

Excerpts from “A Monk Does Not Bow before a King”

Shamen bujing wangzhi lun

By Lushan Huiyuan, 404 CE

Nativist Chinese objections to Buddhism were not exclusively reserved for the cultural sphere (see the excerpts from Mouzi). They included many more tangible objections, reflecting concern both for the growing political power of the saṃgha in both north and south China and, in some cases, the extravagance and dissolute behavior of the monks. The issue came to a head in the south in proposals as early as 340 to laicize portions of the clergy in order to limit their power and return “nonproductive” members of society to the tax rolls. More pointed still was the instance of the clergy that as renunciants from society they did not have to pay obeisance to the emperor. That issue came to a head between the years 402 and 404, when Huan Xuan, a military leader and, briefly, emperor of the Eastern Jin, proposed again that the monks submit to temporal authority. His demands were famously answered in an essay by the most eminent monk in the south, Huiyuan, who set forth yet again the position of the church.

The Buddhism of the Householder

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 Śākya 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’ commands, 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 transformations in the way of government.

The Buddhism of the Monk

But the monk who has left the household life is a stranger dwelling 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. He knows that birth and rebirth are the result of his being subject to (universal) transformation, and that by not complying with (this process of transformation) one may seek the (highest) principle. . . .

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 [i.e., they shave their heads] and realize the achievement of their ideal with the changing of their garb [to the robes of a monk]. . . . Since they have changed their way of life, their garb and distinguishing marks cannot conform to the secular pattern Afar 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.

[translated by Leon Hurvitz]