

Lecture 153: A Wreath of Blue Lotus - Edited Version

Because there is really only one Going for Refuge, there can really only be one kind of 'ordination'. But ordination may take place in a number of ways. Historically speaking, as we can see from the Pali scriptures, it could take place when the Buddha, upon meeting and communicating with someone, saw that the person was ready to go for Refuge, ready to commit himself. On such an occasion, the Buddha would simply say, 'Come, O monk! (Ehi bhikkhava!) Lead the spiritual life (brahmachariya) for the destruction of suffering.' And the person was ordained. It could be as simple as that. Similarly, we find that ordination could take place when someone, deeply impressed by the Buddha's teaching, repeated the formula: 'To the Buddha for Refuge I go. To the Dhamma for Refuge I go. To the Sangha for Refuge I go,'-and the Buddha accepted that. Otherwise, the ordination could take place when the individual concerned was 'accepted' by an assembly of five or ten monks. However, the episode with which we shall be concerned here centres upon a rather unusual-in fact a quite unique-form of ordination.

At one time the Buddha was staying among the Shakyas of Kapilavastu in a park known as the Banyan Park. The Shakyans were the people among whom the Buddha was born, and among whom he grew up. Kapilavastu was their capital. After the Buddha's Enlightenment many Shakyans became his followers; in particular, many young Shakyan men left home and became 'monks' under his guidance. Among these was of course Ananda, the Buddha's constant companion in his later years.

While the Buddha was staying at Kapilavastu many people came to see him-including friends and relations he had known before. Among these came Mahaprajapati, the Buddha's maternal aunt and foster-mother. (The Buddha's own mother, Mayadevi, had died when he was only a few days old, and it was Mahaprajapati who had brought him up.)

On this occasion Mahaprajapati came with an unusual-even unprecedented-request. This was nothing less than that women should be permitted to go forth from home into the homeless life under the Dhamma Vinaya set forth by the Buddha. She wanted to be ordained.

The Buddha's response was a categorical refusal. There was no beating about the bush: he just said no. Three times Mahaprajapati made her request and three times the Buddha refused. In fact he asked her not even to wish for such a thing, and, in the end, she just had to go away unsatisfied. The translation of the Pali text tells us, moreover, that she went away 'sad, sorrowful, tearful, and wailing'.

The second half of the episode takes place some time later. We are not told exactly when it takes place, but it is clear that the Buddha has left Kapilavastu. He has been wandering from place to place and has now come to Vaisali and is staying in the Mahavana, the 'great grove', or 'great forest', at the 'Hall of the Peaked Gable'. Meanwhile, Mahaprajapati has not been idle. She has not accepted the Buddha's refusal to allow women to be ordained and proceeds to get her hair cut off, dons saffron robes, and sets off for Vaisali with a number of Shakyan women. She is clearly a very determined lady; she won't take no for an answer, even from the Buddha.

Eventually she arrives at the Hall of the Peaked Gable and takes her stand outside the porch. Her feet are of course swollen and dust begrimed after the long journey, and we are told that she is sad, sorrowful, weeping and wailing.

Sooner or later Ananda finds her. He knows her, of course, because he is also a kinsman of the Buddha and therefore her kinsman too. He asks her what she wants and why she is so upset, and she replies that she is upset because the Buddha will not permit women to Go Forth from home into the homeless life.

Ananda is a very sympathetic soul. He feels sorry for Mahaprajapati and does his best to help. He goes immediately to see the Buddha, saying that Mahaprajapati has come all the way from Kapilavastu and is now standing outside the porch weeping and wailing. He also suggests, out of the kindness of his heart, that the Buddha should grant her request.

But the Buddha refuses Ananda's request just as categorically as he had refused Mahaprajapati's, and asks him not to wish for any such thing. Three times Ananda makes his request, and three times the Buddha refuses. However, Ananda does not give up. After all, he knows the Buddha very well, and so argues with him, saying, 'Suppose women were to Go Forth from home into the homeless life under the Dhamma Vinaya set forth by the Tathagata, would they be capable of attaining the fruits of Stream Entry, or the Fruit of Once Returning, or the Fruit of Never Returning, or the Fruit of Arahantship?'

When the Buddha admits that women are so capable, Ananda seizes his opportunity. He reminds the Buddha that Mahaprajapati was of great service to the Buddha when he was an infant; on the death of his mother she actually suckled him. It would therefore be a good thing, he says, if women were permitted to Go Forth from home into the homeless life. The Buddha is unable to resist this argument, and grants Mahaprajapati's request.

He grants it, however, on certain conditions. He tells Ananda that if Mahaprajapati will undertake to keep eight important rules, then that will be reckoned as full ordination. The rules are as follows:

A sister, even if she be an hundred years in the robes, shall salute, shall rise up before, shall bow down before, shall perform all duties of respect unto a brother-even if that brother have only just taken the robes. Let this rule never be broken, but be honoured, esteemed, revered, and observed as long as life doth last.

Secondly, a sister shall not spend the rainy season in a district where there is no brother residing. Let this rule never be broken....

Thirdly, at the half month let a sister await two things from the Order of Brethren, namely the appointing of the Sabbath [this is the translator's rather strange word for the uposatha] and the coming of a brother to preach the sermon. Let this rule never be broken....

Fourthly, at the end of keeping the rainy season let a sister, in presence of both Orders, of Brethren and of Sisters, invite enquiry in respect of three things, namely, of things seen, heard, and suspected. Let this rule never be broken....

Fifthly, a sister guilty of serious wrong-doing shall do penance for the half-month to both Orders. Let this rule never be broken....

Sixthly, when a sister has passed two seasons in the practice of the Six Rules she may ask for full orders from both Orders. Let this rule never be broken....

Seventhly, a sister shall not in any case abuse or censure a brother. Let this rule never be broken....

Eighthly, henceforth is forbidden the right of a sister to have speech among brethren, but not forbidden is the speaking of brethren unto sisters. Let this rule never be broken, but be honoured, esteemed, revered, and observed as long as life doth last.<Vinaya Pitaka, ii, 10, quoted in Some Sayings of the Buddha, pp. 121-2>

On hearing this reply, Ananda goes to Mahaprajapati and tells her what the Buddha has said. This is her response:

'Just as, lord Ananda, a woman or a man, youthful, of tender age, fond of self-adornment, having washed the head and having gotten a wreath of blue lotus or of jasmine or of scented-creeper flowers, should take it with both hands and place it atop of the head,-even so do I, lord Ananda, take upon me these Eight Important Rules, never to be broken so long as life doth last.'<Ibid p.123>

Ananda now returns to the Buddha and tells him that Mahaprajapati has accepted the eight rules and is therefore now fully ordained.

This, then, is the episode with which we are concerned. This is our wreath of blue lotus. Clearly, it provides us with a good deal of material for reflection. I am going to concentrate on just one important part: the eight important rules. Why did they take the particular form that they did? And what are we to make of Mahaprajapati's response to them?

Before looking at the rules, however, we must briefly examine Mahaprajapati's behaviour after the Buddha's initial refusal. As we have seen, she gets her hair cut off, dons the saffron robes, and sets off for Vaisali with a number of Shakyan women. Finally, she stands outside the porch of the Hall of the Peaked Gable. In doing all this, she seems to be trying to force the Buddha's hand. We might even say that she is trying to present the Buddha with a *fait accompli*. After all, she has left home, shaved her head, and donned the saffron robes. She is in effect now a nun, so the Buddha might as well accept the situation, might as well permit her to do what she has in fact already done.

Now the fait accompli is a very interesting phenomenon. Essentially, a fait accompli consists in creating a situation in which the other person is, in effect, deprived of their power of choice or decision. I say in effect because they are not literally deprived of it; nevertheless, a situation is created in which they can exercise that power only at the cost of a great deal of trouble and even a great deal of unpleasantness. The fait accompli involves an element of what we may describe as emotional blackmail, and is thus a form of coercion. This of course means that it is a form of violence, and is hence completely out of place in the spiritual life. If you present someone with a fait accompli you are not treating them as an individual. But this is what Mahaprajapati did: she tried to force the Buddha's hand. Her desire to Go Forth was no doubt sincere but, in this connection, she did not treat the Buddha with very much respect.

We are also told that she stood outside the porch 'sad, sorrowful, weeping and wailing'. One can perhaps understand her being sad and sorrowful, but what about the weeping and wailing? It would seem that she was trying to get her way in a rather childish fashion. We can contrast this with Ananda's attitude. Ananda argued with the Buddha. He prepared his ground and gave reasons as to why women should be permitted to Go Forth-with the result that the Buddha was unable to resist his request; he was unable to resist reason, unable to resist argument.

This part of the episode is surely of some significance. The fait accompli in fact failed-as it always does in the long run. Emotional blackmail fails, attempted coercion fails. On the other hand, reason suffused with sympathy succeeds. Mahaprajapati herself failed to gain her point, but Ananda gained it for her.

It is now time that we moved on to the eight important rules themselves. Why did they take the particular form they did?

Perhaps the first thing that strikes us about them is that they are quite severe, even quite harsh. We cannot quite help feeling that the Buddha is perhaps being rather unfair towards Mahaprajapati-though he no doubt knew her better than we do. Indeed, the Buddha seems to be being quite unjust to women in general. The eight important rules would certainly make the blood of a modern feminist boil with rage, and they might even make some men a little uneasy. Let's go into the matter a little.

If we look at these rules, it is rather obvious that their main function is to subordinate the order of nuns to the order of monks, to make the bhikkhunis completely dependent on the bhikkhus. The bhikkhunis, the nuns, are to be kept in a state of perpetual pupilage. What could have been the reason for this?

One scholar has suggested that Mahaprajapati's request created an 'organizational problem' for the Buddha (it seems that even the Buddha had organizational problems!). By this time the order of monks had been in existence for about twenty years. Organizationally speaking, the Buddha was faced with three alternatives. He could admit women to the existing order of monks, thus creating a single unified order, he could create an entirely separate and independent order for women, or he could subordinate the order of nuns to the order of monks.

The first of these options was clearly out of the question. Both monks and nuns were expected to lead lives of celibacy and this would presumably have been rather difficult if they were living together as members of a single unified order. The second alternative was out of the question too. The Buddha could hardly be the head of two quite separate, independent, orders. In any case, he was-externally at least-a man, and a man could hardly be the head of an order of nuns. If it was really to be separate and independent, that order of nuns would have to be headed by a woman. That left only the third alternative, that of subordinating the order of nuns to the order of monks. This, according to the scholar, is the alternative that the Buddha adopted.

This explanation is certainly of interest. There may even be some truth in it. But it does not really suffice to explain the specific form in which the eight important rules were presented. Something more than organizational convenience seems to have been involved. Perhaps it would help if we tried to understand what it was that the rules were intended to prevent. To do this, however, we have to look at rules in general.

If we look at the Vinaya-Pitaka, or 'The Book of the Discipline', we find that it contains many rules, of many different kinds. There are rules for monks, and rules for nuns. According to the Theravada tradition, there are, altogether, two-hundred-and-twenty-seven rules for monks, and three-hundred-and-eleven rules for nuns. How did these rules come to be laid down?

It is certain that the Buddha did not draw them all up in advance. He did not sit down under his Bodhi tree and think, 'What sort of Sangha would I like to have? And what sort of rules should it observe? How

should it be constituted?' The Buddha laid down rules in response to unskilful behaviour on the part of a member, or members, of the Sangha. So long as there was no unskilful behaviour there were no rules; the Buddha was not interested in laying down rules for their own sake. He was interested simply in the moral and spiritual development of the individual, and laid down rules only when 'forced' to do so.

These eight important rules, however, were laid down in advance of any offence actually committed by Mahaprajapati. But the same principle does perhaps apply.

The effect of these rules is to subordinate the order of nuns to the order of monks. It is to make the bhikkhunis completely dependent, organizationally speaking, on the bhikkhus. So what kind of unskilful behaviour are the eight rules meant to prevent? To what kind of possible offences do they refer?

Clearly they are meant to prevent the nuns claiming equality with, or superiority over, monks. That is to say, they are meant to prevent women claiming equality with, or superiority over, men. In other words, we could say that they are meant to prevent an irruption of feminism into the order.

To say this does not mean that the Buddha did not believe in equal rights for women in the ordinary social sense. It does not mean that he did not believe that a woman could be spiritually superior to a man. After all, he had told Ananda quite categorically that women were capable of attaining the fruits of Stream Entry and so on, and, presumably, a woman who was a Stream Entrant was spiritually superior to a man who was still a worldlyling. So what the Buddha wanted to do, it seems, was to prevent women from Going Forth for the wrong reasons, that is, for social rather than for purely spiritual reasons.

There are indications that this sort of thing did sometimes happen afterwards, despite the Buddha's precautions. A woman might seek ordination because she wanted to be free from her husband, or because she was a widow and wanted to be more highly respected-which as a nun she would be-or because her parents were unable or unwilling to find her a husband. The same sort of thing can happen even in modern times.

I received my shramanera ordination from U Chandramani Mahathera at Kusinara. U Chandramani-fortunately for me-was very generous with his ordinations. Amongst others, he ordained a large number of women. He did not ordain them as shramaneras, since that was no longer possible, but as anagarikas. Eventually he ordained so many women that he was begged to stop by his bhikkhu disciples. The women whom he had ordained were mostly Nepalese and, as I knew from my personal contact with them, they wanted ordination mainly for social reasons. They wanted to enjoy the same rights as men, and saw ordination as a means of achieving this end. In most cases they were not really interested in the spiritual life at all.

This seems to have been the sort of situation that the Buddha wanted to prevent, and this is why he set forth the eight important rules. He was trying to make quite sure that Mahaprajapati wanted to Go Forth for purely spiritual reasons, that she really wanted to go for Refuge, really wanted to gain Enlightenment.

We can take things even further than this. We have seen that Mahaprajapati tried to present the Buddha with a fait accompli. And we have seen that she tried to get her own way in a rather childish fashion. In Mahaprajapati, there was a strong element of what William Blake called the 'Female Will'. In fact, from a certain point of view, she was almost an embodiment of that Female Will. The Buddha saw that before Mahaprajapati could truly Go Forth the Female Will had to annihilated-and the eight important rules were intended to do just that. At this point I should perhaps say a few words about what Blake meant by the Female Will.

According to Blake, in the 'unfallen Individual', reason and emotion, 'masculine' and 'feminine', are united. The feminine 'portion' of the fundamentally bisexual Individual is called the 'Emanation'. With the Fall of Man-to summarize rather rapidly-Reason and Emotion are divided: the Emanation is divided from the Individual and takes the Female form, and Man is left as what Blake calls a 'Dark Spectre'. Worse still, the Emanation acquires a will of her own and this 'Female Will' acts in opposition to her consort. As S. Foster Damon puts it, 'The Emanation's self-centred pride seeks dominion over the male. She is jealous of all his activities, and seeks to stop them by denying her husband his freedom.... She is even jealous of her husband's labours, which take his attention from her; so she prevents his working.' <S. Foster Damon, A Blake Dictionary, London 1979, p.121>

It is this kind of spirit, it seems, that the Buddha wanted to prevent from entering the Sangha, he wanted to curb the Female Will, and this is why he set forth the eight important rules.

How then does Mahaprajapati receive the rules? She says:

‘Just as, lord Ananda, a woman or a man, youthful, of tender age, fond of self-adornment, having washed the head and having gotten a wreath of blue lotus or of jasmine or of scented-creeper flowers, should take it with both hands and place it atop of the head,-even so do I, lord Ananda, take upon me these Eight Important Rules, never to be broken so long as life doth last.’

From these words it is clear that Mahaprajapati accepts the eight important rules in a completely positive spirit. She passes the test-if it is a test-and the Female Will is annihilated in her. She really did want to Go Forth, really did want to gain Enlightenment. And gain Enlightenment she eventually did.

In the Therigatha, or the ‘Verses of the Elder Nuns’, there are some very interesting verses attributed to Mahaprajapati after her attainment of Enlightenment:

‘(157)Buddha, Hero, homage to you, O best of all creatures, who released me and many other people from pain. (158)All pain is known; craving as the cause is dried up; the Noble Eightfold Way has been developed; cessation has been attained by me. (159)Formerly I was mother, son, father, brother, and grandmother; not having proper knowledge I journeyed on without expiation. (160)That blessed one has indeed been seen by me; this is the last body; journeying on from rebirth to rebirth has been completely eliminated; there is now no renewed existence. (161)I see the disciples all together putting forth energy, resolute, always with strong effort; this is homage to the Buddhas. (162)Truly for the sake of many Maya bore Gotama. She thrust away the mass of pain of those struck by sickness and death.’<The Elders’ Verses II (Therigatha), trans. K.R. Norman, Luzac & Co., London 1971, p.18>

The last verse but one is particularly beautiful. Mahaprajapati says, ‘I see the disciples all together putting forth energy, resolute, always with strong effort; this is homage to the Buddhas.’ We might say that this verse could serve as a motto for the entire Sangha-past, present, and future. We could also say that Mahaprajapati’s acceptance of the eight important rules and her attainment of Enlightenment are by no means unconnected. The eight important rules made sure that her Going Forth was sincere; they made sure that she really wanted to be ordained, really wanted to go for Refuge. They made sure that her motivation was not social but spiritual. The eight important rules are like a great blazing fire, a fire in which all the impurities in Mahaprajapati’s wish for ordination were burned up, were consumed, and from that fire Mahaprajapati emerged triumphant. To her, the eight important rules were not a crown of thorns but a ‘wreath of blue lotus’. They were not something to be endured, but something to be enjoyed. I am reminded in this connection of a passage in the Diamond Sutra:

‘Moreover, Subhuti, the spot of earth where this Sutra will be revealed, that spot of earth will be worthy of worship by the whole world with its Gods, men and Asuras, worthy of being saluted respectfully, worthy of being honoured by circumambulation,-like a shrine will be that spot of earth. And yet Subhuti, those sons and daughters of good family, who will take up these very Sutras, and will bear them in mind, recite and study them, they will be humbled,-well humbled will they be! And why? The impure deeds which these beings have done in their former lives, and which are liable to lead them into states of woe,-in this very life they will, by means of that humiliation, annul those impure deeds of their former lives, and they will reach the enlightenment of a Buddha.’<E. Conze, Buddhist Wisdom Books, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1958, p.56>

Before concluding, I would like to generalize a little from the episode with which we have been concerned. I have spoken of the Buddha wanting to be quite sure that Mahaprajapati wanted to Go Forth for purely spiritual reasons. But this should not be seen as applying only to Mahaprajapati, or even only to women. It applies to all who want to Go Forth, to all who want to go for Refuge, to all who want to be ordained.

It is important that one should want to do the right thing for the right reason. Indeed, in the sphere of spiritual life, the right thing is not the right thing unless one does it for the right reason. In principle, the eight important rules represent all those factors that prevent us from Going Forth until we are really ready to do so. To begin with, of course, we may experience those factors not as a wreath of blue lotus, but indeed as a crown of thorns. We may feel very ill-used, very hard done by; we may go around wearing a martyred look. We may even feel angry and resentful that we are not being ordained. But a time comes when we no longer experience the crown of thorns as a crown of thorns but as a wreath of blue lotus. We accept that we are not ready for ordination. Then, paradoxically, we find-or it is found-that we are ready.

At this point a question may arise. Must our desire for ordination be perfectly pure before we can be ordained? In the case of Mahaprajapati this seems to have been what the Buddha insisted upon-perfect purity of motive at least with regard to what Blake called the Female Will. In modern times, when life is

so much more complicated than it was in the Buddha's day, one might say that we cannot expect the desire for ordination always to be perfectly pure. But, at the same time, we can expect it to be so, in the sense that we must be prepared to put as much of our energy as we possibly can into the task of spiritual self-development, into the Going for Refuge. Not only that, we must be prepared to take active steps to put all our energies into it. If we can do that then we are ready to Go Forth, ready to go for Refuge.

There is one thing, however, that we must remember. So far as most people are concerned, the Going for Refuge is-to begin with-an 'effective' rather than a 'real' Going for Refuge.<The Going for Refuge is 'effective' when insight into, and commitment to, the spiritual path is sufficiently deep and sufficiently sincere to serve as a strong basis for continued striving. 'Real' Going for Refuge coincides with Stream Entry. From this Going for Refuge one cannot fall away. See Sangharakshita, Going for Refuge, Windhorse, Glasgow 1983> Inasmuch as it is only an effective Going for Refuge, we can fall away from it. It is therefore not only necessary to make sure that our desire for ordination is pure, but to make sure that we keep it pure. It is also necessary to make sure that our motive for being in the order remains pure after ordination. We do this by remaining aware and mindful, by remaining emotionally positive, by living and working under conditions which are conducive to our spiritual development, by keeping in close touch with our spiritual friends, and by coming together repeatedly and in large numbers. Otherwise, we may fall by the wayside.

There is just one more point to be made. The eight important rules ensured that Mahaprajapati's Going Forth was sincere. But Going for Refuge is an on-going process. It is not something that we do once and for all. Consequently we all need something like the eight important rules all the time, something that will make sure that our Going for Refuge really is a process that is constantly deepening.

This something is not so difficult to find. We can find it in the positive critical feedback of our spiritual friends-in what has been called 'fierce friendship'. If we are to continue to develop spiritually, if we are to continue to deepen our Going for Refuge, then we will need genuine criticism. I am not of course suggesting that we need nothing but criticism-that can be counterproductive: we also need encouragement, appreciation, and inspiration. But we shall upon occasion certainly need criticism too. We shall need criticism that comes from the heart, criticism that is based upon positive emotion, on metta, criticism that is concerned only with our welfare, only with our development.

When we are given that criticism, how shall we receive it? Hopefully we will receive it in the same spirit that Mahaprajapati received the eight important rules from the Buddha: not as a crown of thorns, sharp and uncomfortable, but as a wreath of blue lotus resting beautifully on the top of our heads.