

Saṅgha as Refuge

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 16:16

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhodassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhodassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So, Sangha is the third refuge and it starts off by saying *Supatipanno bhagavato savakasango* — that's of good conduct, the followers of the Blessed One. Then it says they are *uju-patipanno*, so of upright conduct, *nyaya-patipanno*, wise conduct, and *samici-patipanno*, dutiful conduct. So those are the four descriptions. This *supati* means, translates as good or virtuous people who follow. They're a special group of people — I will come to that in a minute — but basically they are virtuous and good, that's the *supatipanno*. The *ujupa tipanno*, upright, I think refers really to their following of the rule that they're upright in that sense. *Nyaya-patipanno*, they're wise. And *samici* refers to the proper or true path that they're following. So that's the qualities of the Sangha that we respect.

Sangha means community. It normally refers to the ordained Sangha. If you go to Thailand or Sri Lanka or Burma, anywhere like that, and you say Sangha, they immediately think that you mean the ordained Sangha. But here it has a much wider meaning. Here it means anybody who has attained one of the four paths and fruits.

And that's what the next section goes on to say. It says, "So this is the order of disciples of the Blessed One, namely the four pairs of persons and the eight kinds of individuals." Now that refers to their attainment. Remember there are four paths and fruits. The normal explanation of that is that there's a moment in which one has the insight, so you've entered into a path, and then the fruit of it is the release from one of the fetters — from one or more of the fetters.

So when we talk about the four persons, the four types of these followers of the Buddha, *savakatta*, the first one is the stream entrant. So what we mean by that is that they've had the experience of Nibbāna. The Buddha talks about it like a flash of lightning, but it's strong enough for them to have a systemic change. And you can't go back on that. It's a level of consciousness. It's a way of being in the world. And what you've undermined are three of these *samyojana*, three of these fetters.

And the first one is the view of the personality of self — the view of your personhood. You begin to realize that a personality is just a collection of habits, and that when you're sitting in meditation you're actually watching these habits arise and pass away right there in front of you. So that distance, that objectification of your personality, is one of the realizations — that it's not you. It becomes you when you identify with it.

That identification, remember, is a loss of your awareness into the person, the personality, the five *khandh*as, the five aggregates. So that view has been sundered, but it's not completely gone. It's as though you've seen it but you're still held within its thrall. It's like you've seen where the delusion lies, but you still get deluded.

Also what goes is wrong rites and rituals — so the belief that just performing rites and rituals are going to actually get you on the path itself, that they are a liberation in themselves. Which doesn't mean to say that certain rites and rituals are not useful. For instance, in the West — I think they do it also in the East — the naming ceremonies. A little baby is brought. In Burma, they offer the baby, they bring the baby to a monk, and the monk gives them a name, and then gives the parents a little coin to buy the baby. It's like a spiritual transaction. From now on, this little baby has a connection with this particular monk, for good or for evil.

So there's that. Now that of course doesn't — you're not going to liberate the little child at all. I mean, there's just a little connection that's made. So it's the same when we bow to the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. These things in themselves don't liberate, but they are supportive. And it's the same with chanting and all the various religious things that you see people do. They're just supports, often they're the juice of the practice, because vipassanā can be a bit tough. And it's just recognizing that that's all. So in other words they've come to know the path, and the path is the undermining of that delusion which is seeking happiness in the sensual world. That's the core of the problem.

And the third one is this skeptical doubt. So remember, skeptical doubt is not the same as the honest doubt of the philosopher, the wonder. We're not supposed to believe what the Buddha says; we're supposed to have that investigative faculty so that we can make it our own true, our own experience. But skeptical doubt, remember, is that doubt which stops you committing — your uncertainty, your fear of commitment. So that goes because now of course you've made it, you've had that insight. So that's the stream entrant.

The once returner, which means that a person is drawn back into this life form, undermines the next two, which is sensual pleasure as an attractive indulgence, and aversion, which remember has this twin business of hatred and fear. So those are only attenuated in the second level of attainment, the once returner. And those are completely done away with, with the non-returner.

And what that's basically saying is that that person is no longer drawn to this sensual life. There's no attraction there for it. It's much the same as, for instance, when we move out of teddy bears into toys. I mean, the teddy bear's still there, but you're not attracted to it anymore — or at least most people give up their teddy bears. It's that kind of thing. As you move into teenage and that relationship with the world, you give up your childish toys, but that's not a problem because one feels there's a natural growth of our awareness and consciousness and our knowledge of the world, so we're quite happy to leave those little toys behind.

But of course there comes a point where life doesn't seem to present anything else but sickness, old age and death, at which point you'd rather go back to your toys. So apart from that, this non-returner, the *anāgāmi*, just doesn't have anything in this life form that attracts them. What they are attracted to are these inner states of ecstasy, the *rūpa* and *arūpa jhanas*.

And those don't go until you finally — that indulgence in mental states, blissful mental states, doesn't go until you finally crack it at the end of the path, which is the Arahant, the fully liberated one. And with that there goes the core ignorance as to who we are — like who am I? Once that core ignorance goes, the self collapses. And so the other two fetters — conceit disappears, so there's no comparison anymore — and restlessness. Restlessness here I've always understood to mean all the hindrances that we suffer from, but as we grow in the spiritual life, they become less and less until they're just little disturbances in the mind. They lose their power over us. That's how I translate restlessness. But people will probably translate it more literally as restlessness.

So those are your four pairs, and every entrance into the path is the seeing of the path — that's the *magga* — and the fruit of it is the collapse of one of these fetters. That's why the word Nibbāna is often translated as unbinding, unshackling. So it's the unshackling of this knowing from its unshacklement with the fetters. And that's what you're doing every time you let go of something — you're unshackling, you're unbinding your consciousness, your knowing, from its delusion as to what it really is.

So now those four people can of course be both lay people and members of the monastic order, so it transcends that division. And in the tradition, people never actually say — if somebody thinks or believes or knows that they're one of these paths — they don't normally say it, because once you say "I am a Sotapanna" or worse "I am an Arahant," then everybody and his dog proves you're not. You just create enormous problems.

What people normally do is they express how they experience life, and then it's left up to the person to get. The Mahāsi said that these things are really just for one's own self-judgment about where one is. Of course the danger is that one either overestimates one's attainments and then there's usually a big disappointment coming up. But then that's humility, a humbling experience.

So now once we have those four types of persons, which in a sense become an ideal, we say that they're worthy of offerings and this is the requisites. And it's the requisites so that they can continue with their practice or continue to be here as fully enlightened beings because of the good they do — and we'll come to that as the last worthiness. They're worthy of hospitality, the four requisites. And this is also in a sense part of it, of course — food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Those are your four basic requisites of life, aren't they? Food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Everything else is not necessary.

And the third one is they're worthy of gifts, gift-making. And the reason for that is that it also creates merit for you. So when you give to people whom you see are spiritually training, spiritually advanced, and you want to help them, it's also a good merit to you. In the East, of course, this gets corrupted as merit-making,

like a big bank account where you're storing up all these merits that when you die you enter into this beautiful heaven. I think it's wiser to think of it in terms of a growing of our own hearts in generosity. And the merit is the beauty of one's own generous, kind heart. That's your immediate merit, you might say. Whether you get born into a heavenly realm or not is — well, it's to be hoped for.

And finally worthy of respect, worthy of reverence. And the reason for this is that they are an incomparable field of merit in the world — an incomparable field of merit. In other words they're great exemplars. And one good example of that is mountaineering. Once you get somebody climbing Everest — Hillary wasn't it? No, Edmund Hillary, that's it, and Sherpa Tenzing — yeah, though I believe Mallory did it because he was British. When they reached Everest, it opened the gates. Everybody who had a couple of legs could — well, even without a couple of legs could actually make it. It was there, open to be climbed. And of course there are lesser mountains, lesser peaks, and every time somebody makes it, it opens up that avenue for somebody else to do it. So they are exemplars.

And people who are well attained in the spiritual life are simply exemplars. They stand as an example for other people. And in that sense they are incomparable fields of merit, because in a sense there's no greater gift, is there, to humanity than somebody who's attained — especially attained the final path — because that is the goal, at least in Buddhist terms, of where we're all trying to make to. So in that sense they are the incomparable field of merit, and that's why we honour them and pay respect to them.

So that concludes my little homily on the Sangha. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated sooner rather than later.

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