

Responsibility and the Public Preceptors

Jayarava

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This essay has grown a bit unwieldy for online readers so I'm splitting it into two parts. In part one I examine the type of responsibility that a public preceptor carries, how they came to carry it, and how they might share that burden. I summarise two Madhyamavani articles by Subhuti, and then go into the issue of the source of the responsibility for ordinations. Finally I make the claim that if we wish to change the current system, that it will involve having to re-found the order.

In part two I will look at some of the criticisms which are being levelled at the public preceptors and try to show that they are not congruent with how public preceptors actually function, and that they are based in ideological assumptions about the nature of relationships which are not helpful to our ongoing dialogue about the way the order functions.

Up the late 1980's all ordinations were carried out by Bhante. Then a few were carried out on his behalf by Subhuti and Suvajra. Finally in 1989 Subhuti and Suvajra carried out ordinations on their own behalf. Sangharakshita had begun sharing his responsibility for ordaining people. Subhuti and Suvajra acted, according to Sangharakshita "entirely on their own responsibility, ... without reference to me". (My Relation to the Order, p.6). Sangharakshita says that rather than handing over, or even handing on the responsibility, what he has done is to *share* it, and he gives the image of one lamp being lit from another to illustrate what he means. This is a theme which Subhuti takes up in his 2002 Madhyamavani article "Having the Last Word", Subhuti says there are three kinds of decisions which the public preceptors are involved in:

- Personal decisions
- Decisions that express the will of the order and movement
- Decisions that express the will of the college of public preceptors.

Amongst the most important personal decisions that public preceptors make are the ones to do with ordination. The responsibility of a public preceptor has three aspects:

- Conferring ordination
- Accepting resignations
- Sharing the responsibility for ordinations.

It is very significant that Subhuti does not include these responsibilities in the category of decisions that express the will of the order. The conferring of ordination is the personal witnessing of one person's Going for Refuge, by another person. The act has more than a private significance, Subhuti acknowledges this, but the responsibility lies solely with the public preceptor. Of course public preceptors gather information,

and consult widely – especially with local chapters and other preceptors – but the decision to ordination someone is a *personal one* that the public preceptor takes. In the end the preceptor must be personally convinced that a person is going for refuge. The buck stops with them.

Moksananda, in his book on ordination, makes the point that it is from the preceptors that an ordinand takes the precepts (Ordination, p.73). We don't take precepts from the order as a whole, but from the preceptor *personally*. The order must have confidence that the preceptor can carry out that responsibility, but the preceptor is not really ordaining anyone "on behalf" of the order. They are ordaining a person on their own behalf, and the order accepts that this is a valid ordination because they accept that the preceptor is capable of witnessing Going for Refuge. Ordination then, is not a function of the order, it is a function of the preceptor. In his book *Sangharakshita: a new voice in the Buddhist tradition*, Subhuti sums up Bhante's views this way:

"One expresses one's commitment before a senior member of the sangha. He or She witnesses one's Going for Refuge and confirms that it coincides with his or her own Going for Refuge. In publicly witnessing one's Effective Going for Refuge, that senior member of the sangha acknowledges that one is now a member of the sangha too. Because he or she accepts that one is Going for Refuge effectively and sincerely, the sangha as a whole can do so too." (Sangharakshita, p.117)

Given the personal nature of the ordinations then, Subhuti says, the sharing of that responsibility is also necessarily a personal decision for the public preceptors. The public preceptors need to personally have confidence in the experience and skill of the people they appoint. They also feel the need to ensure of a high degree of harmony amongst the public preceptors.

Subhuti also notes that the responsibility of the public preceptors extends to "determining the form of the ceremony, the ordination process, and deciding who is to carry out the ceremony in particular cases... [and] the appointment of new public and private preceptors, ordination team members, and officers of the order (principally the Order Convenor and Overall Mitra Convenor)". (Madhyamavani no6., p.52) The public preceptors are, then, responsible for every aspect of ordination.

These are the responsibilities that Sangharakshita handed on to the Public Preceptors – or at least this was Subhuti's understanding of what Sangharakshita was asking them to do back in 2002. It is assumed that the public preceptors have the confidence of the order – in the special sense that they are able to be effective witnesses of someone's Going for Refuge. Sangharakshita must have assumed that this confidence existed when he appointed the public preceptors, else they would not have been able to function effectively.

In the winter 2004 Madhyamavani Subhuti says that he has realised that responsibility for ordinations does not infer a responsibility for the order as a whole. He says that the public preceptors "recognise that we will not be the only sources of spiritual leadership. Indeed we do not want to be. We do not feel that we have a special role in the Order 'as of right'". (Madhyamavani 9, p.6) The College of public preceptors has taken some actions to encourage the order to take responsibility for

itself: chapter retreats at Madhyamaloka, and Order forums are two examples. He goes on to say however that he does not see it as the public preceptors role to work it all out. The responsibility for carrying out ordinations then is simply that – it doesn't imply any other powers or responsibilities over an above the responsibilities of any order member. In contrast to the sharing of responsibility for ordinations, Sangharakshita did *hand on* his organisational responsibilities. The discussion of how the order and movement are organised is a separate one, although one could argue that there is some overlap.

In his 2004 article Subhuti describes ordination as the most effective tool for promoting and preserving the unity and high spiritual standards of our community. This is in part because having ordained someone they are free to behave in any way they like, there is no power in the order to control them.

The only 'power' the public preceptors have is to expel someone from the order, and that is a last resort when it is clear that all attempts at communication have failed. This is the only thing that preceptors can do against someone's will – no one can be ordained against their will, nor can they be made a preceptor against their will. Subhuti says: "The fact is that we have only one mechanism to ensure unity and high spiritual standards: that is by admitting to the order only those people who really are in harmony with the Order and its ideals". (Madhyamavani no.9, p.8). But once again this decision to admit someone to the order is a personal one, and this is something which Subhuti describes as "a very important principle in Bhante's thinking" (Madhyamavani no.9, p.9). The witnessing of someone's Going for Refuge is not a role, but a step in a personal relationship. However Subhuti is leaving something out here. The order does have other mechanisms which will help to maintain unity and standards in the order. We have chapters – although some order members do not belong to a chapter. We have regional and national order weekends as well as the biennial international convention. We have centre councils which can ask order members to step aside from teaching, administrative or spiritual roles if they do not believe the order member is fulfilling the role satisfactorily. This last has happened much more often than the expulsion of order members. Subhuti also leaves out order members penchant for giving 'feedback'. Some rather fierce feedback is being offered to public preceptors for instance. However Subhuti is right in that if we ensure that new order members really are in harmony with the ideals of the order at the beginning, they are less likely to find themselves out of harmony later on.

Reading something written by Dharmacārin Ā in Sanghajala has made me think. He asks why we need standards – he says that he is personally against them. I can see that it is useful to have order members who are in harmony with each other. I can also see that the order needs to be confident that the people ordained by public preceptors are effectively going for refuge. But this comment of Ā's made me wonder whether this is really a matter of standards. Can Going for Refuge be a matter of standards? Actually I think that it cannot. We could expect that an order member would follow the precepts, and we would expect them to have a practice of some sort, and to be in good communication with some order members (would one order member do?). But actually the ordination is about the vital mutual response of one

person to another. This cannot be standards based, because it is about individuals responding to each other. Even in the public ordination there is only one preceptor for each ordinand. And if ordination is not a matter of standards, then neither can on-going membership of the order.

On the other hand Subhuti, as a public preceptor, may have a legitimate concern with standards in another sense. When a Public Preceptor ordains someone, they are making a public declaration that the ordinand is effectively Going for Refuge. To the new order member slips away from their practice, and ceases to effectively Go for Refuge. For the order to have confidence in a Public Preceptor we would not want to see a lot of the people they've ordained leaving the order, or behaving unethically, because that would undermine the confidence in the preceptor, which would undermine the confidence that ordinands, and in a worse case scenario perhaps even give them cause to doubt whether their ordination was valid. So from this point of view it is right that Subhuti, and other preceptors, not to mention all order members, should be concerned with standards in terms of effective practice. But of course a preceptor is personally concerned with the well being of the people they've ordained and this would include a wish that they would maintain an effective practice. So one might reasonably expect preceptors to be concerned about 'standards' in this sense as well. However in these cases we are not speaking of arbitrary measures of something, like, for instance, how many times a week someone meditates. It is more that we wish people to continue to practice effectively and to benefit from their practice.

In his 2004 article, Subhuti then sets out some of the 'criteria' that might be applied to the selection of preceptors – which amounts to a thorough examination of the candidate's life and practice to ensure that they are able to take up the responsibility. The wide consultation process that is currently in place is heralded in this article when Subhuti says that he believes that the process of assessing candidates would draw on comments from as widely in the order as possible – indeed the current assessment draws comment from outside the order. Also the idea that the appointment must be reviewed every five years is mentioned. The aim of this examination of candidates, and even of incumbents, for preceptorship is that the order has confidence in them. This is very important because we don't want the situation where we do not accept an order member as having been validly ordained. However in the long run it is the preceptor who makes the decision and carries out the ceremony. Some suggestions as to how preceptors might come together in a variety of ways to help people prepare for ordination are given, and then the article concludes with Subhuti saying that the College remain open to suggestions.

So this is the lineage of responsibility which Sangharakshita began, and which has now been shared with more than twenty people.

I'd like to come back to the source of the responsibility to ordain people. Bhante took this responsibility on himself. One could argue that he had the experience, he had the lineage, and he had the blessing of his teachers, so he was a legitimate preceptor. But Sangharakshita did not choose to ordain people on the basis of his own ordination lineages or traditions; he chose to create a new order. Sangharakshita's role as founding preceptor of our order rests on his spiritual insight

and experience, and on our recognition of that insight and experience. To be a member of this order we have to believe that Sangharakshita was able to be a preceptor, we have to trust that he was able to legitimately confer ordinations, and that the ordination he offered was what he said it was. In other words we must be confident that Sangharakshita was, and is, able to witness our Going for Refuge. If we do not believe that a preceptor can ordain us, then they can not ordain us.

If we accept that Sangharakshita legitimately had this responsibility then it follows that we should accept his decision to share that responsibility. The public preceptors that he initially appointed were given the full responsibility for ordaining people, for making the decision that someone was Going for Refuge effectively, and for carrying out the ceremony. This is the starting point, but we also have opportunities to observe the public preceptors directly, and to develop confidence in their ability to carry out their responsibilities.

If we do not trust Bhante's sharing of his responsibility, if we do not believe that the public preceptors are able to carry out that responsibility then we do not recognise the ordination of the people they have ordained, which is a schism because there are members of the order who do not recognise each other's ordination. If we accept that Bhante has legitimately transferred the responsibility for conducting ordinations, but that the public preceptors have no legitimate basis for themselves passing on that responsibility, then once again we are in schism because there are order members who do not recognise each other's ordination. Even though they are technically a schismatic someone ordained by Bhante might still consider themselves to have been validly ordained. But if an order member ordained by one of the public preceptors is questioning the whether they, the preceptor, can legitimately ordain people, then they are calling into question their own ordination which puts them in a bind.

It is important to distinguish a personal responsibility from an institutional role, or a hierarchical status. A personal responsibility is not something that can be devolved to the masses – it must be handed from one person to another. Before handing on a personal responsibility, if one is taking it seriously, one must be personally sure that the person to whom the responsibility is being given is willing and able to take it on. Even when that responsibility is one which has public significance, if they take it seriously, it is not one that the preceptors can easily abdicate from. An important corollary of all this is that if we wish to have a different system, then we would need to re-found the order. As it is the order is founded on Bhante's spiritual experience as personally communicated, and his responsibility personally shared. If we, for instance, decided that any group of order members could appoint or elect a preceptor then we have removed that foundation and must start afresh. Bhante has been quite clear that no order member 'represents' the order, he says: "groups can have representatives, but spiritual communities can't". (What is an Order Member? p.27). He further suggests that to the extent that a collective can be represented, it is a group and not a spiritual community, and therefore to that extent is not Buddhist. If we began to appoint preceptors by popular support, or by election, to treat preceptors as our representatives, then we would cease to be a spiritual

community. The counter is that anyone who is Going for Refuge ought to be able to witness someone else's Going for Refuge.

In part one of this essay I outlined the role of the public preceptor in conferring ordination. Ordaining people was originally the sole responsibility of Sangharakshita by virtue of his role in our movement, and because of his personal qualities. He shared this responsibility with other people, including the responsibility of sharing the responsibility. Ordination is a stage in the personal relationship between an individual and their preceptor. Just so the appointing of new preceptors is a stage in a personal relationship. Subhuti has said that he considers it part of the responsibility of the public preceptors to have an eye to the unity and standards in the order, and that the conferring of ordinations is the only mechanism for ensuring these. I disagreed and pointed out that we have other mechanisms, but agreed that it was important that we have unity and harmony. I also disagreed with a standards based approach to ordination since it appears to deny that it is a personal relationship between two people. Finally I've pointed out that if we decide that the responsibility for ordaining people must have a new basis, then we will have to re-found the order, and all be re-ordained on this new basis.

Part Two. Criticism of the Public Preceptors.

In this part I look at some of the criticisms which are being presented in Sanghajala. These seem to me to be ideological driven. Ideologies begin with some assumptions about people and the world and I aim to show how those assumptions are not good starting points for a debate about the role of the preceptors.

There is criticism being aimed at the public preceptors which seeks to characterise them as holding some 'power', and of granting that 'power' to a special few as a way of retaining 'power' and the status that goes with it. This is to grasp the wrong end of the snake. It is a kind of crypto-Marxist critique which seeks to characterise all relations as power relations, and which assumes a conflict of interests between the parties in the relationship. I say *crypto-Marxist* because it is not explicitly Marxist, but does appear to be consistent with a Marxist ideology.

Have we got an ideal situation? No, we have not, but we need to be careful about what kind of discourse we are engaging in. A Marxist style discourse can only result in conflict: it assumes and encourages conflict, and seeks to overthrow those 'in power' through conflict. This is not going to be a useful way of approaching our differences in the order. It cannot bring about harmony and unity, and so far as I'm aware it has only ever resulted in conflict when applied in real situations. The crypto-Marxist critique seeks to wrestle 'power' away from the bourgeois preceptors and to offer it equally to the depressed proletariat order. The public preceptors it characterises as despotic - a mere 2% of the order lording it over the 98% silent majority. Bhante has so famously and vigorously attacked this kind of pseudo-egalitarian meme that one can only admire its tenacity in surviving in the minds of order members. Paradoxically some strands of this critique characterise the 98%

majority as intellectually, perhaps even morally, lazy, and presumably therefore unworthy, or even incapable, of exercising the ‘power’ that is being fought for on their behalf. The problem is that not everybody wants, or is ready to take on that responsibility. Also it is grossly unfair to characterise the public preceptors as being despotic in light of their actual behaviour both in devolving the administration of the order and movement away from themselves, and in sharing the responsibility of ordaining people ever more widely.

Another form of critique is to refer to the passing on of responsibility as “Apostolic succession” which is a term from Christianity and means “the uninterrupted transmission of spiritual authority from the Apostles through successive popes and bishops” (Concise OED 9th ed.). But this is not an accurate way to describe the succession of responsibility in our order, because it invokes “Spiritual Authority”. This term tends to mean, nowadays, according to Bhante: “the exercise of power by virtue of one’s office”. (What is the Sangha, p.65) So the suggestion is still that power is being exercised, but in this case it is power vested in an office, rather than a person. Power can, as Bhante points out, simply refer to the ability to act, which may be true of the public preceptors, but it tends to mean: “the possession of a controlling influence over others, the capacity to coerce others, directly or indirectly, physically or psychologically.” (ibid.) The inference in the use of "apostolic succession" is that what Sangharakshita shared with the preceptors was not a personal responsibility but an office which comes with power – the ‘power’ of granting ordination, and the ‘power’ of appointing preceptors. Since the first ‘power’ is of little consequence to someone who is already a member of the order, I’ll just address the second. What is being implied here, to cut to the chase, is that the preceptors are occupying an office, rather than carrying a responsibility. It also implies that they occupy that office illegitimately, and that they are at least attempting to control order members through the exercise of power. Bhante says that if this is the case then “the spiritual community ceases to exist”. (ibid.) So it is a serious accusation. The analogy to my mind is akin to accusing someone of murder, since destroying the spiritual community is very serious indeed. Given the seriousness of the accusation it would seem incumbent on the accusers to come up with some evidence. We would need to see evidence of the destruction of the spiritual community for instance. Or we would need examples of public preceptors being appointed who were unfit for the job – we can afford no beating around the bushes in this case, we need names and dates and times. We need information regarding the unfitness of the preceptor; we need to be shown that they have ordained people who are not effectively Going for Refuge. This is of the utmost and urgent importance. It is not enough to offer generalisations, and hypothetical arguments about what might happen.

The other side of the coin is that preceptors are withholding the ‘power’ to confer ordinations from some order members, especially some long serving order members. The arguments as to why the preceptors would do this are not entirely clear, but seem to revolve around unflattering psychoanalytical commentary of them, and speculation as to what Bhante intended when he shared his responsibility for ordinations with them. Perhaps the public preceptors have been conservative in their

appointments of new preceptors, but they are clearly showing a will to share the responsibility with many people in recent times. Given that the preceptors are only going to share their responsibility for ordinations with someone that they personally trust, and that the candidate must have the trust of the whole order, then there are going to be limited candidates. Some people who might be well suited for the job might be passed over. Is it not better to err on the side of caution? I'm not talking about maintaining standards here, but maintaining the integrity of the order by ensuring that we are not placed in the intolerable situation of doubting the valid ordination of other order members.

It has been further suggested that the choice of new preceptors is also in the service of some hidden agenda. In this version the preceptors are only appointing their cronies, "the usual suspects"; and the "old boys network" reinforces the entrenched attitudes of the preceptors and makes it more difficult for them to change in the desired direction. However as is entirely clear the sharing of responsibility rests on three important principles: personal responsibility, personal relationship, and the trust of the order in preceptors. A preceptor can *only* hand their responsibility on to someone they personally know well to be capable of carrying out that responsibility. Any other course of action would be irresponsible. And even in that case there is little value in giving someone the responsibility to ordain people if the order will not accept those ordinations, that would be unfair to everyone involved.

In part one of this essay I noted that the preceptors have only one action that they can take against someone's will, and that is to expel them from the order. Even in this case one could say that if someone has got to the point of being expelled against their wishes, that they must have given expression to a will which is not coincident with that of the order – and so in effect even expulsion from the order cannot happen against anyone's will. But there is still the suggestion that the withholding of ordination, or the fact of not being appointed a preceptor, is an exercise of power on the part of the preceptors. Many a mitra has tried this kind of argument on the preceptors: *I want to be ordained, if you don't ordain me then that is against my will, and you are therefore doing me a violence.* It is a logically valid statement. However if you demand something of someone that they are unwilling to give, then that is also an act of violence! There has to be consent *on both sides*. To paraphrase Bhante: a preceptor cannot ordain someone unless they are free not to. This type of criticism is again seeking to employ a model in which there is a conflict, rather than a coincidence of wills. While this conflict exists there can be no question of ordination, or of sharing the responsibility for ordinations. If either party feels constrained or coerced then it simply cannot happen in any meaningful sense – the spiritual community ceases to exist the moment we try to coerce each other. One of the assumptions which seems to be hidden away here somewhere is that we have a right to be ordained, or that we have a right to be a preceptor, and that that right can be, or is being, denied. We are surely familiar enough with this miccha-ditthi for it to need no debunking by me.

Another less serious complaint of recent times has been that one cannot criticise an institution without an implied criticism of the individuals making up that institution. Clearly in the case of the public preceptors the distinction is not one that

makes much sense. Since the preceptors in carrying out their role are exercising a personal responsibility any criticism of the way they carry out that role is of a personal nature. They have been given this responsibility, and if they are not carrying it out then they can reasonably expect to be criticised. So far as I can see, there is no evidence of the responsibility not being carried out responsibly.

A psychological or psycho-analytical discourse may not be the most appropriate one to use to talk about our spiritual lives, since it tends to make fundamental assumptions that are not congruent with the Dharma. Similarly we need to be sure that the critiques we are applying to the order and movement are not making assumptions which are alien to the spiritual community. If we take a Marxist position, for instance, then we are bringing a definite set of assumptions about relationships to our discourse. Similarly if we take a Feminist, a Freudian, or a Foucaultian position. Some of these ideas have obviously made their way into popular cultural discourse. They all have interesting things to say about the world, but they all start from a set of assumptions about people and the world. Some of these assumptions are clearly not congruent with the Dharma.

In part two of this essay I have looked at some of the criticisms of the sharing of the responsibility for ordinations: there is the crypto-Marxist critique, which seeks to characterise our system as a power struggle between a powerful minority and a powerless majority. The “spiritual authority” argument is about the exercise of power is vested in the office rather than a person or persons. I tried to show how taking such ideological stances involved unacknowledged assumptions that are unhelpful in trying to have a discussion about ordinations and who confers them. They are unhelpful because they are not congruent with the values that we share.

It may be argued that because the order only imperfectly functions as a collective of individuals, since the individuals are not yet true individuals, then it is only proper to use political or social discourses and ideologies to describe it and to critique it. But this is an appeal to the lowest common denominator – we hardly want the order to devolve into a political organisation, so why talk about it as though it is one? Why not for instance employ a critique based on the opening of the Mahaparinibbana Sutta where the Buddha enunciates principles by which a nation, or a Sangha, can be expected to prosper and not decline? Or one based on the precepts. Let us not employ any critique of ourselves which assumes that we must be in conflict, and that the way forward is to pursue conflict.

We need a healthy and informed debate within the order. We need to be aware of the parameters of our discussion – to comment on the observed, rather than assumed, inferred, or imagined (unless the debate is on art of course!). We need to stick to the facts, and not to introduce any untrue statement. And we need to think clearly about issues. Ideologies, whether studied in their own right, or assimilated from popular culture, are likely to cloud any particular issue we are interested in. Some memes, such as pseudo-egalitarianism, seem particularly pernicious and persistent, and we need to weed them out of our thinking with equal persistence. When emotions run high, and they do seem to, we need to be extra careful about what we are saying. The metta sutta advises us never to wish harm on another, even when

angry. I personally aspire to express more clarity and more kindness in my contributions to the discourse about the order, and I hope that this essay fulfils that aspiration to some extent.