

The Sangha in Buddhist Countries

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Brief history of Theraváda— anonymity of Great Teachers—specialisation of Bhikkhus—‘the works of books’ and practice—popular Buddhism—ordination for custom or merit—Rains-Bhikkhus—disrobing—ritualism—why do people go to viháras?—why go to see Bhikkhus?—why Bhikkhus go to the houses of laypeople—wrong livelihood—the government of the Sangha—divisions in the Sangha—in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and other countries—buildings in a town vihára—in a forest vihára—some popular devotional verses.

Theraváda Buddhism gradually dwindled in northern India with the onslaught of anti-Buddhist activities by many brahmins intent on upholding the views and rituals of their religion. Other Buddhist schools also displaced the original tradition perhaps because they believed in sugaring the slightly bitter pill of the Four Noble Truths with sweet confections of bhaktic devotion, or else serving up complicated dishes of the Bodhisatta's path through aeons of striving. Had the Sásana remained a harmonious whole with numerous Arahants to adorn it, like jewels in a golden crown, there is no way that it could have declined.

In south India, Theraváda remained strong for many hundreds of years[1] aided by its firm establishment, in Sri Lanka. From these two bases Bhikkhus were invited to go to the Golden Land to reform the Buddhism, which had taken root there. This was not always Theraváda and the purity and good conduct of the Bhikkhus from Sri Lanka caused people to love them so that various sects, corrupting the Buddha-word, dwindled away. Theraváda spread through Burma due to the influence of those Bhikkhus and across into the Siamese kingdoms of Sukhotai and Ayudhya. Sinhalese-style Buddhism also spread up the Isthmus of Kra from Nakorn Sri Dhammaraj where there is still a great stupa in Sinhalese form. From Siam it reached Cambodia at the time when the Khmer Empire was going into decline and so replaced the costly cults of imperially sponsored Maháyána with a popularly based teaching. Theraváda in Laos, or the various princely states which now compose Laos, also originated in Siam but its spread was late, about 400 years ago. Thais, even those now within China, turned to Theraváda Buddhism which continues its spread in a small way within the borders of the present Buddhist states wherever there are hill-tribes or other ethnic minorities.

In brief this is the history of Theraváda Buddhism from the time of the Emperor Asoka down to the present. To some extent also, this

was the history of the Sangha though in some periods and some countries our knowledge is meagre. We have the names of a few prominent Bhikkhu-scholars and their Pali compositions but little or nothing of their lives. As to the other side of Theraváda, the Teachers of meditation and how and where they taught, usually we do not even have their names. The latter wrote books only rarely and so their fame was limited to their own days, to the times of their disciples and then gradually forgotten.

This of course, was in the great tradition of anonymity established by the Buddha himself. He did not instruct his Arahant disciples to record his own life, the early events of which he seldom mentioned, let alone wrote an account of it himself. The Arahants in the Buddha-time and later also did not set down their own biographies. If we know anything about them, it is because their own disciples, or the disciples of their disciples, thought it worthwhile to record the few events remaining in their minds. No doubt those who are Enlightened and so have no longer any view of 'self' or 'soul' find it uninteresting to record events from their own lives. It is for this reason that in the Buddhist countries of South and South-east Asia, few names are known of the great spiritual masters of even two or three hundred years ago. This anonymity has also been rendered by the steady turn of the wheel of change, including such such factors

as tropical climates and insects and, of course, war.

So now we come to the present time. We should examine one important question: Is the purpose of becoming a Bhikkhu now the same as it was in the Buddha's days? We have seen in Chapter IV that, even then, there was specialisation in the Sangha. Some made strong renunciation efforts in the forests by themselves or with a Teacher or a few companions. They aimed at and often attained the end of the Holy Life. They were Arahants of whom it was often said, "Birth is exhausted, the Holy Life has been lived out, what was to be done is done, there is no more of this to come." They numbered thousands and thousands in the days of the Buddha but the numbers of Bhikkhus who were not Arahants and whose aim was not directly Arahantship, was greater yet. Their aims were various, some of them approved for Bhikkhus and some not.

Among those whose aims accorded with the Dhamma were the reciter-bhikkhus, though sometimes too they would take up meditation practice when their learning was complete and they had passed it on to others. These reciters were the ancestors of the Bhikkhus engaged in scriptural study who are so numerous in Buddhist countries now. The pattern of development went something like this: In the Commentaries, the Sasana, the Buddha's whole range of teachings, his instructions or religion, was divided into the

Dhamma of thorough learning (*pariyatti*), the Dhamma of practice (*patipatti*) and the Dhamma of penetration (*pativedha*). These three are logically parts of a whole process. One goes to a Teacher and learns thoroughly, which means both learning by heart and reflection upon his teachings. Then one begins to practise according to those instructions, with the words and thoughts being turned to the Dhamma and then disappearing in meditation, until finally the Truth of Dhamma is penetrated in this very mind and body. For example, a Teacher would give a talk on impermanence, which his disciples would remember, more or less, according to their memories. Then they practised meditation in which change in mind and body is seen to be continuous. Finally some of them were liberated by persistent meditation from the view 'I am' and the notions of permanence, which trail along with it; they then flowed along with impermanence knowing it all the time, without any fear. These three stages are one explanation of why the Buddha's teachings are said to be "good in the beginning, good in the middle and good at the end."

Some Bhikkhus quite early on must have found learning more to their liking than intensive practice, which still means that they could be good Bhikkhus imbued with loving kindness and keeping strictly to the Vinaya. Other Bhikkhus, however, found a meditation Teacher quickly after their Acceptance, and practised under his

guidance caring little or nothing for the study of texts. In the Commentaries these two types have crystallised as 'the work of books' and 'the work of insight' and are regarded there, as down to the present day in Buddhist countries, as quite distinct. They are even attributed in the Commentaries to the days of the Buddha, a strange anachronism since there were then no books to study!

Thorough learning of oral texts eventually developed into 'the work of books' because of the Sangha's decision at the Fourth Council (in Ceylon, about 85 BC)[2] to write down the Three Baskets, the Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidhamma, on palm leaves rather than rely solely on continuing the oral repetition of them. When they had been written down, then other works explaining them could also be written, and thus began the production of Commentaries, sub-commentaries and works of all kinds, which continue to be produced in the Pali language down to our own days.

Another cause for the increased importance of books was that in moving the centre of Theraváda from the Gangetic valley to Sri Lanka, the language of Pali had to be used. In its home it was the peoples' language, perhaps a lingua franca over a wide area, but it was not intelligible without Pali study to people in Sri Lanka. So Pali became a 'dead' language, a unique one since it has only the Buddha's words enshrined in it, with the advantage over a living

tongue of not changing in words or concepts, so that the exact meaning of the Buddha can be ascertained by anyone who learns Pali well.

Also, during the early centuries of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese Bhikkhus decided that study was more important than meditation practice (an attitude which persists down to the present in Sri Lanka)[3] This attitude is stressed in some places in the Pali Commentaries but runs counter to the Buddha's own teachings. He did not arrive at Enlightenment by studying texts; only by practice, especially of meditation, did he reach the final attainment. In the Suttas, no encouragement is given to study divorced from practice.

To give an example, we have the Buddha's words in Dhammapada, (verses 19-20 quoted below) spoken about two Bhikkhus, one of whom became an expert on and famous teacher of texts with many pupils. The other got a subject of meditation and retired to the forest, after strenuous efforts attaining Arahantship. They met after a number of years and the teacher of texts, proud of his learning, decided to tax the Arahant with his lack of scriptural knowledge. The Buddha seeing how much harm the scholar would bring on himself by doing so went and questioned both of them on Dhamma. The scholar could explain only according to the texts and only some way but the Arahant could clarify subtle points of

Dhamma dealing with attainment. These were the Buddha's words on that occasion:

“Though often reciting sacred texts
the heedless man's no practicer,
as cowherd counting others' kine—
in Samaóaship¹ he has no share.
Though little reciting sacred texts
according to Dhamma he practises,
rid of delusion, lust and hate,
in wisdom perfect, a heart well-freed,
one who clings not here or hereafter—
in Samaóaship he has a share.”

Even though those Bhikkhus in the Fourth Council, most of whom are likely to have been from among the reciters, laid more stress on learning, the tradition of practice continued. Doubtless the Teachers of meditation, who may have been Noble Ones, even

Arahants, smiled to themselves, but it should also be remembered that, “Even if there would be a hundred or a thousand Bhikkhus arousing themselves to insight, if there would be no study of the doctrine, then there could be no realisation of the Noble Path.[4]” The practising Bhikkhus were little esteemed by those who wrote the books in Sri Lanka, but wise lay disciples, will have looked at it differently.

The help that lay people can get from a scholar and from one on the path to Enlightenment by practice, is different. The first gives the Buddha's words and the commentarial explanations and perhaps some illustrations of his own but the meditation Teacher, though he rarely quotes the Buddha and hardly ever the Commentaries yet offers advice from his own experiences. There is no question at all as to who keeps the Buddhasana alive: it is those who have realised its truth through practice and penetration. Great Enlightened Teachers of the present day emphasise that one should come back to study after one has done this, when the Buddha's words will have such profundity, as they could not have to the unenlightened, and be such a great help to formulating Dhamma and teaching it.

The venerable Ánanda when asked why the Buddha's teachings would decline,[5] replied that it was when people no longer practised

the four foundations of mindfulness.[6] And these are the key to successful meditation.

Fortunately, there are still a good number of Bhikkhus who engage in effort, mindfulness and meditation, in all Buddhist countries, especially Burma and Thailand. Certainly the proportion of Bhikkhus engaging in practice is much smaller now than was the case in the Buddha-time, while those who study are numerous.

Another factor, which has affected this change, is the popularisation of Buddhism. In Thailand, over 90% of the people are Buddhists. But this does not mean, as some idealists imagine, that they all practise meditation every day (and how different things would be then!) For many people, Buddhism is a vital part of their lives, but it consists of their own Buddhist cultural mixture. This will be composed of Buddhist festivals, occasions of making merit in their own homes and at the monasteries having their sons ordained as novices or Bhikkhus, and consulting Bhikkhus they know well on how to protect themselves against various dangers, also enquiring about what is likely to happen through astrology. Among these things, only making merit (by supporting the Sangha) and ordinations go back to the Buddha's time. Other features have been added later, as people desired them.

The Sangha is composed of the people and some remain monks for life, but others stay in the Sangha for periods ranging from days to many years and then leave to become householders again whenever they wish to do so. They bring with them superstitions from lay society, which may be dispelled by their Bhikkhu practice, but may not be.

This situation could be illustrated by picturing the most highly dedicated (always few in number) in the innermost of several concentric circles, while around them in ever increasing numbers, as one moves outwards, are the other classes of people. Where this is the case—and all human beings have the same basic characteristics—study is bound to appeal to a greater number, meditation to fewer.

Again, in Buddhist countries now, becoming a novice or a Bhikkhu may be for yet other reasons, such as custom and merit making for people who have died. It is a custom in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Burma for a young man to become a Bhikkhu for one Rains residence. Sometimes it is done for less than this, but occasionally the Rains Bhikkhus, as they are called in Thailand, stay on in the Sangha because they find the life to their liking.

This custom has both good and bad effects on the Sangha. The good effects are that Buddhist knowledge and conduct are carried

back into lay society when the Rains-Bhikkhu disrobes. Also, there is little feeling of strangeness about the Sangha among laymen, for they have been in the Sangha themselves. On the negative side is the worldly influence brought by the Rains-Bhikkhus into the monasteries, a worldliness that if there are many of them, easily rubs off onto the more permanent inhabitants. Also, much time and energy must be expended on these temporary monks, which could otherwise go into deeper learning or into more practice.

It is a custom to make merit for a dead relative or for some other loved and respected person (such as the king) by becoming a Bhikkhu for a few weeks or months and dedicating all one's good karmas or merits to the dead person. One might indeed help them provided that something good is practised but this custom too can be debased when the ordination alone, just dressing as a Bhikkhu, is considered to be sufficient. All this has changed the attitude to disrobing considerably, that is, to reverting to lay status.

In the Buddha's days most Bhikkhus ordained for life and could live happily all their days in robes because they practised the work of insight-meditation. (Even now, in Sri Lanka it is common for Bhikkhus to remain all their lives in the Sangha but as most of them are engaged in study, the result is not always so happy). Lay life was called by the Buddha the low state and often he spoke strongly about

not reverting to the low state. Certainly he allowed disrobing by Bhikkhus knowing that some would find the Holy Life impossible after some time, but he exhorted those like venerable Nanda[7] who thought of doing so to practise more intensively instead. In most Theraváda countries now, excluding Sri Lanka, disrobing carries no blame, indeed in Thailand the young man who has been a Rains-Bhikkhu and returned to his home is still called, in the countryside, *dit*, an abbreviation for *paóđita*, a wise man.

With the increased emphasis on study went a corresponding increase of ritual. This grew up in the Buddha's teachings, in its purest forms the most unritualistic of paths, firstly due to the more devotee-type of Bhikkhus and second, to the pressure exerted by lay people who wanted ceremonies to mark the principal events of life: birth, marriage and death. Indeed, something had to be provided, for if Buddhist ways of doing things were not available then the laity could turn, in India, to the brahmins and elsewhere to other pre-Buddhist priests.

But Bhikkhus have managed fairly successfully not to become 'priests.' The Dhamma, of course, supplies no basis for a Buddhist 'priest,' in the sense of a 'mediator between God and man.' As no Creator exists, no mediator priest is necessary. We have seen already that Bhikkhus cannot marry people, nor can they guarantee them

passage to a good future life. That depends on the kammas made by people while alive and in the last moment of consciousness at death. But Bhikkhus are invited at such occasions and requested to chant traditional verses and discourses of the Buddha which are thought to promote harmonious vibrations and to set up a good wholesome environment. This is particularly true when the Bhikkhus who do the chanting are pure-hearted and practising well.

Of course, ritual has its advantages as well as its dangers. The simple rituals of Theraváda usually have a basis in the Dhamma. For instance, people offer flowers to a figure of the Buddha and while doing so repeat, “These flowers, bright and beautiful, fragrant and good-smelling, handsome and well-formed, soon indeed discoloured, ill-smelling and ugly they become. This very body, beautiful, fragrant and well-formed, soon indeed discoloured, ill-smelling and ugly it becomes.”

If mindfulness is not strong while doing this or the act becomes mechanical then its value is lost, but when done with awareness and concentration, it is a short contemplation of impermanence. Repeated many times with devotion in the course of a life it could lead to the attainment of insight. The dangers have been spoken of already and can be seen easily by critical eyes. It is such dangers of ritualism which are the frequent target of westerners in the East. But

it is unfortunate that such criticism is often made without considering the state of mind from which it has sprung—and this is nearly always unwholesome.

We have already touched on some of the relationships, which exist between Bhikkhus and laypeople. Some other features should be considered here as well. For instance, what do people go to a temple monastery for? The temple building, to be described below, will be visited more or less frequently to make offerings of flowers, incense and lights, followed by the triple prostration and perhaps chanting in Pali well-known verses or passages recollecting the virtues of the Triple Gem.[8]

Such a visit to the temple is often a personal or family devotion with just one person or a small group participating. The reason for the visit could be the birth of a child, some fortunate business circumstances, or the death anniversary of a beloved relative. Buddhist temples and shrines are usually open and anyone may make his devotions at any time.

On the other hand, the occasion for such visits could be on the Uposatha days when many people go to the temple, undertake the Eight Precepts and probably spend a whole day and night there in the practice of Dhamma.[9] People may go to the temple, which is in the monastery grounds, but they may not meet any of the

Bhikkhus who are resident there.

If they go to see Bhikkhus, what is the purpose of their visit? Usually they take with them a small gift, perhaps some incense, or candles and flowers to give to the Bhikkhu they will visit. They may also take with them, if it is during the morning when Bhikkhus eat, cooked food for one particular Bhikkhu or for distribution to many. Even in the afternoon or evening food may be taken to the monastery as an offering though it is not accepted by the Bhikkhus then but put aside for the next day when a lay attendant will prepare it.

Lay people may request Bhikkhus to chant at the time of their visit or upon some future occasion, such as an invitation to their houses. This is made for all sorts of anniversaries or celebrations, in fact any time is a good time to help support the Sangha and so make good kamma, or merit. These invitations will include either a breakfast or a forenoon meal and the number of Bhikkhus invited may vary from one to several dozen.

When they are visiting the monastery lay people may also ask questions about Dhamma, or about how to apply the Dhamma to the problems and difficulties they have to face in life. They may also request a formal sermon to be delivered on an anniversary either in the temple or in their homes.

Again, they may go to an abbot with money donations for repair work or new construction in his or other monasteries. He will not accept the donation directly but have a layman, called a steward (*veyyavaccakāra*), look after it and give a receipt for it. To some Bhikkhus who are known to have healing abilities, laypeople may take those who are afflicted mentally or physically and ask him to use his powers and sometimes knowledge of herbs, too, to cure them.

At other times, when in danger or sorrow, people may go to ask the blessing of a Bhikkhu which he will give in a number of ways, from a sprinkling with water to the gift of small Buddha-images or sections of Buddhist scripture, to hang round the neck.

As a contrast, with this there are the most devoted lay people who will go to a monastery and under the guidance of the meditation Teacher there, stay as long as they can do meditation all the day and much of the night. They would retire, of course, to those monasteries, which specialise in meditation practice, very often far away in the forest, on a mountain or clustered round a group of caves.

These are just some of the many reasons why lay people go to temples and monasteries.

When we consider the reverse, why Bhikkhus go to the houses of laypeople, some points have been mentioned above. The commonest reason is the Bhikkhu's alms round which may be early

in the morning as in Thailand and Burma or later as in Sri Lanka.[10] The Bhikkhu is silent, walking barefoot silently, never asking for anything and passing by quietly the houses and shops where nothing is given. When he is offered food, he opens his bowl silently and when the donor has finished giving, in silence he goes on his way to collect just enough to keep the body going. On the alms round, to be seen every morning throughout Buddhist countries, Bhikkhus do not usually enter peoples' houses as the food is given at the doorstep.

At the time of a previously arranged invitation to a home, however, Bhikkhus enter and are seated in due order on seats which have been prepared for them. As honoured guests they are offered something to drink—tea or fruit juices and then the family may request the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts, which they will repeat after the senior most Bhikkhu. After this follows the auspicious chanting, varied according to the occasion.

A meal may be offered when this has finished and afterwards a short sermon and then some verses called anumodaná—rejoicing with the merits of the donors, are chanted. Gifts of necessities may be offered to the Bhikkhus before these last verses, or money for their support, may be placed in the hands of their attendant and the Bhikkhus informed of this.

In Buddhist countries now, indeed, since the days of the

Buddha, there are Bhikkhus who engage themselves in ways of which the Buddha did not approve. They should be mentioned here so that readers, if they go to, or have been, in Buddhist lands, may not be surprised. The commonest among offenders are those Bhikkhus who do little or nothing except wear their robes and eat two meals a day. Another Buddhist tradition has called them “rice bags and clothe-hangers,” an apt name indeed. When the number of Bhikkhus who do little except chat pleasantly with relatives or friends becomes great, then Buddhism is sure to be in trouble. Among the graver departures from the Buddha's intentions are those Bhikkhus who become famous as possessors of real or supposed powers which they exploit—as the Thai expression puts it, “they want it loud”—that is, their own reputations. They dispense holy water, Buddha-amulets and the like and, while they may lighten the burdens of others to some extent, they certainly make their own karmic burdens heavier! Such Bhikkhus can become quite wealthy but not in Dhamma.

Others achieve fame through astrology—of which the Buddha sceptically said (in a previous life when a Bodhisatta) “What will the stars do!” In teaching Bhikkhus he called such knowledge “low science.” Some have reputations for being able to cast out demons and spirits and are known in Thailand as ‘ghost-doctors.’ To help

people in this way is of course unobjectionable but it can be dangerous for those who wield power, since conceit increases easily in the unenlightened mind.

Then there are Bhikkhus who have medical knowledge of herbs and different sorts of treatment such as massage. But their knowledge is not systematic and will be derived from their Teachers or from what they have gathered going through life. A greater or lesser admixture of magical elements also makes their treatments uncertain in results. The Buddha advised Bhikkhus to treat other members of the Sangha and near relatives only, thus avoiding awkward situations, which could arise if a Bhikkhu's prescriptions turned out ineffective, or worse, killed the patient. However, in past times, when there were no trained doctors, a Bhikkhu faced with a plea for medical assistance would very likely act upon compassion rather than the Vinaya, the rules of which are to prevent him from becoming a regular doctor with an income.

Bhikkhus who become landowners or politicians also follow improper ways of livelihood. Landowning, indeed any property, cannot be held by individual Bhikkhus but must belong to the Sangha. And while it is proper for the Bhikkhus who shoulder the 'work of books' to be concerned about the well being of laypeople, it goes too far when they ally themselves with this or that political

party. In fact, such support only calls down obloquy on their heads when party-leaders do not live up to their programme or are unsuccessful in their attempts at government. Politics and parties, with all the strife that usually accompanies them, are for lay Buddhists to take an interest in.

In Thailand, Bhikkhus have no vote and are expected to keep out of political matters. If they wish to engage in politics, which is the layman's world, then they disrobe and become laymen. Sri Lanka, with the difficult heritage left by colonialism, has had Bhikkhus who have attached themselves to various parties. In Burma, too, some Bhikkhus became too interested in politics until this was discouraged by the government.

The two approved ways of Bhikkhu livelihood will form the subject of the next chapter.

It is obvious that since there are Bhikkhus whose practice is not so good, some measure of government must exist in the Sangha. There are also various matters to be organised, which require some kind of administrative structure. The Buddha laid down that seniority among Bhikkhus, that is, how many 'Rains' they have passed in the Sangha, was to be the reason for paying respects. Thus the senior most Bhikkhu would be the one whom all others revered as their leader. This works well when he is learned, a meditation master or

both, but what if he is just “old in vein“ while younger Bhikkhus have more virtues than he has? This difficulty has been solved by the creation of ‘abbots’ of Viháras. They are appointed and elected (in Thailand) on the basis of their merits and the preferences of both Bhikkhus and leading lay people. They hold that post, ‘Lord of the ávása’, as long as they wish or until they die but though they have this position of rank and title too, still they must still pay respect to Bhikkhus with no such appointments or learning as they have but who are senior in ordination.

Thailand, Cambodia and Laos have hierarchies similar in character, with the country divided into provinces, counties and districts, each division having an abbot appointed as the ‘Chief of the Sangha.’ From among the highest-ranking abbots in the capitals a council is formed and from among its members the King (in Thailand) appoints the most senior to be Sangharaja, literally the ‘Ruler of the Sangha.’ This Council meets frequently to discuss matters of importance for the Sangha; also to take action when necessary about infractions of the Vinaya.

Sri Lanka and Burma do not have such a systematic method of Sangha government. In fact, in the three countries first mentioned, the abbot has a large measure of autonomy but this is still greater in Burma and Sri Lanka. There are no kings (*rájá*) in these countries

now so there are no Sangha-rajats, though this office did exist in the past. Differences in the Sangha, which have been smoothed over better in Thailand, with its Sangha administration and Sangharaja, have caused more dissension in the other two main countries of Theraváda, making different groups in the Sangha there more prominent.

The Sangha in Theraváda countries has hardly ever been without some divisions. It is wrong to speak of `sects' since most laypeople take little interest in such matters which depend on interpretations of the bhikkhus' discipline or Vinaya, In Sri Lanka, for instance, there are three main groups: the Siam Nikáya (-group), the Amarapura Nikáya and the Rámanya Nikáya. The Siam Nikáya derives its lineage from Siam, before the fall of the capital of Ayudhya to the Burmese in 1767. About twenty years before this, a delegation was sent by the king of Sri Lanka to Thailand for the purpose of establishing the Sangha in Sri Lanka where no pure bhikkhus could be found, only novices living in a few of the temples. A number of Thai Theras were sent by the king of Ayudhya to restore the lineage of Acceptance or ordination and to establish the Sangha soundly in both study and practice. Much credit for the success of this mission and its lasting results must go to the untiring work of the venerable Sri Saranankara, a Sinhalese monk of great

determination and devotion as well as scholarship and pure practice, who was later designated to be Sangharaja by the king, the last such leader of the Sangha in Sri Lanka.

The second group, the Amarapura Nikaya, evolved out of an incident relating to the caste system. The story goes as follows: Later on, it is said that a man of 'low caste' who had been accepted as a bhikkhu, saluted the king, which under the caste system would not have happened. To begin with, caste was not a teaching that found favour in the Buddha's eyes. He criticized brahmins and other 'high' caste people frequently; for their haughty behaviour, as well as the oppression which such a system brings to those of 'lower' castes. 'High' and 'low', according to the Buddha, are matters of conduct in mind speech and body :

One's not by birth an outcaste

nor a brahmin by one's birth,

by kamma one's an outcaste,

by kamma one's a brahmin.

(Vasala Sutta, Verse 21, The Book of Discourses)

Therefore, men and women from all sections of society might be

accepted into their respective Sanghas provided that they were free from the obstacles to ordination (see Ch. VIII). The verses and stories which have been translated in this book of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis from all levels of society confirm that the Sangha was open to all. The Buddha also allowed bhikkhus to conform to a royal (or government) law provided that it was in accord with Dhamma. We shall see the application of this shortly. Another point here is that bhikkhus who respect Buddha-images and step, like everyone else, among men, only honour bhikkhus senior to themselves, those who have more years or 'Rains' in the Sangha, and never laypeople even though they may be kings and queens.

But that bhikkhu, aforementioned, was thought to have done wrong in honouring the king while the king, perhaps out of ignorance, was thought to have done wrong in ordering that low-caste men should not be accepted into the Sangha. The Sin. Nikáya, however, still upholds this royal law.

Caste has no place, even in lay Buddhist society, let alone the Sangha, but still there were Buddhists, in Sri Lanka, who due to their proximity to India were infected with this caste attitude. At the same time, there were men, designated as 'lower'-caste, who desired acceptance as bhikkhus, and who were adversely affected by the above-mentioned ruling. A resolution came about when a novice

from this background, having been refused acceptance, in Sri Lanka, went in due course to Burma and there became a bhikkhu. On his return in the early years of the, nineteenth century, he founded the Amarapura Nikáya, which continues to admit people from all sections of society.

The third group, the Rámanya Nikáya, has some similarities with the Dhammayuttika in Thailand which is also derived from Mon or Rámanya practice. Reform of Vinaya practice, accurate calculation of the Uposatha days (full moon and new moon when special precepts are undertaken by laypeople and the bhikkhus have recitation of the Patimokkha) and emphasis on a return to simplicity and absence of luxury, are Rámanya principles. This group, though small in numbers, has a very considerable influence. To some extent, like the Dvára Nikáya in Burma, this group was formerly exclusive, not eating or consorting with bhikkhus of other groups. Laypeople supporting Rámanya temples usually did not invite or support blukkhus from elsewhere.

Each of these groups has its own administrative hierarchy with appointments and titles given to abbots in charge of the temples controlled by the respective groups in different places.

Differences in Vinaya between the three groups are only minor matters though noticeable in some respects. For example, most of

the Siam Nikáya bhikkhus cover only one shoulder with their robes when "among the houses" while the groups derived from Burma cover both. Rámanya Bhikkhus use palm-leaf sunshades, not the western type of umbrellas used by other bhikkhus.

The Buddha himself said that differences in Vinaya upon minor matters were not so important but differences in Dhamma would be serious: "Dispute about livelihood or about the Patimokkha, (the fundamental rules), is trifling, Ánanda But should dispute arise in the Sangha about the Path or the Way (of practice), such dispute would be for the misfortune and unhappiness of many, for the harm, misfortune and suffering of gods and men. "*"

In Burma, too, only varying Vinaya practice divides the two main groups of bhikkhus. Sudhamma Nikáya is by far the largest. In the time of the Burmese kings, there was a Sudhamma Council which governed the whole Sangha in Burma but gradually groups formed around one or two famous Teachers and became distinct from the Sudhamma tradition. At present, Sudhamma monasteries vary in strictness with the discipline practised and enforced by their abbots. But there are many in this tradition, particularly small monasteries, where Vinaya practice is not strict and bhikkhus from such places can be seen in the street smoking or chewing betel with their robes care lessly thrown over one shoulder. But it should be

remembered that in all monastic traditions it is always laxity that is conspicuous, while well-behaved monks go unremarked.

The other main group, Shwejyin Nikáya; is named after the village from which its founder, Shwejyin Sayadaw, came. He was a teacher of the queen of King Mindon, last but one king of Burma. She persuaded the king to free this teacher from the jurisdiction of the Sudhamma Council. Shwejyin Sayadaw and those who followed him were strict in Vinaya and emphasized that bhikkhus should behave with restraint, making effort to conduct themselves well. The bhikkhus of this tradition have no dispute with their brethren in the Sudhamma group.

This cannot be said of the third Nikáya, Dvára, a small dissident body formed in the last century. Their first Teacher, Okpo Sayadaw, was contentious by nature though of great learning. He made much of a rewording of the usual way of paying respect to the Buddha - 'by body, speech and mind kammās,' teaching instead that one should say 'by body, speech and mind-doors.' Since 'door' is dvára in Pali, the group's name has been derived from this. This group is exclusive and will not eat or live with other bhikkhus. It is said to be gradually disappearing.

*Trans. Ven. Nyanamoli Thera (Middle Length Collection, Discourse 104).

Formerly the Sangha in Burma was controlled by a Council of Theras, a kind of Sangha-government which has been dissolved under a later administration. Now each abbot is responsible for the discipline and practice of the bhikkhus in his temple. If he is in charge of one of the very large monasteries, a number of related temples, headed by bhikkhus trained by him, may also be his responsibility.

Thailand, formerly Siam, has only two main Nikáyas. The largest by far is called now Mahánikai, the large group, which was the original line of ordination (acceptance) in Siam since ancient times when it was brought from Sri Lanka. In the turmoil which followed the sack of Ayudhya, Siam's capital until just over two hundred years ago, many bhikkhus took to wrong modes of livelihood or so defiled their robes that they were no longer bhikkhus though they continued to appear as such. The standards of both scholarship and of practice sank low, a fact that was witnessed personally by Prince Mongkut, in the days of King Ráma the second. He had entered the Sangha to be a Rains-bhikkhu for the usual period of three months but his father, the king, died during this time and another prince was selected to be Ráma III Prince Mongkut decided to remain in the Sangha. He had a very intelligent and critical mind and always tried to find out what the Buddha's words

meant, removing in the process the layers of commentarial explanations, ritual and superstition which clouded clear understanding. He excelled in the Pali language but spoke to people in the way that they could understand easily, thus attracting many intelligent bhikkhus and lay people as his disciples. As he came to know more and more from his studies of the original teachings in Vinaya and Sutta, he became dissatisfied with the state of the Sangha in Siam and eventually was re-ordained by Mon bhikkhus whose conduct was correct and who were learned as well. This was the origin of the Dhammayuttikanikai or Dhammayut for short, the group of those who adhere to Dhamma. This group is still small in Thailand but very influential and progressive. Mahanikai has now reformed and strengthened itself, due partly to the example set by Dhammayut.

Now that we have glanced in brief over the three main Theraváda Buddhist countries a word or two can be said upon the position elsewhere. Cambodia adopted Theraváda after the disappearance of the royal-supported northern Buddhist traditions which were plentifully mixed with Hindu elements. Now the country has the same two groups in the Sangha as Thailand though the forest bhikkhu tradition is uncommon there.

Laos is similar but Dhammayut is found mostly in the south and

not recognized formally by the government. Forest-dwelling bhikkhus are to be found both in central and southern areas. Many mountainous parts of the country are not Buddhist, being inhabited by animist hill tribes.

In Vietnam, both south and central, Theraváda is found in western Cambodian-speaking districts and among Vietnamese in some of the towns. Theraváda is in a minority in this country where most temples are of northern Buddhist tradition which has come down through China. Theraváda bhikkhus with those of Maháyána have formed a united Buddhist body but the formal acts of both Sanghas are kept separate. It remains to be seen what will happen to Buddhism in general and the Sangha in particular in the above three countries now that they have Communist governments. Events in Cambodia (Kambuja) have not been encouraging.

Bangladesh has a considerable Buddhist minority with a Sangha divided between two traditions. One is a small group of bhikkhus, the Maháthera-Nikáya, who claim to be descended from bhikkhus fleeing from Bihar at the time of the Moslem invasions. It is reported that they were corrupted in the course of time in their new home but refused the chance of re-ordination by Burmese bhikkhus. This was taken by the great majority who now form the Sangharaja-Nikáya. In fact the latter group alone can claim to be

Theraváda although the other group has reformed itself and is hardly distinguishable now.

India, Nepal and Indonesia are countries where the Sangha did not survive though pockets of lay Buddhists struggled on. Now in all those countries Theraváda bhikkhus are found. In India, many have been accepted by the bhikkhus of the Maha Bodhi Society, an organization founded by the Sinhalese teacher, Anagarika Dhammapala, but training facilities after ordination have not been adequate. Very few Indian bhikkhus are learned and fewer still are well practised in meditation. Very large numbers of people have become Buddhists--numbers are now into the tens of, millions--so some improvement in the position of the Sangha there can be expected in future. An All-India Sangha organization has been formed. In Nepal, the position is different as a large lay Máháyána Buddhist population has existed since ancient times. Bhikkhus had been forced to disrobe and marry by the Hindu kings of the Past resulting in a gradual decline of Buddhist scholarship and practice. Since the Second World War and after the opening of Nepal's frontiers, Nepali Buddhists have trained in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand and a small Sangha now exists there.

In Indonesia also, Maháyána has some influence through both Javanese traditions and the Chinese community. However, the

majority of bhikkhus are Theraváda and friendly relations exist on the whole. Much credit for this revival must go to early Sinhalese initiative while later, Thai bhikkhus have been active.

Although divisions exist in the Theraváda Sangha at large, there is generally the minimum of sectarian feeling among bhikkhus. One or two can always be found who are ready to paint the other party as the protagonists of Mára (the Evil One) himself but they are very few. This is due to the Buddha's discourses on such subjects as the Six Conditions for Concord, a discourse which is included in the first appendix. He emphasized specially how the Sangha should remain in harmony and concord, without divisions. The present divisions have not come about through schism in the Sangha, which would imply strife indeed, but through re-ordinations or new lines of ordination or acceptance being introduced. Once groups have been established, even where there are only small points of Vinaya dividing them, it is difficult to get unity again. This was achieved in Sri Lanka by the great king ParakRámabahu I who arranged union for the three groups then existing. Other kings in Burma have done the same but it is not easy to maintain unity for long periods of time in a body like the Sangha which depends for this upon agreement of all the leading senior bhikkhus. If one should disagree and wish to practise his own interpretation of Vinaya, then others cannot stop

him. Governments have helped the Sangha's unity by upholding correct Vinaya-decisions and backing up the Vinaya with secular laws.

It is common for bhikkhus of all groups to invite each other to festivals and special gatherings in their monasteries. Only formal Sangha-acts are not performed together and in other respects, particularly in Dhamma, there is complete unity.

The last topic which this chapter will outline is a survey of the buildings to be found in a Theraváda monastery. First, the word 'monastery' used to translate such words as *Vihára*, *ávása* and *áráma*, can be as misleading, just as using the word 'monk' (or even 'priest') to render `bhikkhu' into English gets confused with Greco-Christian connotations. A bhikkhu is not confined to his monastery and will usually leave the monastery at least once a day for his almsround.

A monastery does not have gatehouses with closed gates; on the contrary, where it is in an urban area the whole tide of local life sweeps in and out of its open gates. The area will be walled or fenced in some way and the area enclosed may be small, perhaps an acre or less or very large, thirty or forty acres in extent in some Bangkok *Wats*. This is the Thai word for the whole monastery-temple complex for which we have no corresponding word in

English. If we call it a temple then that suggests only a place of worship without a monastic residence. But if it is called a monastery that does not imply a public area with a temple open to all people.

The original words were *vihāra* meaning a dwelling place (for bhikkhus) or *āvāsa* having the same meaning. *Arāma* meant originally a park but has come to mean the monastery-temple built in the park, As each Buddhist country has its own words, Wat in Thailand, Phongyi-kyaung in Burma, or Pansala in Sri Lanka, it is better to use the well-known term *vihara* for all monastery-temples.

The town vihara will be rather clearly divided into different areas sometimes by interior walls, or by lines of trees, paths and so on. One part will be the Buddha-vihāra, that is where the large Buddha images are found, either in or outside temples. The larger part of the area is called the Sangha-vihāra the place for the bhikkhus to stay. It will consist of a number of residential buildings in wood or brick which may be large or small and house just one bhikkhu or many together. A large building with many rooms, often ornately carved or decorated, may be the *kuti* (residence) of just one bhikkhu if he is the abbot of an important vihara. Or another large building may house many bhikkhus, each with a room and a verandah linking them. Small wooden buildings will have usually a single bhikkhu with perhaps a tiny room for a novice or lay-pupil as

well. Groups of these kutis in various sizes may be arranged in a rectangle round a square sometimes containing trees and having in its centre a sálá. This is an open-sided hall in which bhikkhus will gather for special invitations by lay people. *Sálás* may have an open area underneath which can be used as an informal kitchen by visitors, or an area for the storage of various things. Formerly viháras in towns, if not by the side of a river or canal, will have had wells to supply water for drinking and washing. This is still common in the country. The construction of bathrooms, even of steam baths, is described in the Vinaya though the latter are not found now. Bathrooms and lavatories these days are often constructed in blocks away from the residential buildings. These are the main structures in the Sangha-vihára.

To return to the Buddha-vihára, the most impressive building there will have the largest Buddha-image. It may actually be called the vihara and is often the building open for public worship. Also, it is sometimes the place where the Sangha go to pay their respects, and if so, it is common to find a raised area reserved for this purpose. But this may be done in another building, as may be the formal acts of the Sangha. The large Buddha-vihára may be the area consecrated for such acts, or there may be a separate *Sìma*-building. A *sìma* is a boundary for formal Sangha acts and is established round certain

buildings or areas and marked in a special way so that bhikkhus are aware of the boundary.

Also in the area of the Buddha-vihara there maybe a large wooden *sálá* which will be the meeting place for large numbers of devotees on the Uposatha days. It may enshrine a small Buddha-image, and there is often a raised platform for bhikkhus to sit on. A more or less elaborate Dhamma-seat for the bhikkhu who expounds Dhamma is the only other item in the hall, the audience sitting on the wooden floor. Other smaller halls may accommodate overflows of the faithful on special days and provide sleeping space for pilgrim bhikkhus and visitors. Ladies will sleep in the nun's *sálá* where there is a section of the vihara for nuns.

The only other important building is a specially Buddhist structure called a *stúpa* or *cetiya*. This is usually in the form of a spired image and situated behind the largest temple enshrining a Buddha image. When devotees revere the Buddha inside the temple they will also be paying respect to the *stúpa* just behind the image. The earliest symbol of the Buddha to be revered was the stupa, the only way in which he was respected until the development of Buddha-images. A stupa enshrines relics of his person—objects which he has used or it may be the repository of many Buddha images, Buddhist text, handwritten open palm-leaves, as well as gold

and jewels. Buddha-relics usually do not resemble charred bone but are jewel-like crystal, found only in the ashes after the cremation of Buddhas or Arahants. But these are certain body-relics which are different, such as the Tooth-Relic enshrined in Kandy, Sri Lanka, or the Hair Relics which are contained in the beautiful Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon, Burma. Articles used by the Buddha are such things as his almsbowl, fragment of which have been found in India. But the great majority of stupas contain the third kind of reminders of the Buddha - innumerable small Buddha-images and Buddhist texts.

Stupas may be small, perhaps only the height of a man, or any size up to 300 feet. The most massive and ancient examples are to be found in Sri Lanka at Anuradhapura, while in Burma the Shwe Dagon is pre-eminent and in Thailand, Phra Pathom Cedi at Nakorn Pathom is revered as being the first *stupa* in the country as well as the largest.

Near to the main temple and the stupa there will be a scion of the Bodhi Tree under which the wanderer Gotama became Gotama the Buddha. This may be walled round in a decorative way and set into its walls will be niches where people can offer lights, incense and flowers. The most famous Bodhi Tree now is in Sri Lanka at Anuradhapura where, very ancient, is the southern branch of the tree

under which the Buddha sat. It has been surrounded with an ornamental gilded fence and is the site of great devotion every day of the year. The Bodhi Tree at Buddha Gaya in India, the place of Enlightenment, is now a fourth generation tree planted on the spot where the Buddha awakened.

All these main shrines will have around them paved paths for honouring the Buddha by circumambulation. This is done with one's right side towards the sacred object and devotees circle the shrine while repeating sacred texts and they may carry in their hands offerings of candles, incense and flowers. Silent recollection of the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is also done at this time. At the time of Buddhist festivals thousands may join in this circumambulation.

Each village has its vihāra a centre of village activity where a few bhikkhus and sāmaóeras may live. The buildings are usually less grand than town vihāras but more colourful than those in the forest where meditation is practised. There one finds a great simplification of the buildings. Only a large wooden sala and a scattering of kutis in the forest are needed. The sálá will enshrine a Buddha image and there will be the usual arrangements for seating but there will be no 'glitter' as in the large town vihāras. Everything is plain, the emphasis being on practicality and simplicity rather than grandeur.

The kutis are small wooden structures for only one bhikkhu or sámaóera and they are set well apart with forest between them. There may a 'fire sálá' where water can be heated for hot drinks or medicines. Also there may be small lavatories but where the vihára is newly constructed even this function will be served by pits dug out in the forest. There will be more about the forest and the town viharas in the next chapter.

In the different Buddhist countries some symbols of the Buddha receive more reverence than others. People in Sri Lanka particularly revere the great Bodhi trees which are found in each vihára But in Burma it is rather the stupa (or cetiya) which receives most attention and no vihára will be complete without a spotlessly whitewashed 'zedi.' Thai people, however, rather favour the Buddha-image as the centre of their devotions and many famous bronze images, some very large are the object of popular pilgrimages.

To close this chapter some of the ancient and popular Pali verses used in devotions both by bhikkhus and by lay people in Sri Lanka have been translated.

With lights of camphor brightly shining
destroying darkness here,
the three worlds' light, the Perfect Buddha,

dispeller of darkness, I revere.

With this incense sweetly scented

prepared from blended fragrances

Him I revere who is rightly revered,

worthy of highest reverence-

The Buddha I revere with varied flowers,

by this, my merit, may there be release;

even as this flower fades away

so will my body be destroyed.

With those flowers, as long as they last,

colourful, fragrant and excellent,

the Sacred Feet on the lotus

of the Lord of sages, I revere.

All the stupas in every place

wherever they are found,

the bodily relics, the great Bo-tree

and Buddha-images, I revere.

Notes

- [1] See, *Buddhism in South India*, Wheel 124-125, BPS
- [2] The Fifth Council was held in Burma in the reign of King Mindon-min, C.E. 1871, when the text of the Tipiṭaka was inscribed upon 729 marble slabs to be seen in Mandalay. The Sixth Great Council was international and held in Burma to mark the 2500th year of the Buddhist Era (1956).
- [3] See, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*, Walpola Rahula, pp. 26-27.
- [4] Ibid, pp. 26-27 quoting Anguttara Commentary.
- [5] See, *The Splendour of Enlightenment*, Ch. XVI, Mahámakut Press.
- [6] See, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, Ven, Nyanaponika Thera, Rider and Co., London, p. 141 (-Related Collection, 47, 22-23).
- [7] For his story see, *The Life of the Buddha*, BPS Kandy, and *Buddhist Legends*, Vol. I p. 217.
- [8] See Ch. VI and *Pali Chanting with Translations*, Mahámakut Press.
- [9] See, *Lay Buddhist Practice*, Wheel 206-207, BPS
- [10] See, *The Blessings of Pióḍapáta*, (The Almsround), Wheel No. 73 and the accounts in Ch. IV

Chapter 5

from

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Bhikkhu Khantipálo

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

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