

CHAPTER FOUR

MONKS AND LAY FOLLOWERS

The Sangha is formed.

Becoming a member of the Sangha (the community of monks) was initially a matter of responding to the Buddha's simple invitation to join, but as time went on various conditions were imposed. Anyone who wanted to commit his life to the Sangha had to vow that he was a free man, that he had no debts, that he was not in royal service, that he was over 20 years old and that he had his parents' consent. This was to ensure that the members of Sangha had not joined to escape a master, a creditor or military service. Joining became a ceremony in which the novice repeated three times the triple formula:

I take the Buddha as my refuge.

I take the Dharma as my refuge.

I take the Sangha as my refuge.

We have seen how the first orders of monks known as the Sangha were formed. The Buddha ordained nuns as well as monks, but the female orders have died out in the Theravada tradition. In some Theravada orders, it is possible for women to lead lives which are very similar to those of the monks, but they do not become ordained and do not take on the title 'bhikkhuni'. In the Mahayana traditions, however, both monks and nuns are found today.

Before ordination, one's hair is shaved off as a sign that one's previous secular life is being discarded. The monk also receives a spiritual name, often one which is somehow appropriate to his personality or what he must strive to become. A name of one of the Buddha's close followers might be possible — for example, Subhuti or Sariputra — or one might receive a name which designates an office, such as 'Dharmarakshita' (meaning, 'keeper of the teachings'). The spiritual name indicates a kind of negation of the self, as well as a break with the monk's past secular life.

A Theravadin monk is not permitted to own possessions. He has the use of three robes (an under-garment, an outer garment and a cloak): for the traditional Theravadin monk, these will be saffron in colour; in other traditions they could be maroon (as in Tibetan), or black (as in Zen). Sandals may be worn, but Theravadin monks often regard them as a luxury. (Whether they are a luxury or a necessity depends on a country's climate, so variations in the details of these practices are to be expected.) In addition to one's clothing, a limited amount of equipment is permitted: an alms bowl (with carrying strap), a belt, a razor, a needle for mending, a waist-band or belt and a strainer. The purpose of the strainer is to filter out any minute living creatures in one's water: all forms of life are to be respected.

There is no fixed pattern as to where a monk lives. Some have no fixed abode, and wander in the open air, often in forests or mountains, sleeping under trees. Others live in caves or in huts which they have made from leaves or pieces of wood. More common, however, is life in a vihara: the word literally means 'dwelling-place', and viharas are usually unpretentious, often indistinguishable from ordinary homes. If for some reason a vihara is unusually large or important, it can be called a monastery. Some fairly large

properties are owned by Buddhist communities, often having been put at the disposal of the Sangha by wealthy benefactors, such as royalty or successful businessmen. If the monastic community is large, there will be a division of labour, with delegated tasks such as receiving guests, maintaining the water supplies or ensuring that robes or alms bowls are in serviceable condition. In some Zen monasteries, monks may be required to do gardening, but this task would never be given to a Theravadin monk, since tilling the soil involves killing worms and small insects, and would therefore violate their monastic precepts. In smaller communities, each member of the Sangha will pursue his or her own simple life.

Theravada Buddhism tends to be loosely structured. Unlike Christianity, with its hierarchy of cardinals, bishops, moderators and the like, each Sangha is responsible to itself alone. There is no presidential figure or national assembly which demands obedience or is available for consultation in the event of problems. Within a Theravadin vihara one monk will be regarded as the senior monk: this is determined neither by age nor by ballot, but by the length of time one has been ordained. The structure of Tibetan and Japanese Buddhism is somewhat different: in the Tibetan tradition, special veneration is given to incarnate lamas and of course to the Dalai Lama. In Japanese orders a hierarchy of priests and sometimes a high priest is to be found.)

In a Theravadin monastery or vihara, the monastic day starts very early, often at 4 a.m. It begins with chanting, and then the monks will go into the nearest village to do their alms round, which provides them with breakfast. Members of the laity will bring them their mid-day meal, and local residents often arrange a rota system amongst themselves to do this. The monk does not ask for food, in contrast to the beggar who does: it is therefore incorrect to describe his bowl as a 'begging bowl', as westerners often do. The monk will wait patiently for a short time outside each house: if no food is brought out, he will move on. When he has received sufficient food, he will return to his dwelling place. (In some communities where the day begins later, the alms round provides the mid-day meal.)

It is a mistake to think that Buddhists are always vegetarian. Most western Buddhists are, but a monk is not supposed to refuse any food he is given, with few exceptions. If he suspects that an animal has been specially killed for him, this would be unacceptable. Also, food must be prepared and ready to eat; raw ingredients will not do, for two reasons: first, members of the traditional Sangha do not cook, and, second, the willingness to accept cooked food underlines the Buddhist's rejection of the Indian caste system. In India, in the Buddha's time, it was normal for laypeople only to accept prepared food from members of equal caste; by accepting food from everyone, regardless of their status, the Buddhist monk demonstrates that the Sangha is outside the Hindu caste system. Monks are permitted to accept invitations to eat at people's homes, as did the Buddha and his early followers when invited back to his father's palace.

Food must be consumed by noon, after which the monk does not eat. Although this is foreign to our way of life, Buddhist monks to whom I have spoken insist that their eating habits are preferable to ours, since we tend to eat our largest meal late in the day, at a time when no subsequent physical exercise is taken.

The remainder of the day is relatively unstructured. A monk may teach younger disciples, or he may read in order to further his study, or he may meditate in silence. He may also have personal tasks requiring attention. It is tempting to think in our western

armchairs that all Buddhist monks are developing themselves spiritually in this calm of meditative existence. But, just as there are good and bad clergy in Christianity, there are good and bad monks, and it would not be unknown for an occasional monk to spend the afternoon half asleep instead of being in the concentrated state which meditation requires!

The Precepts

The traditional Theravadin monk undertakes to observe a number of precepts. Altogether there are 227 of these; but there are normally ten main precepts. There is slight variation in content, but the list generally runs as follows.

- (1) To avoid the taking of life.
- (2) To avoid taking what is not given.
- (3) To avoid unchastity.
- (4) To avoid incorrect speech.
- (5) To avoid intoxicating liquor and drugs, which lead to carelessness.
- (6) To avoid eating at improper times.
- (7) To avoid dancing, singing, and seeing public entertainments.
- (8) To avoid wearing garlands and using scents, ornaments and finery.
- (9) To avoid using a high or luxurious sleeping place.
- (10) To avoid handling gold or silver (i.e., money).

Theravadin monks do not marry, but married monks (sometimes called priests) are not uncommon in Mahayana Buddhism. Members of the Theravadin Sangha have strict rules about relationships with women. A monk may not be alone with a woman or touch her. Sexual misconduct is a particularly serious offence, for which a monk can be suspended from the Order. If he is discovered to have had a sexual relationship with a woman, the penalty is expulsion.

The Laity.

Most people's attention has focussed on the Buddhist monk, perhaps because he is a seemingly strange figure whose life-style differs so markedly from ours. However, we must not stereotype the Buddhist as the saffron-robed monk who meditates constantly in order to gain enlightenment. The majority of Buddhists are lay people, and indeed the Sangha could not exist if there were not a laity to support it.

Just as one cannot be born a monk, one cannot be born a Buddhist layperson either. A lay Buddhist is one who has taken the threefold Refuge:

I take the Buddha as my refuge.
I take the Dharma as my refuge.
I take the Sangha as my refuge.

In order to become a Buddhist, one would normally recite the Triple Refuge in the presence of a monk. Laypersons may take on precepts, but, unlike the Sangha, this is done gradually, when the follower is ready. For example, one may be a convert to Buddhism, but not yet ready to give up alcohol. In the meantime, the convert will probably decide not to drink to excess: perhaps one day he or she will give it up

completely. And if this Buddhist attends a ceremony in which precepts are recited, he or she will remain silent when the precept proscribing alcohol is said.

At first appearance it seems that the monk is being parasitic on the laity. It is only because the laity grow crops and earn money that the monk is enabled to pursue the contemplative life without distractions. Since monks are not community workers, the laity appears to gain nothing directly in return. If a lay Buddhist wants to achieve a practical goal like securing a good harvest, or passing an examination, in the Theravadin tradition at least, one would not normally pray to the Buddha or expect the Sangha to do so. Monks are not like Hindu or Christian priests, who act as mediators between gods and human beings, and would certainly not use spiritual means to secure material benefits for the populace.

Rites of Passage and Death

Even rites of passage, such as birth and marriage need not involve the Sangha: lay Buddhists would be much more inclined to mark such events by ceremonies connected with other religions which co-exist alongside Buddhism. Some Buddhists will ask a monk to bless their marriage or read scriptures before the wedding takes place. New parents may provide food for the monks to mark the birth of their child, since giving alms to the Sangha brings merit to the donor, helping to ensure a good rebirth. But these are not prescribed ceremonies or acts.

Death, however, is different. Monks usually are asked to officiate at funerals and this provides an opportunity for monks and laypeople alike to be reminded that everything is transient. Theravadin monks take the opportunity provided by a funeral to preach on life's impermanence and death's inevitability. Death is the event which separates one rebirth from the next, and a death of a friend or relative, as well as an occasion for grief, is a salutary reminder that everyone present is also subject to death, and must gain sufficient merit to secure a good rebirth.

Of all the varieties of Buddhism, the Tibetan tradition lays the greatest emphasis on death. When someone's life has ended it is common for the Tibetan Book of the Dead to be recited over the corpse. This book gives instructions for the guiding of spirits after death. (Tibetan Buddhism commonly believes that one has a spirit body, or 'astral body', which is connected to the physical body during life, but becomes severed from it at death. Those who have clairvoyant powers are said to be able to see the astral body in the form of an aura around a living person, and can tell when someone has died by apprehending its departure.)

It is held that for 49 days after death, the spirit hovers around the body. It sees many visions of lights and buddha-figures attempting to guide it either towards the six realms in which rebirth occurs, or else towards nirvana. The Tibetan Book of the Dead gives instructions to the spirit about how to interpret these after-death experiences and how to attain enlightenment in this after-death state. Because the spirit cannot normally be seen or heard, it does not follow that it cannot see or hear what is happening in the physical world it has just left — hence there is believed to be tremendous value in offering to the spirit the guidance which this book has to offer.

Whether or not the Tibetan Book of the Dead is used, Buddhists agree that it is important to approach death with as clear and unclouded a mind as possible. For this reason, a Buddhist will avoid receiving drugs such as morphine which reduce the level of

consciousness or speed up the dying process. Having 'perfect view' and 'perfect mindfulness' involves experiencing death in as fully conscious a state as possible.

After the body has been disposed of in the customary manner, a symbolic effigy of the deceased is installed in the house, and readings, prayers and food offerings are given. Ideally, one should not wait until one has died to learn what the Book of the Dead has to teach: appropriate study during one's life-time will enable the Buddhist to know in advance what to expect on meeting death. However, only a small proportion of Tibetans would actually possess copies of the book, or indeed be able to read its contents.

In other Buddhist traditions, the laity will give donations to the Sangha in exchange for the monks reciting portions of scripture, thus bestowing merit on the deceased, so that he or she might be reborn well. Chanting is performed at various times in the 49-day period after a death, and also on the monthly or annual anniversaries of the death.

The Sangha's Contribution

Apart from times of bereavement, there is little which the monks directly 'do' for the laity. However, it is not expected that the Sangha should act as community workers, and westerners have often failed to understand laypeople's expectations of the Sangha by inadvertently comparing the little Buddhist monasteries scattered around the East with the small village churches one finds in a country like Britain. In 1892, the Anglican Bishop of Colombo visited a Sinhalese monastery, and during his visit asked a villager whether the monks did any good in the village. The villager's response was, 'No, why should they?'

This may seem surprising. However, every religion is faced with the dilemma of whether to apply small bandages to heal specific isolated sores in society, or whether to attempt major surgery to get to the root of humankind's fundamental problems. The monks do the latter by giving teachings, which, if put into practice by everyone, would get rid of the root causes of unsatisfactoriness. If everyone were to follow the precepts and the Eightfold Path, ignorance and selfish desire, which lie at the root of all ills, would disappear.

In Theravadin countries, it is usually necessary to become a monk in order to be enlightened, dispelling the three 'fires' of ignorance, greed and hatred. Many of the laity support the Sangha, hoping that one day too, perhaps in a future rebirth, they would be able to take on the robe and lead the meditative life, relying on others to support them.

There is a possible compromise for laymen. Becoming a member of the Sangha need not be a permanent commitment, and it is not uncommon for laymen to take the robe and live in a monastic community for short periods of time, perhaps even just for a fortnight. Such action is held to bring merit to the one who does it, and at some future date the possibility of rejoining the order may lie open. Monks and laypeople are therefore not totally separate.

Devotions

Members of the Sangha will generally take responsibility for conducting devotions (puja). As ever, there are variations in accordance with local traditions; however, a typical Theravadin puja might take the following form. (This is the order followed by the London Buddhist Vihara.)

First, homage is paid by all participants to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the 'Three

Refuges'. The congregation recites the Five Precepts (the first five of the Ten Precepts mentioned earlier). Flowers, lights (candles) and incense are then offered by being passed round the congregation. Verses are recited in praise of the Three Refuges, after which the senior monk delivers a short sermon. A short piece of scripture is then recited. (The Karaniya Metta Sutta — Discourse on Loving Kindness — would be suitable.) The congregation then spends a short time in meditation, and the puja ends with blessings (mangalas) being said.

Festivals

It might be expected that the Sangha has a large role in Buddhist festivals. This is not the case. Monks will play some part in festivals, but, since the monks' primary concern is nirvana, they will involve themselves as little as possible in the preparations and activities. Although the populace may use a festival as an excuse for festivity, and the monks may co-operate by making public processions, festivals are not primarily celebrations: they are for devotion and increasing spiritual merit. This is done by observing the precepts more strictly than usual during a festival day; in Burma and Tibet, for example, special kindness is shown to animals, and the laity might rescue animals from slaughter-houses or take fish out of dried-up river-beds to place them in fresh-water ponds.

One festival which is marked by all Buddhists is the festival of Wesak (sometimes called 'Buddha Day'), commemorating the birth of the Buddha. This falls on the last full moon in May. In the Theravada tradition it marks the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha simultaneously. One Buddhist once remarked to me, 'It's like celebrating Christmas, Easter and Whitsun all at once!' But even at Wesak there is little festivity — only a short procession, chanting, scripture reading and meditation.

During the three-month monsoon period (roughly July to October), Theravadin monks go into retreat. This is partly to ensure their own shelter, and partly because farmers formerly complained that monks were trampling their crops into the mud in their wanderings! When the rains begin, villagers give food, medicines and clothes to the monks, who deliver teachings in return. Some of the laity will retreat with the monks for all or part of the monsoon season. Young boys of eight or over, who are permitted to be ordained as novices (not fully fledged monks), will ask to be admitted to a monastery at this time. This is sometimes accompanied by a piece of pageantry, in which boys are decked with fine clothes and process on animals through their village to the monastery, where their fine clothes are removed, their heads shaven and they take on the robe. They will stay in the monastery with the monks for at least a night, and in many cases for a longer period. Girls too can take part in the pageant in similar vein, but they do not join the Sangha.

After the rainy season has ended, the kathina festival takes place: the monks process, and villagers go to the monasteries to present raw cotton cloth, which the monks then dye saffron (or red, as appropriate) to make new robes. Villagers celebrate this festival for several days with dancing, singing and plays. The monks, of course, do not attend these, as this would be a violation of the monastic precepts.

Inside the monastery, it is common for uposatha ('Observance Day') to be celebrated twice monthly. As with other 'festivals', fasting and especially strict observance of the precepts is the order of the day. At every second celebration of Observance Day, monks

confess any misdeeds they have committed. They assemble in the shrine room on low seats, whereupon the senior monk begins by chanting, and then solicits confessions. If there is silence, he says: 'Pure of these misdeeds are the Venerable Ones. That is why they have kept silent. Thus have I heard it.' If any monk is guilty of misconduct and remains silent, this is tantamount to speaking falsely, and is a serious breach of the monastic precepts.

In sum, the monk follows the Buddhist path in one way, the laity in another. The Sangha does not offer very much by way of direct physical help, but provides teachings which, if practised, would provide humankind with a means of resolving the unsatisfactoriness of human life.

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