

Western Monks and Nuns: Taking Care of Our Own Reality

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Lama Yeshe gave advice to his 100 monks and nuns in Dharamsala, India in 1982, at the first Enlightened Experience Celebration. Nalanda, the first IMI monastery outside the East, was established in France later that year. Here is an excerpt.

We are very fortunate in that we are trying to live purely according to Lord Buddha's vinaya rules. Very rarely does anyone do this, and it should give us reason to be happy and proud to be among the few who do.

Before going on, I'd like to mention why I have called our FPMT Sangha organization the International Mahayana Institute. Some people have questioned my doing so, but the name has significance: our monks and nuns come from all over the world, so we are truly an international body; we follow the Mahayana Buddhist tradition; and since we are an educational phenomenon, I think it appropriate to designate this organization an institute.

Some people question the necessity of forming an organization. Why not simply go to the mountains and lead ascetic lives like Milarepa did? I can answer that with another question: without organization, how could we have held this Dharma festival? Even two people living together need to be organized. You can't reject organization; it is necessary in every aspect of life.

Also, I felt that, according to the vinaya rules, it was my responsibility to create this institute. Its members began by studying the lam-rim teachings. From this they gained an understanding of the nature of samsara and understood that the best way to practice Dharma was to develop renunciation. Based on this experience they were enthusiastic to be ordained and I gave them permission.

Now, it's very easy for me to ordain someone. "Blah, blah, blah," and it's all over in an hour. But ordaining someone is not simply a one hour job. Lord Buddha said that you have to take care of the Sangha you ordain. So I asked myself, "How can I take care of my Western Sangha?" I'm a simple Himalayan monk who has no worldly experience and has never even managed a Tibetan monastery. The most I ever did as a student was to serve and cook for my teacher. What were my qualifications for taking care of a hundred Western monks and nuns?

Thus, I came to the conclusion that if I were to create a Sangha community organization, its members would help each other. We need some security. When Westerners become Tibetan monks and nuns they become outcasts, accepted by neither Tibetan society nor the West. We voluntarily put ourselves into this situation; it is up to us to create our own new reality. Therefore, in 1974, I formed the International Mahayana Institute, with about twenty members. Since that time we have added about five or ten a year.

Originally we were based at Kopan Monastery, near Kathmandu, and were quite successful in studying philosophy, learning certain rituals and developing a unique monastic life. However, after some time, the Nepalese government changed the visa rules and it became too expensive for most of the monks and nuns to stay there. Anyway, they were Westerners, not Nepalis, so it would have been ridiculous for them to think of spending the rest of their lives in Nepal. I mean, it was wonderful that they had renounced the comfort of this life, but we had to find another place. Unfortunately, it took us a long time to do so. The West is not easy; you need a lot of money to get things done.

Finally, a devoted student offered us a place in France, and Nalanda Monastery came into being. I am so happy about this. We now have the opportunity of living a monastic life and taking care of each other in the West.

Even though we have developed a certain degree of renunciation, we still have our problems; we're not yet arhats or buddhas. We need to take care of each other emotionally. It is difficult for lay people to understand why Sangha get emotionally upset: "They've renounced samsara, what are they crying for?" Monks and nuns understand. Yesterday you were okay; today you're crying a bit; tomorrow it will have cleared up. Monks and nuns know how to be warm to one another.

There's a big difference between lay people and the ordained; different lifestyles, different ways of thinking, different responsibilities. Also, new monks and nuns can't appreciate how hard the older ones worked to get the means of living and to create retreat and teaching facilities. At the beginning there were just a few, and those who had some income shared it with others. I saw this myself and it made me very happy. As the numbers grew, there wasn't enough to go round, but still, we did the best we could. Now there's a bit of a split between the haves and the have nots, but I hope that once we get Nalanda Monastery properly established, everybody will share and help each other.

So this is how I feel. I have a vision of what needs to be done, but I cannot do it alone. I cannot cook every meal, sew every robe. You people need to get organized, work together, help each other. This is very, very necessary. Monks and nuns need to be properly educated; without getting organized, this will not be possible.

This is a short history of the FPMT Sangha organization and how Nalanda Monastery came into being.