"Lord, how are we to do that to the followers of Assaji and Punabbasu? Those monks are fierce and rough!"

"Well then, take a lot of monks with you!"

"So be it, Lord," Sāriputta and Moggallāna replied. . . .

[There follows a rather elaborate description of the proper format for the act of banishment, which Sāriputta and Moggallāna are then successful in carrying out.]

Source: Translated from *The Vinaya piṭakaṃ*, ed. Hermann Oldenberg (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879) 2:9–13.[23]

2.5 THE LAITY AND THE SANGHA: COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The question of the relationship of laypersons to monastics is a complex one. On the one hand, the monastic sangha itself, in ancient India as well as in modern South and Southeast Asia, comprised both town-dwelling monks, who were primarily preoccupied with meritorious activities such as preserving the Buddha's teachings and imparting them to laypersons, and forest-dwelling monks, whose chief concern was with the practice of meditation and whose inclination was often toward more ascetic practices (see 2.3.3). Similarly, within the laity, it might be possible to distinguish between ordinary lay householders, who were involved in meritorious activities, and dedicated lay devotees, who were likewise committed to good deeds but whose relationship to the sangha was somewhat more intense, as reflected in their taking upon themselves additional precepts.

The complex relationships of all these groups, however, often boils down to a specific issue: what makes members of the monastic community "special"? In the selections that follow we shall address this issue by focusing on three particular questions: What spiritual or soteriological advantages are to be gained by joining the sangha? In what ways is the practice of meditation open to laypersons? And how do the laity and the monastic sangha relate in the making and sharing of merit?

2.5.1 Why Not Remain a Layperson?

As Buddhism developed in India, Buddhists appear to have joined the order for a wide variety of reasons. Some saw life in the sangha as the only alternative for a situation in lay life that had become intolerable to them. Others apparently decided to become monks because they viewed it as a chance to get a steady supply of good food in return for little physical labor. Some, usually younger sons, entered the sangha when their parents "gave" them to a monastery as novices, to make merit, or to have one fewer mouth to feed. Others saw it as a chance to get an education, to better themselves through enhanced status, or to be companions to a brother, a cousin, or an uncle who had already joined the order. Finally, of course, the motivation of a spiritual quest—a desire for enlightenment—never disappeared.

[23]Alternative English translation, I. B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline* (London: Pali Text Society, 1951), 5:14–19.

With regard to the latter case, however, an important further question was perhaps inevitable: was it necessary to become a monk in order to attain enlightenment, or could that goal be accomplished as a layperson?

As with many important issues in Buddhism, different Buddhists had different answers. Some schools of thought had it that only fully ordained monks and nuns could attain arhatship. Others, more liberal, were willing to recognize the potential of laypersons. The following selection, featuring once again the elder Nāgasena and his interlocutor King Milinda, taken from a collection of Buddhist tales preserved in Chinese, gives a middle-of-the-road answer: it *is* possible for laypersons to attain enlightenment, but the path there is much easier and quicker for monastics.

Long ago, there was a king named Milinda. He was very intelligent and learned, and there was no subject in which he was not well versed. He thought that no one could surpass him in knowledge, and so he asked his ministers: "Is there anyone intelligent enough and clever enough in debate to answer any question that I might ask him?"

Now, one of Milinda's ministers used to invite to his home an old monk whose conduct was very pure but who was not very learned. He came to discuss things with the king.

The king asked him: "Those who attain to the path, do they do so while living at home as laypersons, or do they do so by wandering forth as monks?"

The old monk answered: "Both can attain the same path."

The king retorted: "If both can attain it, then why bother wandering forth?"

The old monk was silent, for he did not know what to answer, and King Milinda became more arrogant than ever.

Then, the ministers said to Milinda, "There is another monk, named Nāgasena, who is unusually intelligent and wise and who is now living in the mountains." [. . .]

[The king invited Nāgasena to the capital, and, when the two of them met], the king asked: "Is it by living at home as a layman or by wandering forth as a monk that one can attain the path?"

Nāgasena answered: "Both can attain the same path."

The king replied: "If both can attain the path, then why wander forth?"

Nāgasena said: "Here is a simile: If you send on a journey to a place that is three thousand leagues away a young and strong man on horseback and provide him with all the necessary supplies, equipment, and weapons, will he be able to get there?"

The king replied: "Yes, he will."

Nāgasena went on: "Now, what if you were to send an old man there, riding a decrepit horse, without any provisions, would he get there?"

The king replied: "He could, but even if he had provisions, he might not be able to reach his goal, and it would be even harder for him without provisions."

Nāgasena then said: "To reach the Path by leaving one's home—that is like the journey of the young, strong man; to reach the Path by remaining a householder, that is like the old man's journey."

Source: Translated from *Tsa pao tsang ching* (Taishō shinshū daizōkyō, ed. J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe [Tokyo, 1924–29], no. 203, 4:492c–493b].[24]

2.5.2 Meditation in the Midst of Daily Life

It is sometimes claimed that one of the other things that differentiates laypersons from members of the monastic community is that the former engage in merit-making practices in order to improve their karma and achieve a better rebirth, whereas the latter meditate in order to transcend the whole karmic process of death and rebirth. Such generalizations, however, can be grossly misleading. For one thing, meditation itself is a merit-making activity, and making merit can be viewed as a form of meditation. For another, it is by no means true that all monks meditate.

It could be argued that certain forms of meditation demand the time, isolation, and freedom from worldly concerns that can come only with a monastic life. But the meditation tradition was supple and varied in its approaches. In the following very short anecdote, we have an example of a meditation technique that was eminently suited to lay life, a practical means of paying attention to one's thoughts. The method was said to have been taught by the elder Śāṇakavāsin to his disciple, the young Upagupta, whom we already met at a later stage in his career in selection 1.2. At this point, Upagupta is still a layman working in his father's perfume shop in the bazaar in Mathurā, in northern India.

The Venerable Śāṇakavāsin went to find Upagupta, who was selling perfumes in the marketplace. Upon seeing him, he said: "My son, as you conduct your business, are your thoughts pure or impure?"

Upagupta replied: "I do not know. What are 'pure thoughts' and what are 'impure thoughts'?"

The Venerable Śāṇakavāsin said: "When people feel desire, passion, and anger toward one another, that is what is called an impure mental state. When their interactions are free from these things, that is a pure mental state. In this way, my son, you can know the origin of your thoughts: when an impure mental state arises, put aside, on your left, a black stone. When a pure mental state arises, put aside, on your right, a white stone. . . ."

On the first day, there were twice as many black stones as white ones. On the second day, there were as many black stones as white ones. And

[24]Alternative English translation, Junjiro Takakusu, "Chinese Translations of the Milindapañha," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1896, pp. 17–20. Alternative French translation, Edouard Chavannes, *Cinq cents contes et apologues extraits du Tripiṭaka chinois* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1934), 3:121–23.

gradually this went on until there were only white stones left and no black ones, only good thoughts left and no bad ones, only decisions according to the Dharma left and none contrary to it.

Source: Translated from *Aśokarājāvadāna* (Taishō shinshū daizōkyō, ed. J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe [Tokyo, 1924–29], no. 2042, 50:117c–118a).[25]

2.5.3 Making and Sharing Merit

It is commonly claimed that, in South Asia, the sangha and the laity enjoy a reciprocal or symbiotic relationship: laypersons support monks with material donations and thereby receive, in return, not only the Dharma (in the form of teachings) but also merit, which will enable them to attain a better situation either in this or a future lifetime (see 1.5.2). Making merit, in fact, lies at the basis of much of lay life, even though, of course, laypersons are not the only ones who make merit; monastics are equally interested in it.

The most effective form of making merit is giving (dāna). For the laity, this generally means the giving of food and other supplies to members of the sangha. For the sangha, it may mean the giving of Dharma to the laity, in the form of sermons, sūtra recitations, or spiritual advice. But there are other forms of making merit as well. A common though noncanonical listing sets out ten meritorious types of action, including deeds that can be done by either monks or laypersons: giving, observing moral precepts, meditation, showing respect to one's superiors, attending to their needs, transfering merit to others, rejoicing at the merit of others, listening to the Dharma, preaching the Dharma, and having right beliefs.

One of these meritorious actions, the transfer of one's merit to others, is the subject of the following selection. It is common, on ritual merit-making occasions in South and Southeast Asia today, to see laypersons solemnly pouring water from one vessel into another while reciting certain verses. They are thereby signaling their intention to share the merit they have made (by virtue of their donation to the monks or attendance at the ceremony) to other beings, usually their deceased parents or other members of their family. This transference of merit, being an act of generosity and compassion, is itself an act of merit; hence it does not mean a depletion of one's own merit supply but rather an increase of it. (Similarly, one can "cash in" on the merit of others simply by rejoicing at their merit making, for such rejoicing is, in itself, seen as a meritorious deed in its own right.)

A crucial factor in the efficacity of all this is the monastic community. It is not possible to make offerings directly to one's dead relatives. Rather, it is by making gifts to the monks that one can assure oneself of helping others, for the sangha acts as a sort of merit transfer station (especially between the living and the dead), whereby the goods that are offered in this world can be translated so as to benefit beings elsewhere. The following story concerning an offering made by King Bimbisāra, a contemporary lay supporter of the Buddha, is often cited today as one of the paradigmatic illustrations of the point.

[25]Alternative French translation, Jean Przyluski, *La légende de l'empereur Açoka*, (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1923), p. 348.