

Buddhist Monks and Nuns from the Buddha's time till now

From

BANNER OF THE ARAHANTS

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Chapter II

The Beginnings of the Sangha

Stream-winning and Arahantship—four more Arahant Bhikkhus—Buddhas and Arahants—meanings of Sangha—Arahants and attachment—the Holy Life—Going forth—Story of Yasa—Exhortation to the 60 Arahants—1st, 2nd and 3rd methods of ordination (acceptance)—the 30 Bhikkhus—the three Kassapa brothers—the pair of Foremost Disciples—the lives and verses of some Arahants.

Venerable Añña-Kondañña had only to hear one discourse of the Buddha to gain Stream-winning, the first glimpse of Nibbána and of Enlightenment. But he did not become Arahant or perfectly enlightened immediately, and before this could happen, the Buddha had to teach a second profound discourse (on the Mark of Non-self[1]). Before he did this he instructed the four other ascetics, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahánáma and Assaji until they too attained the Stream. When all five were Stream-winners, then, the Buddha taught about non-self—how we wrongly identify mind and body as 'self' or 'soul'—and how such identification should be avoided—by the giving up all attachment to the concept 'I am'—and as a result of this, all five won Arahantship. At the conclusion of this discourse those four ascetics also asked to become Bhikkhus.

What distinguishes a Buddha from an Arahant? Both are enlightened, free from pollution and defilement, both have penetrated the Four Noble Truths but one who does so first, “the discoverer of the undiscovered Way“ is a Buddha. He is like a man who in utter darkness lights a great fire so that many can see. Indeed he is called the Kinsman of the Sun for this reason. Those who hear and practise his teaching, having enough wisdom to realise its light is spread further.

The word Arahant, literally ‘one who is worthy’ (to accept homage, alms food, etc.) is also used of the Buddha, who was the first. With those five Bhikkhus as well it is said, “Then there were six Arahants in the world.“

One or two Bhikkhus do not constitute a Sangha, for which there has to be a quorum of at least four. So the Sangha came into existence when those four Arahants requested to become Bhikkhus.

“Sangha” can have two meanings: any order of Bhikkhus four or more in number is a *bhikkhusangha*; and the community of all people who have seen Nibbána, whether they have had only a glimpse—and so become Noble Ones such as Stream-winners,

Once-returners, Non-returners, or whether they are Arahants able to enjoy the bliss of Nibbána whenever they wish—all are the *Ariyasangha* or Noble Sangha. Lay people may well become Stream-winners, Once-returners and Non-returners; but if a layperson becomes an Arahant it is suitable for him or her to become a monk or nun[2]. Lay life is bound-up with craving, but an Arahant has none, and life can best be led in the Sangha where craving is not a necessary adjunct to life. Why is this?

Let us take the case of those first five Bhikkhus. To what indeed could they have been attached even before they became Arahants? They had lived in the forest and meditated at the foot of trees. They maintained their bodies on food collected on alms round when they walked silently and householders placed cooked food in their earthenware bowls. These ascetics covered their bodies with rags picked up from rubbish heaps. These they washed, sewed together and then dyed a brownish orange with earthen-colours. Back in those days, when they were sick they made-up simple medicines from roots and bark, fruits and herbs, one of the commonest (to relieve fevers) is still used in India: myrobalan fruits pickled in fermented urine. As far as possessions went, there was not much to be attached to! These four, clothing, food, shelter and medicine, were the basic

requirements for a human being but in lay life they became elaborated and extended by craving into hundreds of thousands of things, all of which are thought to be 'necessary' for happiness. Those first six Arahants, who lived with just the bare necessities, were supremely happy for they were without attachment to worldly things and to any idea of 'self.' They had no attachment to mind and body, which they saw were processes continuing, while life lasted, until the complete attainment of Nibbána, which followed at the break-up of the body.

The purpose of this life, as stated by the Buddha himself was to discover in oneself the end of *dukkha*, which is the end of craving. In the beginning, no directions were necessary while the Sangha was composed of Arahants and other Noble Ones who caused no harm, either to others or to themselves, lead the holy life and so needed no rules or regulations. It is said in a commentary that no serious offence against the holy life was committed by anyone in the Sangha for the first twenty years. Those not yet enlightened, however, still having biases towards greed, aversion, delusion and fear in their minds would be in need of some rules to guide them. To this end, the Bhikkhus' way of life later became regulated by the Buddha.

The 'Holy Life,' what does this mean? This word in Pali (the language spoken by the Buddha) is *brahmacariya*. *Brahma* here has the sense of 'purity' or 'excellence' and *cariya* can only be rendered reasonably well by an archaic English word 'faring' meaning both going and practising. This means the practice is made with effort, which is excellent and strives towards further excellence or purity. Therefore it means going against the current of passions and defilements—all kinds of greed, lust and attachment, all sorts of anger, hatred and violence, rooting out even the defilements connected with delusion: dullness, sloth, boredom, distraction, worry, depression, uncertainty, pride and fear. So the *brahmacariya*, the way of pure practice also implies chastity, as sexual relations always have an element of lust in them.

When one is able to leave behind sex, one is able to go beyond the many requirements for the household life. All that goes along with sexual relations with another, the money needed for a family and its very many needs, all can be dispensed with by the Bhikkhu.

Some people will say, "Oh, this is just escape! It's running away from responsibilities! Escaping from the real world!" But it is not the good Bhikkhu who 'escapes'; it is people pursuing their numerous

sense-pleasures who try to do so. Whenever an unpleasant defilement arises, say boredom, they escape by turning towards some attractive object of the senses. But Bhikkhus cannot escape in this way because they do not (or should not) have the possibilities for escape. They cannot evade defilements, the causes of *dukkha* in their own minds, in this way, so they have the splendid opportunity instead to be mindful of the arising and passing away of these defilements. When one is mindful and cultivates insight like this it is called the beginning of seeing the world as it really is. Confused minds, lacking mindfulness, never understand this world; they are too attached to it. Thus the Bhikkhu's life is lived free from family responsibilities and all the worries, which are a usual accompaniment, so that he can deal with his mind.

Sometimes one hears the expression used of a Bhikkhu that: “He renounced the world.” This is not a Buddhist way of describing the renunciation of household life. One cannot “renounce the world” because even if one goes from the middle of a crowded city to stay in a cave far up some mountain slope, remote from humanity, ‘the world’ goes with such a person. Memories and thoughts do not get left behind! Furthermore, the Buddha calls this mind and body ‘the world’ and mind-body continue, changing endlessly according to

kamma and other causes, until Arahantship is reached and then lived out, when there is an end. The Buddha used the expression, “Going forth from home to homelessness,” to describe the person who ceased to be a householder and took upon himself the training of a Bhikkhu.

Ordination as a Bhikkhu will be outlined below. This procedure of ordination is called “ordination of the body,” that is, hair and beard are shaved off and the new Bhikkhu from that time on wears the yellow robes. These are the outward marks of his renunciation of those pleasures, which are enjoyed by the householder. Then, by this practice he has to cultivate inner renunciation—the attitude of turning away from any matters in which greed and craving are involved. This is known as “ordination of the heart” for the heart or mind usually only follows slowly what has been accomplished quickly in the ordination procedure. Of course, there are some people who in the lay state can practise so well that their power of renunciation is very strong and they do not need the “ordination of the body.” But even so, in Buddhist countries many people who are like this become ordained so that their practice is unimpeded by the troubles of lay life.

So the reason for doing this, often repeated in the Suttas (or Discourses of the Buddha) runs like this, “Lord, as I understand the Dhamma given by the Exalted One, it is not possible while living in a household to lead the holy life as utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell. Lord, I wish to shave off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe and go forth from the home life into homelessness.” This is what one young man, Ratthapála[3], said to the Buddha. Sometimes the household life is said to be “crowded and dusty“ (with the dust of passion) “while life gone forth is wide open“ as the Buddha proclaims he felt at the time of his own Going-forth. The same reasons apply today to those who go forth, not for reasons of tradition, but because they want time to practise the whole of the Buddha's Dhamma.

Perhaps some people will say that Going-forth to find the way beyond *dukkha* is selfish, an aim which brings little fruit. But the Buddha did not see it like this. Once a young Brahmin came to visit him and stated that his Brahminical sacrifices were of great fruit to many people whereas the Going-forth benefited only one person. The Buddha replied with his own case: that after Going-forth and by great efforts reaching Enlightenment, he then was able to teach the way to innumerable people some of whom benefited to the utmost

extent by becoming Arahants. (See, Sangáraya Sutta, AN 3:60).

One who goes forth must spend some time, usually a number of years, with Teachers who guide his learning and practice. But when this period of training ends, then possessed of learning and good practice, perhaps with penetration of the Dhamma too, he can teach and help others on the way beyond *dukkha*. It is like a medical student who must spend some years at study and practice before he can perform delicate operations on the body. After he is qualified and experienced as a doctor, he will be able to remove bodily *dukkha* from his patients. The well-trained Bhikkhu likewise, can help remove mental *dukkha* from those who seek his advice.

Many of the first Bhikkhus in the Sangha did not have to spend much time at practice before penetration of the Dhamma. As with the first five Bhikkhus, so it was with the next one, a rich young man called Yasa.^[4] He became disenchanted with his pleasure-filled life, and one night after seeing his dancing girls and musicians strewn around the floor sleeping and looking like so many corpses, he wandered out of his palace. As he wandered he exclaimed of his life, “It is fearful, it is oppressive!” (That such a young man should speak these words shows his spiritual eminence). The Buddha heard him

and calling to him, said, “This is not fearful, this is not oppressive. Come, Yasa, sit down. I shall teach you Dhamma.” When Yasa heard this he rejoiced, and after listening to a gradual Dhamma talk: on giving, moral conduct, the heavens, the dangers, vanity and defilement of sensual pleasures, the advantages of renunciation, then on the Teaching peculiar to the Buddhas—the Four Noble Truths, he attained with a spotless mind to the Eye of Dhamma, “Whatever has the nature to arise, all that has the nature to cease.” He became a Stream-winner at this time.

As Yasa’s mother and father worried about his absence, his father sent out search parties and he went to look for him. When the father came to the Buddha he too listened to Dhamma and became a Stream-winner, but while the sermon was being given and Yasa was listening to it, he attained Arahantship. So when the father knew that Yasa had become an Arahant and consequently could not return to a life of pleasurable indulgence, he praised his son, and invited the Buddha and Yasa as his attendant-Bhikkhu to his house for the meal that day. Yasa's father became the first lay disciple to go for Refuge to the Buddha—the Enlightened One, the Dhamma—the Path to Enlightenment, and the Sangha—the Community of those who have attained Enlightenment by following that Path.

When Yasa also asked to be accepted as a Bhikkhu, the Buddha answered, “Come Bhikkhu, well-expounded is Dhamma. Live the holy life for the complete ending of *dukkha*.” Then, Yasa became the seventh of the Arahants.

At the offering of food in Yasa's former house, his mother and former wife both listened to Dhamma and became Stream-winners. They were the first laywomen to go for Refuge to the Three Treasures: The Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

Now Yasa was a well-known young man; so when four of his friends: Vimala, Subáhu, Puóóaji, Gavampati, all of them sons of leading merchant families in Benares, heard that he had become a Bhikkhu they said amongst themselves that it must be an extraordinary Teaching which would cause Yasa to leave home. They went to see him and he took them to the Buddha asking him to teach them. After they had listened to his gradual Dhamma-talk they also became Stream-winners, and asked to become Bhikkhus and then, after being instructed from time to time by the Buddha, also attained Arahantship. So there were eleven Arahants in the world.

Yasa had more friends and acquaintances in the countryside,

also from the merchant class. Fifty young men from these families got together and went to visit venerable Yasa. They attained Arahantship in exactly the same way as his four friends mentioned above. The only difference is that we are not told their names either here or anywhere else in Buddhist scriptures. Their names were forgotten in the course of time, and it may be that they passed away during their subsequent wanderings far afield in remote parts.

The Buddha spoke to those Bhikkhus the words so often quoted in connection with spreading the Dhamma: “Bhikkhus, I am free from all shackles whether human or divine. You are free from all shackles whether human or divine. Go now and wander for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of gods and men. Teach Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle and good in the end, both in the spirit and the letter. Explain the holy life that is utterly perfect and pure. There are beings with little dust in their eyes that will be lost through not hearing Dhamma. But some will understand Dhamma. I shall go to Uruvelá, to Senanigama, to teach Dhamma.” We should note that these inspiring words were spoken to Arahants, not to ordinary men still with passions.

Then we must picture those Bhikkhus, who were truly great men, after paying homage to the Buddha's feet, taking their robes and bowls and setting-off one in this direction and two or three in that. A thin small ripple of yellowish robes spreading out over the countryside from the Deer Park outside Benares. Though few in number how great was the movement that they started! When people asked them questions what profundity and directness there was in their answers! Those words spoken by them were born out of pure, compassionate hearts, desire less, hate less and brilliant with penetrating wisdom. With emissaries like this the Dhamma was sure to spread.

From amongst the people who heard Dhamma from these Arahants a number wished to take up Dhamma-practice full-time, unobstructed by worldly activities. They requested those venerable ones to accept them as their disciples. But the Arahants told them that they must go with them and receive the words of acceptance from the Buddha himself. Then those Arahants would bring their pupils all the way back to the Deer Park even though the way was rough and travelling difficult.

The Buddha, after considering this matter, then allowed the

Bhikkhus to give the going-forth and acceptance to those who asked for it. Hair and beard had to be shaved-off, the applicant clothed in the yellow-dyed lower robe like a sarong, with the upper robe over the left shoulder, leaving the right one bare. He must then pay homage three times to his Teacher's feet after which, kneeling down with his hands held palms together, he should say: "To the Buddha, I go for Refuge, to the Dhamma I go for Refuge, to the Sangha I go for refuge. For the second time to the Buddha ... Dhamma ... Sangha I go for Refuge. For the third time to the Buddha ... Dhamma ... Sangha I go for Refuge."

This is the second stage in the development of the Going-forth and Acceptance as Bhikkhus. The first, the words spoken by the Buddha for instance to Yasa (see above), was called the "Come-Bhikkhu-acceptance." The revised method is known as "Acceptance by Going to the Three Refuges." The procedure for becoming a Bhikkhu changes once more to the form used today.

It was found that the second method of Acceptance did not deal with a number of matters which arose so that some undesirable people with wrong motives and the wrong intentions became Bhikkhus. To rectify this, the Buddha, when such cases came to his

attention, laid down matters which should be clear before Acceptance, (such as possession of one's own bowl and robes), as well as other matters which qualify or disqualify a person from Bhikkhu-hood. (For an outline of the procedure see Appendix II).

The third method, as finally laid down by the Buddha, incorporates the second stage, which now becomes the way of Going-forth to become a Sámāóera or novice. It is followed by a procedure in which the Sangha of not less than five Bhikkhus gathers first to hear the motion chanted that so-and-so requests Acceptance and then listens in silence to three announcements of this fact. So long as the text for this formal act of the Sangha is completely and perfectly recited and so long as no Bhikkhu in that Sangha speaks, the motion is 'carried'—by silence. If any objections are raised then the act has no validity.

Finally in this chapter, the Buddha's acceptance of a further thirty Bhikkhus, the conversion of the Kassapa brothers, the arrival of his foremost pair of disciples, and some stories of individual Arahant Bhikkhus, should be mentioned.

When he was on his way to the area around Gayá where the three

brothers Kassapa and their disciples lived, he stayed for a while in a wood. A party of thirty young men came from the town to that place to enjoy the coolness of the forest, most with their wives and servants. One of them was unmarried and had brought along a prostitute as his companion but she ran off with his valuables while they were enjoying themselves. Everyone searched for her but instead of finding her, they came across the Buddha seated in another part of the wood.

When they asked him if he had seen a woman, he said, “Young men, what have you to do with a woman?” They told him what had happened and he said, “What do you think about this, then; which is better for you—that you should seek a woman or that you should seek yourselves?” They replied that it was better to seek for themselves, so the Buddha invited them to sit down and listen to Dhamma. After paying homage to him and listening to a gradual discourse on Dhamma, they all became Stream-winners and then asked to become Bhikkhus. The Buddha accepted them with the ‘Come-Bhikkhu’ formula.

We are not told what happened to this group of thirty. It seems that they did not accompany the Buddha on his journey to Gayá as

he had, apparently, no company when he was with the Kassapas.

The Buddha, meanwhile, first went on to seek the eldest of the brothers, Uruvelá Kassapa. He was the teacher of five hundred ascetics who had coiled or matted hair, and practised various ceremonies, such as fire-worship and austerities such as baptising themselves in the icy river during the winter to wash away their sins. As he was teacher of such a large number his fame spread far and wide so that he received abundant offerings.

He could not be taught by the usual methods of instruction for he had become proud of his reputation, so the Buddha employed various special means to impress him. Sometimes these means are wrongly called 'miracles' but there is nothing miraculous about them. Although they are certainly out of the ordinary they also become possible by cause and effect; they are not powers granted from above. As Gotama the Buddha had penetrated all the darkness of the mind with the brilliance of his Enlightenment, such 'super-knowledges,' as they are called, became possible for him. However, he rarely used them, and then only when the usual methods of teaching would not work.

In this case, to break Uruvelá Kassapa's pride he had to accomplish many strange things and though the ascetic was impressed by them, thinking, “The Samaóá Gotama is very powerful,” yet he also thought, “But he is not an Arahant like me.” Uruvelá Kassapa really thought that he had got to the highest attainment and so could learn nothing further. Finally, the Buddha seeing that the ascetic would not be moved to declare himself a pupil once again, said to Uruvelá Kassapa, “You are neither an Arahant nor on the way to becoming one. There is nothing you do by which you might become an Arahant or enter into the way of becoming one.” These words shocked Kassapa into awareness of his own imperfection so that he and all his disciples became Bhikkhus. Similarly, his brothers and their disciples amounting to another five hundred ascetics also asked for Going-forth and Acceptance.

To them all, a thousand or more Bhikkhus, the Buddha addressed the Disquisition on Fire, his third recorded discourse: “Bhikkhus, All is burning. What is the All? Eye is burning, sight objects are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye contact is burning ... Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion ...” All of them attained Arahantship at the conclusion of the discourse. Again, of all this vast concourse

we know only the names of their leaders, the three Kassapas, of Uruvelá, of the River, and of Gayá. Some of the other Arahants from this assembly may be among those relatively unknown enlightened elders whose verses are included in the collection known as Verses of the Elder Monks (Theragáthá—see end of this chapter).

Even though the Buddha had now so many enlightened Bhikkhus some of them famous either in lay society or in the religious life, he did not proclaim any of them as his foremost disciples. This he did only a little later when the venerable Sáriputta and Moggallána came to join him. They had been friends from their youth and as young men became disillusioned with the amusements and pleasures of the world. Having made a compact to tell each other about the Deathless State (Nibbána), should either of them win to it, they journeyed all over India discussing with Teachers and meditating with them. But they could not find a Teacher who knew the way.

Eventually Venerable Sáriputta saw the Arahant Assaji, one of the first five Bhikkhus and sure from his composure that he had won to the Way, approached and asked him questions. The venerable Assaji modestly said that he could not expound Dhamma in detail

but would do so in brief. He said:

“The Tathágata has told the cause
of dhammas causally arisen
and of their cessation too—
thus proclaims the Great Samaóá.”

So bright and quick was venerable Sáriputta's wisdom in comprehending conditionality that with the first half of this verse he became a Stream-winner. (When we hear it, or see it, the profundity in the verse has to be explained to us, demonstrating how dull our minds are). After honouring his Teacher, venerable Sáriputta went to inform his friend, who after hearing the same verse from him also attained to the Fruit of Stream-winning.

Then both of them proceeded to honour the Buddha's feet and be acclaimed by him as his foremost pair of Bhikkhu disciples. Both attained Arahantship soon after, venerable Moggallána after a week and venerable Sáriputta when a fortnight had gone by. [5]

The Sangha had grown to great numbers, and in a very short

time. With the Dhamma perfectly expounded by the Buddha, all who wore the Bhikkhu's robes were then Noble Ones, attained to the insights of Stream-winning, Once-returning, Non-returning or won to the Enlightenment or the Arahant. Difficult situations did not arise with such Noble Ones nor were evil actions done by them; so the Sangha needed little regulation as yet.

As a fitting conclusion for this chapter let us look at some brief accounts of the lives of a few Bhikkhus who became Arahants. There is a collection of their verses in [6] which they describe how they lived prior to ordination, how they came to ordain and their Enlightenment experience afterwards. Out of the two hundred and fifty nine Theras (here meaning Arahant monks) just sixteen have been chosen here to show the range of different sorts of people and their experiences. A similar selection of enlightened bhikkhunìs' poems will be given in Chapter VII.

First comes Vira, who was a son of a minister to King Pasenadi. His name means 'hero' and fittingly he became a great athlete and a warrior. When he married and a son was born to him he saw the troubles in the round of birth-and-death, and so went forth to homelessness and making great effort attained Arahantship. Then his

former wife tried to lure him back to her in various ways and venerable Vira said, “This woman, desiring to seduce me, is like one wishing to shake Mount Sumeru with the wing of a gnat!” And he showed her the futility of her actions by reciting this verse:

Who was hard to tame is by the Taming tamed,
a hero, contented, from all doubts released,
victor over all, completely rid of fear,
Vira stands firm and Quenched[7] perfectly.

[8]

The woman hearing him was deeply moved and thought, “My husband has won to this—what good is domestic life to me?” She went forth as a Bhikkhuni and soon attained Arahantship.

In the case of Sundara-samudda it was not a wife who tried to lure him back to lay life and its pleasures but a prostitute engaged for this purpose by his grieving parents. He came of a wealthy merchant family and his parents feared that the wealth of the family would be lost if their son continued in the Bhikkhu life. They promised that woman the hand of their son in marriage if she could prevail upon

him to disrobe. Accordingly she invited him upon alms round to receive alms food from her at the house door on the first day, later inviting him to sit within the house and finally persuading him to take his food alone with her upon the house's topmost floor. Then she tried to seduce him. The Thera perceiving her efforts and their effects upon himself, resolved to make a supreme effort and sitting there won to concentration, insight and Arahantship. Concerning this it is said:

Adorned she was, well-dressed
crowned with a garland, decked with gems,
her feet made red with lack
and sandals on—a prostitute
stood before me and sandals doffed,
holding her hands in reverence,
she spoke to me softly, sweetly
and with an opening compliment:
“Young you are for the going-forth!

Stay within my Teachings[9] here,
enjoy the pleasures of mankind
and I indeed shall give you wealth.
This I promise you in truth
(or if you doubt my words)
I'll bring you fire and swear!,[10]
And when I saw that prostitute
beseeching me, hands reverent,
adorned as she was, well dressed too,
just like a death's snare laid,
thorough application of mind arose,
the danger was revealed and then weary
with the world was evenness established.
Then my mind was free!
See the Dhamma's normality!
Possessed is the triple knowledge, [11]

done is the Buddha's Sásana.

(459-465)

Isidinna was another merchant's son born in western India but eventually heard the Buddha give a Dhamma talk and then became a Stream-winner. While he was still living as a householder a deity who had compassion for him roused him with these words:

I have seen laymen learned in Dhamma,

“Pleasures are transient,” so often they say

but passionately they are attached to

caring for children, jewellery, wife.

They know not the Dhamma as it really is

though often they say “O transient pleasures”

they're lacking the power to cut their desire

and therefore attached to children, wife and wealth.

(187-188).

When Isidinna heard this he was deeply moved and going forth, not

long after won Arahantship. And when he confessed his penetrative knowledge, he repeated these verses.

Satimattiya also spoke about laymen though in this case, about their faith. He came of a brahmin family and as a young man entered the Sangha and lived in the forest. His practice won for him Arahantship after which he lived instructing Bhikkhus and teaching lay people, especially the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. One family in particular had faith in him and his Dhamma-teachings and in that house there was a beautiful daughter who served him very respectfully with food. A hallucination resembling him appeared to her and the family and it seemed as though he took hold of her hand. She knew that it was not him but the others lost faith in him. The next day when he called to receive alms food he perceived their changed manner and investigating with his mind, knew what had happened. Then he explained to them what had really occurred and the householder begged his pardon, but the Thera to show his non-attachment spoke these verses:

Formerly with faith in me

you have it now no more,

what is yours is yours alone,

no bad conduct here I've done.

Faith changes and is shakeable,

this indeed I've seen.

Folk respect, then disrespect

but why should a wise man waste?

A sage's food, little by little,

is cooked in various families—

I'll go around for my little alms,

my legs are strong enough!

(246-248)

Also a Brahmin, Mahánáma, heard the Buddha teaching Dhamma and gaining faith, entered the Sangha. After receiving a meditation object from the Buddha, he retired to the seclusion of Mount Nesadaka. But he was not able to stop evil thoughts and desires arising and exclaimed “What use is life to me with this corrupted mind?” Disgusted with himself he climbed up to a steep place and prepared to throw himself down, first uttering this verse:

By this mountain found inferior,[12]
to ruin come on Mount Nesadaka,
far-famous with its many peaks,
all covered with woods of sálá.

(115)

While he was exhorting himself with this verse the Thera won insight and Arahantship so that this verse became his declaration of penetrative knowledge

Sappadasa too tried to kill himself out of despair because of his wandering mind. He was born as the son of King Suddhodana's ceremonial priest and therefore of brahmin stock. When the Buddha returned to his own people to teach them, Sappadasa obtained confidence and went forth. He was overpowered by defilements of mind, however, and so could not win one-pointedness of mind. Finally, he became so distressed that he got to the point of committing suicide, but then insight arose and Arahantship was attained. Declaring his perfect knowledge he said:

Five and twenty years since I went forth
and not so much as a finger-snap
of peaceful mind have I obtained
Never getting one-pointedness of mind

since afflicted by sense-desires,
lamenting and with arms outstretched
I went away from my dwelling-place.

Shall I, shall I take a knife—

what use is life to me?

Giving up training, such as I,

how am I to die?

Taking then my razor

I sat upon my couch

with the blade placed on my throat

to cut my own artery;

thorough application of mind arose in me,

the danger was revealed and then weary

with the world was evenness established.

Then my mind was free!

See the Dhamma's normality!

Possessed is the triple knowledge,

done is the Buddha's Sásana.

(405-410)

The Buddha taught that one is not a brahmin by birth but by deeds, a teaching mirrored in the story of Sunīta. He was born in a family of outcastes whose traditional work was to throw away the garlands and flowers used in peoples' homes, festivals and worship. One night as the Buddha sat in meditation of the Net of Great Compassion. Sunīta came to his knowledge and he saw the requirements for Arahantship in his heart, shining like a lamp within a jar. When dawn came the Buddha took his bowl and followed by the bhikkhus set out on almsround, until he came to the place where Sunīta was working. He was sweeping up rubbish into heaps, putting it into baskets which he then took away on a carrying-pole. (Now according to caste laws, outcastes such as Sunīta must not come into contact with or approach, those of the higher castes). Sunīta, seeing that the Buddha was filled with joy and finding no place to hide in on that road, placed his pole in a corner of a wall and stood as if stuck to the wall honouring the Buddha with his hands together. When the Buddha came near he said to Sunīta, 'What is this wretched way of life to you? Can you bear to go forth?' And Sunīta, experiencing the rapture of one who has been sprinkled with the Deathless, said: 'If even such as I, Exalted One, may in this life go forth, why should I not do so? May the Exalted One, having compassion on me, let me go forth!' And the Buddha said, 'Come,

bhikkhu!' and that was his Acceptance.

After hearing the Buddha's instructions he won attainments in due order until Arahantship—and Sakka and Brahma With their heavenly retinues came to pay him homage. Many bhikkhus hearing of his attainment, came to ask him questions—'From what family did you go forth?' 'Why did you go forth?' 'How did you penetrate the four Noble Truths?' Sunita told them the whole matter in these words:

Humble the clan in which I was born, poor and having little food, lowly the work I had to do—I threw away the flowers. I was despised by men, disregarded, reviled by them, so making my mind humble, respectful was I to many folk. Then I saw the All-Enlightened One revered and leading the bhikkhu-sangha, the Great Hero as he was entering the chief city of the Magadhese.[13] Laying down my carrying-pole, I approached to honour him, out of compassion just for me the Best-among-men stood still. Having honoured the Teacher's feet, then standing near at hand I requested the going-forth from

the best-of-beings-all. Then the Teacher compassionate, compassionate with all the world, spoke these words to me, 'Come bhikkhu' and that was my Acceptance. Afterwards I lived alone in the forest, diligent I did the Teacher's bidding as the Conqueror exhorted me. And in the first watch of the night I recollected my former lives; then in the night's middle watch the Eye Divine was purified and in the last Watch of the night I tore asunder the mass of gloom. Then as the day was dawning and the great sun arising, hither came Indra and Brahma too, their hands together revering me—'Homage to you, nobly born of men! To you homage, highest among men! Now your pollutions are destroyed, worthy of gifts you are, noble sir.' Then the Teacher seeing me revered by the deva-hosts assembled there, revealed a smile and spoke about this matter: 'By effort, by the Holy Life, by self-restraint and taming, by this one is a holy one, this is the highest holiness'. [14] (620-631)

Sumangala was also a poor man who earned a sparse living in the fields with a sickle, plough and mattock. One day when King

Pasenadi had given a great offering to the Buddha and the Bhikkhusangha, he saw this and thought, 'These Sakyan samaóas live in sheltered lodgings and have fine robes—what if I were to go forth too?' When he had gone forth, he took a meditation exercise to the forest, but he could not stand the solitude and thought to return to his village. But as he went along, he saw peasants in the fields working hard with soiled clothes, covered with dust and seared by hot winds, and it occurred to him how much misery they had in their lives. So roused to great exertion by this, he attained Arahantship and to celebrate his emancipation from suffering he uttered this verse:

Free from three crooked things, free indeed!

Free from my sickle, plough and mattock!

Even though they are here, ever here,

Enough of them for me, enough of them!

Meditate, Sumangala, meditate, Sumangala!

Live diligently, O Sumangala.(43)

Kappapakura was even worse off since, born of a poor family,

as a boy the only way he could support himself was to go round clad in rags and begging for rice—hence his nickname 'Rags-and-rice'

(Kappapa-kura). Later, he lived by cutting and selling grass. One day engaged in cutting grass in the forest, he saw a Thera and sitting down near him, heard the Dhamma. Then he thought 'What is this wretched way of life to me?' and so entered the Sangha, putting his ragged cloth aside. Whenever discontent with the bhikkhu-life assailed him, he would go and look at his rags, put them on and then lead a layman's life again. He left the Sangha in this way, seven times and bhikkhus told the Buddha about him. One day, as he was a bhikkhu again, he sat nodding on the outside of the assembled bhikkhus while the Buddha was giving a Dhamma-talk. The Buddha admonished him with these verses (quoting Kappapakura's thoughts about his rags) :

`(Compared) with this painful and too heavy (robe), this is the rag of Kappapakura'; (who though having) Dhamma in measure full (likened to) a vessel containing Deathlessness, (yet) no step he takes to accumulate concentrations.[15] Do not nod off, Kappapa! Do not make me cuff (the Dhamma) into

your ear! Nothing indeed, Kappapa, have you learnt,
nodding off in the Sangha's midst. (199-200)

This strong exhortation of the Buddha pierced, as it were, even to his bones, and he thus managed to establish insight and soon attain Arahantship. Then he repeated these verses which had been his goad as his declaration of perfect knowledge.

In accordance with his past kamma, Dasaka, who was reborn in Sávatthi as the child of a slave of Anáthapióđika, would find a corner on the outskirts of the assembly and sit there snoring. To stir him the Buddha one day spoke this verse :

A dullard drowsy with much gluttony, engrossed in sleep, who wallows as he lies, like a great porker stuffed with fattening food, comes ever and again unto the womb.[16](17)

Aroused by this exhortation the Thera shortly afterwards won Arahantship.

Now we come to the verses of two boys, both called *Sopaka*, meaning 'of low caste' and both born poorly. The first of these boys

lost his father when young and was brought up by his uncle, who, instigated by his own son attempted to have Sopaka killed by taking him to the charnel-ground at night and there tying him to a corpse, thinking, 'The jackals will kill him.' But when the jackals came young Sopaka cried out for help and the Buddha at that time sitting in meditation saw his plight and that his heart contained the conditions for Arahantship. So he projected a vision of himself and spoke to Sopaka words of comfort, and the boy burst his bonds and went to where the Buddha stayed, already a Stream-winner. The Buddha later taught this boy's mother the Dhamma so that she won the fruit of Stream-winning while Sopaka, concealed from her, became an Arahant. Then, when the Buddha wished to give him the Acceptance[17] he asked him what later became called 'The Boy's Questions.' All the ten questions, beginning with 'What is the one?' (A. All beings are sustained by food), were answered accurately by Sopaka, so this was his Acceptance. Sopaka Thera told of his Acceptance in this way :

Seeing the Best-among-men pace up and down in the terrace's shade I approached him there and homage paid to the Chief-of-men arranging my robe right shoulder bare I placed my hands together then and

followed after the Stainless One, He who is Chief among beings all. Then He-who-knows, skilled questioner, questions asked of me and I, fearless and unafraid, replied to the Teacher then. When the questions had been answered the Tathágata commended me and turning to the Bhikkhu-sangha spoke about this matter :`For the Anganese and the Magadhese it's gain for them indeed,for them (whose gift of) robe and bowl, lodgings and medicine, reverence and conduct helpful, this one enjoys,—it's gain indeed! From this day onward, Sopaka, come and see me when you wish and let our discourse, Sopaka, be the Acceptance for you. At the age of seven from my birth the Acceptance I received, now any last body bearing. Ah! the Dhamma's normality! (480-486)

With the second boy, Sopaka's mother had great difficulties at his birth and fell into a coma. Relatives, thinking her dead, carried her with Sopaka still unborn, to the charnel-ground and began to cremate `the body' and having lit the pyre, went away. Rain put out the fire and Sopaka was born, though the mother died. The

watchman of that place adopted the boy who, when seven years old, came to the notice of the Buddha as he was seated in meditation. Realizing that this boy could win Arahantship, the Buddha went there and Sopaka rejoicing, saluted him. After obtaining the consent of the father, Sopaka became a member of the Sangha, the Buddha giving him the meditation-subject of loving-kindness (*mettá*). And after winning Arahantship through this method, Sopaka encouraged all the other bhikkhus and *sámaóeras* to practise in the same way—making no difference between those who are friendly, indifferent or hostile—for all alike; their love should be one and the same nature, including all states of existence, all beings in all ages :

As she would be good to her only son, so one should
be good to all beings everywhere. (33)

Brahmadatta was another bhikkhu who showed the power of his loving-kindness, though in his case, in the face of difficulties. He was a prince, son of the King of Kosala and saw the greatness of the Buddha when he was presented at the Jeta Grove. Having faith, he entered the Sangha and in due course attained Arahantship. One day on alms-round, a brahmin abused him but the Thera continued in silence. Again the brahmin reviled him and people commented on

the Thera's silence. At this, Brahmadata taught them Dhamma :

How can anger arise for the angerless,
tamed and living evenly,
freed by perfect knowledge,
tranquil, one who's `Thus'?¹

For he is worse when vilified
who then reviles the angry man,
but he who pays not back in kind
wins a battle hard to win.

For the benefit of both he lives—
himself and the other one,
knowing the other's anger
mindful he is and calm.

He is indeed healer of both,
himself and the other one,
yet people who know not Dhamma
think he is a fool.

That brahmin, hearing these words, asked both for forgiveness and for the Going-forth and practising the development of loving-kindness was taught in this way by Brahmadata Thera:

If anger should arise in you
reflect on the Simile of the Saw,²
if craving for flavours should arise
remember the Son's flesh Simile.³

If your mind runs craving pleasures and existences
bind it quickly with mindfulness

as a beast found eating corn.²

(441-446)

Out of loving-kindness and compassion, Passika helped his unbelieving kinsfolk. He came of a brahmin family and after gaining confidence in the Buddha, entered the Sangha. While he was practising, he fell sick and his relatives attended upon him and healed him. Greatly moved by the illness to the dangers in life, he increased his efforts and so won Arahantship. Afterwards, he established his kinsmen in the Refuges and Precepts, so that when they died rebirth took place in the heavenly realms. And when the Buddha asked him about his relatives, Passika Thera replied :

Though only I from unbelieving kin
had wisdom as well as confidence,
firm in Dhamma and possessed of virtue
this was for my relatives' good.

I rebuked my kinsmen,
from compassion urged them on

and relatives for love of me
served the bhikkhus well.
They, in due time, died,
gaining the joy of the Thirty-three,²
my mother and brothers rejoice
realizing their varied desires.

(240-242).

Another bhikkhu who was ill was Vakkali, born in a brahmin family and proficient in the three Vedas with their ritual. He one day saw the Buddha, and so great was his attraction that he left home for the homeless life, so that he could see more of his person. He followed the Buddha everywhere and never took his eyes off him until one day, laid low by illness, he could not see him any more. When bhikkhus saw that he was depressed, he explained to them that he could not see the Buddha and they arranged for the Buddha to visit him. The Teacher said to him 'What is there in seeing this vile body. He who sees Dhamma sees me—he truly sees me'.² Vakkali no longer gazed, but his attachment was still strong, so the Buddha sent

him away at the end of the Rains-retreat. Vakkali dwelt on the Vulture Peak near Rájagaha gradually maturing his insight but suffered from insufficiency of food, so one day the Buddha, visited him and said :

Brought low by colic as you are,
dwelling in the forest grove
where it is rough, with little food,
how, bhikkhu, will you fare?
With abundant bliss and rapture
suffusing this congeries,
even enduring what is rough
I shall dwell in the forest grove.

Developing bases of mindfulness,
the faculties and powers too,
the factors for Enlightenment,

I shall dwell in the forest grove.

Having seen my fellow-monks

resolutely making effort,

ever-strong in energy,

living together harmoniously,

I shall dwell in the forest grove.

Recollecting the Enlightened One,

Chief of the tamed with mind composed,

always diligent day and night,

I shall dwell in the forest grove.(350-354)

With these words the Thera aroused insight and attained Arahantship.

And now by way of a lighter interlude, here is Usabha who was born among the Buddha's own people, the Sakyans, and when the

Buddha visited his kinsfolk out of compassion for them, Usabha saw the Buddha's power and wisdom and having confidence, entered the Sangha. But all his days after this were passed in company with others while all his nights went in sleep, and he neglected all practice of Dhamma. One day, confused in mind and negligent, he dropped off to sleep and dreamt that he had shaved his head and beard, put on a purple cloak and then seated on an elephant, entered the town for almsfood! Seeing the people there he dismounted for shame and awoke then thinking, 'Why, it was a dream! Confused and unmindful I saw myself in sleep!' Roused by this incident he established insight and in due course won Arahantship. And as he had made the dream his road, so he celebrated it when declaring his perfect knowledge:

Putting on my shoulder

a robe the colour of mango-shoots,

seated on an elephant's neck

I entered the village for alms.

(ashamed) I dropped from the elephant

and profoundly moved (awoke).

At first on fire, then at peace

attained to pollutions' end.² (197-198).

Notes

[1] For a translation see *Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha*; Wheel No. 17, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka.

[2] It is incorrect to use the word 'sangha' for a group of lay Buddhists who do not constitute a Sangha in either of the accepted senses defined above.

[3] See the Discourse about him and by him in Appendix I.

[4] Most of the quotations in this chapter are from *The Life of the Buddha* translated from the Pali by Ven. Ñāóamoli Thera, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka.

[5] For a detailed account, see *The Life of Sáriputta*, Wheel No. 90/92. BPS

[6] The Elder Monks' Verses have been twice translated in the P.T.S. Translations Series (see, *Psalms of the Brethren/Sisters; Elders' Verses I/ II*). The translations appearing here, while they have been newly made by the writer, drawn on the previous renderings in some places. The writer readily acknowledges his debt to the

translators of both volumes.

[7] Quenched—put out the fires of lust, aversion, delusion and attained to the cool peace of Nibbána, to Arahantship.

[8] Numbers refer to verses in the text of the Elder Monks' Verses (Theragáthá).

[9] 'Teachings' is a translation of the religious term Sásana, left untranslated in the last line. Literally it means 'instructions' but covers all aspects of 'Buddhism' which is called the Buddhasásana in Buddhist lands.

[10] Swear an oath on fire or go through an ordeal by fire to 'prove' veracity.

[11] Triple knowledge described as the Enlightenment experience in Chapter I.

[12] 'found inferior' and 'to ruin come' attempt to convey the meaning of one difficult Pali verb.

[13] [Rájagaha \(modern Rajgir\)](#).

[14] The words translated 'Holy Life', 'holy one,' and 'holiness' are brahma cariya, brahman and brahmanam.

[15] Bracketted words are partly explanations supplied by the Commentary and partly guesswork The text seems rather corrupt—

meaningless if translated literally. There is as little of metre in the Pali of the first verse as in my rendering.

[16] Trans. Ven. Ñáóamoli Thera, in *The Guide* (Pali Text Society, London) This is also verse 325 of the Dhammapada (*The Path of Truth*, Mahamakut Press, Bangkok).

[17] This is an exceptional case since Sopaka was nowhere near twenty years old.