a so-called transcendental spirit. It is kind of similar to "you are in the world but not of the world." This is attractive to people like me. I'm still very career-oriented, but I'm also searching for the spiritual. I think lay people have a career but you are also looking for the spiritual. I think monastics are looking for the spiritual but also want to care about the whole world. That's why, rather than emphasizing on the leadership, I think it's very important to emphasize the whole education of the community and advocate the real message

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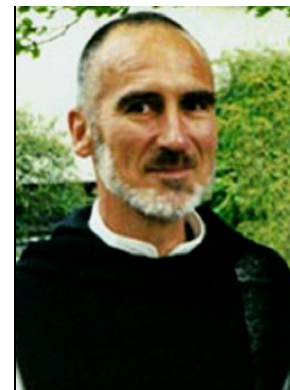
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of God or the Dharma. That's what I kind of want to bring to this subject. Thank you.

Rev. Kusala: It's been my experience that many Buddhist centers and temples were started by some very special, very charismatic people who gathered some very important people around them to practice. And when they died, often times there wasn't a mechanism in place to assign the abbotship. At the center where I live, when our founder died, there was a struggle and lawyers, and you just go, "Wow!" And property was split up. Sometimes, even if there is something in place, it doesn't work. So I think it's a problem with the way a lot of the Buddhist centers are set up because it's very individual center and very special. I don't know what the answer is. I asked our abbess, when she dies, "Who's going to pick your successor?" And she said, the board of directors. So, we'll see how that works.

Patrick Henry: It does seem to me that this is a point at which Buddhists could turn to Benedictines for a good deal of the wisdom of the sort that Columba was talking about. It may be that the transmission of authority, as in the Rule, depends so much on a particular theological understanding that it would not be easily translatable into Buddhist practice. But, on the other hand, what Columba has shown is that the Rule is one option among many in a whole theological framework. You can have the Rule of the Master, which comes from a certain idea of divine hierarchy and then you can have Benedict's Rule which is a very different one. And I think it may be even if in the Benedictine scheme, there is not something that can be simply transported over into the Buddhist scheme, there may be in that debate and discussion, within those first few centuries of Christian monasticism, some guidance for the way to carry on that discussion. I'm going to give Judith a sort of prerogative here to speak because she wrote a lot about this in the book.

Judith Simmer-Brown: Actually, this brings a complex set of issues that reminds me of something I learned many years ago in graduate school that has been extremely helpful for me in my practice of Buddhism in America. In scholarly circles, there are four criteria to decide whether a Buddhist tradition is going to survive in a new country. If these four things are not in place, then the chances of the tradition dying out are very strong. Monasticism is definitely one of



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them. The first one is: Is there a genuinely established monastic community with the indigenous peoples of a new country, or are the monasteries just foreigners? Do you have North Americans practicing in monasteries? Is the monastic life supported and healthy and with an education in place and all of that? The second one was: Are there indigenous Dharma heirs who have been recognized by the missionaries, who are the foreign teachers, who have received mind transmission and have received the full transmission necessary in order for the lineage to continue? The third one is: Are the texts of the tradition translated into the new indigenous language? Is there sufficient ability for the tradition to have those things? And the fourth one is: Is there sufficient patronage and financial support in the new country or is it all fostered from overseas?

These are things I learned in my first years of Buddhist practice and in my many years in Buddhist community I have paid attention to this and it has been of great concern to me. But it seems perfectly natural that in this period of development of Buddhism in North America that we have issues in each of these areas. And I know for myself and for people in my community, these are the areas where we try to put our attention, because I think the rockiness of Dharma transmission to indigenous Dharma heirs in this culture is a huge issue, in some lineages more than others. But without this, if this doesn't get well established before the death of this generation of Buddhist practitioners, then it's not going to continue in this country. It will just die out as a fad. Or in each of these areas. I do think that each of these are important. Monasticism is very important, but without the other things in place, there are no lay communities to support the monasteries. So all of these are extremely important.

There is one other point I want to make. Earlier, I was discussing with someone that we have the phenomenon in North American Buddhism that we have large lay communities and small monasteries, because we are not really equipped yet to financially support monasteries from North American finances to the level that they should be at. So, many of the teachers that I know discourage people who might be interested in the monastic path unless they have a very deep sense of vocation. Because it's very difficult to practice monasticism without a monastic community to be in. And so we have a lot of people who would love to be monks or nuns who are sort of held back from it because of how

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difficult it is to practice in that way, and a huge lay community. Perhaps in 15, 25, or 50 years we'll have a strong monastic community. It's so interesting that the more I learn about Benedictine monasticism, that sense of a shrinking monastic community and a larger lay community, it's a fascinating flow and it seems that there could be some kind of support back and forth about how we work with these disparate situations.

Patrick Henry: Judith, could I just put one question to that? In terms of Rev. Heng Sure's remarks, would you say that for now, given the traditions of Buddhism and given the state of monasticism in this country, it is implausible that anything like the Benedictine transmission of leadership, in which the community, on the death or retirement of an abbot comes together and discerns itself what it needs for the next stage of its life and then you identify that person as the one who will be your Dharma teacher in a sense, will happen. Do you think, in some generations down the line, that might happen.

Judith Simmer-Brown: There are different traditions of transmission or succession in Buddhism, and monastic succession is different from Dharma teacher succession. In Buddhism, the way Dharma teachers are chosen outside of the monastic setting is by Dharma transmission from a certified Dharma heir from a previous generation passing that on. There are some lineages of American Buddhism where that's happening more smoothly than others. In the Tibetan tradition, it's been most difficult. It has been very conservative. In the Tibetan tradition, there is a lot of concern about whether to pass the Dharma heir situation on to a Western person and a lot of concern about that for lots of different reasons. In other American traditions, it's been an easier process. But until that is settled, there is a serious question about whether we really will have an American Buddhism in each of these different traditions.

Jack Milan: Thanks. Just a follow up question, Judith. I wonder if you would just elaborate a little bit on why it's difficult for those men and women interested in monastic life to pursue that?

Judith Simmer-Brown: I think I should be only one of those people to answer that question since I am not a monastic person. A fully supported monastic life requires a fair amount of lay support. In some

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communities, that has been more successful than others. But the fundamental thing is that with a relatively young community of lay practitioners, who are taking as much time off from their jobs to practice and raise their families in the Buddhist tradition....I'm from a Western lay community that is relatively well developed. There are probably six or seven thousand members in my international community and a very small monastic community. Those who take monastic vows have a choice of going to Asia and living in a monastery or living in a monastery in the West. But our monasteries are underfunded and can only handle so many people, and so people have the choice of also living outside the monastery. It's extremely difficult to follow the monastic way living in a lay community. We have Naropa students, we have several monastic scholarships at Naropa and try to support monastic people to be students at our university. But it's difficult to live in that kind of setting, financially because of keeping the vow, but also just the whole sense of what it means to be a monastic person in a society where there is not a lot of support for that, as everyone here knows, that's why we're here. It's so important to develop healthy monastic communities and we are not quite where we really need to be in terms of the people who really have a vocation for Buddhist monasticism. So some of them are drawn to becoming Christian monastics because they would really like to follow the monastic life.

Judith Miller: I'll ask this question of you just because you answered the other one. Could you envision, over some years, co-locating Buddhist and Christian monasteries in a common physical place? Because Christian monasteries have lots of space [laughter], or growing space and fewer people.

Roger Corless: Just to very quickly remark, I proposed this years ago. As a matter of fact, I'll tell a story on myself. When I was about 18 or something, I went to my first Christian monastery. I was in the Church of England at that time and I went to Nashtum, which is relocated, but it's a Benedictine place. At first I was quite shocked by everything because people were doing all of the bowing and I had been brought up as a Protestant. I thought it was all idolatry and pagan, but then I felt I was part of it quite quickly, maybe a previous life or something. So then, by the end of the second day, I went to the guest master and said I felt called by God to establish a dual monastery of Buddhists and

Christians. He was very kind and listened to me, 18-years-old you know, and he said, "Well, why don't you finish your degree at the university first, and then give it another think?" [laughter] That was excellent advice, and so many years later, I published an article called "The Dialogue of Silence" , which was published in India so it's difficult to get a hold of. But it does propose how Buddhists and Christians could live together and then it has at the back a chart of the Rule of St. Benedict and the Partimoca, divided into topics to show that they are similar enough that you could live with each other but probably in different parts of the monastery. So, I would be happy to make a copy of this and give it to anybody who's interested. I don't know whether you can get a hold of it anymore, the book may be out of print. But it's an excellent idea and maybe its time has come, right?

Garth Stanton: Listening to the discussion, it seems to me that maybe underlying all this is the issue of mysticism, in that, Dharma transmission is a mystical process and mysticism in the Western tradition in the Church is not very well practiced or accepted. So, maybe we need to think a little bit more about fostering mysticism, not in an esoteric way, but to attract young people. Because that is really what people are looking for, I think. I think, as I remember, Karl Rahner said that in the coming age Christians will be mystics or nothing, and I think that applies to Buddhists, too.

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