

The Saṅgha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 26:25

Foundation Course 2, Talk 9: The Sangha

Sangha literally means comprising, so it comes to mean assembly and community. The Buddha was born into the Kshatriya, the warrior and ruling caste, and it seems his father, Suddhodana, was the chief of a council of rulers. This council was also called a Sangha.

Before and during the Buddha's lifetime, the society was going through quite a fundamental change. It had been a pastoral society of wandering herdsmen centred on small market villages. But with the growth of agriculture and a more settled population, cities grew, and in them there came about a greater division of labour. So whereas in a pastoral society most could do most of the jobs, in a city-based agricultural society craftsmen developed who had specialised skills, such as wheelwrights and cobblers. Also with the cities, there grew a larger concentration of population and a more centralized system of government. Kings and courts began to develop, and this indeed was a profound political change.

By the time the Buddha died, there were still some states who were ruled by a group of people, a sort of republic, but the area in which he lived, the great fertile plain north of the Ganges, had mostly come under the rule of autocratic kings.

The importance of this little piece of history is to highlight the Buddha's own political leanings, which are not only developed in the discourses dealing with such matters, but are manifest most in how he organized the community of monastics, which he called the Sangha. In fact, before he passed away, the Buddha declared that his work was done since the Dhamma had been taught and the four Sanghas established. These four sanghas, orders or communities, are the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni, that is, the monks and nuns, and the upasaka and the upasika, the lay men and the lay women.

He saw them as quite distinct orders, and more significantly, left no one in charge. In fact, when Ananda asks him who will rule them once he has passed away, the Buddha told him that the Dhamma must be the guide. The Dhamma here also included the rules of conduct he left, the *Vinaya* or discipline he left for the monastics, and the *sila*, the morality rules he left for laypeople. So the Buddha himself did not follow the trend of his society in setting up an autocratic structure in the order, with a head, a lieutenant, sergeants and so on. He left it quite open, expecting the monastics and lay people to discuss openly any problem, for he was sure there was enough scriptural procedure for people to come to a correct decision.

So far as the Buddha was concerned, he saw his followers as four distinct Sangha, each with their own way of life, non-governed by any person as such, but guided by the Dhamma, the teachings he had left.

Legend has it that the first ever two disciples of the Buddha were in fact two laymen, the merchants Tapusa and Balika. But it was more probably the five disciples he delivered his first discourse to after his enlightenment. The same five in fact who had deserted him a little earlier, for they thought he had given up the quest upon eating a bowl of rice milk.

From the first discourse, the turning of the wheel of the law, news seemed to have spread quickly about him, and ascetics approached him wanting to be his disciples. His reply was, "Ehi bhikkhu, come bhikkhu, well explained is the Dhamma, live the brahmacharya, the holy life, for the complete ending of suffering." This was the formula of the first ordinations, the first makings of an order. It was as simple as that.

However, when an originator cannot be present, followers often want to formalize things. And as the number of applicants grew and the order spread so that the distance became quite a problem, the Buddha allowed senior monks to ordain. In the end, a final ordination procedure was established and became known as the going for refuge in the triple gem. It is called the *Upasampadā* ordination.

The system established was that anyone who had been in the order for ten years or more could present someone to the order for admission. He is known as the postulant *upajjhāya*. To ordain a monk it takes ten other monks, save in non-Buddhist countries where monks are rare. In such a case, five monks will do.

At first the novice becomes a *sāmaṇera*, taking ten precepts. These are the usual five of the lay person: not to kill, not to take anything not freely given. The third, normally not to misuse the senses, here becomes a vow of chastity, of celibacy, a complete abstinence from all sexual conduct. Then there is not to lie and not to take any intoxicating drugs or drinks. The further five are not to eat after midday, not to wear perfumes or self-adornments like jewellery, not to go to entertainment such as dancing and films, not to sleep on high or luxurious beds, and finally, not to touch or handle money.

Such precepts can also be taken by boys from the age of 8, and in fact *sāmaṇera* means little ascetic. This is quite a common practice in Buddhist countries, and many stay to the age of 20 when they can ordain.

Once these lower orders are taken, the novice can put on the monk's robes, and then, if he is of age and willing, he can take the higher ordination. This consists of answering a certain amount of questions to make sure there are no barriers to the monkhood, such as, does he have the permission of dependence? Does he have a serious illness? Is he in debt? And so on. Once the ordaining monks are satisfied, the postulant is then brought into the circle and told the rules of the Vinaya, the discipline, upon which, so long as he accepts them, he is received into the order.

For the first five years he comes under a teacher, usually the person who introduced him to the order, the *upajjhāya*, but not necessarily so. After five years he is known as a senior, and can teach if asked to do so. After ten he is known as a *thera*, or elder, and has the privilege of ordaining other monks. After twenty years he gains the title of *mahāthera*, or great elder.

However, every country has its own way of addressing monks. Most people use the word *bhante*,

equivalent to venerable, when addressing a monk. But depending on the tradition, some call elders ajahn, as in Thailand, which is a corruption of the word ācārya, meaning teacher, or if they are from Burma, they are addressed as sayadaw, royal or noble teacher. Junior monks call senior monks bhante, but senior monks call junior monks by their name.

When it came to how to spend the day, the Buddha left no regimen, although all monks have to eat before noon, and there are plenty of discourses advising monks how to spend their time wisely, in meditation and in learning the Dhamma. The day is very much left up to the monk or monastery to organize. Monasteries have their own timetables, and some are quite highly organized. The Buddha himself advised the ardent monk to meditate in the first part of the night, sleep the second, and meditate again in the third part, in other words, to do with four hours sleep. But he doesn't make it a rule. Even in his own time, it seems, many could not summon up the energy needed for such strenuous practice.

In fact, when it comes to the actual Vinaya, the discipline, the rules of the monastic life, they all grew up in a very organic way. The Buddha was asked early on to formulate rules and regulations, but he refused to do so, since the early monks had done no wrong. However, as they did do things that brought criticism either from other monks or from the lay people, The Buddha would consider the situation, and if he thought it appropriate, would declare a rule.

For instance, the rule that says monks must eat before noon came about because lay people complained that monks were forever coming on alms round. The rules concerning the monk's behaviour with women, which strictly speaking is that he should not speak to a woman out of earshot, came about because of slander and indeed the odd dalliance of monks with women. In fact, when you look at the rules, you discover that a lot of them are about protecting the good name of the order.

These days, some of the rules seem a little excessive, especially this relationship between monks and women. But you'll be surprised how the image of a sex-starved monk nipping over the monastery wall still persists in people's minds. A monk can't be too careful in this field, so don't be surprised if monks, especially from the Theravāda tradition, don't even shake hands with women. Anyway, such a custom is not particularly an Eastern habit, where the greeting is to join hands and bow.

Luckily, the Buddha's ministry lasted 45 years, during which all sorts of things happened, so that the final compilation of the Vinaya, the 227 rules, covers virtually all aspects of monastic life, and makes it very clear how the Buddha wanted his monks and nuns to behave.

The rules are laid out in order of severity, and here we shall briefly mention a few. The most serious to break are known as the *pārājika*, the defeats. For if a monastic transgresses any of these four, they must leave the order and cannot rejoin again in this lifetime. They are to have any form of sexual intercourse whatsoever, to steal anything, to kill a human being, and to create a schism or split in the sangha.

Then there follow thirteen rules for which the monk needs twenty other monks to reinstate him in the

order, if they are broken. They include virtually any sexual behavior, groundlessly accusing another of having broken the pārājikas, the defeats, and supporting a schism. There are then 30 rules entailing forfeiture. If a monk owns something he ought not to have, then it is simply taken away. There are 92 rules which are forgiven on the telling. They entail such things as abusive speech, lying, and even damage to plants.

The rules also cover all the conduct appropriate between monastics and laypeople, among monastics themselves, and even how objects should be treated. There's a whole section of training rules that say how a monk should eat and robe. The final section lists the seven rules on how to settle disputes that arise within the order.

I recommend a reading of the *Pātimokkha*, as it is called. It will give you an insight into what a monk's life is all about. In short, it's about conduct, study and meditation. It's simply a refinement of the Noble Eightfold Path: *sīla*, right conduct, *samādhi*, right meditation and *paññā* wisdom. It's about the development of awareness. It's about behaving in a harmless, restrained, gentle way. It's about devoting one's life to self-introspection and learning. It's learning how to live at peace with oneself and with others.

On a more mundane level, it's about achieving an absolute simplicity of lifestyle when it comes to material possessions. The Buddha wanted monks to have only those things that sustain life. Food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Just the bare necessities, nothing lavish. They're called the four requisites. The majority of monks still live at this level, and in a world increasingly swamped by consumerism and lost in the drive to achieve more and more personal possessions, such examples of simplicity of living will become more and more important in reminding people that there are other values, other ways of living, which may be more successful in terms of achieving peace and happiness.

Not that everyone has to live on the breadline. It's more to do with attitudes to material wealth. It's that perspective which undermines attachment to sensual pleasure, whether expressed in goods or services. The perspective of what does it matter in the end.

Propertylessness, on the personal level, is the hallmark of a monk. The monastery and all its contents belong to the sangha, the community. In the West, monasteries are usually trusts supported by laypeople, who are themselves the trustees. Although the rules specify only eight basic possessions a monk can have, such as his three robes and begging bowl, he is allowed other things, and these days you might find them owning the odd piece of modern gadgetry, such as an electric shaver and an alarm clock. This way of living is to bring our modern ideas of conservation down to a personal level, a simplicity of lifestyle.

When it came to the community itself, the Buddha obviously wanted it to behave as a community of equals. His was indeed a revolutionary demand to ask anyone who joined the order to drop all pretense of caste, higher or lower, and simply join the end of the queue. No matter if an untouchable joined only the day before, the Brahmin followed him on alms round.

What is more, in any decision-making within a given group of monks, all have the right to a say and to vote. Usually decisions made by the group are unanimous. What the Buddha obviously wanted was a real democracy in the sense that each individual was to be considered equal to anyone else and had a right to influence decisions. This in a society of a rigid caste system and a society turning more and more towards autocratic rule shows how clear the Buddha was in his ideas of what sort of basic rules lead to a peaceful and harmonious community.

Even if a dispute grows within a certain group of monks that seems unresolvable, they are allowed to part company and begin another sangha. A sangha here is any grouping of monks so long as there are four or over. In this way, monks can agree to differ. At base, he destroyed the idea of personal wealth at the expense of others, and he demanded that everyone share responsibility by giving each equal power to vote. The fact that the Sangha has lasted over 2,500 years is testimony to his wisdom.

Although the Bhikkhu Sangha, the order of monks, was quickly established, the Bhikkhuni Sangha, the nuns, took a little longer to form, and came about through the unswerving efforts of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. She had been the Buddha's stepmother, his mother's sister, in fact, who died on giving birth to the Buddha. Once the Buddha's father Suddhodana died, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī found herself free of family, so she decided to see if she could join the order as a monk. She went to ask the Buddha for ordination. He refused her three times.

This seems to have been a ritual in those times to test the sincerity of the candidate. To refuse twice, but to accept the third time. Even now, Buddhists take the refuges three times, preserving this tradition of expressing one's determination. It was unusual to be refused a third time. However, Mahāpajāpatī was not going to be disheartened. She and a small group of women with her donned the yellow robe and went again to seek the Buddha, who was over 150 miles away at Vesāli. They arrived, exhausted and bedraggled, and again asked the Buddha three times, and again he refused to contemplate a bhikkhuni order.

A lot of Westerners are now inclined to accuse the Buddha of sexism, but I think that's to look at it through 20th century eyes. To understand the Buddha's response, and to be fair, we need firstly to recognize just what a revolutionary he was for his times in many other ways, and secondly, what the status of women was in that society which made such an idea seem out of the question.

He was a revolutionary, for instance, in his attitude to animal slaughter, especially the use of animals for sacrifice. It is said it was the Buddhists and their allies who eventually put an end to this useless ritual. He also condemned the caste system, which he destroyed in his own order.

When it came to women, the prejudice against them went deeper still. One need only read the book of Manu to see that women were reduced to chattels. For instance, a man was able and indeed had to read the scriptures, the Vedas, and had to have sacrifices made in order to achieve spiritual advancement. A woman was unable and indeed forbidden to do this. She was told it was enough to be a good wife.

Now there was not only this prejudice against women which firmly tied them to the household and which labelled them unable to have certain spiritual training or that it was needed or warranted, there was also the conditions of the ascetic life itself as it was led in those days. In the Buddha's time monasteries as a place where monastics dwelt all the time were very rare indeed. Most ascetics anyway preferred to live the wanderer's life going into seclusion into the forest and searching out alms food in the villages and towns. Often they lived under trees and in caves, taking shelter in a monastery only during the four months of the monsoon. It was indeed a hard life, even by the standards of those times.

What is more, the forests were the hideouts for bandits and criminals, not to talk of wild tigers. The idea of women wandering about even in groups would have seemed a wanton carelessness, asking for trouble.

So the lack of precedence, the hardship of the life — remember also that Mahāpajāpatī was a court lady — plus the dangers of the lifestyle, would have seemed great obstacles.

However, the Buddha did finally agree, and it came about through the intervention of Ānanda, his attendant and personal assistant during the last twenty years of his life. He asked the Buddha if it were possible for women to achieve the highest goal and become arahats. The Buddha said yes. If so, replied Ānanda, shouldn't they be given the same opportunity as men to live the *brahmacarya*, the holy life? The Buddha agreed, and so the bhikkhunī order was established.

However, he added eight extra rules to the Vinaya, the discipline, for the nuns, which established the relationship of the bhikkhunī order to the bhikkhu order. The bhikkhunī are the junior order. Again, this need not be interpreted as sexist. In our society, when the three armed forces are together at a ceremony, the navy, being the most senior service, stands first, then the army, and then the air force in order of seniority.

Unfortunately, the bhikkhunī order died out about a thousand years ago in the Theravāda tradition, though it is still very much alive in the Chinese Mahāyāna schools. These days there are many women and men who wish to reinstate the order, but to do so there needs to be a bhikkhunī. Catch-22.

What we do have today is women who have taken the eight precepts, which include the vow of celibacy. In Thailand they dress in white, in Burma pink. Here in Britain there are also nuns who have taken ten precepts of the lower order of sāmaṇerī. They are wearing brown robes. There is also a society, the Saṅghamittā, called after the daughter of the Emperor Asoka, the arahant Saṅghamittā, who went with her brother to Sri Lanka and converted the country to Buddhism. This organisation is working for the re-establishment of a bhikkhunī saṅgha. Tibetan Buddhism also lacks the full order of bhikkhunī, and the Dalai Lama has taken a great interest in this movement.

It's difficult to know what will happen, but I myself am optimistic. Once there is a large enough caucus of women wanting the higher ordination, and the Buddhist community feels it just won't peter out, the question of Ānanda will once more be invoked, and a formula will be established to reinstitute the

bhikkhunī order.

So what are the duties and responsibilities of the monastics? Taking for granted that they must try to live the brahmacarya, the holy life, their two specific duties are to study the teachings, the Dhamma, and to practise the meditation, vipassanā. To teach is only a duty in itself if asked to do so. Within a year of his first discourse, the Buddha sent monks off in all directions: "Go forth, monks, for the benefit of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world."

Because monks cannot teach unless they are asked, Buddhism has not developed into a proselytising religion. People will come forward because of their interest and maturity. There's no need to convert.

What about the other two orders, the lay women and the lay men, the upāsikā and the upāsaka? The Buddha also left many guidelines — the five precepts and all sorts of advice concerning family relationships and social responsibilities. It also became a tradition for lay people to spend every half moon in the monastery and to take eight precepts for that day. This is still followed in the East.

The relationship of the lay orders with the monastics is crucial to the well-being of Buddhism. The monastics depend upon the lay people for the four requisites: food, shelter, clothing and medicine. It is considered to be the lay person's responsibility to see that the physical needs of the monks and nuns are met. The lay people, in turn, look to the monastics for help concerning everyday problems of social or personal nature, but especially for spiritual guidance. They see the monks and nuns as the guardians of the Dhamma.

Although lay people hold monastics in veneration and show them high respect, they have also the duty to see to it that the Vinaya, the discipline, is preserved and well followed. There was a case, even in the Buddha's time, of a quarrel that arose between two monks and their followers at Kosambī. It was a dispute as to whether one of the monks had broken the Vinaya, the discipline, or not. The Buddha had come to sort out the quarrel, but they wouldn't listen to him, so he went off to live by himself in the forest. When the lay people heard about this, they refused to support the monks until they had gone to the Buddha, apologised and taken his advice. In this way they were forced to seek an end to their quarrelling.

It is not unknown even these days for lay people to stop supporting monks who are not following the Vinaya. So here we see quite a clever interdependent interrelationship the Buddha contrived to establish between the monastics and the lay saṅghas.

These days, however, the word saṅgha is used to refer only to the monastics. But this use of the word must not be confused with its other meaning: the Ariya Saṅgha, the community of saints Buddhists take refuge in.

Indeed, do not expect monks and nuns to be perfected enlightened ones. In the Buddha's time, there was a certain monk called Dabba the Mallian, who on becoming an arahant and wondering how best to serve the Dhamma, offered to take care of the monks' lodgings. The Buddha agreed it was a worthwhile thing to

do. Dabba then set about dividing the monastic grounds into separate areas. In one part, he put all those who were interested in the discourses, so they could rehearse and discuss them. In another part, he put all those interested in the Vinaya, the discipline, for the same reason. He chose a quiet area for those who wished simply to meditate. And there was a special area designated for those who indulged in low talk and were athletic.

So it would be a great mistake to see the saṅgha as a ready-made supermarket of arahats. On the other hand, it would be unjust to see them as a band of rogues. Monks and nuns are simply ordinary people who have decided to live in a particular way. Some do it with consummate dedication. Others, shall we say, bide their time.

The Ariya Saṅgha, the noble ones in whom Buddhists take refuge, are in fact those who have intuited Nibbāna and have entered the paths. But this saṅgha may belong to any of the orders. There is a very strong tradition of lay people achieving insight. Early this century there was an arahant in Burma called Sunlun Sayadaw, an illiterate farmer who achieved the third path before becoming a monk.

The reason such people are taken as refuge is because of their knowledge — their experiential knowledge — of the third noble truth, the end of suffering. They are the past and living examples of the truth of the Dhamma. Furthermore, because now they know for themselves, their faith in the Buddha Dhamma is unshakeable. By putting confidence in such people, Buddhists reinforce their own confidence. When you see a dentist's certificate, you have more confidence in the treatment and more confidence in yourself to undertake the treatment.

Furthermore, their importance lies in the fact that they are the very purpose for which the Buddha worked so tirelessly for forty-five years. For what is the point of the Dhamma if it is not to get people to that enlightenment? What is the point of the four saṅghas if not to support those individuals who have the necessary perfections to achieve the highest goal?

So, to take refuge in the noble saṅgha, the saints, is to aspire to be one of their number.

Well, I hope this talk has been interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the Nibbānic peace within.

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