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Going Into Homelessness

George Grimm



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Preface

This Bodhi Leaf is an extract from George Grimm's magnum opus, *The Doctrine of the Buddha: the Religion of Reason and Meditation* (2nd revised ed., Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958), translated by Bhikkhu Sīlācāra.

Grimm (1868–1945), known in his day as 'Bavaria's most benevolent judge', was an early German Buddhist who wrote on the Dhamma from deep personal conviction. Despite a controversial interpretation of the *anattā* or 'not-self' doctrine, his book remains a brilliant pioneering attempt to comprehend from within the Master's teaching as a unified whole.

This extract was chosen because it deals with a crucial topic which today is in danger of being brushed aside with too much haste, namely, the 'going forth into homelessness', the adoption of the monastic way of life. In our own secular age, this momentous step—always placed by the Buddha at the very start of the gradual training—is being trivialised by being reduced to a choice of 'lifestyle' or a cultural convention possessing no intrinsic value. Grimm's

essay, building upon the Pali suttas, offers a powerful and cogent reply to the contrary: that monasticism is not a mere dispensable appendage of the Dhamma but a natural and necessary outgrowth rooted in its transcendental core.

Grimm does not overlook the Buddha's declaration that the Dhamma can be practised with deep commitment by the laity or that a dedicated lay person may far surpass a slack and negligent monk. But he eloquently reminds us, by appeal to the Buddha's own word, that those who earnestly seek for full deliverance itself within this very life must be prepared to sever their ties to the world, including those that keep them in the home life. The Buddha in his great compassion founded the Sangha to encourage this step and to give it full support.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

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he more exalted anything is, all the less is it generally understood, because it exceeds the mental capacity of the average man; and all the more is it exposed to misinterpretations. Indeed, because the cause cannot be removed, it is also quite impossible to meet these misinterpretations successfully. Hence it has always been the fate of the highest truths not only to be misunderstood, but also to be ridiculed.

It is therefore not astonishing that the doctrine of the Buddha too, the highest truth ever communicated to mankind, has frequently met this fate, especially in the countries of the West. This has been the case to a high degree from the fact that in its full, practical realisation, it issues in monasticism, an institution against which the ordinary man of the world instinctively revolts, because if it were in accord with the truth, it would mean the severest condemnation imaginable of his own way of living, which is entirely given up to the pleasures of the senses.

There are even in the West 'Buddhists', in all seriousness believing themselves to be such, who consider this institution of the Buddha superfluous! Of course they thereby only prove the truth of the old Indian proverb: "Even in the ocean, a jug cannot hold more than its own measure."

But to those who understand the way of freedom taught by the Buddha, it will be clear that this path cannot possibly be trodden in its entirety in the world. It demands nothing more and nothing less than the cultivation of the deepest contemplation and ceaseless watchfulness with regard to every single act, even the most insignificant, in the activity of the senses, so as to recognise as such every motion of thirst for the world in all its perniciousness, and thus allow no kind of grasping to arise any more.

But how should such unceasing control of all the impressions of the senses be possible within the world? It is impossible, because in the world these impressions are far too numerous for us to be able to maintain complete watchfulness over every single one of them. In the world, it is only on the rarest occasions, and then only for a brief period that we attain thoughtfulness, to say nothing of unbroken watchfulness.

As Raṭṭhapāla says to Master: “If I really understand the doctrine expounded by the Exalted One, it is not possible, living the household life, to carry out point by point the perfectly purified, perfectly stainless holy life” (MN 82). Not even the fundamental precepts can be constantly kept: “Who lives at home is much busied, much occupied, much concerned, much harassed, not always wholly and entirely given to

truthfulness, not always wholly and entirely restrained, chaste, devout, detached" (MN 99).

Certainly, also in the world, we may restrict our relations to it as much as possible; for instance, we may enter no profession, found no family, but these relations will never allow of being cut off entirely. For to live in the world just means to maintain relations with the world. So far, however, as these relations extend, to that extent we are occupied with worldly things; to this extent, therefore, we are cultivating and strengthening the fetters that chain us to the world. In so far, therefore, the ties cannot be definitively severed; and hence, to this extent, complete deliverance is impossible. For, wholly delivered he only is who "has cut through every tie."

On this point there can be no reasonable doubt. And thus it is really only a self-evident thing when the Buddha expressly asserts the impossibility of reaching Nibbāna while living the ordinary life of the world. "Is there, O Gotama, any householder, who, not having left off household ties, upon the dissolution of the body, makes an end of suffering?" "There is no householder whatever, Vaccha, who, not having left off household ties, upon the dissolution of the body, makes an end of suffering" (MN 71).

Precisely in consequence of this point of view the

Buddha founded the Sangha as the Order of all those who have left home for the life of homelessness, in order, under his guidance, to strive as noble disciples towards the great goal of complete departure out of this world. In this Sangha of the selected ones, therefore, not less than in the Buddha and in his Doctrine itself, as the Three Jewels, *Tiratana*, must those take their refuge who wish to tread the most direct road to deliverance, as it is expressed in the formula of confession which up to the present day constitutes the actual confession of faith of all Buddhists:

To the Buddha I go for refuge.

To the Dhamma I go for refuge.

To the Sangha I go for refuge.

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