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Theravāda Buddhism

A social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo

Richard F. Gombrich

ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL
London and New York

Kitsiri Malalgoda: *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750–1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (7)
Heinz Bechert: *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada Buddhismus* (7)
Gananath Obeyesekere: 'Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon' (article) (7)

Naturally these works figure, with others, in the references (which constitute almost my only footnotes). But that does not convey my full debt to them. This is especially true of *What the Buddha taught* and of Malalgoda's book. The Ven. Dr Rahula has provided my basic understanding of Buddhism, so adequate acknowledgment through such academic apparatus is impossible. The first half of chapter 7 owes so much to Malalgoda that to signal every point I have learnt from him would look absurd. Since all these authors are, happily, alive and well as I write, I hope they will forgive me for depending more heavily on their work than the footnotes can indicate.

I am also grateful to my friend and teacher Gananath Obeyesekere for letting me use in chapter 8 some of the fruits of our joint researches.

Though I cannot here list the many other scholars to whom I am indebted for their publications, I must mention, as a kind of patron saint of our studies, T.W. Rhys Davids, who not only founded the Pali Text Society (in 1881) but also wrote so sensibly and so elegantly about Buddhism.

For their help in the form of criticism and advice I am most grateful to Steven Collins, Lance Cousins, David Gellner, Mohan Wijayaratna and Paul Williams, colleagues whose work I confidently expect to overtake much of my own.

I would also like to thank the staff of the Instituut voor Oosterse Talen of Utrecht University for the hospitality of their superb library.

Richard Gombrich,
Oxford, August 1985

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A. INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

Buddhists consider that their religion has Three Jewels*: the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. They begin any ritual or religious ceremony by saying three times that they 'take refuge' in these Three Jewels, which are therefore also called the Three Refuges. Indeed, the taking of the Refuges is what defines a Buddhist.

When they take refuge in the Buddha, Buddhists are thinking first and foremost of Gotama Buddha. Buddha is a title, meaning 'Enlightened' or 'Awakened'. Gotama was the family name of a man who was born on the Nepalese side of the modern Indian-Nepali border, probably in the sixth century BCE, and died at the age of 80. According to later tradition, his personal name was Siddhattha. At the age of 35 he attained Enlightenment by realizing the Truth, the Dhamma. Outsiders see him as the founder of Buddhism; for Buddhists the matter is slightly more complicated. As they see it, the Truth is eternal, but not always realized. Time has no beginning or end but goes through vast cycles. Every now and again there arises in the world a religious genius, a Buddha, who has the infinite wisdom to comprehend the Truth and the infinite compassion to preach it to the suffering world, so that others too may attain

*When English terms translate Buddhist technical terms we shall normally capitalize them.

Enlightenment. Gotama is the most recent Teacher in the infinite series of Buddhas. He was human, not divine, and is no longer personally accessible to us.

(The last sentence would not be accepted by Mahāyāna Buddhists. In this book the terms Buddhism and Buddhist refer primarily to the Theravāda tradition. Not everything said is correct for all Buddhist traditions, e.g. those of Tibet and the Far East. About *all* Buddhists few valid generalizations are possible.)

Every Buddha realizes and preaches the Truth. But not all of them ensure that that Truth will long be available to men. By preaching a code of monastic discipline, Gotama Buddha founded an Order, a Sangha. This institution not only consists of those who have decided to devote their lives to striving for Enlightenment; it also preserves the memory of the Buddha's Teaching. Thus, in a metaphor central to Buddhism, the Buddha is the great physician, the Dhamma is the remedy he prescribes, the Sangha is the nurse who administers that remedy.

The word Dhamma is variously translated into English. In so far as it is what the Buddhas teach, the intellectual content of Buddhism, it is aptly translated 'Doctrine'. This doctrine both describes and prescribes, so it is both 'Truth' and 'Law'.

When a modern Buddhist takes refuge in the Sangha he is thinking primarily of monks. In Theravāda Buddhist countries – Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand are the main ones – most villages contain monasteries housing at least one monk, a man with shaven head wearing yellow robes. However, the term Sangha is ambiguous. In early texts it was used to refer to all who had accepted certain fundamental Buddhist doctrines and signalled their acceptance by taking the Three Refuges. Another traditional reference is to all who have attained a certain degree of sanctity, so that they will be Enlightened within seven lifetimes at the most; they are technically called Stream Enterers. Probably this latter meaning, the 'ideal Sangha', and the first meaning originally referred to exactly the same people, the community of professed Buddhists. However, the commoner use of the term is, and has long been, to refer to the 'conventional Sangha', namely those ordained. Unless otherwise stated, that will be the use of 'Sangha' in this book. For some 1500 years the Order contained monks, nuns and novices, both male and female. But early in the present millennium the female ordination tradition was lost. In Theravāda countries today there are some women who lead cloistered lives and behave like nuns, but they are not strictly reckoned as members of the Sangha.

If Theravāda Buddhists want to refer to Buddhism not just as a doctrine but as a phenomenon in history, a whole religion, they usually call it the Sāsana, the Teaching. For example, where English speakers might talk of the welfare of Buddhism, they would talk of the welfare of the Sāsana. Gotama Buddha founded the present Sāsana.

Theravāda is the branch of Buddhism now preserved in Sri Lanka and parts of continental southeast Asia. (As will be explained (pp. 110–12), it is misleading to call it a sect; one could call it a denomination.) The term means 'Doctrine of the Elders'; the elders in question are the senior monks, who preserve tradition. The title thus claims conservatism. An adherent of Theravāda is called a Theravādin. Theravāda reached Ceylon from India in or very near 250 BCE. For more than a thousand years thereafter it existed mainly in Ceylon and southeast India. In the eleventh century it went from Ceylon to Burma; over the next two centuries it diffused into the areas which are now Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. In all Theravādin countries there are minority populations who are for the most part not Buddhists; Theravāda has been the religion of the majority community (Sinhalese, Burmese, Thai, etc.) and generally enjoyed state patronage and official status, except of course under colonial rule. In Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand Theravāda Buddhism is today in some sense the established religion and enjoys widespread support and patronage. Information about Laos is hard to come by, but it seems that the communist government there has preserved the Sangha in some form. In Cambodia, on the other hand, the Khmer Rouges government of Pol Pot in the late 1970s massacred most of the monks and defrocked the rest, so that the Sāsana is virtually extinct. However, Theravāda is showing new life, not only in the western and developed world – Theravādin monasteries have been founded in several countries of western Europe, in North America and in Australia – but also in non-communist countries of Asia: Nepal, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Its arrival in these countries is, however, so recent that it is too soon to say whether it can strike roots and command popular support.

Hallmarks of Theravāda Buddhism are the use of Pali as its main sacred language and dependence on the Pali version of the Buddhist Canon as its sacred scripture. The Buddhist terms in this book are in Pali, unless otherwise stated. The word Pali originally meant '(canonical) text'; its use to designate the *language* of the Theravādin canonical texts seems not to antedate the eighteenth century. Pali is an ancient derivative of Sanskrit and quite close to it. Thus some words which may be more familiar to the reader in their Sanskrit forms turn up in this book with

small phonetic changes: for Sanskrit *Dharma, karman* and *nirvāṇa* Pali has *Dhamma, kamma* and *nibbāna. Buddha* and *Sangha*, on the other hand, are the same in both languages. (However, in chapter 2 most Indian words are in Sanskrit, as appropriate to the subject matter.)

Pali literature is quite extensive, but very little of it is what we would call secular. So far as we know, it has all been composed by members of the Sangha. The Canon itself is voluminous. In Pali it is called the *Tipiṭaka*, which means that it consists of 'three baskets', i.e. three collections of texts: the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, which contains the *vinaya*, i.e. the rules or 'discipline' of the Sangha; the *Sutta Piṭaka*, which contains the Buddha's sermons and some religious poetry and other miscellaneous texts – this is far the largest 'basket'; and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, which contains what is sometimes called 'systematic philosophy', a scholastic elaboration of doctrine, especially as regards the analysis of mind. Then there are the commentaries on the Canon, which probably consist largely of material compiled in ancient India, though in their present form they almost all come from Ceylon; and sub-commentaries and similar ancillary literature. Among this ancillary literature stands one monumental work, the *Visuddhi-magga, The Path to Purity*. It is a summary compendium of Theravādin doctrine, written in Ceylon in the early fifth century CE by Buddhaghosa, the monk who also put the most important commentaries in their final shape.

Perhaps the most notable Pali text which is quite independent of the Canon is the *Mahāvamsa, The Great Chronicle* of Buddhism in Ceylon. Other Theravādin countries emulated the *Mahāvaṃsa* and compiled chronicles of their own.

Not all the literature of Theravāda Buddhism is in Pali. In late mediaeval Ceylon some Buddhist works were composed in Sanskrit. Far more important, popular religious literature has everywhere been composed in the local languages. Much of it is translated or paraphrased from the Pali or otherwise depends closely on the Canon for its subject matter, but there is also a fair amount of apocryphal literature.

The traditional English name of the country with which the latter half of this book is concerned is Ceylon. A new constitution in 1972 changed the official name of the country to Sri Lanka. These words are of course in the Sinhala language, and 'Ceylon' is presumably a corruption of them, as 'Spain' is a corruption of 'España'. I have never understood therefore why 'Sri Lanka' should be used in English, let alone the barbarous adjective 'Sri Lankan' in place of 'Ceylonese'; in English we do not call Spain 'España'. However, I wish to offend no national susceptibilities, so I have tried to

conform to the new usage and have called the country 'Ceylon' only when referring to periods before it officially shed that name. As will be explained below, the majority of the population of Sri Lanka have always been Sinhalese. Their language can also be called 'Sinhalese' but I have preferred to refer to it as Sinhala.

The names of Sinhalese monks, which they acquire at ordination, have two parts: the name of their village of origin, followed by a Pali given name. Modern bureaucracy often reduces the name of the village to an initial. Sinhalese tend to refer to monks by the village name, but not consistently; I have chosen the latter (Pali) name, shorn of honorifics, for bare reference, e.g. I refer to the Ven. Hikkaduve Sumangala as Sumangala.

Two final points of usage. When I write *vinaya* I refer to monastic discipline, whereas *Vinaya* refers to the text, the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. When I write *nikāya* in referring to a monastic ordination tradition (see p. 111) I am using the common noun, whereas Nikāya is being used as part of the proper names of such groups; neither has anything to do with the *Nikāya* which is a body of texts, a sub-division of the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

I must now turn to the theoretical issues raised by writing a social history of Buddhism. Any reader who is not interested in them and wishes to take my interpretive framework on trust can turn straight to p.00.

B. A *SOCIAL* HISTORY OF BUDDHISM?

To attempt to write the social history of a religion is a problematic enterprise. Such an enterprise has never been undertaken outside the modern West; it smacks of a secularized society. Most people in the world do not regard religion as a fit subject for empirical study. What they want to know about a religion is whether the beliefs it inculcates are true or false, whether the conduct it recommends is right or wrong. Since religions other than one's own are wrong – or at least wrong for oneself – to study them would be an irrelevance or worse. Since one's own religion represents the truth, and truth is timeless, to imply that that truth has only been reached through historical circumstance and that belief in it may be similarly conditioned seems likewise sacrilegious, or at best foolish.

The classic formulation of this problem is that of Edward Gibbon:

> The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native

suggest that the Buddha propounded his social contract theory because of his observation of tribes like his own Śākyas or because of a memory of early Vedic practice. Given the whole context and flow of the sermon, I am sceptical of such a naturalistic explanation. In some of the Buddhist stories preserved in the *Jātaka* collection kings look vulnerable; they are liable to ejection by their indignant subjects if they fail in their duty, typically by failing to make it rain. That, however, is not a contractual view of kingship. The story of 'The Great Elect' is well known to Theravādin tradition, but I am not aware that it had any effect on the practice of politics and I doubt whether the Buddha ever thought that it could or should. Buddhism produced no parallel to the execution of Charles I; and the reason for that is yet again the reservation of its higher practice to monks and nuns.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Sangha's discipline

The history of Theravāda Buddhism seen from the point of view taken by the tradition itself (what anthropologists call the 'emic' view) is the history of the Sangha. This virtual identification of the fortunes of a religion with those of its professionals is alien to most religious traditions, even to some strands within Buddhism itself – not least to many educated Buddhists today. But in our view it constitutes the very core of Theravāda Buddhism. In this it is very Indian. Our view of early Indian religion and culture is mainly a brahmin view, because it is brahmins who composed and preserved texts. Similarly, Theravādin tradition is the product of texts composed by, and indeed largely for, monks and nuns. We shall show in chapter 6 that in the Theravādin societies of Ceylon and southeast Asia the Sangha, though remaining unlike brahmins in other ways, played a part analogous to brahmins as the cultural specialists of their society. Though one must not push the comparison between Buddhism and brahminism too far, to look for a lay tradition of Theravāda Buddhism is a misunderstanding of the same kind as looking for a low-caste tradition of brahminism: were it a lay tradition it would not be Theravāda, 'the doctrine of the elders', i.e. of the fully trained members of the Sangha.

To explain the phenomenon in these terms is not, however, to deny its coherence, its logic in terms of Buddhism itself. We have shown above that the Buddha, evidently influenced by his cultural environment, took it almost for granted that the vast majority of those who were serious about

taking his way to salvation would join the Sangha; that though the conventional Sangha of those in robes and the ideal Sangha of those who were assured of Enlightenment in no more than seven lives might not be coterminous, the overlap was great and of prime importance.

In doctrinal terms, the path to salvation was spelled out in terms of morality, meditation and wisdom; the meditation and wisdom constituted a self-cultivation which would normally be the province only of the Sangha. We shall have more to say of lay practice in the next chapter. Doctrinally, the lay Buddhist was offered a set of noble ideals, ethical values which can no doubt stand comparison with those of any religion. For the adherent of any religion in the world, however, the problem is just how to apply his lofty ideals to the problems of day-to-day living. The Five Precepts tell one what not to do, but as advice for positive action they are – necessarily – vague.

General principles of the vinaya

Once society has attained a certain degree of complexity, to give a detailed handbook for living which foresees every contingency is clearly impossible. But if life is radically standardized and simplified, such a guide may be attempted. This is what is generally done by the rules of monastic orders, and this is what the *Vinaya Piṭaka* attempts to do for the Sangha, the world's oldest monastic order. It provides a complete way of life, a rule of conduct, for monks, nuns and novices; the general principles are never lost sight of, and they provide a means of generating a host of detailed, particular prescriptions.

The *vinaya* is a remarkable achievement. On the one hand, no one could accuse it of losing sight of the wood for the trees: the Buddha is constantly reminding his hearers that it is the spirit that counts. On the other hand, if, while keeping this spirit in mind, you continue to follow these instructions to the letter, you are implicitly assured of a satisfying life. Not of *nibbāna* itself, for to attain that you will have to add to the monk's pure conduct the practice of meditation and the total understanding and absorption of the doctrine which constitute wisdom. But this monastic way of life will give you a perfect springboard for those higher attainments.

The key to this life is that victory over craving which results in 'being content with little'. This is the attitude which must be cultivated, the attitude which lies at the heart of the simple life. In practice, the simple life is based on owning the minimum of property (we shall discuss what

that means) and also on that drastic simplification which results from cutting the normal social ties to family and community. The Buddha told his monks to live as 'islands to themselves, their own resorts';[1] they were to be self-reliant, depending on no external resource. In this sense, we may say that living the life of the monk just as the *vinaya* prescribes it is very close, as close as it is possible to get, to acting out in daily life the spiritual goal of attaining *nibbāna*. As Carrithers puts it, commenting on the life and statements of a modern Sinhalese hermit monk: 'In this view ... the monk's way of life is more than merely a means to an end: it is very nearly the end in itself.'[2]

This explains why the present chapter goes into some detail about how exactly members of the Sangha are supposed to live. For in my understanding of the Theravādin tradition, this is the very heart of Buddhism: a painstaking practicality training a sensibility to understand suffering and thus to escape from it.

That practicality is embodied in a monk's *sīla* – the term I have been translating as 'morality', the prerequisite for meditation, wisdom and Enlightenment. To quote Carrithers again: the monk's 'inner life begins properly with his command of *sīla*, and this moral purity is rooted in his careful observance of rules, both great and small, which govern his every deed. *Sīla* is both inward and outward ..., two aspects of the same reality.'[3]

The Sangha, then, is conceived as an association of self-reliant individuals. But Buddhism's built-in dual character is of paramount importance in understanding this, its central institution. For Buddhism the supreme values are wisdom and compassion. Wisdom is Enlightenment; but to understand suffering in oneself is to understand it equally in all living beings and to wish them as well as one wishes oneself. That is why wisdom and compassion are considered inseparable in every Buddhist tradition. Their compatibility, even mutual reinforcement, at the highest level of attainment does not, however, solve all practical problems for those toiling on the lower reaches of the path: often progressing oneself and helping others to progress seem to conflict. (Every university teacher experiences the conflicting demands of teaching and research.) We shall see how this tension plays itself out in the later history of the Theravādin Sangha.

The duality is, however, already inherent in its constitution. For his own good the monk is to practise poverty and chastity; but in place of obedience he tries to preserve the Buddha's message, embodied in the scriptures, for the good of the world. While each individual monk is supposed to be seeking his own Enlightenment – the wisdom ideal – he is

also to contribute to an atmosphere in which his fellow-monks can do likewise. Nor should he totally ignore the laity; if he does not teach them, recruitment to the Sangha will cease and Buddhism will die out, to the detriment of future generations. We shall explore relations with the laity at the end of the chapter. Here we wish to emphasize that the Sangha has always seen itself as a community – that is indeed what the name means. In fact, the monk does not just belong to the Sangha (which we spell with a capital), the totality – which came to be known as 'the Sangha of the four directions'; what is of practical importance to him most of the time is that he finds himself in a particular community, a *sangha*, a body of men who meet regularly and in their face-to-face relations have some of the qualities of a family.

Historically this again represents a kind of middle way between brahminism and Jainism. The brahmin is embedded in the society into which he is born: the Buddhist would call it community at the expense of individuality. Though the Jains too developed a Sangha, their religious heroes are first and foremost solitary renunciates, usually referred to as *muni*, the 'silent sage' of the ascetic tradition: individuality at the expense of community. The Buddhist tradition attempts to keep both in balance.

Thus the very rules of the *vinaya* have a dual rationale. For the individual, we have seen, the Sangha is to institutionalize the Middle Way between the spiritually unprofitable extremes of indulgence and needless discomfort. But the *Vinaya* itself gives more prominence to the community rationale. Whenever the Buddha is represented as disapproving of something, he says that it is not conducive to increasing the number of believers.[4] He then pronounces a rule, for which he gives a stock list of ten reasons.[5] They can be summarized as the protection and convenience of the Sangha, the moral purity of its members, increase in the number of believers and the good of non-believers. This, we might say, epitomizes the Buddhist view (at least in the Theravādin tradition) of how Buddhism relates to society. Nor is this empty rhetoric: the occasions for promulgating rules are frequently lay dissatisfaction. In fact the scriptures represent the process of forming the *Vinaya* as a continuous process of meeting exigencies, of solving problems as they arise, often as unintended consequences of previous rulings. (It is particularly interesting to observe the many cases where a new rule is shown to lead to a new problem, which is then solved by its modification.) The Canon attributes each ruling to the Buddha himself. Can this be so?

Dating and development of the rules

Modern scholars have tended to argue that the *vinaya* developed over as much as two or three centuries. The *Vinaya Piṭaka* has been assigned by one eminent contemporary scholar to the third century BCE.[6] In my opinion it can hardly be that late, for it is full of references to *realia* and yet betrays no acquaintance with states larger than the kingdoms of the Buddha's day. However, even if my argument – admittedly not conclusive – that it must therefore pre-date the Mauryan empire (probably founded in 324 BCE) is accepted, this still leaves a century for the *Vinaya* to develop.

In one respect modern scepticism seems on strong ground. The *Vinaya Piṭaka*, like the rest of the Canon, has survived in several recensions. All claim the authority of the First Council, but they differ in details and in arrangement. One can argue that where a version of the *Vinaya* has something which is not in the others, it must have been added after the monks using that version had split off to form their own sect (for precise details on such sect formation see pp. 110–12 below). Moreover, we can be fairly sure that most of the early splits which led to these separate recensions date from the third century BC; only the first one, that of the *Mahāsāṅghikas*, may be a bit older. The recensions of the *Vinaya* which are probably oldest, other than the Pali, survive only in Chinese translation. They have not been translated from the Chinese, so that they are still not directly accessible to those, like me, who do not know Chinese. However, the contents of the various recensions of one of the two main parts of the *Vinaya*, the *Khandhaka* (see below), have been summarized by Frauwallner.[7] He argues that this book was composed about a century after the Buddha's death, perhaps in connection with the Second Council (see p. 128 below).

Though I necessarily speak with little authority, since I cannot myself check the evidence, I gather that the divergences between the Pali *Vinaya* and the versions surviving in Chinese are not so great that they would affect any of my arguments. Moreover, I must add that I have the strong impression, from the little contact I have had with those Chinese texts through other scholars, that they are not always very close or reliable translations. In particular, where the Pali has a difficulty the Chinese version tends to omit it. This means that we can by no means be sure that the appearance of something in the Pali text but not in the others proves that it was added after the Pali tradition separated from the rest (which happened during Asoka's reign: see chapter 5, part B). Besides, we shall

see that the *Khandhaka* is unlikely to be the earliest part of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*.[8]

For the present, I cannot see that any subsequent scholarship has disproved what Rhys Davids and Oldenberg wrote about the construction and chronology of the *Vinaya* in 1880.[9] They dated its completion to c.350 BCE[10]. But in accepting even this degree of scepticism of the Buddhists' own claim that the text goes back to the First Council, held just after the Buddha's death, I am going by a hunch: the tradition has not yet been proved to be *substantially* incorrect, only to be impossible if taken to apply literally to every detail. The language of the Buddha's pronouncements is completely stereotyped, and many of the case histories read as if they had been compiled *ex post facto*, but none of this suffices to prove that the claim of the Buddha's authority for the rulings is fictitious where – as in most cases – the rulings are recorded in every recension of the text. The fabrication, if it is one, has been very carefully and thoroughly executed, for not only does the *Vinaya Piṭaka* display a great internal consistency, it can also be cross-checked in many places with the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

Oddly enough, the most basic of all *vinaya* texts is not, as it stands, a part of the Canon, though it has canonical status. I refer to the *pātimokkha*, the list of rules of personal conduct which all monks and nuns are to recite once a fortnight. (On this recitation see more below.) Half of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, called the *Sutta-vibhanga*, consists of a commentary[11] on this code, which is embedded in it. The second major portion, the *Khandhaka*, deals mainly with the rules of community life – though it is not really possible to draw a line between what concerns the individual and what the community: for example, the *pātimokkha* is the individual code, but it must be rehearsed communally, and the rules for that rehearsal are in the *Khandhaka*. In trying to reconstruct the development of the *vinaya* it is tempting to assume a steady movement from rigour to laxity. But it seems impossible to stratify parts of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* on this principle. A monastery has a lay attendant called a *kappiya-kāraka*, which means 'suitable-maker'; he is someone who accepts gifts which monks are not allowed to accept, such as money, and uses them on their behalf: in modern parlance, he 'launders' them. While the word *kappiya-kāraka* does not appear in the *pātimokkha*, the practice which it represents certainly does. There is a long rule quite early in the code[12] which begins as follows: a layman may send a monk, via a messenger, the cost of a robe. The monk is to say, 'We don't accept the cost of a robe but we accept a robe at the time when it is permissible.' The messenger may then say, 'Have you anyone to look after you?' If he wants

the robe, the monk should point out a monastery servant (*ārāmika*) or lay disciple (*upāsaka*) who looks after him, who can accept and use the purchase price.

This institutionalization of 'laundering' is a far call from the primitive simplicity which may be the product of our romantic imaginations. Or even of the Buddha's? He is recorded as having said that in the good old days – which presumably means earlier in his career – monks lived in forests, subsisted on alms and wore cast-off rags, and were perfectly content, whereas nowadays it is monks who 'receive the four requisites in abundance' who win respect. (The 'four requisites' are material comforts – see below.) So we come to two important conclusions. First, that the ever-lamented 'corruption of the Sangha' began, by the Buddha's own account, during his lifetime. Second, that the *Vinaya* as it stands is of a piece, and if we refuse to believe its own account of the Sangha's development – as of course we can – we are left with no certain knowledge of the subject. I agree with Wijayaratna[13] that while on the one hand 'it is probable that some rules were framed and arranged later, after the Buddha's death,' on the other, 'Whether or not such and such a precept was established by the Buddha himself, the important thing for us is the sense and interpretation given to it by Theravādin monachism.'

The middle way between discomfort and indulgence

As Wijayaratna goes on to show in his book, the general sense of the *vinaya*, in harmony with the opening words of the First Sermon, is that neither comfort nor discomfort should become an issue to distract one from the quest for Enlightenment. What the Buddha stressed was the monk's subjective state of satisfaction. One day the King of Kosala congratulated the Buddha: some renunciates, he said, he found haggard, ill-favoured and unsavoury, but the Buddha's monks were satisfied, healthy and cheerful. The practice of meditation requires a certain amount of solitude, but even the life of solitude is not to be taken too literally: true solitude, said the Buddha, is to be found not in the physical condition but in freeing oneself from anxiety about past and future and living free from desire.[14]

'If a comfort does not become an obstacle to the life of renunciation, monastic Buddhism does not consider it unsuitable for "renouncers". On the contrary, in several cases the Buddha indicated that discomfort is an obstacle on the path of internal progress.'[15] What exactly did this mean in practice?

There are two standard lists of the possessions permitted to the Buddhist monk. In one formulation, he is allowed four 'requisites': clothing (three robes), begging bowl, dwelling and medicine. The other list has eight items: three robes, begging bowl, razor, needle, belt and water-strainer. When the Sangha attracted the generosity of the faithful, property beyond these lists had to belong to the Sangha as a corporate body, not to any individual. But we shall see that this tended to degenerate into a legal fiction; and there have also been explicit modifications of this pristine rigour.

To this day, however, every member of the Sangha is supposed to reflect each evening that he/she has used the four requisites only to supply the basic necessities to maintain health, not with any greed or luxury.

When a monk is ordained, he is told at the end of the ceremony that he has four 'resorts' (*nissaya*), i.e. things to depend on: eating food got by begging; wearing rags from dustheaps; living at the foot of a tree; using fermented cattle urine as medicine. Anything more comfortable is to be regarded as an extra, not to be relied on.[16] These four means of subsistence were perhaps typical of the wandering renouncers of the time. But the Buddha did not insist on such asceticism. The first schism, albeit a temporary one, is said to have occurred when a wicked monk proposed to the Buddha that five practices be made compulsory:[17] subsisting on alms; vegetarianism; wearing only rags; living only in the jungle; living only at the foot of a tree. The Buddha's answer implied that except for staying outdoors in the rainy season all of these practices were allowed, but he refused to make them compulsory. The fact that the ordinand is not to be warned of the four *nissaya* in advance points in the same direction: he is not to be put off by giving him the impression that his life will necessarily be devoid of creature comforts.

A list of ascetic options in what one ate or wore or where one lived came to be classified in late texts as thirteen *dhutanga* (a purely technical term of obscure meaning). Nine of them are already listed – though not so labelled – in a canonical sermon.[18] But what the Buddha has to say about them is that they can be undertaken for all sorts of bad reasons, such as showing off; they are only worth while if they are undertaken to cultivate 'being content with little'. And that can be cultivated without stereotyped asceticism. However, the *dhutanga* represent a limit to what the Theravādin tradition will sanction by way of mortifying the flesh. The list does not include vegetarianism (though that too is permitted) but includes the other four practices suggested for imposition by the wicked

monk, as well as such similar rigours as eating only once a day, living in a cemetery, and never lying down but sleeping seated. Some of the practices are mutually exclusive, and the tradition, so far as we can tell from modern practice, has been for a monk of ascetic temperament to take to them one at a time. These ascetic options thus remain open, but with the proviso that the monk practising them must not draw attention to the fact. Several are presumably not available to nuns, as they (for their own protection) are not allowed to go round alone.

Not surprisingly, the tendency to be too ascetic has been less of a problem in the history of the Sangha than the opposite. By comparison with other renouncers, such as Jains, who aim to own nothing at all, even the more ascetic Buddhists live in comfort. Moreover, being assured of food, clothing and shelter must have seemed an enviable lot to the poorest members of their society. Periodic claims that the Sangha has been infiltrated by men and women only interested in a comfortable life are all too plausible. The Sangha's tendency to luxurious living, exemplified especially in property ownership, has led again and again to demands for its 'purification'.

It is worth asking why this should be. The Indian renouncer is supposed to be outside the social system, just as the liberation he is seeking is outside the world. But there is always an element of ambiguity: *outside* easily shades into *above*. The state of *nibbāna* is wholly other, nothing to do with cosmic topography, yet there is always a tendency to represent it as above the highest heaven. The position of the ascetic is analogous. He is usually addressed by some such secular title as 'lord' or even more: in northern India to this day an ascetic is a 'great king' (*mahārāj*). In traditional Sinhala the Buddha is always referred to as 'Lord Buddha' or 'Great King Buddha'. Monks too are always 'lords'. We shall see below how this ambivalence between being beyond society and being at its head developed in Sinhalese culture.

This is not a purely structural question, the ambiguity of a spatial metaphor. Respect for freedom from material wants is a universal Indian value. This value produces the following dynamic. The more a monk demonstrates his indifference to worldly comforts, the more he impresses the laity and comes to be regarded as worthy of their material support. Indifference to comforts thus causes them to be provided. This presents a golden opportunity for the hypocrite and explains why monks who practise austerities are not allowed to advertise the fact.

Monks are not allowed to refuse gifts which are properly made to the whole Sangha, though they may deflect them from their own use. To

refuse them would deprive the lay donor of a chance to earn merit (see next chapter).

This difficulty provides a fine example of the unintended nature of social consequences, as neat as our case of the man who lowers the price of that which he wishes to sell (p. 16). On the other hand, this unintended result of asceticism has no *inevitable* consequences for the ascetics themselves. They retain free will, and the steadfast among them will not be corrupted by popular favour. Others, however, do become corrupted as the enjoyment of comforts begins to affect their own values, so that they come to prize those rewards and to respect those monks who evidently have them. Probably the most valued and at the same time the most insidious of those rewards is fame. It follows that those who deviate from the Buddha's standard of 'contentment with little' are likely to become more widely known than those who preserve his ideals. Scandal and luxury are more easily visible than modesty and frugality. Thus persistent complaints of the corruption of the Sangha cannot prove that the Sangha has been preponderantly corrupt; they only show persistent awareness of the ideal.

We have shown how, inasmuch as the renouncer defined his condition as the antithesis of the brahminal norm, the essence of that condition was homelessness. Steven Collins has shown[19] how the idea of homelessness permeates early Buddhism: literally leaving home and the fire of the hearth, one has to extinguish the fires of greed, hate and delusion till, with the internalization of the no-soul doctrine, one is not at home even in oneself. To this day, Jain renouncers are supposed to keep moving and have no fixed abode for nine months of the year. Homelessness is a central issue in the Indian tradition of renunciation.

Like their Jain counterparts, Buddhist monks were enjoined to stay in one place for three months of the rainy season. I consider the parallel significant. The *Vinaya Piṭaka* has the Buddha promulgate the general rule for the rains retreat as the result of public criticism that by walking round during the monsoon monks are harming 'living beings with one sense' and destroying lots of little creatures.[20] Living beings with one sense are plants; Jains consider all matter to have some kind of life and categorize it by the number of sense organs it has. It is Jains, not Buddhists, who normally worry about the welfare of new grass or accidentally treading on beetles; but evidently the Buddha wished to avoid unfavourable comparison with these competitors.[21]

Monks were not allowed at the end of the rains retreat to stay where they were: they were supposed to resume their wanderings,[22] in

conformity with the Buddha's original injunction to spread out and preach. However, there was never at any stage, so far as we know, a rule that one had to keep moving. Here again the middle way: between the brahminical householder's fixity and the Jain's perpetual motion. According to the *Vinaya Piṭaka*,[23] King Bimbisāra of Magadha presented the Buddha with a place to stay at Rājagaha, a bamboo grove, only a few months after the Enlightenment. It was neither too near nor too far from the town, accessible, not too crowded by day, quiet by night – a happy medium in every way. Strictly speaking, the gift was made to 'the universal Sangha with the Buddha at its head'. This donation was the model for many which followed, till there were monasteries in the four main cities of the region (Rājagaha, Vesālī, Sāvatthī and Kosambī) and on the routes between them;[24] and according to tradition the Buddha spent almost every rainy season in one of them. Initially monks were not allowed to reside in buildings, but when a big businessman of Rājagaha wanted to have some put up for the Sangha, the Buddha allowed it.[25] So it is that we find in the *pātimokkha* various rules about the permitted size and location of monastic buildings.[26] Buildings lead naturally to furniture, notably beds: when the King of Kosala's grandmother died he gave her furniture to the Sangha, but as monks are not allowed high or luxurious beds the Buddha had the feet taken off the sofas and the horsehair stuffing taken out of the divans.[27]

All these communal possessions required organization and looking after. There were the usual rules of boarding houses: leave this place as you would like to find it.[28] More significantly, monasteries had to appoint officials[29] to assign rooms, look after stores, and organize the acceptance of meals from the laity.

None of this, however, amounts to the complete abandonment of the wandering life, as was to happen in Sri Lanka. Monks still had no rights to the use of property in one monastery rather than another. Even nuns were enjoined to change residence at the end of the rains retreat,[30] and all but the old and infirm were encouraged to travel.[31] Their duty, after all, was to spread the word; they were not allowed to refuse an invitation to preach, even during the rains retreat.[32] Evidently the typical monastery would contain both regular residents and visitors. This is just what Holmes Welch[33] describes in his picture of how Chinese Buddhist monasteries functioned only fifty years ago, and though Chinese Buddhist monasticism lost some of the original Indian features, in this respect I think Welch may be describing an uninterrupted tradition. Bunnag's picture of contemporary Thai monasteries is very similar in this respect.[34]

After what has been said of the Buddha's appeal to the bourgeoisie and his emphasis on such virtues as thrift and diligence, it will come as no surprise that he strongly emphasized decorum for the Sangha. In a society which (though not unaware of hypocrisy) hardly differentiates between character and behaviour,[35] correct deportment is not a trivial consideration. Indeed, although many monks fail to live up to the ideal, it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance traditional Sinhalese Buddhists still ascribe to what we might dismiss as the monk's 'public image': he is to present a picture of calm control, walking with slow, measured steps, his eyes cast down on the road ahead of him, always quiet and making as few involuntary movements as possible.[36] The long last section of the *pātimokkha* consists of such rules of decorum, listing improprieties to be avoided when eating, preaching, or otherwise appearing in public.

Very much in character is the Buddha's attitude to washing. The *vinaya* does not explicitly enjoin it, but the many references show that it was frequent. We might assume this to be rational and normal. But while brahmins bathed frequently, under ritual prescription, the advanced Jain ascetic is forbidden ever to bathe or brush his teeth, both because he eschews comfort and for fear of killing bugs.

Renouncers differentiated themselves from householders, who looked after their hair, either by shaving it all off or by not tending it and allowing it to grow into a matted tangle. The Buddha naturally took the cleaner alternative: members of the Sangha all have their heads shaved on admission and go shaven thereafter. They do not, like some Jains, pluck it out by the roots – hence the razor in their equipment. Removing the hair makes a person's sex much less obvious, the more so if they are also dressed in shapeless garments; if the eyebrows too are shaved, as they are in some ordination traditions, the individual is startlingly transformed in the eyes of his acquaintances and seems depersonalized – till his new appearance becomes familiar. To this day, a well-turned-out monk has a shiny pate.

Considerations of decorum no doubt combined with those of comfort to establish the *vinaya* tradition that monks (and *a fortiori* nuns) should be properly dressed. The Buddha frowned on nudity. Nuns were not allowed even to bathe naked;[37] monks were not to be naked except when in a bathroom or actually covered by water, and when naked they may do each other services (e.g. passing the scrubber) but not interact in any other way.[38] The specific reason the *Vinaya* gives for forbidding nudity is that otherwise people would take monks for members of other, more

ascetic sects.[39] The Buddha was always anxious to differentiate his Sangha from such extremists; they retaliated by calling the Buddhist monks nothing but 'shaven-headed householders'.[40] When some monks were stripped of their robes by highway robbers and continued their journey naked they were indeed taken for naked sectarians, which caused the Buddha to allow extra robes to be accepted in such emergencies.[41]

At the time, it was not customary for renouncers to accept gifts of clothing: they either went naked or somehow provided for themselves. For the first twenty years, according to the Canon, the Buddha and his followers wore robes made of such cast-off rags as they could find among refuse or in cemeteries.[42] But one day when the Buddha was ill his doctor offered him a robe, and from then on monks were allowed to accept cloth from the laity,[43] though they had to cut it up[44] and stitch it together again, presumably to reduce its value. As Wijayaratna remarks,[45] it may well be that as the Sangha grew it became extremely hard to find enough discarded cloth to clothe them all.

For Buddhist monks wear rather a lot of clothes by tropical standards. The monk has three robes. Nuns have two extra pieces of clothing. Both monks and nuns have a further cloth for wear when bathing outside in the monsoon.[46] The reason given for the 'three robes' is that they were what the Buddha found he needed to keep warm on a cold night.[47] However, decorum is also important. Except under certain special circumstances a monk or nun must never appear in public less than fully dressed in all the robes,[48] and there are detailed instructions on how they are to be worn.[49] Moreover, one must never wear a torn robe, which is why every monk and nun is to possess a needle and thread.

Robes were the monk's most valuable private property. He was not allowed to decorate his robes,[50] and was restricted to one set at a time.[51] On the other hand, he was allowed to exchange his robes; the Buddha exchanged his with Mahā Kassapa.[52] He was also allowed to give them to his old parents if they were in need.[53] This illustrates that they really were his property, not just objects for his use – the very thin edge of what was to prove a very long wedge. Any spare robes, on the other hand, belonged to the whole community, which in practice meant the monastery, and special officers were in charge of them.[54]

At the end of the rains retreat the laity offer the material for a robe to their local monastery.[55] This material has to be new, or at least in good condition. The local *sangha* cut it up and stitch it together again and then offer it to one of their number – the theory is that he should be one who has kept the rules of the retreat. There is a special name for this robe:

kaṭhina. The *Vinaya Piṭaka* and the entire Theravādin tradition contain only a very small number of monastic ceremonies, and this is the only one of them in which the laity are integrally involved. Not only has the *kaṭhina* festival survived from canonical times till today: it is the only Buddhist festival which is celebrated in virtually identical form in every Theravādin country.

In what must have been a striking departure from standard ascetic practice, monks were allowed to wear simple sandals, though not normally in the monastery.[56] (To go barefoot indoors is the universal Indian custom.) Conversely, unless ill they were not allowed umbrellas except within the monastery;[57] umbrellas are a sign of social dignity in India. Brahmins proverbially carry umbrellas. So far as I know, the prohibition on monks' doing so has long been a dead letter; in Sri Lanka there is a traditional kind of umbrella peculiar to monks, made of huge leaves of the talipot palm, while today they are manufactured of cloth dyed a monastic yellow.

Again in contradistinction to extreme ascetics, members of the Sangha had always to eat their food from alms-bowls, which were to be made of earthenware or non-precious metals,[58] and it was compulsory to possess one's own.[59]

The middle way in food was not to eat after midday; the Buddha explained that this was good for the health.[60] This practice is often conventionally referred to as eating only once a day, but to take that literally is one of the ascetic options (*dhutanga*), not the norm. My experience in contemporary Sri Lanka is that most monks have two meals, breakfast and lunch;[61] so long as the lunch is over by noon the discipline has not been infringed. Around six in the evening monks consume a snack which is called 'medicine', using the term from the canonical list of four requisites; this 'medicine' amounts to a drink and often also a little of some kind of food which requires no mastication. This view of 'medicine' goes back to the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, for the Buddha there[62] permits the use of clarified butter, fresh butter, sesame oil, honey and molasses as medicine, and their consumption – like that of other medicine – at any time. The original rigorous prescription of fermented cow's urine as the only medicine seems never to have been enforced, and indeed the Buddha's concern for the proper care of the sick is a recurrent feature of the *Vinaya*. Again, it is notable that to this day Digambara Jain ascetics may only ingest medicine along with their single daily meal.

How were the Sangha to come by their food? The most important principle was that they were forbidden to get it for themselves: no monk

may consume any food he has not received from someone else.[63] (But a partial exception was made for fruit.) Total dependence on lay support is thus ensured: on the one hand, a monk may not live as a solitary hermit in the forest; on the other, he may not grow his own food. This rigorous interpretation of the general precept 'not to take what is not given' Buddhist monks shared with Jain renouncers. Another important principle is that a monk is to be indifferent to the quality of his food; he is not allowed to express any preference.[64] The corollary of this, in the Buddhist view, is that he is not a vegetarian: if he is given meat, he is to eat it.[65] However, this is not taken to extremes: certain meats, such as human flesh, are forbidden.[66] Moreover, in accordance with the principle that any Buddhist must avoid taking life, a monk must refuse to eat an animal which has been killed especially for him.[67] Clearly, once the laity learn of this rule they will not slaughter an animal to feed the Sangha. In practice (though the *Vinaya* says nothing of this) it is also feasible for a monk to let it be known that he would prefer not to eat meat.

The Sangha began by begging their food, though the term 'begging' is perhaps misleading. Members of the Sangha are to walk silently from door to door, asking for nothing, receiving in their bowls any scraps or leftovers that the laity may care to give them.[68] They do not even thank for the food, since it is they who are doing the favour by giving the laity a chance to earn merit; but they may say a few edifying words. These words usually take the form of informing the donor of the merit gained. Already in the Canon the Buddha tells a donor that he has thereby ensured his rebirth in heaven.[69] However, as we have seen, the Buddha refused to make the alms-round compulsory.[70] From the earliest days, there was no bar to accepting lay invitations to come for a meal. Though the first such recorded invitations were addressed to the Buddha himself and his entourage,[71] when the rules were elaborated the invitations were supposed (unless there was a famine) to be addressed impersonally to the Sangha in general; it is then the responsibility of a monastery officer to decide who should go.[72] This system is still largely in operation in the Sangha today: specific individuals may also be invited, but such invitations are less meritorious, and not customary on solemn occasions.

What was originally prohibited was to store food[73] or to cook it,[74] both practices being associated with the life of the householder, not that of the renouncer. The Buddha is said to have made exceptions to these rules during a famine,[75] when people brought food supplies to the monastery. The rules prohibiting monks from cooking and storing food are widely observed in the letter, but often by having lay servants handle and

prepare food within the monasteries. Infringements of the rules can often be justified by invoking practical difficulties. Once laity are allowed to bring food to the monks – and the monastic regulations could hardly stop them – one can see that the line between receiving food *ad hoc*, the original intention, and arranging meals on a more regular basis becomes hard to draw.

Of course, what must seem to us today to violate the original spirit of the discipline is that monks should have servants at all. But in ancient India this was not so evident. To some extent, servants were taken for granted. Pupils acted as servants to their teachers, and it was assumed that an important monk like the Buddha would normally have another monk acting as his personal attendant. One could then draw the line by saying that it is all very well for one member of the Sangha to attend on another, but lay servants are different. In practice, however, what is to stop a lay devotee from devoting himself to personal attendance on the Sangha? Should one, then, draw the line by saying that he must not be hired or paid for the purpose? But this too can hardly be enforced in practice if it is rich lay devotees who wish to do the hiring and paying. They may even be donating the services of their own slaves.

Thus it is that the issue of whether the Sangha may have servants or slaves is little discussed in the *Vinaya*. Originally, before there were monastic establishments, there can have been no lay servants. But they gradually arrive on the scene and are taken almost for granted. For an ordinary servant there was a euphemistic term, *ārāmika* – literally just a person connected with a monastery. The *Vinaya* story[76] is that once a saintly monk was clearing a mountain slope to make a cave to live in, and the king promised to give him a man, an *ārāmika*, to help him. He asked the Buddha whether this would be in order and the Buddha agreed. However, the king for a long time forgot to do anything about it; then later, to atone for his negligence, he assigned the monk five hundred servants, who constituted a whole village. While this story seems absurd as it stands, it does illustrate how royal patronage must have shaped the Sangha's development. Throughout the history of Sri Lanka until very recently the richest monasteries have owned not only vast tracts of real estate but also the labour of its inhabitants, and probably only the king owned land on such a scale as to make such huge donations as whole villages possible.

As his very name indicates, it is the *kappiya-kāraka*, the 'legitimizer', who seems to be the gateway to laxity. We have seen above that such a figure already appears, albeit not under that name, in the *pātimokkha*,

and that he might be a monastery servant or just a pious layman – a professional or an amateur, as it were. The *kappiya-kāraka* seems always to have had this ambiguous status. In modern societies he is not exactly a servant but a lay person, usually of some social standing, who is constantly in touch with the local monastery; he is not a full-time or salaried official, but rather a part-time lay trustee of monastic temporalities. It seems, however, that in the huge monastic establishments of ancient cities he was often a full-time attendant, a sort of bailiff.

On entering the Order as a novice one takes Ten Precepts, of which the final one is not to accept gold or silver. This prohibition is repeated in the *pātimokkha*,[77] along with another on buying and selling,[78] which is to include barter of a commercial character. On the occasion of a celebrated controversy which is said to have occurred a hundred years after the Buddha's death, a certain community of monks was accepting cash donations; they were censured by the majority.[79] The Theravādin tradition takes the strongest possible line against monks' accepting money: if somehow they have acquired it they are to get rid of it immediately, if necessary throwing it away.[80] At the same time, other episodes in the *Vinaya* make it clear that laymen did give cash to such 'legitimizers'. The price of a robe in the rule quoted above was presumably cash. Elsewhere in the *Vinaya*[81] the Buddha says,

> There are men of faith who deposit gold in the hands of *kappiya-kārakas*, saying, 'With this give the reverend what is permissible (*kappiya*).' Monks, I allow you to consent to what is permissible from that source. But in no way, I say, is gold or silver to be consented to or sought.

The last sentence echoes the wording of the *pātimokkha* rule forbidding the acceptance of money – or causing others to accept it.

This is not necessarily hypocrisy. If a layman spontaneously gives an attendant money to spend on a monk, the monk has willed nothing wrong. But evidently in practice the line between allowing and not allowing money to be collected or solicited for one by a proxy is a thin one.

An amusing line of text shows both that the 'legitimizers' must have been thoroughly institutionalized before the *Vinaya Piṭaka* was closed and that they were not an unmixed blessing. The prohibition on monks' cooking for themselves was rescinded, as mentioned above, during a famine, when 'the legitimizers took most of the food and gave little to the monks'.[82] The monks had a servant problem.[83]

The Sangha were enjoined to withdraw from the productive economy not in the sense that all labour was forbidden to them (though some was – for example, digging or even causing another to dig[84]) but that they were not allowed to earn. It is this, as well as the requirements of decorum, which made it one of the four offences in the gravest category to pretend supernormal powers one did not possess: such claims would be used for material ends. It was also an offence, though less serious, when one did in fact possess them to tell a layman.[85] (Like all Indians, Buddhists assume that progress towards self-control, whether by meditation or by austerities, brings with it as an inevitable by-product certain powers, such as flight.) The same thinking lies behind the general principle that monks are not to talk about or make a display of their religious progress,[86] whether in frugality or in meditation.

The disbarring offences and enforcement of chastity

The gravest category of offence is called *pārājika*. The traditional Buddhist etymology of the term is 'entailing defeat'; more likely it originally meant 'to be set aside', i.e. excluded from the Sangha. Anyone guilty of any of the four *pārājika* offences (eight for nuns) was deemed *ipso facto* to be no longer a monk[87] (or nun); that is the theory, but in practice some mechanism for giving force to the expulsion has often been required. The four offences, in the traditional order, are having sexual intercourse, taking something not given (above a trifling value), intentionally killing or causing to kill (as by inciting to suicide) a human being, and falsely claiming miraculous powers. For nuns were added: touching a man between shoulder and knee; allowing men various forms of physical contact; condoning or concealing another nun's *pārājika* offence; persisting in taking the side of a suspended monk.[88] Though these look more varied, the case histories establishing the last two also concern sexual offences.

No idea is more central to our concept of monasticism than sexual abstinence, so it is not surprising that the Buddha condemned sexual desire and activity both literally and metaphorically. Like the English words 'passion' and 'desire', the word *kāma* can refer to desires for objects in general or for sex in particular; and the Buddha condemned *kāma* in all its forms.[89] The only opinion, as against word or deed, for which a monk could be condemned was if, after three admonitions, he persisted in the view that there was nothing wrong with *kāma*.[90]

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the Buddha did not hold the

view, so widespread in traditional India and elsewhere, that sexual desire is the woman's fault and sexual intercourse the result of female temptation of the male. One brief text[91] reports that the King of Kosala was unhappy when news was brought to him that his wife had borne a daughter; the Buddha encouraged him with a little verse saying that some women are better than men. (From the modern feminist point of view he slightly spoilt this fine sentiment by adding that they may bear fine sons!) More substantial is his sermon which describes sexual desire of men for women and of women for men in identical terms.[92] He did not regard women as socially equal to men even within the Sangha, but he exhorted men to respect them: a monk should regard a woman, according to her age, as a mother, a sister or a daughter.[93]

Hierarchies of age and sex

While the Buddha had a keen eye for what was merely social convention, so that he saw men of all *varṇas* and classes as essentially equal, there were two social hierarchies he never questioned: age and sex. Even here, all were equal in their capacity for Enlightenment. One novice is supposed[94] to have become Enlightened at the tender age of seven (the minimum for joining the Sangha); and indeed the Buddha is supposed to have said that generally those who joined the Sangha late in life were less satisfactory.[95] A great many nuns have left testimony that they attained Enlightenment;[96] and the tradition that no woman could become a Buddha is not in the Canon. But when it came to social relations, even within the Sangha, age and male gender had precedence. (There is a slight difference, in that age was reckoned from ordination, not birth, so it was really seniority, whereas gender is of course absolute.) It is the senior monk who is to preside at the *pātimokkha* ceremony (see below) and generally has precedence in ecclesiastical affairs. Nuns, on the other hand, were subject not only to their own hierarchy of seniority, but also to monks. They had to receive double ordination, from both nuns and monks, and were always subject to masculine supervision: any nun, no matter how long ordained, ranked below the most junior monk.[97]

Apart from the precedence accorded to age and sex, monastic hierarchy was minimal. The functions of the office-holders concerned only temporalities and did not give them any precedence in religious matters – and this has generally continued to be the case even where the office of abbot, i.e. head of a monastery, has become institutionalized. But the relation of teacher and pupil is crucial. Every novice and junior monk

becomes the personal responsibility of a preceptor, who is to teach him every aspect of what he needs to know. In this respect, of course, Buddhism is like all Indian traditions: no culture, perhaps, has so emphasized the teacher's responsibility for his pupil's welfare and formation as the Indian – a fact reflected by the modern English borrowing of the word *guru* from India. What is remarkable about the early Buddhist view of the relations between teacher and pupil is that just as the teacher has a duty to correct his pupil's faults the pupil has a reciprocal duty to criticize his teacher – not in general, to be sure, but if the teacher has taken up a wrong doctrinal position,[98] or is in danger of saying something unsuitable.[99] I know of no parallel injunction in other classical Indian traditions. Here again the particularistic ethic is replaced by a general, impersonal principle.

The formal organization of the Sangha

I have briefly depicted the limits within which monks were supposed to order their lives and shown how those limits could be bent. In the process I have said something of the Sangha's informal organization. Now we must turn to its formal organization, a topic of paramount importance for a proper understanding of its history – yet one which is still often misunderstood.

The Sangha has certain communal ceremonies. The word ceremony should not mislead. The Buddha opposed mere ritual activity. The Sangha's ceremonies are formalized, but purely functional. They are in fact called, baldly, 'Acts of the Sangha'. They are to this day carried out without ritual elaboration, and in their plainness contrast vividly with the public religious activities of the lay Buddhist population.

Two of these ceremonies are crucial: the higher ordination (*upasampadā*) and the communal rehearsal of the *pātimokkha*. The first two chapters of the *Khandhaka* portion of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* are devoted to these two ceremonies respectively.

As we have already indicated by talking of novices as well as monks and nuns, Buddhist ordination comes in two stages. We shall here give the details only for males. A boy can become a novice (*sāmaṇera*) when he is old enough to scare crows away,[100] which is interpreted to mean seven or eight. He must have his parents' consent.[101] His initial ordination, in English often called 'lower ordination', is in Pali called *pabbajjā*, an expressive word, for it means 'going out', that is from home to homelessness. This is *not* a communal ceremony; a single monk accepts

the postulant, typically in the presence of no one but his immediate family; he is shaved and exchanges lay clothing for monastic; and he takes the Three Refuges and says a few more words after the monk.[102] The novitiate is a period of training; the novice is bound by his Ten Precepts[103] but not by the rules of the *pātimokkha* (except for those of decorum) and is not entitled to take part in the Sangha's ceremonies.

The higher ordination (*upasampadā*) cannot be taken till one is twenty (the age is however reckoned from conception, not birth).[104] It is a far more formal and elaborate affair. The postulant novice is presented by one monk, his 'teacher', to a formally constituted assemblage of monks presided over by another officiant, the 'preceptor', and is admitted as one of their number when he has shown himself duly qualified.

Originally the terms *pabbajjā* and *upasampadā* referred to the same thing: the Buddha gathered his first disciples, much in the manner of Jesus, by summoning them to follow him with the words 'Come, monk'. We need not here trace[105] how the two ordinations became separated and the higher one elaborated; we could not go much beyond the account of this evolution given in the *Khandhaka* itself.

The most important point for Buddhist history is that an ordination (and by this word from now on we shall mean the higher ordination) is not valid unless it is conferred by a quorum of monks – whose own ordination must of course be valid too. The monks should be learned and of at least ten years' standing.[106] The quorum was set at ten,[107] but five for 'border areas'[108] – *in partibus infidelium*, we might say. Five has been the quorum applied outside northern India.

Like all formal Acts of the Sangha, the ordination ceremony proceeds by the presiding monk putting the proposal to the assembly three times. Silence signifies consent, and unanimity is essential. When the proposal has thus been accepted the presiding officer states it a fourth and final time as a *fait accompli*.[109]

Before this proposal is put, the candidate is asked whether he is human, male, free from certain serious diseases, free from debt, not a slave or a soldier, whether he is of age and has his parents' consent.[110] He may also not be criminal, crippled or deformed.[111] He is also examined on his ability to recite a few canonical texts (though this is not prescribed in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*); the examination is almost a formality but does require preparation.

The monk, we have seen, is a self-reliant individual striving for his own salvation. By that criterion, his moral condition is his concern and no one else's. But he is also a member of a local monastic community, a

sangha – even if he is a transient; and he is, willy-nilly, a member of the wider Sangha and thus represents Buddhism in the eyes of the laity. To that extent, his conduct is the concern of both his colleagues and interested laymen. How is the foolish, erratic or unscrupulous monk to be kept in line?

Ultimately the Sangha has only one sanction: expulsion. Even that they cannot fully enforce, in that they cannot remove a recalcitrant offender from the premises; but from their point of view a monk who has committed one of the four *pārājika* offences has thereby disbarred himself and is no longer in communion – he is *ipso facto* a layman again.

What of lesser penalties? Theravāda Buddhism knows no penances. If you have done, said or thought a wrong, doctrine says, nothing can simply cancel that out. But what you must do is be aware of what you have done and resolve to do better. There is no liturgy for repentance, only the rational exhortation to learn from one's mistakes. Even such psychological progress, however, can be institutionally aided if one is not merely to be aware of one's faults but declare them to another. Hence the monastic custom of compulsory confession.

For most of the offences in the code, confession is itself the main or only punishment. If one has acquired some unallowable possession, one forfeits it with the confession. There are also a few offences, the gravest after *pārājika*, for which the monk is suspended from full communion, the length of suspension depending on the length of time he has failed to confess the offence.

The *pātimokkha* code lists the offences (227 in the Theravādin tradition; but of these 75 are only the rules of decorum) in categories according to the penalty prescribed, from the gravest, the *pārājika*, to the least, the rules of decorum. This list is to be recited every fortnight at the *pātimokkha* ceremony, which Durkheim might have called the Sangha's solidarity ritual.

The ceremony is to take place every month on the days of the full moon and new moon.[112] These days, as well as the intermediate quarter days of the lunar month, are known as *uposatha* days, whence the Sinhalese word *poya*, which is also used by western Buddhists. The *pātimokkha* ceremony is thus also known as the *uposatha* ceremony. The senior monk present, reckoning seniority from higher ordination, recites the *pātimokkha* after a brief preamble.[113] At the end of each category of offence he asks three times whether all present are pure: he then announces that since they are silent they are pure. In an emergency, says the *Vinaya*,[114] he may also drastically abbreviate the recitation, so long as

he asks about and announces the *sangha*'s purity. (As happened with food rules originally relaxed for a famine, I believe that this 'emergency' regulation has become generally current.)

Even abbreviated, the form of the ceremony shows that it was meant to be functional, to serve as the occasion for confession of one's faults. It is even possible that originally the demonstration was intended to edify the laity, for the text ascribes a part of the origination of the institution to a king's suggestion.[115] However, the character of the public recitation rapidly changed. The rule was laid down that laymen were not to be present;[116] this suggests to me that originally they were and it was felt to be embarrassing for them to hear the confessions. After the next development, however, excluding the laity lost its point, for the actual confessions came to precede the communal ceremony.[117] Monks confess one to another, in pairs, and assemble for the ceremony only when all, having confessed, are 'pure'.[118] The ceremony thus becomes purely expressive of that purity, and to that extent a mere ritual. This makes me think that here we do have a development which, though it is in the *Vinaya*, must post-date the Buddha's lifetime. It indicates an overwhelming desire not to lose face before one's colleagues.

Two or three monks can confess to each other and thus regain their purity (or confirm it, if they have nothing to confess). But the quorum for performing a *pātimokkha* ceremony is four.[119] Here we come to the truly communal dimension of the *pātimokkha* institution.

The Buddha attached the greatest importance to this ceremony; it answered the first principle he laid down for the prosperity of the Sangha when he modelled its constitution on that of 'tribal republics', acephalous polities (see above, p. 50): that it hold 'full and frequent assemblies'.[120] He laid down elaborate rules to ensure that it took place and that everyone attended. No one was excused unless he was too ill to be moved, and even so sick a man had to send a declaration of his purity by proxy; ***in extremis*** the rest of the Sangha was to come to hold the ceremony at his sickbed.[121] He clearly saw it as the focal point of *sangha* life. This in turn made it necessary to define a *sangha*. Since some monks lived scattered and isolated, and many were itinerant, the community had to be defined geographically: those within a certain area on the relevant day. Hence the importance in *vinaya* of the monastic boundary (*sīmā*). A correct *uposatha* cannot be held till a boundary has defined the community. (There is also a formal proceeding for laying such a boundary.[122]) The area encompassed is not to be larger than can be walked across to attend the ceremony and by the same token there should be no physical barriers

such as uncrossable rivers within it.[123] Thus the real monastic community is defined geographically, like the Christian parish, but for quite a different purpose.

The displacement of confession to prior privacy did not disturb the *pātimokkha* ritual's *communal* function. It was the one thing which held the Sangha together. Each celebration, of course, was the announcement of the purity of a particular *sangha* and ensured their renewal of face-to-face relations – perhaps some had spent the intervening fortnight meditating in seclusion. But since monks moved between communities, these regular compulsory meetings bound the Sangha together as a whole. We must remember that there was nothing else to do so, both because of the difficulty of communications and because there was no hierarchy, no structure of command, after the Buddha's death.

Maintaining Buddhism in recognizable form must really have been a great problem for the first centuries. Central authority lay in the scriptures, 'the Buddha's word'; but even that depended on an oral tradition which could easily have become hopelessly fragmented. We know little about the mechanisms which bound all the far-flung *sanghas* together, though the texts give us glimpses. There were evidently occasions analogous to 'visits from head office', even though strictly there was no head office. A Pali commentary gives an example of those who project their own fears on to a lonely forest environment:

> There are monks who make their living in one of the 21 acquisitive ways, such as practising medicine, acting as messengers, or usury ... They hear that monks who know the 3 *Piṭakas* have set out on a mission to purify the Sāsana and will arrive today or tomorrow; they go into the forest and sit behind a bush and at the slightest sound of grass or leaf they are terrified, thinking 'Now we are lost', for they imagine those monks coming and catching them and making them put on white clothes [i.e. laicizing them][124].

Sect formation: Theravāda defined

But the Sangha did in fact split, into what historians have called 'sects'. How did this come about and what did it mean?

The Sangha's ideal is that all its Acts be carried out in unanimity. But this does not always work, and there is provision for voting in the case of disagreement. The crucial question then becomes the size of the minority. Since the quorum for holding a *pātimokkha* ceremony is four, a minority

of less than four is of no account, because the dissidents cannot break away to form their own *sangha*. But four or more monks can do so. Therefore the *sangha* is only 'split' when there are at least four votes on each side.[125] Causing a split in the Sangha is one of the six heinous offences,[126] like parricide or shedding the blood of a Buddha; but it undoubtedly occurred. Presumably it was always the other side who were the splitters.

So splitting the Sangha is a technically precise matter. It occurs when a community, a *sangha*, has a disagreement which causes two groups of more than three monks to hold separate *uposatha* ceremonies. (It applies to other ceremonies too, but the *pātimokkha* recital is both the most frequent and the most important.) Monks who do not co-operate for the *pātimokkha* do not, *a fortiori*, co-operate for ordination ceremonies, and so different lineages arise within the Sangha.

Buddhist 'sects' are therefore bodies of monks (and nuns); they have nothing to do with the laity. Splitting is a matter of *vinaya*, of behaviour. If the split arises as the result of a disagreement, the disagreement itself is likely to be over a point of *vinaya* – of this recent Theravādin history furnishes us with many examples. But whatever the source of the disagreement, the result is measured in *vinaya* terms: holding separate *pātimokkha* ceremonies.

Monks cannot co-operate in a *pātimokkha* ceremony if they do not share exactly the same *pātimokkha* code. Differences in the code may have arisen not only from *sangha*-splitting, but also unintentionally, especially through the geographical isolation of different *sanghas*. In fact it seems likely, as Frauwallner has shown,[127] that most of the early sects originated from such regional variation, not through conscious disagreement. Once a monk becomes loyal to one version of the *pātimokkha* code he can only remain in full fellowship with others who share his view.

A sect is sooner or later perpetuated as a separate entity by holding its own ceremony of higher ordination. A body of monks who share an ordination tradition, a 'sect' if you like, is called a *nikāya*. As Bechert has written:

> In the first instance, a *nikāya* or sect can be described as a group or community of monks that mutually acknowledge the validity of their *upasampadā* or higher ordination and therefore can join together in the performance of ... acts prescribed by Vinaya or Buddhist ecclesiastical law.[128]

It is important for western readers, used to a culture in which doctrine is the diacritic between religious bodies, and heresy the cause for expulsion, to appreciate that in India orthodoxy is less important than orthopraxy, doing the right thing, and that this has been true even of so intellectual a religion as Buddhism. Thus Mahāyāna, for example, is not a sect, but a current of opinion which cut across sects as properly defined. There is no such thing as a Mahāyāna *pātimokkha*. By the time that Mahāyāna doctrines arose, about the first century BCE, there were said to be eighteen sects in India. The number eighteen stayed constant in Buddhist historiography, and evidently became conventional.

This is of course not to say that when a body of monks separated from the rest it might not espouse some particular shade of doctrinal opinion. Human group loyalties often work in that way, and the set of eighteen 'sects' were associated with (often small) doctrinal differences. But the doctrinal opinion was unlikely to *cause* the split, which had in any case to be actualized by performing one's own *pātimokkha* ceremony.

Only now are we in a position accurately to define Theravāda. The term means 'doctrine of the elders', but this is not significant: all religious groups tend to claim that it is they who preserve the pristine doctrine. In doctrinal terms, Theravādins specified that they were *vibhajja-vādin*, which means 'analysts', and they delighted in classifying psychological states. A Theravādin monk, however, is one who adheres to the Pali version of the *pātimokkha* with its 227 rules, and is thus a member of the Theravādin ordination tradition – the two conditions are interwoven.

Originally there can have been only one Theravādin ordination tradition. Later, in ancient Ceylon, there were further splits, refusals to hold the *pātimokkha* together, and thus a further multiplication of ordination traditions. That story we reserve for chapter 6.

Before returning to the ancient Sangha, we should explain the term Hīnayāna. This word was coined by Mahāyāna polemicists, who called their own doctrinal position 'the great vehicle/course' (the word *yāna* is ambiguous) and that of their more conservative opponents 'the lesser vehicle/course' or, more politely, 'the disciples' vehicle/course' (*śrāvaka-yāna*) – the 'disciples' being those who personally heard the Buddha preach. It is unfortunate that the pejorative term gained currency in the west. Since Theravādins adhere to a pre-Mahāyāna view of Buddhism they are, from the Mahāyāna point of view, of the Hīnayāna; but the term has neither the same meaning nor the same reference as Theravāda, and is best avoided.

Maintaining conformity

We return now to the relation between the individual monk and his community. Was opinion indeed totally free? There is an offence in the *pātimokkha* code[129] which has been summarized as 'clinging to evil views'; does this not reveal a concept of heresy? The rule is long and complicated, and careful scrutiny shows that it does not. The offence is for a monk to put forward (not just think, but propound) a particular view: that what the Buddha taught to be obstructions are in fact not. The other monks are to ask him three times not to calumniate the Buddha, and the offence is if he persists after three such admonitions. The accompanying tradition is that the argument is about whether sexual activity is an impediment to the monastic life, obviously a basic point of discipline. So this is no exception to the principle that a monk has done no wrong unless he thinks so, and confesses it, himself. For, we repeat, it is a cardinal principle of Buddhism that the moral quality of an act lies in the intention behind it.

The *pātimokkha* thus appears a perfectly harmonious and consistent system of self-regulation. But alas, things are not quite so simple. For individual monks may act in bad faith; and it is also possible that corporate decisions may need to override the individual conscience. Thus it is that the *pātimokkha* is not the only system of monastic regulation in the *Vinaya*, though I feel sure it must have been the earliest. As I have mentioned above, there are other procedures for corporate acts of a *sangha*, procedures which were used for settling disputes and also occasionally for disciplining individuals. One such procedure is the appointment of a committee of senior monks.

> The committee is proposed to the disputatious sangha by the traditional announcement, and the appointment is ratified by unanimous silent consent. In so consenting, the disputing sangha also agree to abide by the decision of the committee.... The method ... clearly depends on the real authority structure of the Sangha, the gerontocracy.[130]

Respect for seniority and experience is another of the principles the Buddha enunciated for the welfare of lay polities and the Sangha alike.[131] Carrithers goes on to conclude:[132]

> In the absence of formal office and formal procedures of decision-making, the guidance of the Sangha is left to a small, learned group

of rugged individualists who must act harmoniously through reasoned face-to-face discussions.

Unanimity in decision was yet another of the principles which the Buddha laid down for the well-being of his Sangha.[131] This was not to be a merely formal matter. Many a time the Buddha told monks to live together in amity, looking at each other with eyes full of affection.[133] Buddhist loving kindness was no mere abstraction, no mere topic for meditation, but to be practised by the Sangha in their daily lives. During the rains retreats, when monks lived together for three months at a stretch, the Buddha forbade them to live in silence 'like dumb animals' – as, he said, other renouncers did.[134] And at the end of the retreat they hold a special *pātimokkha* ceremony at which each asks all his fellows to forgive him if he has offended them in any way during the retreat.[135] Monks in a good *sangha* were 'separate in body but one in thought.'[136]

Relations between ordained and laity

This brings us to relations with the laity. In the previous chapter we discussed Buddhist doctrine for the laity; here we must add a few words on clerical-lay relations. Buddhist monks are accustomed – and sensitive – to the accusation that they do not work actively for the welfare of their fellow creatures. Their answer is that their most important service is to show by example the way to end all suffering. 'The monk who dedicates himself to the Buddha's teaching lights the world like the moon coming out from behind the clouds,' says an ancient verse.[137] This was echoed to Carrithers by an elderly monk: 'We monks are like that street-lamp.... If we behave well, Sir, then the world can go along in our light.'[138] This would not excuse all callousness. Monks do what they can. 'Temporarily and provisionally it is possible and necessary to allay much suffering; but permanent and really effective alleviation is possible only for each individual in himself...'[139]

The Buddha from the outset conceived the Sangha as a missionary organization. Within a few weeks of his Enlightenment, when he had collected his first sixty disciples, the Buddha is said to have dispatched them with the famous exhortation which I have quoted in the Introduction (pp. 18–19). As mentioned above, monks and nuns were not allowed to turn down any invitation to preach. This may not seem so remarkable to us nowadays, but it seems to have been another innovation of the Buddha's. Brahminism was exclusive, so that the

question of public preaching did not arise. The saints of other heterodox sects prided themselves on silence: according to a Jain tradition, the Jina, on attaining Enlightenment, no longer ate, slept or talked; but a divine sound emanated from his body and was interpreted by brahmin disciples, who on that basis composed the scriptures.[140]

The relations between the Sangha and their lay supporters were conceived as reciprocal generosity: the Sangha gave the Dhamma, the laity gave material support, rather disparagingly termed 'raw flesh'.[141] Naturally the laity were conceived as having much the better of the bargain. In fact, since giving to the Sangha brought them merit, they were favoured by both halves of the transaction. The Sangha could refuse to receive alms from someone by passing a formal act of 'overturning the alms bowl'[142] and this was evidently a feared sanction, no doubt because of the public opprobrium. This exception proves the rule that normally donations had to be accepted.

The scale of lay generosity must have been impressive. The texts often describe the Buddha as travelling with 250 or 500 monks; these are conventional round numbers but indicate a considerable entourage. When such a group accepted an invitation to a meal it must have required considerable organization and resources; and their alms round must have imposed quite a strain on the host area. No wonder that the Buddha's chief lay patrons are depicted as being extremely wealthy. Yet there are few if any stories of monks going short, except in famines. The historian may well conclude that the danger lay in the opposite direction: excessive lay generosity. The preceding pages have perhaps sufficed to show that lay pressure to accept gifts probably accounts for most of the Sangha's (recurrent) 'corruption'. The texts even suggest that kings were most dangerous in this respect. The Buddha's great patron Bimbisāra, King of Magadha, plays an interesting role. He was the first person, according to the canonical account, to invite the Sangha to a meal and to give them a monastery. Well and good. But he was also the person who gave them a whole village of five hundred people to be their servants. Of course we do not know whether these stories are literally true; but I suggest that even if they are not, they record the real problem of relations with state power and patronage. It was necessary to entertain such relations, if only because the Sangha needs state support to enforce its decisions – a problem even more crucial than excessive riches.

There are other indications that the Sangha early had to accommodate to the facts of political power. We have recorded that no soldier was admitted to the Sangha. The story behind this, according to the *Vinaya*,[143]

is that once King Bimbisāra had trouble on his borders and sent crack troops to deal with it. But these soldiers decided that if they were to kill anyone they would sin and later suffer for it, so to escape their dilemma they became Buddhist monks. A minister advised the king that anyone who thus deprived him of his soldiers deserved to be executed. As the king was on good terms with the Buddha, he advised him that other kings might not take such a thing lying down. Reading between the lines, we can deduce that he warned the Buddha that for their own good the Sangha had better not ordain soldiers.

Probably a similar need to yield to the social order can explain the exclusion from ordination of thieves, debtors and slaves.[144] Since Buddhist monks were inviolate, ordination would have offered them an escape from their secular obligations. No doubt the slave-owners objected. The exclusion of slaves stands in striking contrast to the sermon in which the Buddha points out to a king that if one of his slaves were to leave and become an ascetic he would much improve his lot.[145] The king addressed is Bimbisāra's son; if that is historically accurate it makes it unlikely that the decision to exclude slaves really goes back to the Buddha himself; but the evidence is tenuous.

The issue of accommodation to political power is most explicitly addressed in a small anecdote, otherwise of little moment, of how King Bimbisāra once asked for the beginning of the rains retreat to be postponed. Agreeing, the Buddha said, 'I prescribe, monks, that you meet kings' wishes.'[146] This dictum from a specific context has been given far wider application.

This is not merely common prudence. The Sangha, and hence Buddhism, has a particular need of political patronage if it is to flourish. Monks can reach decisions to expel malefactors – or pronounce that they have automatically expelled themselves – but they lack the power to enforce those decisions. History has shown time and again that without state support – which need not mean *exclusive* state support – the Sangha declines for this very reason. Indeed, it falls prey to a vicious circle: when it cannot expel 'immoral' monks it acquires a reputation for being decadent, so that lay support further declines and it becomes increasingly impotent to set its house in order. In the next chapter we shall meet Asoka, the Buddhist model of how a king should behave to support the Sangha.

When we consider the decline and revival of the Sangha through history, corruption through political weakness seems to have been an even greater danger than corruption through economic power. The

physical well-being of the Sangha – as of other segments of society – requires a measure of political security, but not direct access to power. What is required is that the secular arm lend the Sangha the strength to purify itself. Whether kings can go further and actually initiate such a purification is however dubious.

This problem of enforcement is not mentioned in the *Vinaya*. No doubt while the Buddha lived his authority carried all before it. But I can divine another reason for the silence: the problem was never solved in *vinaya* terms, and casuistry does not record unsolved problems. The only solution for the Sangha was to receive support from outside. That is why they have had 'to meet kings' wishes'.

CHAPTER FIVE

The accommodation between Buddhism and society in ancient India

A. BUDDHIST DEVOTION

In the first chapter we recalled that plans never turn out exactly as intended. The more people the plans involve, the more unintended consequences there are likely to be. In this sense a religion, like any other social movement, is bound to some extent to be a victim of its own success.

In the previous chapter we described a few developments which the Buddha can hardly have intended or even foreseen when he sent out the first sixty monks to spread the word: use of property by proxy, control of lay labour on a large scale, denying slaves admission to the Sangha, the refusal of those who had forfeited the right to remain in the Sangha to disrobe themselves – all these are plausible examples. For all but the last of these developments there is direct evidence in the Canon, where they are ascribed to the Buddha's lifetime, and of course to his intention – for piety could not admit that while he was alive such things could take place without his willing them. This chapter will deal mostly with developments which even the Buddhist tradition does not ascribe to the Buddha's lifetime, though in some cases it claims that he foresaw them. These attitudes and practices probably began among laity and are characteristic of lay Buddhist religiosity, but that is not to deny that they have also been part of the lives of the Sangha throughout recorded history.

It is sometimes said that the Buddha did not appeal to faith or that Buddhism is not a faith. Those who say such things are usually trying to draw a contrast with that strand in the Christian tradition (which of course is not the only strand) which says that one must believe Christian dogma however repellent it may be to reason: that such apparent conflict with reason is but a test of faith and all the more reason to believe: 'Credo quia absurdum' – 'I believe because it is absurd.' That is certainly quite un-Buddhist. But there is plenty in the Pali Canon about faith. The word most used is *pasāda*, which indicates emotion as much as belief, a calm and happy confidence that something is so. In the *Sutta-vibhanga*, the canonical commentary on the *pātimokkha* which constitutes about half the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, Wijayaratna has counted 409 occasions on which the Buddha criticizes conduct on the grounds that 'it is not going to instil faith (*pasāda*) in those who lack it or increase the faith of those who have it' (this is not a literal translation). Calm and happiness are themselves 'profitable', 'skilful' states of mind, little steps along the path to *nibbāna*.

The Buddha as an object of faith and devotion

A convert to Buddhism declared his faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and every Buddhism occasion begins in this way. But there is just one sentence which precedes even this 'taking refuge': a salutation to the Perfectly Enlightened Buddha. It is the Buddha himself who is the principal object of religious emotion; the Sangha arouse emotion primarily in so far as they are the Buddha's sons and daughters, his heirs, his representatives among us.

Whether or not he foresaw it, it is hard to think that the Buddha would have welcomed this 'personality cult'. In the text which describes his last days, the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*, we get glimpses of his character which seem authentic. After the attack of dysentery which so weakens him that it leads to his death, the Buddha says that he has taught the Dhamma, so that now anyone who feels he can do it can take over the leadership of the Sangha;[1] he goes on to tell the monks to rely on themselves alone (quoted above, p. 89). Then, just before his death, he says that the Dhamma and Vinaya remain to instruct his disciples.[2] Yet the very same text reports beginnings of the personality cult, providing canonical justification for pilgrimage and the worship of relics. True, the Buddha's remarks were made to monks, and the devotional practices, it can be argued, are primarily for the laity. Yet the stark contradiction between 'having no refuge other than yourselves' and 'taking refuge' in the Three Jewels is

striking. It seems hard to argue that Buddhist lay religiosity as we know it was just what he intended. However excellent a consequence of his teaching, I submit that it was not the Buddha's idea.

The Buddha himself was the prime object of faith and focus of devotion. The existence of gods, both here on earth and in the various heavens, was not usually questioned, let alone denied, but they were only kinds of superman, who could be propitiated for worldly favours but could not help one to progress on the path which is the only guaranteed escape route from suffering. (It is therefore considered inappropriate for members of the Sangha to worship them, though they too do not question their existence.) Theravādin doctrine has never wavered from the position that the Buddha is dead and no longer active in the world; in moments of great crisis some individuals do pray to him for help, but that is the spontaneous outburst of emotion and in their calmer moments they know that it can do no good except as a psychological relief to themselves. Buddhist saints, other Enlightened beings – they are commonly known as *arhats* – are similarly dead and of no influence on the world.

This seems to provide a very narrow ideological base for cult and mythology, and indeed that is a fair generalization about Theravādin culture. As we have explained in the Introduction and will exemplify later, Theravāda has co-existed with other systems of action and thought, derived both from Indian and local cultures, which the outsider can call 'religions', inasmuch as they are 'patterns of interaction with super-natural beings'. But at a very early stage, before it expanded outside India and largely indeed before it split into sects or developed doctrinal diversity, Buddhist culture did provide somewhat more material for creative artists to elaborate and pious Buddhists to adore than the personality and biography of Gotama Buddha. This material consisted of the Buddha's former births and a multiplicity of Buddhas.

The beginnings of both these developments are in the Canon, even in what are believed to be its oldest parts. An element of the Buddha's Enlightenment was that he remembered his former births – paradoxically infinite in number, as the world has no beginning. Stories of the Buddha's former births, called *jātakas*, became a major genre of Buddhist literature. Some originated among the Buddhists, others were adapted from Indian folk literature, especially animal fables. In all of them, whether he is man, animal or deity, the hero is identified with the future Buddha. The term for 'future Buddha' is *bodhisatta*, which in Sanskrit became *bodhisattva*.

The former Buddhas[3] are less interesting, for the biography of every Buddha follows much the same pattern; we can see that it is just modelled

on that of Gotama. Why the doctrine arose is not clear. Possibly it was borrowed from the Jains. Another line of reasoning is that it provided the Buddha with some apparently external authentication, a prop for Buddhists in argument with non-believers whose own gurus claimed to have learnt doctrines handed down in a spiritual lineage. The Buddha had cognized the Dhamma by his own effort; but the Dhamma is eternal and so could be cognized by similar geniuses from age to age.

Like the Buddha Gotama's former births, the series of former Buddhas must stretch back to infinity. However, these two perspectives on the remote past were co-ordinated by creating a story that the future Gotama Buddha had formally embarked on his career as a *bodhisatta* by taking a vow at the feet of a former Buddha called Dīpaṃkara, who vouchsafed him the prediction that he would succeed. Dīpaṃkara was 24 Buddhas back and Gotama became, at least for Theravādins, the 25th (sometimes 28th) of those whose names are known to us; he renewed his vows at the feet of each. The stories of his former births were then standardized at 550 (a round number); during these births he behaved with a moral heroism which enabled him to accumulate the ten moral perfections (generosity, courage, fortitude, benevolence, etc.) which are the prerequisite for Buddhahood. The story of how the ascetic Sumedha, the future Gotama Buddha, fell at Dīpaṃkara's feet and made his great resolve is depicted in very many Theravādin temples and at least alluded to in innumerable works. Perhaps even more popular, and probably known to every Theravāda Buddhist child, is the last story in the *Jātaka* collection; in this the future Buddha, born as Prince Vessantara, attains the perfection of generosity by giving away not only all his material possessions but even his wife and children.[4] These stories are probably as important in Theravādin culture as the stories of Gotama Buddha in his final life.

The line of births culminating in Gotama Buddha is ended, but the line of Buddhas stretches into the infinite future. The next Buddha, Metteyya ('the Kindly One'), is already sitting in heaven waiting his time to be born on earth. Orthodoxy fixes the date of his arrival among us in the very remote future, and Buddhists who express the wish – as many do – to be reborn in the time of Metteyya are ready for the long haul. Metteyya should therefore have little effect on religion in practice. But he supplies material for messianic aspirations, a potential he has occasionally realized in Theravādin countries.

Pilgrimage

According to the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*,[5] the Buddha declared before his death that an Enlightened person (or a world ruler) should be buried under a *stūpa*. A stupa (for which there are many synonyms) is a funeral mound, of which the main part by tradition is hemispherical and covered in masonry. Such memorials would serve to instil the tranquil joy of faith in all pilgrims, and so help them to obtain rebirth in heaven. This text serves as the charter for Buddhist pilgrimage. Indians seem always to have venerated certain spots – particular rivers, mountains, large trees – and the Buddhists felt the need for distinctively Buddhist sites to venerate. This does not mean that they had to stop venerating the others: faith in the Buddha did not require them to doubt that natural features were inhabited by more or less powerful deities. But for them the most important places to visit were those associated with the Buddha's life, especially the scenes of his birth (the Lumbinī grove near Kapilavatthu), Enlightenment (Bodh Gayā), first sermon (Sārnāth, near Benares) and death (probably near Pāvā in Bihar). The most important of these has always been Bodh Gayā; it drew pilgrims from all over the Buddhist world in ancient times and now again does so in the twentieth century, on a far larger scale than ever before.

The exact site of the Buddha's death seems early to have been forgotten. This diminished the already small number of places with sacred associations for Buddhists; and in any case, as Buddhism spread, few people in those days could hope to travel hundreds or even thousands of miles to Bihar. The number of pilgrimage centres was, however, early increased by the belief in former Buddhas; places associated with their – albeit mythical – biographies could be more widely distributed. But they were still all in India. When Buddhism spread overseas, new myths arose: every Theravādin country has a myth that Gōtama Buddha paid it at least one flying visit, and the places where he touched down became pilgrimage centres.

Among the world's most famous journeys are some undertaken by individual Chinese monks in the first millennium CE to see the ground the Buddha trod. But pilgrimages are more commonly undertaken by Buddhist devotees, mostly laity, travelling in groups and devoting themselves to intensive religious activity over the entire period of the journey, so that the pilgrimage also has the latent function of cementing relations between the participants. However, the importance of the custom can be exaggerated. Pilgrimage is not an obligation, like the

Muslim *hajj* to Mecca. There is not even a Buddhist word for 'pilgrimage'; it is referred to as a 'worshipping journey' or some such. No one thinks the worse of a fellow-Buddhist for not having gone on a pilgrimage.

Relics

Far more important than pilgrimage is a development with which it is closely associated: the cult of relics. So far as I can discover, this was invented by Buddhists. This is the more striking, as their scriptures do not even claim that it was invented by the Buddha himself. But the same *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta* says[6] that after the Buddha's cremation – though not at his behest – his relics were divided into eight parts and given to eight people, each of whom built a stupa over the relics and instituted a festival in their honour.

The general Indian belief is that a corpse is extremely impure, even after cremation. The Buddhist saint – and *par excellence* the Buddha – is, however, someone who has succeeded in going 'against the stream'; he has managed to reverse the normal process of nature. According to the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha's own funeral symbolically reflected this reversal.[7] Corpses were normally disposed of outside the settlement, to the south (the direction of the god of death). The gods insisted that the Buddha's body be carried through the middle of the town near which he died and burnt to the east – the most auspicious direction. The preservation and worship of his physical remains follows the same symbolic pattern.

Stupas originated as tombs for the Buddha's relics – which of course multiplied as the demand for stupas grew. The text says that all Enlightened beings, *arhats*, are entitled to such tombs; and by extension the cremated remains of all monks in Theravādin countries are still buried under small stupa-shaped tombs; but to my knowledge it is only stupas which contain relics (however fictive) of a Buddha which are worshipped. In later times the relic entombed in a stupa was sometimes not a piece of bone or the like but a portion of scripture inscribed on gold; this reflected the Buddha's dictum (see p. 71 above) that 'he who sees the Dhamma sees me': the text was the Buddha's 'Dhamma-body'. Small portable relic caskets are also made in the shape of stupas.

By a later classification, relics are said to be of three kinds: corporeal; objects used (by the Buddha); reminders. Corporeal relics are always bone, teeth or hair. Objects used are such things as begging bowls, but also the tree under which the Buddha sat to attain Enlightenment (which is

known as the Bo tree from *bodhi*, 'Enlightenment'), and in practice by extension other trees of that kind, the *ficus religiosa*. These two kinds of relics were venerated from very early days. The third kind may be a somewhat later addition. Its prototype is probably the stupa; originally it was held to be an object of worship only because of the relic it contained, but in due course it became a 'reminder', in particular of the Buddha's death.

In early Buddhist art – the earliest surviving dates from the second century BCE – the Buddha is not directly portrayed; his presence in the scene is indicated by some 'object used' such as a pair of sandals, which reinforces the general context. This significant absence presumably symbolizes the Buddha's reversal of nature and obliteration of what would cause him to be reborn. But very early in the first millennium CE statues of the Buddha began to be made and worshipped. The Theravādin tradition has been that such worship is justified by classifying the statue as a 'reminder relic'. In fact the statue is only treated as really sacred if it has a corporeal relic enshrined in it as well.

The doctrine of relics is thus fundamental to the practice of Buddhist worship, even if it looks rather like an *ex post facto* justification of devotional practice. It is also important to understand that in Buddhism – as in all Indian religions – such devotional practice is individual, not congregational. The layman makes his or her way to the shrine and offers flowers or incense before a Buddha image and recites Pali verses, as if in prayer, but it is all an exercise to purify one's mind. I have described this cult elsewhere.[8] All that need be said here is that it remains extremely simple, in contrast to Hindu ritual, and is for the most part carried on without professional intermediaries.

Mortuary rituals and 'transfer of merit'

The Theravāda Buddhist monk hardly ever acts as what we would call a priest. He officiates at no life crisis rituals except funerals – and even there he can claim to be present as preacher and consoler, not as officiant. We do not know whether the monk assumed this funerary role for Buddhists in ancient India, but it is quite logical for him to do so. Death is the perfect occasion for preaching on impermanence and the inevitability of suffering. Indian death rituals can only be said to begin with the funeral. In a series of complex rites, brahmins are fed in an attempt (among other things) to improve the lot of the dead man and cause him to be reborn in some agreeable situation. Buddhist monks substitute for

brahmins in the rituals following the death of a Buddhist, and are formally fed a week after the death, three months after, and at annual commemorative rituals. On all these occasions the merit is ritually transferred to the dead person.

The 'transfer of merit' requires explanation. We saw above that Buddhism is a simple moral dualism: *kamma*, action — which the Buddha defined as intention – is either good or bad. And we said that 'the currency of good actions' was translated into 'the more fluid concept of mental purity'. But it was not always so translated; that was done by those who had acquired a sophisticated understanding of Buddhist doctrine. In particular it was done, one may presume, by the Sangha, those whose goal was *nibbāna*, to attain which would make their *kamma* irrelevant. But lay Buddhists, who were not so clearly differentiated from the rest of the population, were evidently setting their sights lower and aiming only to be reborn in heaven (or in a good station on earth); and their moral concepts were correspondingly more mechanistic. For them, merit was a kind of spiritual cash, a medium of exchange which could get you the things money cannot buy.

The doctrine of *kamma* places full responsibility for his fate on the shoulders of the individual. Yet evidence from Hindu as well as Buddhist sources shows that people cannot always accept the harshness of this doctrine, any more than Christians could accept the logic of predestination; they devise evasions at the price of logical consistency. A case in point is Hindu funerary ritual, in which there are several transactions in *kamma* and the mourners try to relieve the dead man of his sins. We have seen that this is also an arena for transferring *kamma* in Buddhism.

The precise details are complicated and the interested reader must consult secondary literature.[9] But Buddhist ideology, by having recourse to the fundamental doctrine that only intention counts in ethics, has performed a sleight of hand and invented a rationale for the process. If merit lies in good intention, a person who does a meritorious deed – be it feeding monks or going on a pilgrimage – can get a second lot of merit by thinking, generously, that he wishes other people could reap the benefits of his actions. Of course they cannot – that is the law of *kamma* – so he loses nothing, but he gets good marks, as it were, for wishing that they could. They too may wish that they could: they can empathize in his merit and *feel* as generous as if they had made the donation themselves; so they too collect good marks. The result is *as if* merit, spiritual currency, were transferred, with the difference that the original merit-maker does not

lose his. Buddhists aptly compare the process to lighting one candle from another.

The transfer of merit (as it is rather inaccurately known in English) plays a large part in Theravādin practice. For example, when one feeds monks they say a Pali formula which invites one to offer the merit – strictly speaking, to offer the chance to empathize in the merit – to the gods. In return for this favour they will accord their protection. It is no good objecting that the gods could have empathized whether the offer was formally made or not; the answer can come pat that otherwise the matter might have escaped their attention. Since gods give help in this world, the custom of transferring merit to them links Buddhism to the local communal religion.

This dedication to the gods of the merit of offering a meal occurs in the Canon, though as far as I know only once – again in the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*.[10] But the rather simplistic treatment of merit as spiritual currency often crops up when the context concerns laymen; even in the *Vinaya* a lay donor is told that he has 'generated' merit and so achieved heaven.[11] The treatment of ethical action as a currency fits Buddhism's commercial background. But there is a discrepancy: real economics is a zero sum game, so that within the system gains are equal to losses, whereas in Buddhist spiritual economics you gain by giving away. I must add that Buddhists do not consider the possibility of transferring sin/demerit, as sometimes occurs in Hinduism; the best one can do to avoid the fruition of a bad action is to do so much good that the result of the bad keeps getting pushed to the back of the queue.

In Sri Lanka any public or collective expression of Buddhist piety is simply called a 'meritorious act'. It usually takes place around monks. The most common 'meritorious act' is indeed the feeding of monks, an event so common and central to Sinhalese Buddhism that it has appropriated the ordinary word for 'donation'. I mention the Sinhala because I am acquainted with its vocabulary, but one can assume that these developments occurred among Buddhists of the first generations in ancient India. At a 'meritorious act' merit is both made and transferred. One can participate even if one is too poor to give, and it is possible to argue that religious activity is thus a process of sharing and so strengthening communal ties. But one cannot press this argument too far, for my experience is that, whatever doctrine may say, people still feel surer of their merit if they have actively given than if they have been passive onlookers; they are not confident that the coin of 'empathy' carries the same purchasing power.

This may sound like common sense; I do not, however, think it is trivial. Buddhist spiritual economics is no zero sum game, but on the other hand the feeling is that spiritual capital gains interest. The rich have the resources to make donations; that means that they can afford to be generous with their merit – that is, use it for making more; and they get the protection of the gods into the bargain. Once one is on the right road one can thus set up a virtuous circle. The corollary is also true: the wicked man sinks on the scale of being and is reborn as a bug or even in hell, where he has almost no chance to make merit. This may be a depressing picture to the sentimentalist. But it is a picture of a universe of moral order, in which power and other pleasant things directly correlate with virtue.

I must not leave an impression of merit-making as a dry metaphysical mercantilism. Carrithers catches the spirit of lay Buddhism:

> Merit, *puñña*, is not only a sort of intangible religious good, but is also a psychological good, in that giving to (well-behaved) monks inspires laymen to generosity, happiness, peace, and so forth. Hence the atmosphere at a hermitage during an alms-giving ceremony... is strikingly quiet and pious, and, for those laymen susceptible to piety, an occasion of happiness or even reflection. The virtuous monk... 'inspires faith'. This is faith, however, in the psychological efficacy of the Dhamma, rather than in some entity.[12]

B. SECULAR POWER: ASOKA

The most important Buddhist layman in history has been the Emperor Asoka, who ruled most of India for the middle third of the third century BCE. On the capital of one of the pillars Asoka erected is beautifully carved a wheel with many spokes. This representation of the wheel of Dhamma which the Buddha set in motion is the symbol chosen to adorn the flag of the modern state of India. The lions on the same capital are on the state seal. Thus India recalls its 'righteous ruler'. Asoka is a towering figure for many other reasons too, but we confine ourselves to his role in Buddhist history. Before Asoka Buddhism had spread through the northern half of India; but it was his patronage which made it a world religion.

We know very few hard facts about the history of Buddhism in the century or two between the Buddha's death and Asoka's accession – if we knew more, we would be less vague about the chronology. The most