Huiyuan: A Monk Does Not Bow Down Before a King

When an Indian entered the Buddhist clergy, he left his clan, his caste, and all his worldly possessions. As one standing outside of ordinary society, he from then on paid no outward signs of veneration to secular potentates. In China, too, early Buddhist clerics, though they knelt in their religious ceremonies, displayed no signs of respect to laymen in positions of authority, not even to the emperor.

At first this constituted no great problem, since only the most eminent monks were ever likely to meet the emperor, and these were usually foreigners who were not expected to follow full Chinese etiquette. When native Chinese came to constitute the majority of Buddhist clerics, however, the problem became more serious. The question was brought under discussion at court during the Eastern Jin period, but no settlement was reached until 404 C.E. At that time the high minister Huan Xuan (369–404), who had temporarily usurped the throne, referred the problem to one of the outstanding monks of the day, Huiyuan (334–417), for a recommendation. Huiyuan replied with a letter stating that, though Buddhist laymen, like other laymen, were obliged by the customary etiquette to acknowledge their loyalty and respect for their sovereign, the Buddhist clergy, who by the nature of their life and sins were far removed from ordinary men, could not be expected to go through the outward signs of obeisance. Huan Xuan accepted Huiyuan’s argument and decreed that monks need not bow before the emperor. Shortly after this, Huiyuan composed a treatise titled “A Monk Does Not Bow Down Before a King” (“Shamen bu jing wang zhe lun”), stating his argument in greater detail.

Buddhism in the Household

If one examines the broad essentials of the teachings of the Buddha, one will see that they distinguish between those who leave the household life and those who remain in it. . . . Those who revere the Buddhist laws but remain in their homes are subjects who are obedient to the transforming powers [of temporal rulers]. Their feelings have not changed from the customary, and their course of conduct conforms to the secular world. Therefore this way of life includes the affection of natural kinship and the proprieties of obedience to authority. Decorum and reverence have their basis herein, and thus they form the basis of the doctrine. That on which they are based has its merit in the past. Thus, on the basis of intimacy it teaches love and causes the people to appreciate natural kindness; on the basis of austerity it teaches veneration and causes the people to understand natural respect. . . . Thus obedience is made the common rule, and the natural way is not changed. . . .

Hence one may not benefit by [the ruler’s] virtue and neglect propriety, bask in his kindness and cast aside due respect. Therefore they who rejoice in the way of Sākya invariably first serve their parents and respect their lords. They who change their way of life and throw away their hair ornaments must always await [their parents’] command, then act accordingly. If their lords and parents have doubts, then they retire, inquire of their wishes, and wait until [the lords and parents] are enlightened. This, then, is how the teaching of Buddha honors life-giving and assists kingly transformation in the way of government.

Buddhism Outside the Household

This second part sets forth the core of Huiyuan’s argument as to why the monk should not make a display of respect for worldly potentates. The monk, so the argument goes, is not a disrespectful, much less an impious, person, but he stands completely outside of the framework of lay life; hence he should not abide by its regulations insofar as merely polite accomplishments are concerned.

He who has left the household life is a lodger beyond the earthly [secular] world, and his ways are cut off from those of other beings. The doctrine by which he lives enables him to understand that woes and impediments come from having a body, and that by not maintaining the body one terminates woe. . . .

If the termination of woe does not depend on the maintenance of the body,
then he does not treasure the benefits that foster life. This is something in which the principle runs counter to physical form and the Way is opposed to common practice. Such men as these commence the fulfillment of their vows with the putting away of ornaments of the head [shaving the head] and realize the achievement of their ideal with the changing of their garb. . . . Since they have changed their way of life, their garb and distinguishing marks cannot conform to the secular pattern. . . . After they reach to the ford of the Three Vehicles, broadly they open up the Way of Heaven and the human. If but one of them be allowed to fulfill his virtue, then the Way spreads to the six relations and beneficence flows out to the whole world. Although they do not occupy the positions of kings and princes, yet, fully in harmony with the imperial ultimate, they let the people be. Therefore, though inwardly they may run counter to the gravity of natural relationships, yet they do not violate filial piety; though outwardly they lack respect in serving the sovereign, yet they do not lose hold of reverence.

He Who Seeks the First Principle Is Not Obedient to Change

In general, those who reside within the limits [of ordinary existence] receive life from the Great Change. . . . Life is fettered by physical form, and life depends upon change. When there is change and the feelings react, then the spirit is barred from its source and the intellect is blinded to its own illumination. If one is thus shut up as in a hard shell, then what is preserved is only the self, and what is traversed is only the state of flux. Thereupon the bridle of the spirit loses its driver, and the road to rebirth is reopened daily. One pursues lust in the long stream of time; is one thus affected only once? Therefore he who returns to the source and seeks the First Principle does not encumber his spirit with life. He who breaks out of the grimy shell does not encumber his life with feelings. If one does not encumber one's spirit with life, then one's spirit can be made subtle. The subtle spirit transcending sense-objects—this is what is meant by nivāna. The name nivāna, can it possibly be an empty appellation? I beg leave to extend this argument and so to prove its truth. Heaven and Earth, though they are great because they give life to living beings, cannot cause a living being not to die. Kings and princes, though they have the power of preserving existence, cannot cause a preserved creature to be without woe. Therefore in our previous discussion we have said, "[He who has left the household life] understands that woes and impediments come from having a body

22. That is, postponing enlightenment in order to bring others closer to salvation, attaining enlightenment by personal exertions in an age in which there is no Buddha, and attaining enlightenment by hearing the Buddha's preaching. These three are associated with the bodhisattva, the pratýekabuddha, or "private buddha," and the pratyekabuddha, or "voice-hearer," respectively.