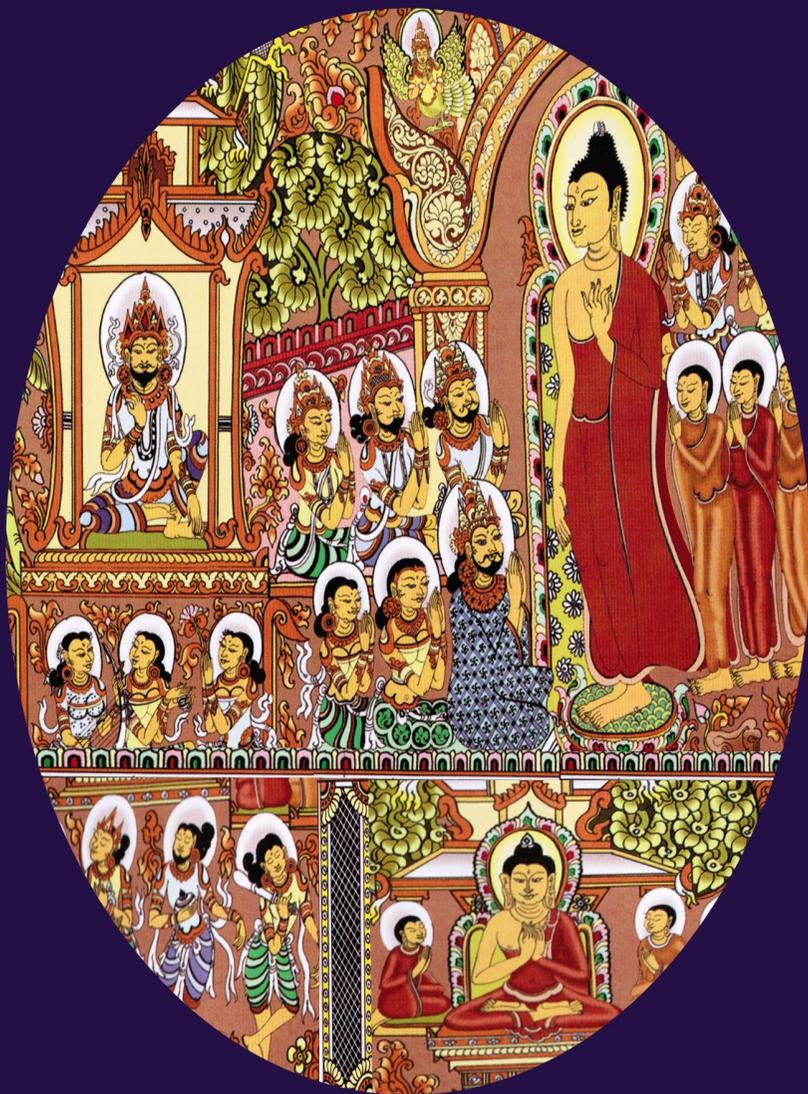


# *A Culture of Awakening* the life and times of the Buddha-Sasaṇa



Bhikkhu Cintita

**A Culture of Awakening:  
the life and times of the Buddha-Sasana**

**Bhikkhu Cintita**

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# Preface

“I’m spiritual but not religious!”

We’ve all heard this statement, often along with an off-hand dismissal of “organized religion.” Or, we hear that the Buddha did not start a religion.

We Westerners often see polarity between the personal and the social. We love the lone individualist, in particular the spiritual virtuoso who boldly takes the path less traveled. Siddhartha, Hermann Hesse’s hero, is such a person. We love it that Buddhism exalts that spiritual adept, the light unto himself, the one who retreats from city or village life to explore in solitude life’s questions, an ideal well represented in the life of Buddha himself, who after much travail, shattered the constraints to which the common person is subject. We love these guys but we sometimes have trouble reconciling them with temple life, the chanting, the bows, the hierarchy, the postures, the robes and the bald heads.

Still, we must acknowledge that our practice has a social context. Something or someone inspired us to begin this practice, something or someone provided the tools, the instruction, the readings, the examples that allowed us to begin and sustain this practice. The importance of this context only grows when we appreciate just how *radically* different this lone individual who has broken free, is from the rest of us: He has broken through not so much social constraints as his own human nature, bursting the limitations of hundreds of millions of years of evolution that have otherwise produced frightened, greedy, hateful and confused beings, and has instead entered the rationalized and ethicized awareness of the Noble Ones. He did not just arise spontaneously. He needed a lot of help; a social context can provide the conditions in which Noble Ones are likely to arise, the initial inspiration, the role models, the admirable friendship, the transmission of extremely sophisticated and fragile teachings, the teachers, the patient encouragement and the time. These are the elements at play in a culture of Awakening. This is the cultural context that will also in turn best absorb his civilizing influence.

In fact, the Buddha *did* start a religion, if what we mean by that is an

institutional basis for propagating and protecting his teachings.<sup>1</sup> He was very much concerned to create a context supportive of all of the above and codified his results particularly in the *Vinaya*, the complement of the *Dharma*. In doing so, he set the *Buddha-Sasana* in motion, Buddhism as it is lived in its social and historical dimensions, that which has thrived, spread, suffered setbacks, and persists to this day. In fact, the Buddha was as wildly successful in this endeavor as in many of his other undertakings, producing not only the first world religion, but what is now possibly the oldest institution on the planet, the Sangha that has carried the flame of the Dharma to light one hundred generations of Buddhism. If we understand how the Sasana is structured, we can make sense of how it has evolved historically and how it shapes cultures. In particular, we can make sense of variation in Buddhism, and of its capacity to maintain at its core the authentic teachings of the Buddha, yet to tolerate enormous variation and innovation. We can also make sense of the peculiar way in which Buddhism is developing in the West.

This essay provides an inclusive perspective of Buddhism that is all too commonly overlooked or else dismissed in the West, yet so intrinsic to Buddhism in Asia that it hardly needs mentioning. Starting out spiritual but not religious, it took me many years to come to the understanding represented in this book. I hope to speed up the process for the reader. My early exposure to Western Soto Zen showed me a ritual world that initially made no sense to me at all, but that in the end I was curious and open-minded enough to want to get to the experiential bottom of. Established as a Soto Zen priest, very much concerned with the future of Buddhism in the West, my curiosity and modest reserve of open-mindedness extended to the many ethnically Asian temples found in Texas, California and elsewhere, which seemed to me to be intriguingly different from Western centers, yet strangely similar to one another, regardless of country or tradition of origin.

Drawn to traditional monastic practice, I also began studying the *Vinaya*, the traditional monastic code, no longer observed in Japanese Zen. I considered ordaining in a *Vinaya* tradition for many years, but still holding to many worldly ways I had many doubts about my own capacity for living a life of renunciation. The deciding factor arose in my mind, after much study and contemplation, with the realization that the Monastic Sangha is, by the Buddha's design, the lynchpin of the Sasana. The conclusion seemed inescapable to me: Without the presence of real monks and nuns practicing in the traditional way, Buddhism was not going to make it in the West! It never has anywhere else, it will not here. I resolved to myself,

“It's a clean job, but somebody has got to do it!”

I ordained as a *bhikkhu* (full monk) in Burma, lived there for over a year, and

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1 I think it was *Jesus* who does not seem to have done such a thing.

have been living here at a Burmese monastery in Austin, Texas now for a number of years. Living within a devoutly Buddhist Asian culture has given me a further appreciation for Buddhism's rare ability to blend freely with elements of folk culture, and yet at the same time retain its full integrity, particularly in the minds and lives of its most adept and respected representatives. This is the genius of the Buddha-Sasana.

As far as I can determine, no one has written a book like this. It is due and I hope it will be welcome. I hope that it will be of use to students and especially teachers of Buddhism, to all those who want to improve their understanding of the nature and role of a Buddhist community, and to those trying to make sense of the daunting plethora of Buddhist traditions that have found a home or grown up in the West. Moreover, I hope scholars of Buddhism, historians, sociologists and exegetes will find value in the perspectives developed here. Although this book often has the flavor of a scholarship, appearing to view the phenomenon of Sasana from the outside, it is primarily intended as didactic, an offering by a teacher of Buddhism to provide a map to the (would-be) Buddhist student and practitioner who finds herself disoriented within the Buddha-Sasana.

This effort is ambitious in scope. I treat the Sasana as a living organism, with its own morphology and physiology, describing its roots in early Buddhism, particularly its roots in the genius of the Buddha, its developmental history in India, China and beyond, its manifestations in Buddhist societies to this day, and its means of reconciling the variety of understandings and practices that range from the most adept to the most folk-culture-dependent. I try to understand what makes the Buddha-Sasana healthy or unhealthy and to assess in these terms, emerging trends in Western Buddhism as it takes root before our eyes. The breadth of this project certainly exceeds my own capacities and so I wish to encourage others to augment this first attempt at a theory of Buddha-Sasana. All errors are of course my own. I hope they are not excessive but in any case forgiven.

Were this a conventional academic work I would at this point in the Preface thank the various foundations and institutions that have supported me during the process of research and composition. For a monastic that support is constantly there along with the freedom to structure my time and energy as I feel benefits the Sasana. Therefore I would like instead to thank the many donors and supporters of the Sitagu Buddha Vihara in Austin, Texas (USA), and of the Sitagu Dhamma Vihara in Maplewood, Minnesota (USA) and the Calgary Myanmar Temple (Alberta, Canada) and of the monks and nuns who have lived there. Your devotion inspires me. I want to thank Alan Cook, Kitty Johnson, Professor Tom Tweed, Bhikkhu Gavesako, Cory Provost, Marianne Mitchell for proofreading and commenting on earlier drafts; and Kymrie

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Bhikkhu Cintita Dinsmore  
Austin, Texas, USA  
March, 2014

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## ***Notes on the Text***

Foreign words are *italicized* insofar as they have not already entered the English language. For words recognized by an educated speaker of English, I use those recognized forms. Otherwise, I have preferred the Pali forms to the Sanskrit, since I suspect there are more students of Pali than of Sanskrit among the readership. Likewise, I also use Japanese derivatives of Chinese terms where these are more likely to be familiar. For foreign words used multiple times, diacritics have been omitted after first use for readability. Technical terms that I hope the reader will remember are also italicized on first mention.

Sutta references, for instance, *SN 45.2*, are by Nikaya (DN, MN, SN and AN for Digha, Majjhima, Samyutta and Anuttara Nikayas, respectively) and by sutta number, following the scheme of Wisdom Publications and of the Access to Insight Web site. Quoted passages, unless otherwise stated, are from the Wisdom Publication series as follows.

DN : Walshe (1996).

MN : Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995).

SN : Bodhi (2000).

AN : Bodhi (2012).

## Chapter 1

# Preliminaries

Imagine the someone has made up a clever original joke, one that evoked both chortle and guffaw, and that this joke has since been retold many times. Sometimes the retellings have made use of different words, sometimes even of different languages, sometimes they have added an embellishment or stripped away minor details. Characters might have changed names or gender, settings might have varied, elephants might have been replaced by hippos. As we catalog the retellings we will find that some have missed the point of the joke completely, enjoying neither chortle nor guffaw, but that others have recounted the joke with a skill matching or surpassing the original, keeping the story line functionally intact, introducing the relevant information at just the right time, creating the same anticipation and culminating in a punch line to evoke the same response in the hearer as the original telling.

What shines through in an *authentic* retelling is the *functional core* of the original story. But how has the core been lost in some cases, yet preserved in some cases, in spite of a long history of alterations, so much so that they are unmistakably recognizable in the former cases as a manifestation of the same story? I presume that the answer is that the authentic retellings have been transmitted by *adept* humorists who have understood the point of the joke and the art of telling it. Even if it is transmitted to them with some small error, they will know how to correct it to restore its functional integrity, because they *get* the joke. Without adept humorists, the joke degrades over time into nonsense and an audience response of dead silence.

*Sāsana* is a Pali expression that means literally *teaching*, but that is generally used, particularly when expanded as *Buddha-Sāsana*, to refer to *living Dharma*, that is, to Buddhism in its personal, cultural, social and historical dimensions. For readability I will generally use the simpler form Sasana. The

Sasana is something organic that can be located in time and space, that can grow, thrive, propagate or wither and disappear, that can uphold the authenticity of the Dharma, in the midst of change, or degrade. “Sasana” has been variously translated into English as “the Buddha’s dispensation,” as “the Buddhist religion,” simply as “Buddhism” or even as “the Buddhist church.” “Buddhism” itself has never been a good rendering of “Dharma” because Dharma is by nature something much more static and ideal. Dharma is like the joke that has been preserved in its functional authenticity, and the Sasana like that which carries the joke along in real time, in real places and by real people, ideally, but not always, maintaining its integrity.

The logic of this essay can be summarized briefly as follows:

1. The structure and functionality of the Sasana itself was established in the early teachings of the Buddha, particularly in the ancient *Vinaya*.
2. This structure and functionality has remained surprisingly stable over a span of a hundred generations.
3. Resilience and malleability, that is, Buddhism’s capacity for retaining its integrity and simultaneous tolerance of adaptation and variation, are emergent properties of this structure and functionality.

The Sasana is a living organism that knows how to self-regulate, to adapt, to propagate and to brighten any landscape with its civilizing influence. If we understand the Sasana, we can make sense of how it has evolved historically and how it shapes cultures. We can also assess the particular way in which Buddhism is developing in the West.

I know of no systematic modern account of the Buddha-Sasana, of its doctrinally determined structure and function, of its origin and history, of its commonalities and variations, of its virtues and faults, of its modern manifestations and of how it is taking root in the West. This essay is the first attempt at a comprehensive account of the Buddha-Sasana, in its doctrinal, historical, cultural/sociological and personal dimensions.

### ***Spiritual or Religious?***

Are you spiritual, or are you religious? The answer probably has to do with the amount of consideration you give to the *Sasana* rather than to the *Path*. The Path and the Sasana represent two distinct perspectives to Buddhist life, practice and understanding. The *Path perspective* is centered in personal practice toward development of character and ultimately toward liberation. The *Sasana perspective* is more centered in the life of the Buddhist

community. Quantitatively the Sasana perspective has almost always dominated, though qualitatively the Path perspective is the most sophisticated, sublime and extolled. Indeed the Sasana perspective tends to carry those elements we generally identify as “religious,” for instance, devotional, ritual, liturgical and institutional features, which tend to express themselves in the context of community. For instance when we consider the Noble Eightfold Path, the heart of the Path perspective, we fail to come across things like:

- Right Bowing,
- Right Robes,
- Right Ecclesiastical Governance.

Yet the Sasana perspective is the *precursor* of the Path perspective and the Path perspective is an integral *part* of the Sasana perspective. This is why the Sasana perspective is critical.

I am not interested in this essay with answering the well-worn question whether Buddhism is a religion or not.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say that the Sasana has many elements that share at least a passing family resemblance to religion. Among these elements are:

ritual and ceremony	sacred spaces
sacred artifacts	veneration
devotion and worship	sense of tradition
liturgy	group identity
common world view/conviction	salvation
clergy	institutions

I mention these aspects because the common statement, “I’m spiritual but not religious,” seems often to sweep aside *all* of the elements on this list at once. Why this list comes together as something meriting special attention, and often alarm, in Western folk culture is discussed in a later chapter. Suffice it to say it is a reaction peculiar to our culture.

While all of these “religious” aspects are found in Buddhism from the earliest times, it is worth noting that each of them is also found also in what would normally be regarded as distinctly *secular* contexts. For instance, table manners along with proper arrangements of cutlery, plates and glasses in a proper table setting, exhibit a large number of these features. Sports events involve ritual, ritual spaces, worship, chanting, group identity, and typically a sense of tradition. Government functions and places of government exhibit

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<sup>2</sup> See Tweed (2006) for a discussion of the many attempts to define *religion*.

almost every one of these features, by my count, with appropriate substitution of terms: elected officials for clergy, etc. Armies likewise exhibit most, with analogous substitutions, maybe because they need to be equipped to deal with fundamental issues of life and death. Even academia exhibits many of these features.

I will not participate in the across-the-board dismissal of these “religious” elements, but will instead let each speak for itself in terms of its purported functionality and authenticity within the Buddhist project. We will see that each of them is found at least in some embryonic form in early Buddhism, and with a clear and quite rational function. While many of them are systematically and clearly encouraged in early Buddhism, others are carefully circumscribed. However, historically, in almost every case, the tendency has been toward greater embellishment and toward the accretion of similar elements from local folk cultures. But seldom, I hope to show later, does this elaboration actually happen in a way that obscures the early Buddhist message or the functional integrity of the Sasana.

### ***Which Buddhism?***

Any given Buddhist tradition considers itself almost invariably to be the almost unique heir of Buddhist authenticity. Yet in exploring other lands and other sects its adherents are faced with peculiarity and anomaly in the practices and beliefs of the other laity, the garb of the other monastics, the style of other liturgy, the presence of unfamiliar figures in temple statuary, unfamiliar rites at temple altars, unknown scriptures on temple bookshelves, and hocus pocus all around. For many in the West who first come to Buddhism and survey the vast array of traditions with no prior bias toward any particular tradition, the variance is even more striking, and it is easy to see how one might throw one’s hands up in despair and perhaps entertain the hope that Baha’i or Sufism is easier to sort out.

Buddhist traditions have developed for centuries, or even millenia, in quite divergent regions and under quite divergent cultural influences. They have evolved, then cross-bred with each other and with other religious traditions, such as Tantric Hinduism, Taoism and an array of regional shamanistic and animistic practices, to produce doctrinal variants, sects, innovations, new cultural expressions and religious hybrids. A result is that Buddhists of different traditions rarely agree on the contents of their respective scriptural corpora. Buddhism has proved particularly *malleable* under these influences and this is probably at least partially responsible for the Sasana’s ability to project itself beyond its original cultural boundaries and for its status as the

first world religion, predating Christianity and Islam.

What is truly remarkable, but not always obvious, about Buddhism is its *resilience*, its capacity to retain the authenticity of early Buddhism, the functional integrity of what is most basic, even while it bends to vicissitude. Somehow, transmitted through many centuries, through many traditions and cultures, and in spite of its accrued variety, Buddhism has preserved an essential core in most of the traditions, a core that includes, for instance, a more-or-less common understanding of liberation and of the Path of training toward liberation, a Path which focuses on virtue, wisdom and development of mind, and a recognition of greed, hatred and delusion as the primary qualities of mind to be attenuated. It also includes as fundamental trust in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, a prominent role for the monastic order and a particular emphasis on the practices of generosity and virtue. In many ways the structure of the Sasana, as we will see, has been more conservative than the structure of the Path. As a result, Buddhism seems to have much more consistency of purpose and understanding than, say, Christianity, in spite of Christianity's more-or-less agreement on its scriptural foundation.

Buddhism is adept at carrying a good joke into new forms while protecting the integrity of its core meaning. It knows how to make the joke meaningful for the Indian, the Burmese, the Tocharian and the Mongol. There is, in other words, a common Dharma that shines constantly through the various Buddhist traditions, a Buddhism visible first in the earliest scriptures and a common edifice behind the many often wild and perplexing guises appearing under the name "Buddhism." I realize that the claim of a relatively consistent core in Buddhism is for many controversial. However I expect it to become much more compelling in the course of this essay after we have located where the more orthodox elements reside and the more bohemian elements within the living Sasana. Once we do this we will also recognize the mechanisms responsible for the exceptional resilience of Buddhism in preserving authenticity.

## ***Buddhist Authenticity***

The early manifestation of Buddhism derived from what was taught literally by the Buddha. Scholars have a fairly good idea of what *early Buddhism* looked like before it began to undergo retelling, that is, before identifiable sects emerged. It consisted of two parts, the *Dharma* and the *Vinaya*, the doctrine and the discipline. Roughly the Pali Suttas, particularly the *Digha*, *Majjhima*, *Samyutta* and *Anguttara Nikayas* as well as the *Suttanipata* and the

*Dhammapada* of the *Khuddhaka Nikaya* along with the equivalent Chinese *Agamas* are acknowledged by scholars to constitute the most reliable evidence of the early Dharma. The *Vinaya*, the monastic code, is available in several redactions.<sup>3</sup> I should note that these ancient Suttas and the *Vinaya* are still not entirely reliable texts, having passed through both oral and orthographic transmissions and suffering from faults of memory, embellishments, insertions, deletions and other edits along the way.

The Buddha and his early disciples seem to have anticipated that what he had taught would change in different and unpredictable ways and to have expressed his interest in preserving the functionality rather than the word of content of doctrine and discipline. First, he defined Dharma broadly to include whatever served the same narrowly defined functions.

“But, Gotamī, those things of which you might know: ‘These things lead to dispassion, not to passion; to detachment, not to bondage; to dismantling, not to building up; to fewness of desires, not to strong desires; to contentment, not to non-contentment; to solitude, not to company; to the arousing of energy, not to laziness; to being easy to support, not to being difficult to support,’ you should definitely recognize: ‘This is the Dhamma; this is the discipline; this is the teaching of the Teacher.’”<sup>4</sup>

So, Dharma was not strictly confined to the words of the Buddha, but includes whatever shares their function.

Second, the *Great Standards* (Pali, *Mahāpadesa*)<sup>5</sup> generalized recognizable teachings to novel or uncertain circumstances. A particular view that suggests itself under such a circumstance can be tested by standing it against the Dharma and the *Vinaya* and if it accords then it can be accepted.

Third, the *Vinaya* provides specific support for applying the Great Standards to monastic rules by providing for every rule an origin story to reveal the function of the rule. This is an invitation to generalize on the basis of first principles. For instance, there is an early rule that monks should not drive ox carts. The origin story clearly reveals the intent of the rule in avoiding the exhibition of extravagance. Applying this to modern circumstances entails that monks probably should not fly first-class, nor drive a Mercedes, ... but that ox carts are probably now OK.

Finally, the Buddha anticipated that a community of adepts in the Dharma

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Pande (2006), pp. 1-16.

<sup>4</sup> *Gotamī Sutta*, AN 8.53.

<sup>5</sup> See AN 4.180 and a similar passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16.

would be required for its preservation, like a committee of skilled humorists who understand the point of a good joke and can tell others how to retell it properly. This was a function of the Monastic Sangha as we will discuss in detail in the course of this book.

We can think of the core of *authentic* Buddhism as a kind of *eau de Boudhisme*. It is the *functional system* that shines through in early Buddhism, but stripped of this particular manifestation and stripped of extraneous elements of the ancient texts irrelevant to the functionality of that system. Authentic Buddhism thereby turns away from the allure of literalism that adheres to texts, and toward the flexibility admitted by the Great Standards, by the expansive meaning of Dharma, by the early functions revealed in the *Vinaya* origin stories and by the adepts in their role of retelling the authentic Dharma in a way that best preserves its integrity in a particular cultural context.

This functional view of authenticity can also be helpful in interpreting faulty, misspoken or difficult early texts, to recover what is really authentic. It suggests that it might sometimes be more interesting and helpful to ask, when confronted with a particular teaching, not “Is this really true?” but rather “Why was this said?” in order to lay bare the function of the teaching. For instance, there is constant reference to *devas*, godly beings, in the early texts. (These are very old texts; of course they are going to have things that raise modern eyebrows!) The question of whether *devas* really exist or whether as Buddhists we should believe in *devas*, is of little consequence. Much more fruitful is the question, What role do these supernatural beings play in the texts? If they have no recognizable function, maybe they are not core teachings. In fact, *devas* in the texts generally pop in on the Buddha much like laypeople, bowing to the Buddha and listening to discourses. They certainly are not there to demand worship or sacrifice. Instead *they* venerate the *Buddha* and even the *monks*, and generally act as *cheerleaders* of the Dharma. Their role therefore seems to have been largely rhetorical; it would have impressed the ancient Indians that even the gods look up to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The search for the functionality, if any, quickly reveals the connection of any particular element of the teachings to *authentic* Buddhism.

As mentioned, the ancient scriptures are often an unreliable victim of ancient editing. However, seeking functionality can help the adept reader of the early scriptures interpret them properly. His task is like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle in which some pieces are missing, and in which other pieces have been mixed in from other jigsaw puzzles. At some point he nevertheless recognizes, “Oh, I get it: This is the Golden Gate Bridge!” A particular interpretation of the

whole has shone forth that he cannot easily back out of. Although it cannot be proven decisively, and still admits of debate, the convergence of evidence from many sources becomes so overwhelming to those who see what shines through, that doubt disappears. And what shines forth in each case is a functional system. The Buddha was a very systematic thinker.

The Buddhist adept accomplished in Buddhist practice is in a far better position to witness this shining through than the mere scholar, because the former has his own practice experience as potentially confirming evidence. He is like the jigsaw enthusiast who has actually been *on* the Golden Gate Bridge, who is already familiar with its features and the contours of the land- and seascape around it. Once the Golden Gate Bridge has shone through it becomes the basis of interpreting the remaining unplaced pieces, and rejecting some of these altogether as intruders from other people's jigsaw puzzles.

Nonetheless it can be exceedingly difficult to actually trace a functional feature of authentic Buddhism from early Buddhism into a later manifestation, as found, for instance, in Chinese Mahayana or Tibetan Vajrayana, in order to make the case that the later counterpart actually preserves the function of the original. The difficulty is compounded by the substitution of later texts for the earliest scriptures, which is endemic in the history of Buddhism. For instance, although many find Zen close to the Theravada forest tradition on the basis of experience in both traditions, there is scant strictly textual basis for the connection. Part of the genius of Zen language as compared to Indian is the former's minimalism, its ability to focus on the one thing upon which everything else hinges, to describe that one thing and to let the rest find its place implicitly. Because of such subtleties we must hope that the adepts, and ideally the Noble Ones (*ariya-sangha*, those who have attained at least an initial level of Awakening), have been ceaselessly at work ensuring authenticity as these traditions have developed historically.

By way of example, mindfulness practice is clearly a key functional element of early Buddhism, one formulated in the lengthy *Satipatthana Sutta* and in other early discourses. In Japanese Zen there is a method of meditation that was named *shikantaza* by Dogen Zenji,<sup>6</sup> which clearly has something to do with mindfulness or awareness but is described by Dogen with very concise instructions that are textually quite distinct from the *Satipatthana*. It would therefore be very difficult to make an argument for functional equivalence that would satisfy the *scholar*, but a experienced practitioner of both techniques is unlikely to fail to recognize their likeness. If this subjective testimony can be

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6 See *Fukanzazengi* ("Universal Recommendations for Zazen"), e.g., in Bielefeldt (1990), pp. 71-72.

taken as reliable, this is one example of a feature of authentic Buddhism that has been carried historically through place and culture, evolving into a radically different manifestation, yet has fully maintained its authenticity right down to the punch line. This is the genius of the Sasana.

## **Overview**

I will progressively look at Sasana from a doctrinal, then historical, then sociological and finally a personal perspective. The logic of this study is revealed when we consider that the Sasana is a living organism. Just as I might study a flower from the perspectives of physiology, evolution, ecology and consumer choice, I study the Sasana according to the following metaphorical correspondences:

Doctrine	= Physiology
History	= Genetics, evolution
Sociology	= Ecology, horticulture
Personal engagement	= Consumer choice

The study of doctrine will draw on early sources, particularly the Pali discourses and the monastic code, to show how the physiology of the Sasana was explicitly defined in early Buddhism, that is, its functional structure, particularly how the Triple Gem, the monastic and lay communities, the Path of practice and the goal of liberation contribute to an organic functional whole. The first three chapters describe the functions of the whole and of the parts of the Sasana in detail, first, the whole organism, second, Refuge, and, third, community.

It turns out that this organism has been very resilient in reproducing the same functional structure throughout Buddhist history. The study of history reveals how the forces of evolution, propagation and cross-fertilization have brought a mixture of innovations into the Sasana, particularly under cultural pressures, and sometimes altered the shapes of the parts of the Sasana, but only rarely disrupted their early functionality. The Path itself reveals itself as most fragile, sometimes to the degree that liberation is no longer feasible in certain traditions.

The study of sociology of the Sasana looks at its inner dynamics, the interactions of the many members of the Buddhist community, each with a different position in the ecological landscape, under differing cultural and religious influences and with a wildly varying set of Buddhist understandings and practices. It is here that we can most fully appreciate the roles of Refuge and

of the Monastic Sangha as domesticating forces within the Sasana, capable of upholding an influential and authentic Buddhism at the core of a very complex demographics.

Finally, we consider the personal perspective of the individual Buddhist or the would-be student and practitioner of Buddhism as she explores the great variety of Buddhist traditions, Eastern and Western, spiritual, religious and secular, early and traditional, Theravada and Mahayana, village and forest, folk and adept, as it were, completing the journey from the field to the buffet counter. This chapter is vaguely prescriptive and forward looking.

This essay is intended primarily for a Western readership and progresses step by step from early Buddhism toward increasingly modern concerns. The content of the early chapters may be unfamiliar to many Western readers, though commonplace throughout most of Asia. The reason is that the Buddha-Sasana has yet to fully and successfully establish itself in the West with anything like its early and traditional structure. By the end of the essay I hope to have given the reader a perspective that will help to make sense of bewildering array of crops that are taking root in the Western landscape and to see why Sasana matters.

## Chapter 2

# The Physiology of the Sasana

Bo Bo was a typical young man born into a typical Buddhist family in a typical Buddhist land. He was taught, even as an impish toddler, to revere the Triple Gem, the nutriments of Buddhist practice and understanding. The Buddha, for the youthful Bo Bo, had long exemplified certain values such as selflessness, virtue and serenity, and the Dharma had been accessible primarily through a few aphorisms like “Happiness comes only from within” and “generosity creates great merit,” and maybe from hearing some stories of the previous lives of the Buddha. The Sangha of Noble Ones, with whom he had been in almost daily contact, provided living examples of what it is to live deeply according to Buddhist principles, and of the joy and wisdom that emerges in such a life. Bo Bo had lived as a part of a Buddhist community, devoutly supportive of the monks and nuns, and generally practicing generosity and virtue in an uplifting environment. He grew up with a mind bent toward Buddhist values and Buddhist aspirations. He was fortunate to have grown up in a culture of Awakening.

The Buddha once said,

*“... for those who have confidence in the foremost, the result is foremost.”*<sup>7</sup>

Bo Bo noticed that people adopt any of a wide variety of ways of life. He himself for a time thought of marrying his cute neighbor, Yum Yum, and of raising a family, but, indecisive by nature, he was reminded by the example of the monks what a problem soap-operatic life can be. He noticed that the Noble Ones were far more content and full of active goodwill than anyone else, in spite of their utterly simple needs. After struggling with life's vicissitudes for a number of years and contemplating the nature of his dis-ease, Bo Bo's

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7 *Aggappasāda Sutta*, AN 4.34.

understanding progressed to the point that conventional life no longer made much sense. Whereas before, he had thought that he had two options in life, the worldly life and the holy life, he now realized that for him there was only one way ahead: to forsake a personal footprint in favor of the selfless Path that blossoms in Nirvana. And so, Bo Bo joined the monastic order, began to study as the student of one of the neighborhood sages, and from that root began to ascend the Path. Eventually he became one of the Noble Ones himself, and found himself beginning to make a big difference in the lives of others. With time and determination his practice blossomed one day into the fruit of Awakening.

### ***A Functional Sketch of the Buddha-Sasana.***

The Sasana is like a flower, a system of integrated inter-functioning parts each of which helps sustain the whole. In its complete and healthy condition it defines a culture of Awakening. Its physiology was well articulated by the Buddha, or in early Buddhism, and for the most part its integrity has been remarkably well preserved through Buddhist history and throughout Buddhist Asia, as I document in subsequent chapters. In brief, the Sasana functions in three ways. First, the Refuges establish Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as primary sources of wisdom and inspiration. This leans us all toward Dharma even as we may also individually come under the many often unwholesome influences alive in any culture. Second, the community provides opportunities for optimal practice for those of highest aspiration. As a result, Noble Ones walk among us and we are all ennobled by their inspiration. Third, the presence of an adept community of Noble Ones, trainees and scholars ensures the preservation and dissemination of an authentic Dharma in a culture of Awakening

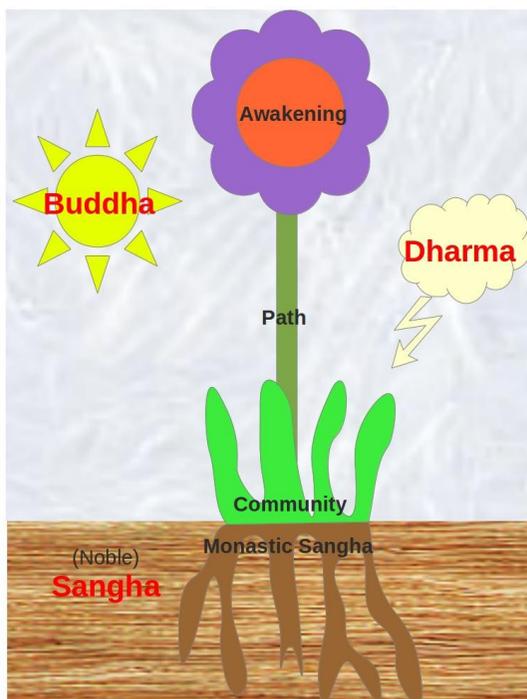
I've chosen a flower as a botanical metaphor, rather than a berry bush or asparagus, because we are all intimately familiar with this most decorative of plants. Here, in a nutshell to be opened later, is how the Sasana, in virtually all of its manifestations both early and traditional, maps onto the basic parts of the flower:

- The stem that supports the blossom is the *Path*, the instructions for practice and understanding, most generally expressed in early Buddhism as the *Noble Eightfold Path*, and leading to Awakening.
- The leaves and roots are the *Buddhist community*. The roots are specifically the *Monastic Sangha* (Pali, *bhikkhu-saṅgha*), the order of ordained monks and nuns, actually fulfilling a specialized role within

the community. The leaves and roots collect nourishment of sun, water and soil in order that the flower thrive.

- The blossom of the flower is *Awakening* or *Nirvana*.
- The sun, water and soil that nourish the flower are the *Triple Gem*, respectively the *Buddha*, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*. They inspire and bend the mind toward wholesome development.

Now, here is the same thing at a finer level of detail:



*The Flower of the Sasana*

### ***The Blossom***

This is *Awakening* (Pali or Sanskrit, *bodhi*), the highest attainment of human character, liberation from suffering, liberation from the taints, perfect wisdom, virtue, Enlightenment, Nirvana, transcendence of the round of rebirths. Most religions define some goal of liberation or salvation and some standard or benchmark by which that goal is attained as a definitive characteristic of the

religion. Awakening sets the bar quite high. For Buddhism liberation is a *singular attainment*, one fulfilled completely by the Buddha, by the occasional *arahant* and by no others,<sup>8</sup> for it entails the total perfection of the human character, and is generally assumed to require many lifetimes of effort. For Christianity, to take an example, salvation is generally a *common attainment*, one fulfilled by many, perhaps most, Christians, by conforming to the dictates of God, or perhaps taking Jesus as one's savior.

This distinction between singular attainment and common attainment is critical to the nature of the Buddha-Sasana, and to this study. To begin with, the support of the blossom of the Sasana requires the stem atop which Awakening sits, and in fact the entire physiology of the Sasana is oriented toward producing that blossom, a difficult and rare result. In this sense the Sasana produces a culture of Awakening. We will see additionally that fixing the benchmark goal of Buddhism at a singular attainment permits a certain elasticity in the varieties of more mundane Buddhist practice and doctrine.

Most religions envision alternative levels of attainment to the benchmark. In a singular attainment school we expect there to be lesser provisional levels of attainment. In Buddhism there are four progressive levels of Awakening, beginning with stream entry (*sotapatti*) and ending with full Awakening or *arahantship*. *Noble Ones* are those that have attained at least the first of these. Aside from these there are various states of well-being gained through *making merit* through generosity, virtue and development of mental qualities. The result of making merit is generally described cosmologically in terms of levels of felicitous or unfortunate rebirth, but also understood in terms of well-being in this life. Making merit does not depend so much on the more sophisticated Path practices oriented toward Awakening, but overlaps with them.

## **The Stem**

This is the *Path* (Pali, *magga*) of individual practice and understanding that leads to Awakening. This is the most uniquely Buddhist part, the least communal and the presumed abode of the "spiritual" in contrast to the "religious." The underlying principle behind practice is loosening the entangling bonds of personal neediness, aversion and views. All the strands of the stem work together and, when taken up with conviction, energy and a sense of urgency, guarantee progress. There is hardly anything like this in its practicality and sophistication in non-Buddhist and non-yogic religious

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8 I take *arahant* here in its early sense involving attainment of the Buddha's Awakening, rather than the later sense that evolved in the Mahayana tradition.

spheres. Since there is abundant literature specifically on the Path I will have little to say about it in this book, but let me summarize it here.

A particularly useful summary begins with elements that are properly practiced in community and thereby suggests how the stem grows out of the roots and leaves.. The formulation is called the *gradual path*, and presents elements of the Path in the order in which each should be initially pursued:<sup>9</sup>

Generosity,  
 Virtue,  
 The heavens,<sup>10</sup>  
 The drawbacks, degradation and corruption of sensual passions,  
 The rewards of renunciation.

When, from the pursuit of the foregoing, the mind is ready, malleable, free from hindrances, elated and bright, the following should be taken up:

*The Four Noble Truths.*

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Noble Path, the Path proper:

Wisdom Section:  
 Right View,  
 Right Resolve,  
 Virtue Section:  
 Right Speech,  
 Right Action,  
 Right Livelihood,  
 Samadhi Section:  
 Right Effort,  
 Right Mindfulness,  
 Right Samadhi.

The Path is the purest Buddha-Dharma, the primary concern of the Buddha's teaching, to which the individual of high aspiration devotes himself relentlessly. This Path nonetheless is part of a context. For instance, the individual's motivation and trust in the Dharma are certainly prerequisites for entering the Path in the first place; certain social conditions are required to give rise to the individual's motivation and trust, and to provide the resources in time and training to enable the individual to pursue the Path.

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<sup>9</sup> *Kuṭṭhi Sutta, Udāna 5.3.*

<sup>10</sup> This can be understood metaphorically as standing for the accrued personal benefits of practice, or *karma*.

## ***The Leaves and Roots***

This is the *Buddhist community* (Pali, *parisā*), including the life and activities of the community, which also tends to be a primary locus of the Sasana. The community has been from the beginning divided into parts, lay and monastic, with clearly defined social roles. The monastic enjoys a special opportunity for practice and study, but a fully committed member of either part is capable of engaging the long ascent up the stem. The lifeblood of the Buddhist community is generosity, for, as we will see, the symbiotic relationship of the lay and monastic components cannot be sustained without the practice of generosity. The community and the practice of generosity are effectively the starting point of the Path of Buddhist practice.

### ***Specifically, the Leaves***

This is the Buddhist community as a whole with as its main component the lay community. The main characteristic of the Buddhist lay community is that it is not explicitly organized nor regulated in any special way, nor under any higher command, but rather waits to be *inspired* by the Triple Gem to embrace practice and understanding and to assume a particular relationship with nuns and monks.

### ***Specifically, the Roots***

This is the *Monastic* or *Institutional Sangha*, the community of monks and nuns. Its main characteristic is that it is organized in a very specific way, inspires the support of the lay community and in this way is able to sustain that rare lifestyle that is most conducive to Buddhist understanding and practice. It serves to produce Noble Ones, who are *the* Sangha as it is most properly understood. The particular organization of the Monastic Sangha is a primary teaching of the Buddha, the topic of the massive *Vinaya*. The Monastic Sangha is an institution in some ways comparable to non-Buddhist religious institutions, though the functions of its clergy are in many ways quite distinctive. In particular monks and nuns are *not* priests, at least not in early Buddhism, that is, their role was not to act as an intermediary between the laity and supernatural forces, nor to perform rites and rituals on behalf of the laity.

The Buddha spoke in no uncertain terms of the dangers of *rites and rituals* (Pali, *silabbata*), even classifying attachment to these as the third of the ten *fetters* to be abandoned on the Path.<sup>11</sup> One should be aware, however that he

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11 SN 45.179, 45.180, DN 33.

did not have in mind ritual or conventionalized *expressions*, which, like words, are means of communication, and which would encompass many things very familiar to us in the modern world, like shaking hands, unfolding one's napkin onto one's lap at a proper dinner or waving goodbye and saying "Ta-ta." Certainly, as we will see, the Buddha fully endorsed bowing and other physical expressions of reverence. Where the Buddha saw an error was in the presumption that rites and rituals were directly efficacious for the purification of one's karma or future well-being, which he claimed can only come through virtuous actions.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly the Buddha did not want the monks and nuns to become priests and forbade such intermediary roles along with astrology, numerology or other means of predicting the future, as well as exhibiting paranormal powers, such as levitation or disappearing one place and appearing somewhere else, in the presence of the laity.<sup>13</sup>

Although the lay community is not explicitly organized, its behavior plays off that of the Monastic Sangha. We will look at this relationship along with the organization and functions of the Monastic Sangha in more detail in Chapter Four, on community.

### ***The Flower's Nourishment***

Refuge is the part of Buddhism that allows the roots and leaves to absorb the nourishment of the sun, water and soil. Refuge focuses on the *Triple Gem* of the *Buddha*, the *Dharma* and the *Sangha*. These nourish the entire practice, and in fact, taking *Refuge* in the Triple Gem generally constitutes the beginning of Buddhist practice, or the official point of becoming a Buddhist. The "devotional" act of expressing reverence for the Triple Gem, it should be noted, is, at least in early Buddhism, not directed toward an otherworldly being or force, but toward things very much this-worldly: toward a remarkable person, albeit now long deceased, toward a set of teachings for and by humans, and toward real people who happen to embody those teachings rather thoroughly in their own lives.

The Buddha reached an advanced understanding, a level of insight and knowledge, that he knew would be very difficult for others to achieve. As a teacher he had to consider the process whereby others can reach that understanding, and recognized that it requires a combination of trust in the teacher(s) and teachings, and direct experience of what these point to. *Trust* (Pali, *saddhā*) is necessary to put aside accumulated faulty notions, mostly

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12 For example, see AN 5.175, AN 10.176, *Therigata* 12.1, SN 2.4 (*Mangala Sutta*).

13 *Kevatta Sutta*, DN 11.

cultural in origin, in order to open oneself completely to the light of the Buddha's insight. Veneration of the Triple Gem is an important psychological element in the development of that necessary trust. It is however nothing whatever like blind faith, but more like the trust a student of science puts into her teachers or a science graduate student puts into the specific paradigm her professor advocates. This is, in other words, a trust that is subject to personal verification as the attainment and understanding of the Buddhist develops, and, as such, it is a trust that is replaced gradually with knowing directly from experience. Refuge in the Triple Gem will be the topic of Chapter 3.

As we will see, devotional aspects of Buddhism ended up bubbling over in perhaps all of the later traditions, particularly in northern lands. Often it became so pronounced that it recast the objects of devotion, particularly the Buddha himself, into something quite unanticipated.

### ***Specifically, the Sun***

This is the Buddha himself, brightening up our lives. Trust in his Awakening inspires commitment to deeper practice. The Buddha stands an an example to emulate, an admirable friend, vividly present in the accounts of his life and in the *Dharma-Vinaya*, his teachings, and in the deportment and understanding of those among us most shaped by his influence.

### ***Specifically, Water***

This is the Dharma. The teachings of the truth that the Buddha directly experienced and the instructions for perfecting the human character constitute the pure water that flows into every aspect of our Buddhist life and practice, carried by the soil through the roots into leaves and up into the stem, to nourish our practice at every level on our way to Awakening.

### ***Specifically, Soil***

This is the Sangha. This represents the adepts, past present and future, who have gone far in the practice, perhaps attaining complete liberation, but progressing at least as far as the first stage of Awakening, *stream entry* (*sotapatti*), which enables them at least to discern Nirvana and to attain *unshakable* trust in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The Sangha nourishes the community through its visible example, its direct experience and its teaching. Now, the Sangha here is properly called the *Noble Sangha*, or synonymously the *Noble Ones*, who are much like saints, to distinguish it from

the Monastic Sangha, the members of an institution designed to spin off Noble Ones one by one through the ascent of the stem. The roots are buried deep in the soil, the monks and nuns have Noble Sangha between their toes, a soil made rich by the many generations of inspiring Noble Ones. We can think of the attainments of the Noble Ones as the pedals of Nibbana. They fall to the ground once they have blossomed in Awakening further to nourish the soil.

In the most vibrant, fully-functioning Sasana the Path is brightly illuminated and well trod by those of aspiration, inspired onward by the Triple Gem. Meanwhile the entire community benefits from the civilizing influence of the many who ascend the path and attain the highest. The Buddha expressed this function well:<sup>14</sup>

"Monks, for this reason those matters which I have discovered and proclaimed should be thoroughly learnt by you, practiced, developed and cultivated, so that this holy life may endure for a long time, that it may be for the benefit and happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit and happiness of devas and humans. And what are those matters ...? They are: The four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four roads to power, the five spiritual faculties, the five mental powers, the seven factors of Awakening, the Noble Eightfold Path."

### ***How the Sasana Works***

The choice of the botanical metaphor is intended to emphasize the physiology of Buddhism, the parts and the interrelatedness of the parts functioning together as an organic system. The dominant operating principle of the leaves, the roots, the nourishment of the Triple Gem and the Sasana is friendship! In particular *admirable friendship* (Pali, *kalyanamittatā*) is possible when Noble Ones walk among us to provide wise and discerning role models and instructors in a culture of Awakening. The principle is to offer to all the opportunity to hang out with persons consummate in virtue, in generosity, in serenity and in wisdom. The following dialog expresses in a rather striking way the critical importance the Buddha attached to this simple principle:

[Ānanda:] "Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship."

[Blessed One:] "Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good

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14 *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16, Walshe (1996), p. 253

comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.”<sup>15</sup>

Just as it benefits us to have artists and good plumbers among us, it ennobles us to have saints and sages, adepts and *arahants* in our midst, the more the better. These Noble Ones are the Sangha mentioned in the Triple Gem, disciples of the Buddha who root their lives entirely in the Dharma, have already ascended far up the stem of the Path and are an inspiration and a resource for us all. It is through admirable friends that the meaning of the Buddha's life and Awakening is revealed and through such admirable friends that the highly sophisticated teachings are clarified step by step to lead the instructing toward and up the Path toward Awakening. It is the Sangha, by recognizing the organic system that shines through the words, that the core of authentic Buddhism is preserved in its full integrity. The Sangha is accordingly the soil that not only provides the nourishment of water and mineral, but also ensures that the entire practice – roots, leaves, stem and blossom – will not be carried away by the wind in the years to come.

The Noble Sangha arises, like all things, from conditions, and these conditions are secured by means of the Monastic Sangha. The Buddha expressed this,

*“... if ... the monks would live the life to perfection, the world would not lack for Arahants.”*<sup>16</sup>

The world will be even less lack for Noble Ones, many of whom are not yet *arahants* but nonetheless attained of lower levels of Awakening. The Monastic Sangha is both training ground and dwelling place for the Noble Sangha, much like a university is both a training ground and a dwelling place for scholars. We will see as the themes of this book develop how without Noble Ones Buddhism can hardly retain its integrity, and how Noble Ones will be very few indeed without a strong monastic community, or at least something like it.

I hope the reader will gain an appreciation by about the middle of this book of just how rational, carefully conceived and well-articulated the system was that the Buddha crafted for sustaining the influence of the Dharma. Although the main concern of his teaching career was with the Path, the Buddha understood that a Stem does not stand by itself, that it exists in a broader context, as a part of the Sasana. A broader Sasana perspective includes the narrower Path perspective. It should at the same time be noted how the monastic Sangha is the *lynchpin* of the Sasana in the Buddha's design, in that it holds the whole

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15 *Upaddha Sutta*, SN 45.2.

16 *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16, Walshe (1996), p. 268.

together. Not only is it charged with producing the Noble Ones, but it is the visible representation of the Third Gem. It is moreover the heart of the community, pumping the practice of generosity as the lifeblood circulating through its veins. It is the haven for those inspired to devote themselves entirely to Awakening and to support of the Sasana. The monastic code, the *Vinaya*, is at the same time the scriptural basis of the Sasana.

### ***Secondary Models of the Sasana***

The flower metaphor gives a particular perspective of the Sasana, a functional perspective that highlights the *resources* for practice available to the member of a particular Buddhist community or tradition and how they work together to sustain each other as an organic whole. The full flower represents the case where members of the community commonly take Refuge in the Triple Gem, have the option of partaking in lay or in monastic life, have the teachers and role models available who might guide them along the Path of practice and understanding and understand that full Awakening is a real possibility for the higher aspirant, and produces Noble Ones, who in turn enrich the soil in which the Sasana is planted.

Where some of these resources are weak or lacking we might envision a flower that must do without well-developed roots, or with little water or sun, or that does not produce a blossom. Such a flower is in danger of withering and dying. Elsewhere some resources may be enhanced or exaggerated. We will see in later chapters how historical evolution has produced alternative manifestations of the Sasana in the various traditions. Historical considerations will provide a further perspective on the mechanisms of the Sasana that the Buddha put in place, particularly with regard to the resilience of Buddhism alongside its malleability.

The secondary view of Sasana to be developed in still later chapters, just to jump ahead for a moment, will take a *demographic* as opposed to a functional perspective. It will capture the principle that the Sasana actually exists most substantially in the relationships and interactions of real Buddhists who fall into different ranges of Buddhist understanding and practice and are informed by different influences. While the functional perspective is largely defined in Buddhist doctrine, the demographic perspective is a consequence of the functional perspective along with sociological considerations. I will make use of the simple metaphor of a comet to represent the distribution of the Buddhist population in two dimensions with the most sincere and adept in practice and understanding nearest the head of the comet, to those most informed by

various folk influences trailing in different directions along the the tail.

## Chapter 3

# Refuge

The flood waters were rising and some of the huts at the river's edge were beginning to be swept away. Villagers began to panic as they came face to face with the foolishness of having built their village against a sheer cliff at water's edge. Many of them began running frantically back and then forth along the river bank, beside themselves with indecision, some of these overloaded with small children and belongings. Others backed away from the rushing waters up to the cliffs, looking helpless and forlorn. Those in denial went about their normal business as if this day had brought nothing newsworthy.

The chief, ever courageous, emerged from his hut, assessed the situation by scanning the length of the river with discerning eyes, grabbed up his youngest daughter in one hand and his embellished staff of authority in the other, and shouted,

“Follow me, villagers!”

He had picked a point along the shore at which he plunged boldly and confidently into the water at a right angle headed directly for the opposite shore. He waded deeper and deeper as the water reached his waist, then his chest, but his determination remained unaltered. Many others followed immediately behind, holding belongings and frightened children over their heads, leading horses and beleashed dogs a-paddle.

However, the more timid waited at the shore and watched the chief's progress, while others, the even more panic stricken, continued to run up and down the shore and others, the flood deniers, went about their normal business too stunned to note the chief's actions. Gradually the chief and his closest followers, having nearly disappeared below the waves, began to ascend as they approached the opposite river bank. But by this time the waters had risen even

further, many of the trailing timid were tragically swept away in the raging waters for having hesitated, followed soon by the panicked and by the deniers. The chief had saved half of the villagers.

## **Trust**

We live in a relentlessly uncertain world yet need to make decisions in that world. It is the rare decision indeed that comes with absolute certitude. *Trust*<sup>17</sup> is that which bridges the gap between the little we actually know and the plenty we would need to know in order to make a decision of guaranteed outcome. Trust belongs to the nuts and bolts of human cognition. We may try to bring as much discernment as possible into our trust but in the end we necessarily make a jump, big or little, into the unknown,

“[Gulp] Well, here goes!”

In this way we have entrusted ourselves, for better or worse, to our baby sitters, to our teachers, to our accountant, to TV pundits, to our dentist, to the authority of science, and for fewer and fewer of us to our national leaders. Or we put our trust in alternatives to all of these. We have no choice *whether* to trust, only *who* or *what* to trust.

In fact, we grow up, before we know it, trusting a mass of tacit and unexamined assumptions instilled at such a young age that we later forget that they are tacit and unexamined, that they are products of trust. Moreover, in this modern age of mass media and mass marketing, values have become cheap, manufactured at will and instilled into us electronically, planted and cultivated by the marketers one year then overturned the next to plant something new. We worship celebrities for no good reason other than that they are celebrities, we celebrate greed, we obsess over hair and clothes, our cars and personal entertainment centers are our shrines, we are taught from the youngest age that “good” is inevitably expressed through the barrel of a gun because that is all that the “bad” understand. In this modern age we are mired in trust, but this trust is almost entirely implicit, unexamined and undiscerning, and largely consciously manipulated by others to their own ends. It requires ample blind faith.

Many people place trust in a rational mind that can keep its options open until certitude is realized. That is timidity. There is no more discernment in timidity

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17 The Pali word that is meant here is *saddhā*, alternately translated as “faith” or “confidence.” “Faith” carries misleading connotations when used in a religious context, often equated with “blind faith,” something authentic Buddhism never asks of us.

than there is in denial or in blind faith, for in timidity we invariably fall back into our tacit unexamined assumptions, the biases and conditioning we inevitably grew up with before we could have recognized what they were. *Timidity* is in effect to place certitude in those biases and conditioning as providing reliable standards for interpreting what lies beyond, then to proceed in baby steps from there. *Courage* is to place our trust elsewhere, even if just as a working assumption or thought experiment to see what it feels like. *Discerning courage* is to add reason to this.

There is no getting around trust in an uncertain world. Life-altering decisions generally arise from a sense of urgency that demand big acts of trust and therefore enormous courage; they are way beyond the reach of the timid or of the deniers who cling fearfully to their certitude. This is the courage of the great explorers, of the hippies of yore on quest in India with nothing but a backpack, and more commonly of the betrothed or of the career bound, stirred by deep longing or by desperation. The Buddhist Path fully embraced by one resolved to ascend the stem toward Awakening will shake one's life to the core and this will demand particularly courageous trust.

And so, trust in the Triple Gem must be great enough to overcome our tacit and unexamined trust. We do best to embark on the exploration of the Sasana from the vantage point of the Buddha, not from that of Madison Avenue, John Wayne or Rupert Murdoch. We do best to replace wild and random influences with those upheld in Buddhism from the outset. Since trust is unavoidable, replacing unexamined trust with discerning trust is generally a good idea. It is the alliance of trust and discernment that reaches furthest.

Trust in the Triple Gem is, moreover, *essential* for bending our minds around Buddhism, because Buddhism includes difficult understandings and practices to internalize. Until we understand what it is the Buddha realized, what it is the Buddha taught and what it is the Sangha has upheld for one hundred generations, we cannot be certain where this way of life and Path of practice will lead us. Until we have experienced deeply this way of life and traveled far on this Path of practice we will not understand what the Buddha understood, taught and entrusted to the Sangha. Therefore, until we have experienced this way of life and traveled far on this path we require trust, ardent trust in the Triple Gem, to nourish our Buddhist aspirations and practice, just as sun, water and soil nourish a flower. Trust in the Triple Gem is what first turns our heads toward virtue, wisdom and peace.

Those born into Buddhist cultures and families commonly learn trust in the Triple Gem from infancy, before they possess the gift of discernment. It is the job of the Sasana to ensure that the discernment of others, particularly of the

Noble Ones, stands behind the notions and values imparted to the little ones. For others, particularly those coming to Buddhism as adults, the initial seed of trust is often found in little things. Sariputta, who would one day become the Buddha's leading disciple in wisdom, gained his initial trust in the Buddha simply by observing the deportment of one of the early Noble Ones on alms round. Many of us in the West who are not born Buddhists gain the initial trust through encounters with Buddhists, who often exhibit profound peace and kindness, or through the profundity that shines through the Buddha's teachings, even before we grasp more than a hint of their import. Bold at first, that trust will grow progressively more discerning and acquire more confidence with experience.

There is great drama in these great decisions, initially urgency and fear, then reflection, then commitment, then outcome. Where trust is ongoing, devotion or veneration might follow. The resolution to trust is experienced as a sudden relief, carrying the taste of safety. The uncertainty that has given rise to fear and urgency may not yet be eliminated, but once urgency has turned to commitment, worry can be relinquished. The sense of ease is a *refuge*, a sense of entrusting oneself, much as we as children entrust our well-being to our parents. The trust we place in the Triple Gem often arises from a sense of urgency as great as that of the villagers in the story above. This is called in Pali *samvega*, a kind of horror at the realization of the full nature and depth of the human condition.<sup>18</sup> It is said that the Buddha-to-be experienced *samvega* when, as a somewhat frivolous Nepalese playboy, he learned, to his dismay, of sickness, of old age and of death, and in response began his quest, like the hippies of yore, to India. *Samvega* arises when we lose our capacity for denial, which is a likely outcome when frivolity ceases. The Buddha-to-be then recognized at the sight of a wandering ascetic an option that gave rise to the bold resolution to address his despair. It is said that he then experienced a sense of calm relief that in Pali is called *pasada*, the antidote to the distress of *samvega*.

Underlying the metaphors of both Refuge and Gem is, in fact, protection or safety. A refuge at the Buddha's time was understood as the protection provided by a mentor, patron or benefactor in return for a vow of allegiance.<sup>19</sup> Gems, similarly, were generally believed to have special protective properties. Refuge in the Triple Gem represents, particularly for those not born Buddhist, a bold decision to entrust oneself to a way of life, understanding and practice that will at first have all the uncertainty and mystery that virgin territory has to the explorer or that a deep and dark cave has to the spelunker. Just as a plan of

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18 See AN 5.77, 5.78, 5.79 and 5.80.

19 Thanissaro (1996), p. 1.

action is a refuge to relieve the panic of the castaway or of those buried in rubble, entrusting oneself to a Path of practice toward Awakening provides a refuge from *samvega*.

But is this a trust that arises out of wise reflection and discernment?

### ***Refuge in the Buddha***

“The Blessed One is an arahant, perfectly enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the Enlightened One, the Blessed One.”<sup>20</sup>

Most religions worship some personality. Buddhism is striking in that the role of veneration is occupied primarily by a (now deceased) human being rather than a deity or supernatural being, albeit a person who attained some remarkable qualities. We already tend to venerate people with remarkable qualities, for instance, our favorite geniuses like Einstein or Mozart. The Buddha was a three-fold genius!

First, the Buddha became a supremely awakened one, a Buddha, worthy, exalted, and with no one having illuminated the Path for him. He thereby attained perfect mastery of the mind, achieving perfect wisdom, virtue and equanimity. This was his first form of genius.

Second, he was able to teach what he had attained, to lay out the Dharma, the proper understanding of reality and the means to tame, drive and master humans and whoever else wanted to travel the Path. This was his second form of genius.

Third, he organized the Buddhist community, in particular the institution of the Sangha, to support, propagate and perpetuate the understanding and practice of his teachings, the Sasana. His third form of genius is rarely mentioned in such terms, but the reader will hopefully appreciate the immensity of this accomplishment in a couple of chapters. In short, the Buddha's three-fold genius is directly tied to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha in which we take refuge.

When we take Refuge in the Buddha we see in this towering personality the highest qualities we might choose to emulate. Refuge in the Buddha is nonetheless an act of trust, beginning with the trust that such a personality is even possible, particularly that Awakening is a possibility. It is only with deep

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20 *Vera Sutta*, AN 10.92.

practice and study, with our own progress on the Path that we begin to see how his qualities of mind are gradually starting to emerge in us, that our trust is confirmed. Trust is necessary in the beginning, until we see for ourselves.

There is little indication that the Buddha intended to become the center of a personality cult. He discouraged some of the more extreme forms of reverence he received, once telling an awe-struck follower (in the most literal sense of follower),

“Why do you want to see this foul body? One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dhamma.”<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless the Buddha elsewhere endorsed the veneration of himself as a wholesome practice. The Buddha once stated:<sup>22</sup>

“One dwells in suffering if one is without reverence and deference.”

The Buddha recommended contemplations about himself for recitation such as the one that began this subchapter, alongside contemplations of the Dharma and Sangha. Nearing his *parinirvana* he anticipated that his relics, the remains after his cremation, would become objects of veneration and accordingly specified, as described in the famous *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*<sup>23</sup> that they be divvied up and distributed to specified clans of lay devotees, so that they might build *stupas* over them. This became the primary physical symbol of the Buddha for purposes of veneration.

The Buddha also specified four significant places from his life as destinations for pilgrimage after he would be gone.

“Ananda, there are four places the sight of which should arouse emotion in the faithful. Which are they? ‘Here the Tathagata was born’ is the first. ‘Here the Tathagata attained supreme enlightenment’ is the second. ‘Here the Tathagata set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma’ is the third. ‘Here the Tathagata attained the Nibbana-element without remainder’ is the fourth.”<sup>24</sup>

We find veneration of the Buddha expressed in the early discourses through full prostrations sometimes touching the Buddha's feet, by circumambulation while keeping the Buddha on one's right, by covering one's otherwise bare shoulder with one's robe, by sitting on a lower seat than the Buddha, by standing when the Buddha entered the room, by walking behind the Buddha or

21 *Vakkali Sutta*, SN 22.87.

22 *Gāraṇa Sutta*, SN 6.2.

23 DN 16.

24 *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16, Walshe (1996), pp. 263-4.

not turning one's back to the Buddha and by proper forms of address. In the early scriptures the Buddha occasionally chastised a visitor for not showing proper respect. And this, in fact, began immediately after his Awakening, with the Buddha's re-encounter with the five ascetics to whom he delivered his first Dharma talk.<sup>25</sup>

The way the Buddha set himself up, albeit in a modest way for the times, as an object of veneration had nothing to do with an “ego trip”; that would contradict all we know about the personality of the Buddha, about the doctrine and practices he espoused, which were directed unambiguously toward selflessness. It would also contradict the trajectory of development dedicated disciples of the Buddha have experienced throughout history. Rather he must have seen a functional basis in the veneration of himself. Let's turn to that. We Westerners sometimes find scorn more natural than veneration, so for us this demands some examination.

### ***The Practice of Veneration***

*Veneration* is a principal Sasana practice and always has been. It finds bodily and verbal expression in a variety of conventional idioms and is particularly associated in Buddhism with the Triple Refuge. It bears similarities to worship, for instance in Abrahamic faiths, and is easily dismissed by the “spiritual but not religious” or strict Path followers. It is for this reason I wish to stress here its importance as a principal Buddhist practice. It belongs to what might be called the “devotional” aspect of human behavior, deliberately evoking an emotional quality of mind, and manifests, as we will see, in sometimes wildly embellished forms in later traditions. Nonetheless, veneration is rather simple in early Buddhism, with no metaphysical or supernatural import.

Veneration in some form or another is almost as natural in human behavior as smiling or frowning. It will spring forth of itself one way or another in most areas of human discourse and to try to strip it away is only to create something sterile, like trying to strip away hugging from procreation. This is not to say we are smart about whom we venerate any more than we are smart about whom we hug. Consider that the most common objects of veneration in our culture are celebrities, such as bad actors and robber barons, or consumer goods, such as iPods and whiter-than-white laundry detergent. We attribute to our celebrities fantastic wealth, sparkling charm and voluptuous sexuality, much as the people of Buddha's India attributed divinity to the great ascetics,

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25 *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, SN 56.11.

brahmins and cows, and we attribute to our recent purchases the capacity to conjure up wondrous advantages. Veneration comes naturally, but, like trust, can be either discerning or stupid.

The practice of veneration works closely with Refuge to open the heart to the influence of worthy teachers and teachings. One cannot learn from someone one does not first hold in high regard. When we show proper forms of respect to the elderly, school teachers, professors, piano teachers and good cooks, we take seriously what they have to impart and so open our minds to learn more quickly from them. Similarly we become, for good or bad, subject to their authority. In the military explicit forms of veneration, such as salutes and titles of respect, are used effectively to imprint structures of command. A potential downside is that veneration is sometimes similarly used or abused for social control – for instance, requisite veneration of superior officers, judges or the police – but again the watchword, as it always is in Buddhism, is *discernment*.

Veneration is a direct causal factor in attaining certain wholesome qualities of mind that we try to develop in Buddhism, including peace and humility. The deference to another that veneration generally entails, serves immediately to deflate the ego, to knock it out of its accustomed privileged position in the universe. In fact this seems to me to be a basic function of the worship of God in most religions. With the development of humility, the craving to *be* somebody and to distinguish oneself as that somebody, relaxes into a greater sense of ease. As the Buddha states with respect to a particular practice of veneration,

“When a noble disciple recollects the Tathāgata, on that occasion his mind is not obsessed by lust, hatred, or delusion; on that occasion his mind is simply straight. He has departed from greed, freed himself from it, emerged from it. ... some beings here are purified in such a way.”<sup>26</sup>

This passage is repeated in this sutta with each of “Dhamma,” “Sangha,” “his [own] virtuous behavior” and “his [own] generosity” replacing “Tathāgata.”

Each culture has its own expressions of veneration, such as the military salute in ours, address through “sir” or “madam,” or putting an apple on the teacher’s desk. Evidence of the importance accorded to physical and verbal forms of veneration in Buddhism is found in the observation that Buddhism has carried many of its originally culturally-conditioned forms from India to every land in which Buddhism has taken root, regardless of how dissimilar the culture. Most significant of these is the bow, *anjali* in Sanskrit, a quite ubiquitous expression

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26 *Anussati Sutta*, AN 6.25.

of respect or greeting in its land of origin, produced by bringing the palms together before the chest or face, sometimes combined with a complete prostration. Japanese Zen master Suzuki Roshi, shortly after arriving in San Francisco, was alarmed at the resistance his American students displayed toward these bows, particularly toward the *three* full prostrations, one for each of the three Refuges, that he asked of them in the early morning. He accordingly adapted this practice to the West: He required of his American students *nine* full prostrations, a custom that has now endured for nearly half a century among his disciples.

Bowing is a form *ritual* conduct, as is shaking hands or wearing a tux to a formal dinner party. Robert Sharf writes, “Ritual habituation inscribes the self with a set of perceptual orientations, affective dispositions, automatic responses that are precognitive.” It begins by enacting these as if in play within an implicit frame of reference that one does not have to believe in or acquiesce to any more than one believes in the grammar of one’s mother tongue. To bow to the Buddha is to enact veneration for the Buddha, to enact veneration of the Buddha is to feel veneration for the Buddha, to feel veneration for the Buddha is to put aside one’s preconceptions and open one’s heart to the teachings of the Buddha. To do this is to align with the Buddha’s Path.<sup>27</sup>

In short, veneration when brought together with discernment is a powerful support for trust in what we seek on the Buddhist Path. Although its expressions are always culturally determined, its indispensable function in Buddhist life and practice has been a bedrock of Buddhism throughout the life and times of the Sasana. It also lends to Buddhism its most *devotional* part, and is the focal point of sometimes extensive embellishment in the later traditions, as we will see. Whether this embellishment has been always helpful or even healthy will be a theme in this book.

## ***Refuge in the Dharma***

“The Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One, directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise. Well expounded is the teaching of the Buddha,”<sup>28</sup>

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27 See Sharf (1995c). Notice that the Buddha’s well-known criticism of rites and rituals applies to their perceived miraculous efficaciousness, particularly in the context of Brahmanism, not to psychological benefits they might carry.

28 *Vera Sutta*, AN 10.92.

The Buddha spoke as follows, initially about honor and respect:<sup>29</sup>

“It would be for the sake of fulfilling an unfulfilled aggregate of virtue that I would honor, respect and dwell in dependence on another ascetic or brahmin.”

He then repeated his sentence with each of “concentration,” “wisdom,” “liberation” and “knowledge and vision of liberation” replacing “virtue.” In the absence of an ascetic or brahmin more worthy than himself he then concluded with regard to his own practice:

“Let me then honor, respect, and dwell in dependence on this very Dhamma to which I have fully awakened.”

Most religions have some form of doctrine or belief system, generally providing a metaphysics, an account of the origin of the world, of mankind or of a particular tribe, and so on. The Dharma stands out in its enormous sophistication and its emphasis on the mind rather than on external forces. It deals with the human dilemma, existential crisis, anguish, suffering and dissatisfaction, delusion, harmfulness, meaninglessness and the rest, as human problems with human causes that arise in human minds, and as problems that require human solutions. The Dharma provides a program whereby the mind is tuned, honed, sharpened, tempered, straightened, turned and distilled into an instrument of virtue, serenity and wisdom. The Dharma itself is among the greatest products of the human mind, as skillfully articulated by the Buddha. It is on the basis of trust in the Triple Gem that we begin to study, practice, develop and gain insight through the teachings of the Buddha. As the Buddha states,

“... when someone going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha sees, with right insight, the four Noble Truths: suffering, the arising of suffering, the overcoming of suffering and the Eightfold Path leading to the ending of suffering, then this is the secure refuge; this is the supreme refuge. By going to such a refuge one is released from all suffering.”<sup>30</sup>

The Dharma also stands out in its empirical quality, “come and see,” in Pali, *chipassiko*. The Dharma points almost entirely to what can be verified in our direct experience, or instructs us in ways to move the mind into certain experiences. Many in the West are inspired to trust in the Dharma in the first place upon learning of this refreshing see-for-yourself quality of the Dharma.

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29 *Gāraṇa Sutta*, SN 6.2.

30 *Dhammapada*, 190-192, Fronsdal (2005), p.51.

Some caution is, however, in order, lest one think this entails that we should trust our own experience above all. In fact, for the Buddha the typical “uninstructed worldling” is actually astonishingly deluded and the Dharma quite “against the stream” from his perspective. We get hopelessly confused in trying to see, much less interpret, our own experience. For this reason the Buddha, in the famous *Kālāma Sutta*, warns us *not* to base one's understanding on one's own thinking:

“Come Kālāmas, do not go by ... logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, ...”<sup>31</sup>

In fact, when the Buddha says “Come” he is shouting down to us flatlanders from the mountaintop. To arrive at his vantage point we need to scramble up hills, struggle through brambles and ford rivers. When the Buddha says “See” we need to focus our eyes intently in the right direction to barely make out what the Buddha sees with great clarity of vision. In order to be willing to do all of this we have to establish from the beginning great trust that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. This is Refuge. What else would induce us to make the difficult climb up the mountain? Investigation and personal verification are necessary parts of following the Dharmic Path but they take time and effort before we can say, “I have *come* and now I *see*.” Until then trust is essential. “Come” is trust, and “see” is verification.

For instance, the Buddha taught that craving is the origin of suffering (the Second Noble Truth). At first this may seem, at least to some, an abstract proposition which we must ponder and try our darnedest to match up with observation. The most likely early outcome is to dismiss this proposition as simply mistaken. It seems pretty clear to us, for instance, that buying that snazzy shirt we so want, would make us exceedingly dashing and that that would lead to improved prospects for romance and other forms of social and perhaps even business success. Therefore, we conclude, craving clearly leads *not* to suffering but to *happiness*! However, Refuge entails instead that we decide to trust the Buddha before our own premature cogitation about our own experiences. Eventually through years of examination, on and off the cushion, we might discover that the Second Noble Truth is not an abstraction at all; it is something that bites us on the nose over and over all day every day. We begin to notice that as soon as craving comes up the suffering is right behind it. As soon as we *have to* have that shirt there is stress and anxiety, unmistakably. We might discover we had been living in a world of incessant suffering, a world aflame, all along but not noticing it!

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31 AN 3.65. Note, I've omitted the *external* sources of evidence in this oft-quoted list.

In brief, without Refuge in the Dharma we would never have scrambled to the mountaintop. We've already taken refuge implicitly, but in many faulty, non-Buddhist ideas and habits taught to us from a young age, or absorbed through too much TV, and we are bound to cling to those until we take Refuge in the Dharma, naively misperceiving them for products of our own “free” thinking. As the contemplation at the beginning of this subchapter states, it is the *wise* who realize for themselves. The Japanese Zen master Shohaku Okumura in a similar vein once said of Zen meditation, “It takes a lot of faith to do *zazen*. Otherwise nobody would do something so stupid.”<sup>32</sup>

### ***Refuge in the Sangha***

“The Sangha of the Blessed One’s disciples is practicing the good way, practicing the straight way, practicing the true way, practicing the proper way; that is, the four pairs of persons, the eight types of individuals – this Sangha of the Blessed One’s disciples is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, the unsurpassed field of merit for the world.”<sup>33</sup>

Living, breathing role models are found in every religious tradition, but in Buddhism these become primary objects of veneration and trust. This makes perfect sense since living breathing persons have the most immediate influence on our lives and are most likely to have brought us to Refuge in the Triple Gem in the first place. Unfortunately sometimes we accord this privilege naïvely to ruffians and scoundrels rather than to admirable friends. For the Buddha, the Noble Sangha is most worthy.

The phrase in the verse above, “the four pairs of persons, the eight types of individuals,” refers to the four stages of Awakening, beginning with Stream Entry, and subdividing each of these by “path” and “fruit.” These are the attainments that define the “Noble Sangha” or “Noble Ones.” Since the benchmark goal of Buddhism is set at the singular attainment of Awakening, its role models have to be quite exceptional in their attainment of full or partial

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32 Although the Buddha was quite empirical in methods and had little sympathy for blind faith, I should in all fairness point out that his teachings are *not* entirely empirical. The ultimate criterion for Dharmic truth is not verification, but benefit! This again is made clear in the *Kālāma Sutta*:

“But when, Kālāmas, you know for yourselves : ‘These things are unwholesome; these things are blameworthy; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to harm and suffering,’ then you should abandon them.” (AN 3.65)

33 *Vera Sutta*, AN 10.92.

## Awakening.

The subsequent lines refer to the practice of giving alms and veneration to monks and nuns, the Monastic Sangha. The idea is that the Sangha brings great benefit to the world but that their attainment and presence are enabled by those who sustain them and thereby share in bringing benefit to the world, often compared to sowing a fertile field. The generosity of alms is thereby the primary means of expressing veneration to the Third Gem. Both practices, veneration itself and generosity as specific expressions, are important elements in cultivating wholesome mental factors for the actor, which is what merit really is.

I've written a bit about the relationship of the Noble and Monastic Sanghas, the soil and the roots, in the last chapter, and will examine this in even more detail in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that there is quite typically an ambiguity between the two. Recall that the former are individuals of great attainment, the Noble Ones, and the latter the members of the monastic order, who individually may or may not be so noble. Generally when we extol the virtues of the Sangha, as in the contemplation above we speak of the Noble Ones, yet the most common formula for first taking Refuge in the early discourses usually in the Buddha's presence, explicitly refers to the Monastic Sangha. This gets confusing but the confusion seems to be deliberate, and is apt. If we think of the Monastic Sangha as a school that trains people to become Noble Ones we realize that offering alms to the Monastic Sangha is a necessary function for ensuring that there *are* Noble Ones in the world in any great number. Therefore it is support of the Monastic Sangha that ensures that the Noble Sangha will thrive. Analogously, it is support of higher education that ensures that scholarship will thrive.

Moreover, the monks and nuns play an important ritual role as objects of veneration for it is they who are readily *recognized* as a Sangha through their (especially now, atrociously) distinctive attire. As such the Monastic Sangha not only substantially *includes* the Noble Sangha, but nuns and monks collectively or individually *symbolize* it, even if it is often in the way a piece of plaster sitting on an altar might symbolize the Buddha. Monks and nuns are particularly opportune ritual objects since they live and breathe, accept alms and actually eat them, and have a good shot at spiritual attainment, all unlike Buddha statues.

In fact, the *Vinaya* requires that monks and nuns not offer teachings if their audience is disrespectful of them.<sup>34</sup> It helps if the practice of giving alms is

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34 The *Vinaya* rules of etiquette (Pali, *Sekhiyā*) specify that a monk will not teach to

thought of as the practice of giving not to a particular Noble One or a particular nun or monk, but to the Sangha as a whole, undifferentiated, on behalf of which a particular nun or monk receives the alms. Accordingly the Buddha said,

“..an offering made to the Sangha is incalculable, immeasurable. And I say that in no way is a gift to a person individually ever more fruitful than an offering made to the Sangha.”<sup>35</sup>

Although the Buddha included himself in the Sangha it is remarkable that the “person individually” referred to was specifically *himself* in the context of the discourse, the most Noble One of the Noble Ones. For the Buddha the Refuge in the Sangha was huge.

### ***Buddhism without Refuge?***

The tyke born of a devout Buddhist family is likely to live his life centered in the Sasana; he lives in the roots and leaves, not initially in the stem. The little seedling will be brought into the presence of Buddha altars, and of monks, nuns and Noble Ones, and will have been taught the forms of veneration. He will have learned to recite the Refuges. He will have begun to absorb a few Dharmic aphorisms and learns to recite five Precepts. With growing conviction, he will become increasingly involved in the community life, developing merit in taking care of the temple and the needs of the monastics, in chanting with gusto. He will someday become aware of the stem and may consider broadening his world to include the Path upward, perhaps to ordain. A full encounter with *samvega* would likely bring him to that bold decision quickly. Regardless, he will be inclined to support generously the aspirations of those who *do* make that choice, for he will understand the civilizing force of the Noble Ones.

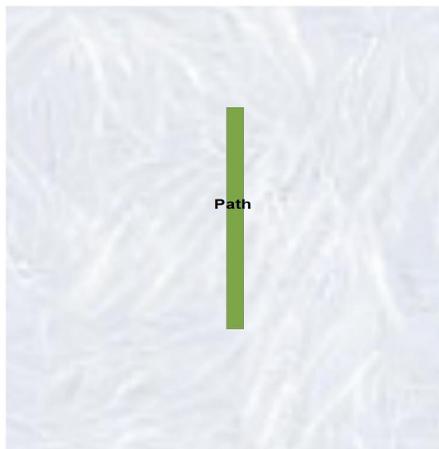
Living in a devout Buddhist community seems in itself capable of inducing remarkable results. I see this in many Asian Buddhists I’ve known. I also see it among the devout of other religious traditions with similar forms of religious expression, which one way or another seem to produce some people of some attainment, even without a Noble Eightfold Path or anything resembling it! It has a remarkable capacity for generating confidence, zest and many

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one who is not sick yet carries an umbrella, club or weapon; wears sandals or shoes; is in a vehicle or on a bed; sits clasping the knees; wears a turban or other head covering; sits on a higher seat, sits while the monk is standing; walks preceding the monk or on a pathway while the monk walks off the path. Each of these would have been disrespectful in the Buddha's culture.

35 *Dakkhīnāvibhanga Sutta*, MN 142, p. 1105..

wholesome mental factors in its adherents, and can produce centered, selfless, composed, kind and insightful people. One can thrive in the grass on the basis of the practice of veneration alone.



*The Path Without Sasana*

A totally different profile would be someone who has not grown up with a foundation in the Buddha-Sasana, a common profile in the West. He might be reluctant to commit to the Refuges or Precepts, has not lived in a Buddhist community, knows nothing about Noble Ones, does not know what function nuns and monks could possibly serve or why they don't go out to get jobs. He might have begun by reading about Buddhism, inspired perhaps by a vague sense that Buddhism is a good thing, maybe having seen the Dalai Lama on TV or inspired by Buddhism's reputation as "peaceful," or by reading *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse.

In any case he has been moved to take up Buddhist practice, particularly meditation, much as he had been moved to take up working out in a gym the year before. Just as the gym membership had made his body stronger, he hopes that joining a "sangha" will make his mind stronger. He likes the idea of Awakening and might even expect to awaken if he meditates ardently for a couple of years, but has no perspective beyond improving this one short life.

This chap lives in the world of the stem. Without deep veneration nor involvement in a Buddhist community he is nourished only by the experience of practice itself. He has no sense of where this nourishment

comes from nor responsibility for preserving it for future generations. He is unaware of the Sasana, the living flower. Accordingly he gazes down upon the grass with disdain, little comprehending the roots and soil and the spiritual growth that is happening down there. I know this profile well: It used to be mine. His practice is likely to be precarious for a time, but he might eventually gain some strength if he manages to grow deep roots. He is spiritual but not religious. The astute reader will notice the absence of the blossom of Awakening in this illustration. Full Awakening is individually such a rare accomplishment under the best conditions, it is hardly conceivable that it is ever attained without the nourishment provided by the Triple Gem.

## Chapter 4

# The Buddhist Community

When the Buddha returned to visit his princely home after his alms-financed Awakening, he continued his rounds in the streets of Kapilavastu much to the distress of his aristocratic father. The alms round was, for the Buddha, a key feature of the monastic life. Even when food was close at hand, the alms round was not to be disregarded. For the Buddha the alms round was not simply a way to feed the monks and nuns: it had a social role to play in realigning the values of both monastic and lay.

A monastic is like a house pet: helpless on his own, absolutely and vulnerably dependent on the kind hand that feeds him, but at the same time of therapeutic value to that same hand (not to mention cute as a kitten in his fluffy robes and with his bald head). Like a house pet, a monastic lives a simple life, needs and possesses little: He does not have a motorboat on the lake, nor a puppy he is working to put through college. He is a deliberate renunciate with a lifestyle that leaves almost no channels for the pursuit of sensual pleasures, the accumulation of stuff, the quest for personal advantage, nor the intractable issues that accompany these. The effect is that he settles, if the mind remains steady, into a state of quiet contentment, a fertile field of practice indeed.

Accepting the generosity of the lay graciously, having no resources at all of one's own that are not donated, puts the monastic in an uncommon frame of reference, but does the same for the lay donor as well. Remarkably, every time the monastic accepts something, the lay donor receives a gift. This is paradoxical to the Western observer, but if you look again, you cannot mistake the sugar plums dancing in the donor's eyes. Every time the lay person accepts a teaching or benefits from a social or pastoral service, the monastic receives a gift. The relationship is unlike what one finds in conventional human affairs. This is an economy of gifts,<sup>36</sup> one that provides much of the context of the

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36 Thanissaro (1997, 2009).

most fundamental Buddhist value and practice, that of *dāna*, Pali for generosity.

The Buddha imagined a harmonious Buddhist community of laity and monastics and he brought this community to light by organizing the Monastic Sangha. His idea seems to have been that the presence of the Monastic Sangha would shape the entire community, the laity taking on its roles entirely voluntarily, in particular *without* formal obligations enforced by some kind of command structure or threats of excommunication.

### ***The Monastic Sangha***

Whereas we find the sublime in the Dharma, we find in the Buddha's institutional teachings nuts and bolts pragmatism. The Sangha (in this chapter taken to mean, unless otherwise specified, the monastic order) is an *institution*. The fundamental purpose of this institution is to produce Noble Ones, saints, the finest in admirable friends, now and in the years to come. Its founding charter provides the optimal training conditions for the practice that produces Noble Ones, it also sustains a wholesome and inspiring influence on the broader Buddhist community, and, as we will see, it ensures the future authenticity of the Sasana.

The Sangha has striking parallels with science as an institution, the disciplined community of scientists organized largely within universities and research institutions. Each, the monastic community and the scientific community, is a complex system responsible for many things: for training its members, for authorizing its teachers, for maintaining the integrity of its tradition against many misguided and popular notions, for upholding pure standards whereby its results can be assessed, for encouraging the growth, prosperity and longevity of its functions, for rewarding patience where results are not immediately forthcoming, for maintaining harmony among its members, for nurturing a positive perception in the public eye. Just as *scientific discipline* is intrinsic to the practice and perpetuation of science, and science as we know it would collapse without it, *Vinaya* is intrinsic to the practice and perpetuation of the Buddha-Sasana, and Buddhism in all its depth would collapse without it. Both institutions are conservative, exhibiting relatively little change over the centuries, even while their products can be highly innovative. From these parallels I will draw helpful analogies to better understand the function of the Sangha in terms of the (presumably, for most readers) more familiar scientific institution.

It is not often enough stated that the founding of the Sangha was a truly monu-

mental achievement. Although there were ascetics in India before the Buddha, “... among all of the bodies of renouncers it was only the Buddhists who invented monastic life,”<sup>37</sup> that is who provided an organized institution capable of sustaining its teachings. Consider this observation:

The Buddhist Sangha is likely the world's oldest human organization in continual existence on the planet!<sup>38</sup>

What is more, the Sangha is still entirely recognizable in terms of attire, lifestyle, practice and function after 100 generations! It was there as great empires, the Roman, Mongolian, Arab, Lithuanian, Mayan and British, arose and grew. It was still there as each of those empires collapsed. From India it extended its civilizing reach to Ceylon and Southeast Asia and into Indonesia, into Central Asia where it followed the Silk Road eastward into China and East Asia and westward as far as the Mediterranean. In modern times it has begun to board airplanes and to sprinkle down on North America, Europe, Australia, South America and even Africa. Buddhism has never penetrated new lands nor established itself *without* the Sangha.

Yet in spite of its robustness the Sangha is delicate. Without any centralized authority or substantial hierarchy, its governance is based on the consensus of local communities (*sanghas*) of monks and nuns, its regulations are enforced through an honor system and its support is completely entrusted to the goodwill of others. The Buddha *could* have set up a hierarchy, with something like Pope and bishops and a range of severe punishments for transgressing authority, but he did not. Who would have thought it would last? This amazing institution is the product of one genius, who cobbled it together from diverse elements present and observed among the ascetics of his time, clearly articulated for it a mission and a charter and released it into the world. And this genius is the very same person who revealed the Dharma, among the most sophisticated and skillfully expounded products of the human mind, and the very same person who attained complete Awakening without a teacher to light the way, the threefold genius we call the Buddha.

### ***The Functions of the Discipline***

The Buddha most consistently called the body of his teachings not “Dharma,” not “Sasana,” and certainly not “Buddhism,” but rather “*Dharma-Vinaya*,” the doctrine and discipline. On his deathbed the Buddha refused to appoint a successor, saying to the surrounding monks,

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37 Gombrich (2006), p. 19.

38 Gombrich (2009), p. 2, makes this claim.

“... what I have taught and explained to you as Dharma and discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher,”<sup>39</sup>

The *Vinaya* is fundamentally about community and about the monastic life style, the life in accord with the Dharma and thereby the most direct path to higher attainments. The *Vinaya* is addressed indeed to monks and nuns, but throughout it emphasizes the responsibility of the Sangha to the lay community, and the expectation of support of the Sangha by the lay community. The Buddha’s teachings on community provide the mechanism through which the light of the Buddha’s teachings burns brightly, through which it spreads to attract new adherents and through which it retains its integrity as it is passed on to new generations.

Here is the Buddha’s mission statement for the Sangha in ten points:<sup>40</sup>

“The excellence of the Sangha,  
 The comfort of the Sangha,  
 The curbing of the impudent,  
 The comfort of well-behaved monastics,  
 The restraint of effluents related to the present life,  
 The prevention of effluents related to the next life,  
 The arousing of faith in the faithless,  
 The increase of the faithful,  
 The establishment of the true Dharma, and  
 The fostering of Discipline.”

Let’s try to understand the functions of monastic discipline point by point in terms of this mission statement, and to recognize, as a means of further elucidation, their close counterparts in the discipline of science.

### **“The excellence of the Sangha”**

The Sangha must be excellent because it sustains something quite sophisticated and precious, the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. The nuns and monks are the designated full-time caretakers of the Dharma. The *Vinaya* ensures the conditions for deep practice and study and for harmony within the Sangha.

Excellence of the Sangha entails that its membership is exclusive. This is a critical point. Although membership is an opportunity offered in principle to all, its members become exclusive through their vows, through the willingness

39 *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16, Walshe (1996), p. 260.

40 Translation is by Thanissaro (2007), p. 5. See also Horner (2006), pp.37-8.

to take on very simple lives of renunciation, a lifestyle fully in accord with Dharma but beyond the consideration of most people. Initially to become a member is quite easy, but sustained membership requires enormous trust in the Dharma, recognition of the disadvantages of samsaric life and oodles of personal discipline. In most cases it entails rigorous training in Dharma, meditation and *Vinaya*. Concentrated in this life among the renunciates, the Dharma burns most brightly.<sup>41</sup>

By way of analogy the scientific community must be excellent because it sustains something sophisticated and productive of rapid progress in understanding the nature of our universe. Science concentrates people of exceptional training into a persistent, stimulating and highly cooperative, if not always harmonious, community. Excellence also entails that its membership be exclusive, in this case ensured through years of intense education, evaluation and training, culminating in apprenticeship under a senior research scientist to acquire the competence to conduct independent research.

### ***“The comfort of the Sangha”***

The Sangha appears to have been planned as the ideal society writ small. The excellence of the Sangha makes that feasible. Internally the Sangha as envisioned by the Buddha observes no class distinctions, provides an exemplary level of gender equality,<sup>42</sup> is regulated in a way to avoid conflicts and maintain harmony, observes procedures to negotiate disagreements should these arise, is democratic and only minimally hierarchical.

At the same time, the Sangha is embedded in, and dependent on, a greater society, whose values may be often contrary but with which it must harmonize. Accordingly it takes care to conform, or at least provide the perception of conforming to the expectations of the wider society and certainly its standards of etiquette. It is worth noting that many, perhaps most, rules observed by Buddhist monks and nuns early on were recommended or inspired by lay people discontented in one way or another with the behavior of some monastics.<sup>43</sup> Some regulations seem to be symbolic and I suspect purely for public perception, that is, not necessarily reflective of the values of the ideal

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41 Conze (1959, p. 53) writes in stronger terms that, “The monks are the Buddhist elite. They are the only Buddhists in the proper sense of the word. The life of a householder is almost incompatible with the higher levels of spiritual life. This has been a conviction common to all Buddhists at all times.”

42 I will consider later why historically the Sangha has often failed to uphold this ideal.

43 The origin stories of individual rules found in the *Vinaya* reveal this.

society (for instance, laypeople pay respects to monastics but not vice versa). The uniform appearance of the Buddhist Sangha serves to distinguish them from ascetics of other traditions who may observe other standards, and from the laity, who have a distinct role.

As an ascetic renunciate community, monks and nuns depend completely on material support from the lay community. This affords them the leisure of practice, study and good works. Remarkably the Buddha not only makes receipt of this support mandatory (monastics cannot, for instance, grow their own food or live off their own resources) but then redoubles this dependence by limiting the monastic's right to *retain* offerings, especially of food, for which ownership expires at noon on the day it is offered!<sup>44</sup> Monastics are not allowed to engage in exchange, such as Dharma talks for food or blessings for money. This provides a high degree of insularity from the concerns and influences of the outside world, including from the need for livelihood, ensuring among other things that the Dharma will not become a commercial product, tweaked for popular appeal. It also means that monastics can engage patiently in long-term practice toward profound but long-term attainment without the pressure to produce identifiable results.

The scientific community analogously receives material support, through professorships, research grants, etc, from the broader society, both to sustain its (much higher) living standards and to offset the costs of research equipment, publication, travel and so forth that its functions entail. This permits its members engage in nearly full-time research, training and teaching, fulfilling the functions of the community. The assumption of academic freedom and the institution of tenure gives the scientific community a high degree of insularity from the prevailing concerns of the outside world, unbiased by politics, religion, superstition, other popular notions, practical applications or benefits or profitability. It also means scientists can engage patiently in long-term research with no pressure to produce identifiable results.

### ***“The curbing of the impudent”***

#### ***“The comfort of well-behaved monastics”***

The Sangha maintains high standards of behavior to ensure ethical conduct, conduct befitting the role of renunciate: celibacy, a nominal personal footprint, harmony of the Sangha, harmony between Sangha and laity, preservation of the reputation of the Sangha, reaching decisions as a group and restraint of self-gratifying behavior.

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44 Ariyesako (1999) provides an accessible overview of the monastic regulations.

Regulations are enforced primarily through simple personal acknowledgment of infractions with the intention to do better next time. The Sangha has no forms of corporal punishment and implements justice largely on an honor system. More serious matters are enforced through peer pressure, through expulsion or moving impudent members to the uneasy fringes of the community for periods of time. For a very small set of very serious offenses the wayward monk or nun is, from that very instant, no longer of the Sangha. If one manages to hide such an offense one is simply a lay person in robes who is successfully impersonating a monk or nun. Those, on the other hand, whose behavior is unblemished garner a great deal of respect, generally among Sangha and laity alike.

Scientific communities also maintain high ethical standards, albeit in quite different realms having primarily to do with potential falsification of data and plagiarism, with disharmonious and unproductive discourse and debate, and with productive evaluation of results and theoretical proposals, scientific standards and methods by peers. Such communities are largely self-regulating, generally at the institutional level, with relatively little centralization of authority. Governance is often in a local university administration, but similar standards of professional conduct are generally recognized and enforced throughout the world scientific community. Institutions share common practices for expelling members or to move them to the fringes of communal activities through hiring, funding and tenure decisions. Pursuit of professional reputation is typically a strong determinant of the behavior of scientists, as distinct from monastics.

***“The restraint of effluents related to the present life”***  
***“The prevention of effluents ... to the next life”***

These two aims, alone among the ten, refer to the results of actual practice toward Awakening. Effluents are unwholesome tendencies and views, the taints from which the human character is purified on the Path. The Sangha functions in this regard by securing for itself the life most conducive to upholding Buddhist principles, a life so barren of any opportunity for personal advantage that a self can scarcely find root, except in the mind. Into its stead flow the wisdom and compassion that, liberated from the tyranny of personal neediness, burst here and there into various stages of Awakening. In this way the Sangha, as long as it follows the discipline scrupulously, produces relatively effectively Noble Ones from among its ranks.

Monastics are allowed by their vows to do almost nothing for themselves.

They are permitted no livelihood, nor trade, and are isolated from the conventional exchange economy. Their material needs are offered entirely by the laity. Monastics are proscribed, except in exceptional circumstances, from *asking* for anything, that is, they do not beg, but only offer the opportunity to give. On alms rounds they are not to prefer one house (the wealthy one, or the home of the French chef) over another. They are not even allowed to endear themselves through charm and wit to families with the intent of garnering better or greater offerings, nor are they allowed to show off any special psychic powers nor talk about attainments to gain in reputation. They can build themselves a dwelling or sew robes for themselves, but if they do so these must be limited in size and quality. They also curtail frivolous speech, shows and entertainments and self-beautification, they observe limits on what they can own or store, and they do not eat after noon. Of course curtailing sexual activity is foundational to monasticism, obviating the most reliable and well-worn route to entanglement in Samsara.

On the other hand there are almost no restrictions on what a monastic can do for *others*: on teaching, pastoral care, good works, advice, even physical labor, as long as it is not compensated. Interestingly, the *restrictions* on the monastics' aid to others for the most part apply to traditional *priestly* functions, such as predicting the future, healing or appealing to the mercy of deities. The Buddha created an order of renunciates, role models and teachers, not of priests.

Virtually all of the progress one (lay or monastic) is likely to make on the Buddhist Path will be directly correlated with what is given up, physically and/or mentally: the physical trappings of life, relations and obligations like debt and car ownership, behaviors like partying flirtatiously or imbibing liberally, needy emotions of lust, greed, envy, pride, avarice, aversive emotions of anger, hatred, fear, jealousy, denial and confusion, the distortion of self-view and having to *be* somebody. The Buddhist Path entails a long process of disentanglement strand by strand from soap-operatic existence, of renunciation. The power of the monastic life is in setting high standards of *physical* renunciation and offering virtually no channel for the practical expression of the afflictive *mental* factors that refuse to let go and generally assault, for a time, even the most dedicated monastic heart. Within the monastic container, meditation and study quickly develop ripe and plump fruit.

The analogous discipline of science develops a different kind of quality in its practitioners: talent for research. It implements policies that provide very high standards for assessing its quality, for publicizing results and for allocating research funding and employment where future results prove most promising. Through continuous discourse at conferences, in published journals and in

informal contexts, research results are continually refined and reevaluated cooperatively within the community to improve their quality. Peer review, and standards for hiring professors, granting tenure, awarding research grants, etc. also provide other forms of constraint and encouragement.

***“The arousing of faith in the faithless”***  
***“The increase of the faithful”***

Where there are Noble Ones, trust will be inspired, for they display first-hand the peace and happiness, wisdom and compassion that result from complete immersion in the Buddhist life. The Noble Ones are close at hand, they teach, they inspire with their deportment, their good works and their knowledge. They inspire self-reflection concerning one’s own life, and tend to melt samsaric tendencies. They are *adepts*, consulted as authorities to which folk Buddhists will defer when Dharmic questions arise. They thereby constrain popular speculative views of Dharma with a firm anchor in the practice and understanding of the Noble Ones.

Although most people do not have first-hand access to scientists, the volume and continuous production of results gives science much of its reputation and influence in the world, most particularly in the production of technology, including the wonderful gadgets that now fill our homes, cars and pockets, along with popular published outreach in the media. Scientists are popularly regarded as the experts to whom others defer, thereby countering popular speculative views of science with the solid anchor of scientific research, inhibiting the former from devolving into pure fantasy.

***“The establishment of the true Dharma”***

Buddhism has been noted as the first world religion. It has proved remarkable in its resilience, especially considering that no other religion has been able to penetrate foreign cultures without military conquest as naturally as Buddhism. This has been possible because the integrity of the authentic Dharma is preserved in an excellent community that enjoys insularity, is strong in its practice, is sustained by the laity and is actively involved in its own training. Something as refined as Buddhism might otherwise easily degrade into superstition, pop psychology or religious intolerance, even in its native culture, but the anchor of the Sangha is difficult to budge. This theme will be developed further in Chapters Six and Seven.

The integrity of scientific results is similarly preserved in an excellent

community that enjoys insularity, engages strong collaborative research, is well supported and is actively involved in its own education. Something as refined as Science might otherwise easily degrade into the superstition, magic or wild speculation from which it arose in the first place, but it doesn't, even though the oddest notions about the domain of science are rampant outside of the firmly planted scientific community.

### ***“The fostering of Discipline”***

Monastic discipline is probably the most archaic element of Buddhism. While scriptures vary throughout the Buddhist world, particularly with the proliferation of the later Mahayana Sutras, the regulations of the *Vinaya* are nearly a constant throughout Buddhist Asia.<sup>45</sup> The discipline is preserved by those who maintain the discipline and who ordain nuns and monks who will maintain the discipline. As long as the discipline is maintained there will be *arahants* in the world, as well as the lesser Noble Ones. As long as there are Noble Ones in the world the Dharma also will not go too far astray.

Imagine by way of illustration that the Buddhist Sangha as a whole decided that from now on the support of a monk will depend on his popularity among the laity, perhaps in terms of how many students he attracts, how many people read his books or listen to his Dharma talks, how well he avoids that most disquieting of words, “renunciation.” Such a change would compromise the comfort of the Sangha, because it would put its essential functions under outside less-than-adept influence. It would also compromise the restraint of effluents, because it would force the monk into the self-centered and perhaps competitive behavior of actively seeking approval of others as a matter of livelihood.

Imagine additionally that members of the Sangha were self-qualified simply by hanging up their shingle, “Venerable Bo Bo,” with no commitment to the renunciate life. This would compromise the excellence of the community. It is easy to imagine how Buddhism would dissolve in a quick flash of unprecedented popularity. Influence over casual seekers would grow for a short time, but fewer and fewer people would be inspired or guided into deep practice and study of the Dharma in the long term. The fostering of discipline is critical to the resilience of the Sasana.

The discipline of the scientific community is perhaps *its* most archaic element. Interestingly it is not preserved in a uniform document and not so deliberately

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45 The most notable exception is Japan, long subject to government interference. See Jaffe (2001) and the discussion in later chapters.

studied as the Buddhist *Vinaya* is. Yet working scientists and university administrators have an implicit common sense of what discipline entails and how to regulate it, and are very sensitive to any assault on its integrity as a community. These various elements of scientific discipline are for the most part very old, implicitly understood by working scientists, and show every sign of enduring into the future.

Imagine, for instance, that the scientific community as a whole decided that, from now on, salary and the ability to publish or fund research will depend entirely on the popularity of the researcher or his research, perhaps measured in terms of how many students he attracts or how many people read his results, with special credit for writing a best-selling book. This would compromise the comfort of the scientific community, because it would put its critical functions under less-than-adept, outside influence: popular opinion. It would also compromise the restraint of mistaken notions, because it would eliminate the guidance of peer review in favor of a much less expert process of review. It would represent a race to the bottom.

Imagine additionally that researchers are self-qualified, simply by hanging up their shingles, “Professor Bob, BA.” This would compromise the excellence of the community. It is easy to see how serious science would dissolve in a short flash of unprecedented popularity. Scientific understanding would also be compromised when unqualified researchers publish results with little feedback from perhaps better qualified members of the scientific community, and when they ignore important aspects of research in favor of what sells. In the end science would be largely discredited. Luckily this scenario is unlikely to play itself out fully, because scientists have a sense of the discipline their community requires.

### ***The Ideal and Reality***

I have written of the Sangha in ideal terms, yet a pervasive factor in the history of the Monastic Sangha is the frequently less than ideal excellence of the Monastic Sangha. The following account from the *Vinaya* describes the infamous Group of Six who are reported to have lived even at the time of the Buddha:<sup>46</sup>

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46 *Vinaya Suttavibhanga Sanghadisesa 13 cd*, abridged from Horner (2006) vol. 1, pp. 314-318. The Group of Six show up repeatedly in the *Vinaya*, always trying to get away with something, from possessing instruments of gold for removing dirt from their ears to dressing in loincloths. In clarifying the bhikkhuni rules a Group of Six nuns appears.

“Now at that time, unscrupulous monks ... were in residence at Kitagiri. They indulged in the following kinds of bad habits: they planted ... small flowering trees, ... , they plucked them ..., they tied them up into (garlands) .... These take or send garlands ... to wives of reputable families, to daughters ..., to girls ..., to daughters-in-law ..., to female slaves of reputable families. ... These eat from one dish together with wives ... female slaves of reputable families. They drink from one beaker; they sit down on one seat; they share one couch; they share one mat; they share one coverlet; they share one mat and coverlet. They eat at the wrong time; they drink intoxicants; they wear garlands, perfumes and cosmetics; they dance and sing and play musical instruments, and they sport. They dance when she dances, they play musical instruments when she dances, they sing when she dances; they dance when she sings ..., they dance when she plays musical instruments ... they dance when she sports ... they sport when she sports. They play on a chequered board for gambling; they play on a draught-board; they play with imagining such boards in the air; they play a game of keeping stepping on to diagrams ... they play at blowing through toy-pipes made of leaves; they play with a toy plough; they play at turning somersaults ...”

This goes on for about five pages. Although this passage is almost certainly farcical, it most have borne some recognizable truth.<sup>47</sup>

Bear in mind that *any* human institution is easily subject to degeneration, where at least some of its members will inevitably fall short of, or even subvert, the mission with which the institution is charged. This is true, for instance, for government and for academia, for journalism and for health care, for road repair and for education, for corporations and for non-profits, for police departments and for social movements. It is certainly at least as true in science as it is in monastic life. Still, doing without the more useful institutions is like the tsunami survivor proclaiming, “That’s it, I’ve had it with water!” or the tornado survivor gasping, “No more air for me.” Like institutions, water or air can get unruly, but without them what would you drink or breathe?

The Monastic Sangha, even as the historically most durable institution on the planet, is not so exceptional in this regard. This is particularly because people frequently ordain with mixed intentions: In many Buddhist lands, for instance, there is a degree of economic security or educational opportunity consequent to becoming a monastic, or simply social status. As a result there will often be

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47 This particular passage is the beginning of the origin story for the rule on “the corrupting of families.”

monastics with poor discipline, little interest in spiritual attainment and little capacity for inspiring the laity or sustaining the Sasana, bloating the local sanghas, living alongside those sincere and inevitably more adept monastics of pure and noble intention. The Vinaya provides little in the way of mechanisms for shedding wayward monastics, except in the most egregious cases, rather favoring eventual reform. Fortunately, there are other factors in the design of the monastic Sangha that limit such degeneration and probably underlie the durability of the Sangha.

First, since the Sangha has no central control and little hierarchy, less than exemplary behavior is always localized.

Second, the arousing of faith in the faithless and the increase of the faithful is likely to be the only elements of the Sangha's mission to be seriously compromised by wayward monks. The reason is that pure monks will tend to form an adept clique within the Sangha to carry on the remaining functions much as they would in a less bloated sangha. They will tend to become Noble Ones and will be accorded the most influence within and outside of the Sangha.

Third, there is a kind of thermostat that provides a check on, and means of recovery from, local degeneration: With a decrease in purity comes a decrease in faithfulness. With a decrease in faithfulness, comes a decrease in support for monastics. With decreased support, negligent monks of mixed intentions leave the Sangha or fail to enter it in the first place, while the more committed adepts remain in the Sangha undaunted. With the increased purity of the Sangha comes an increase in faithfulness ..., and so on.

In spite of inevitable weaknesses inherent in all institutions, the Buddha designed the institution with the best track record ever to date, the one that has endured the longest, and the one most critical to the well-being of the Sasana. The Buddhist monastic life is not always exemplary, but where it is upheld by the individual monk or the local sangha, it provides the optimal opportunity for progress on the Path.

### ***The Shape of the Lay Community***

There is less to say about the lay community from the perspective of early Buddhist scripture than about the monastic, since the Buddha did not organize the former. Rather the lay community is shaped by the presence of the two overlapping Sanghas in their midst, the Noble Ones and the monastics, who root their lives entirely in the soil of the Sasana. The Third Gem has a distinct

advantage over Gem One and Gem Two: an immediate and living presence. It ennobles the community to have monks, nuns and particularly Noble Ones in its midst.

The Noble Ones in particular are the most qualified teachers, the adepts, the most admirable friends who impart the Dharma both verbally and bodily, through explanation and by example. What they explain is very deep, very sophisticated and very difficult to grasp without equally deep practice. Sangha members individually gain reputations for their teaching or humanitarian work, for their inspiring meditation practice or for their scrupulous observance of monastic discipline.

Relatively few in the general population will have the time, energy or inclination to enter the Dharma deeply, what with fields to plow, goods to bargain for and children to raise. Indeed the understanding of the typical lay Buddhist has generally been very limited or erroneous. This is much the same with science: Relatively few people develop deep scientific knowledge: Armchair scientists wonder how rocket ships avoid bumping into all the orbits out there and why it is cold at the North Pole, the place closest to the sun. It has generally been the case that the laity is also much more concerned than monastics with the more excessive devotional practices. The Buddha, for instance, before his death when asked by Ananda what to do with his body, replied that it was no concern for the monks,

“For there are, wise Khattiyas, Brahmins and householders who are devoted to the Tathagata: they will render take care of the funeral.”<sup>48</sup>

Nonetheless, the member of the Buddhist community benefits from living in a culture of Awakening. The Buddha stated that the Dharma is not held in a tight fist; there is nothing esoteric in the teachings; they are open to all. As the laity opens its heart to the Third Gem and rubs shoulders with individual adepts, the teachings flow freely to them. The lay Buddhist benefits as adepts clarify and correct her views upon request, or pro-actively when greed, hate or delusion arise in her heart. Noble Ones are great to have around. If the lay devotee should find the time, energy and aspiration to go deeply, to begin to ascend the stem that reaches toward Awakening, there are kind and friendly helping hands available to explain the meaning of the Buddha's life and Awakening in detail and to clarify step by step the highly sophisticated teachings to lead the instructling toward and up the Path toward Awakening. With work the lay devotee can become quite adept herself and will likely, at that point, avail herself of the ever-present opportunity to join the Sangha in order to pursue the

48 *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16, Walshe (1996), p. 264. The *khattiyas* are the warrior/ruling class.

Path more fully, with the full and enthusiastic support of her generous neighbors.

Most immediately, the lay Buddhist witnesses in the Sangha constant breathing examples of what it is to live a Buddhist life. Its members are walking science experiments, demonstrating with every word and gesture what happens when one lets go, when one renounces everything that common sense says is necessary for felicity, for fun, for fulfillment: the empirical result is that either one quits or one ends up being among the most joyfully contented people in the village! The Noble Ones serve as a reality check for folk people as they make life's decisions, and a subversively and radically civilizing influence on the whole community.

The wholesome practice of veneration extends particularly easily to the living Gem and dovetails with the project of satisfying their material needs, which becomes an expression of both veneration and affection. The needs of the monastics are modest but constant. This puts the devout layperson right at the center of the wholesome practice of generosity, which becomes the lifeblood of the Buddhist community as it gives rise to an economy of gifts grown from monastic roots. Through their support of the Sangha as well as the rest of the Buddhist community, lay Buddhists develop the joyful feeling of doing their share for the Sasana, of participating fully in bringing the civilizing influence of the Noble Ones into the community and in upholding the Sasana to preserve Buddhism in its pristine purity for future generations.

The relationship between the Sangha and lay community is one of complementary roles in partnership. The Sangha upholds the teachings, spins off Noble Ones and thereby serves the community. The Noble Ones are the soil that carries not only the nourishment of water and mineral but ensures that the entire practice, roots, leaves, stem and blossom, will not be carried away by the wind in the years to come. The community supports the Sangha's material needs. Generosity on both sides binds the two together. It is important to recognize that there is little here in the way of hierarchy. What authority the Sangha holds arises from its own attainments, teachings and conduct. The Sangha has no coercive power beyond the layperson's willingness to accept advice or admonition or to view the monastic as a role model. The laity actually has more direct coercive power: Dissatisfaction with the Monastic Sangha can turn into withdrawal of support, a constant external check on the purity of the institutional Sangha.

Because generosity is such a joyful experience, monastery/community

centers<sup>49</sup> can be very happy places in which to practice fundamental Buddhist values, along with selfless veneration. Monastery/community centers encourage community involvement, demand no sophisticated knowledge of Dharma and provide a wholesome environment into which to bring the kids. They also open into an opportunity to rub shoulders with Noble Ones, to benefit from their wisdom and advice and to begin to learn and practice the Path to Awakening.

## **Conclusions**

A culture of Awakening is one that offers the optimal support and encouragement to those who aspire to Awakening and that secures the optimal benefit from the Dharma for future happiness and virtue of those of more modest aspiration. It represents an oasis of sanity in a world otherwise perpetually spinning crazily out of kilter, out of control. The Buddha-Sasana provides the infrastructure for a culture of Awakening. I have described that infrastructure in these first three chapters, grounding it in the Buddha's Dhamma-Vinaya and highlighting the organic functionality of its various interrelated elements in supporting its purpose. I will maintain in the remainder of this book that the flower of the Sasana has remained surprisingly faithful to the form described here, from the time the Buddha first breathed life into it, through its hundred-generation long history, and up to the present day.

In brief, the Buddha-Sasana works in three ways. First, the Refuges establish Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as primary sources of wisdom and inspiration. This leans us all toward Dharma even as we may also individually come under the many often unwholesome influences alive in any culture. Second, the community provides opportunities for optimal practice for those of highest aspiration. As a result, Noble Ones walk among us and we are all ennobled by their inspiration. Third, the presence of an adept community of Noble Ones, trainees and scholars ensures the preservation and propagation of an authentic Dharma.

What I have provided so far is a synchronic account of the Buddha-Sasana. I intend in the remaining chapters to look at the dynamics of the Buddha-Sasana: its historical evolution, its social and demographic variation, its modern manifestations (particularly in the West), and how Buddhism has proven so resilient yet so darn tolerant of cultural influences.

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49 ... like the one I am very fortunate to live in ...

## Chapter 5

# The History of the Sasana

One day, the Buddha sneezed.<sup>50</sup> The monks present called out,  
“Bless you!”

This was a conventional idiom in Buddha's India and the Buddha's response should have been,

“Bless you too.”

But instead he posed a question, something like,

“Wait a minute. Do you think that saying that will influence my future well-being?”

The monks replied, “Well, no, actually.”

“Then you are not to say it!”

And thereby a new rule circulated that monks were expected to follow. However, lay people began to complain about how unmannerly all the monks had suddenly become.

“I blessed a perfectly good monk who sneezed and he didn't even bless me back!”

“How rude! The impudent cad.”

When this was reported back to the Buddha he rescinded the rule that he had earlier proclaimed.

“Monks, householders need blessings. When someone says, 'Bless you', I permit you to answer, 'Bless you too'.”

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<sup>50</sup> This retelling is based on an account in *Vinaya Cullavagga V*, Horner (2001), p. 195.

This little story is indicative of the Buddha's willingness to adapt to druthers. The Buddha gave us a Buddhism that would be subject to and tolerate embellishment. Perhaps *this* is part of the reason that it gained a place as the first world religion as it simply passed peacefully from one land to another.

Moreover, Buddhism after the Buddha's death was open to evolution because it lacked a central authority to impose orthodoxy or orthopraxis, with the integrity of the Dharma entrusted independently to each local monastic sangha. It was open to evolution because its Great Standards (*mahāpadesa*) made the Dharma effectively extensible on functional grounds. It was susceptible to local mutation because the Buddha asked that the texts be taught in local vernaculars rather than more widely understood *lingua francas*.<sup>51</sup> It was open to evolution when it encountered selective pressures in the many cultures into which it spread. It was also open to evolution as democratizing pressures countered its establishment of a singular attainment as the benchmark for salvation. It was also open to evolution as monastic scholars tended to over-elaborate the Buddha's thought in different sometimes highly speculative ways. And indeed the flower of Buddhism would change with time and place, sometimes developing wider leaves or deeper roots, sometimes developing a shorter stem or requiring more sun or less water, but in in most places still recognizable as the same flower, one that still produced from time to time a dazzling blossom and propagated itself still further.

Let's get historical. Just as organisms change from generation to generation, the flower of the Sasana has changed to produce many varieties, and continues to change. The metaphor here is *genetic*. We can talk of three kinds of processes that have together created the diversity of today's Sasana: *propagation*, the process whereby any particular Buddhist tradition extends itself into new regions or populations; *evolution*, the mutative process of change, typically adaptation through natural selection to regional or cultural preferences; and *cross-fertilization*, the process of borrowing traits from one tradition (Buddhist or non-Buddhist) into a distinct Buddhist tradition. Most instructive for consideration are the resilience and malleability of the Sasana, where does it say firm and where does it change?

### ***Propagation.***

As Buddhism spread geographically through India and into neighboring lands it began differentiating itself along geographical lines, in small ways, much as

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51 *Vinaya Cullavagga V*, Horner (2001), p. 193-4.

linguistic dialects tend to distinguish themselves over time until eventually they will become mutually unintelligible, yet functionally similar languages. There also seems to have been an occasional schism, or a split in a local sangha whereby one group of monks went off in a huff, over issues of Dharma or Vinaya or perhaps personalities, and would no longer deal with the remaining monks, probably in the end with much the same result as geographical dispersion.<sup>52</sup> The result was a growing set of sects – at one point measured at eighteen in number – of distinct identity, generally with a distinct homeland but at the same time with considerable geographical overlap, especially in the cities. With time, each sect committed its scriptures to palm leaf, generally in its local vernacular.

For instance, the *Mahāsāṃghika* were based largely to the east in Magadha. They are associated with the Second Council, roughly one hundred years after the Buddha in Vaiśālī in the land of the Vijjians, as one party in a dispute that resulted in a schism in the Sangha over issues of *Vinaya*. The territory of the Sthaviravada (precursor of the Theravada) centered around Avanti in western India. Eventually this sect would expand to the south and through missionaries would reach the Island of Ceylon, where it survives to this day and from where it would spread into Southeast Asia. Pali, in which Theravada scriptures are preserved, may have been the language of Avanti. The Dharmaguptaka sect arose in the Greek kingdom of Gandhara. It was known for its practice of pagoda worship and its Vinaya even contains an extended set of regulation for behavior around pagodas. Its scriptures were recorded in Gandhari and Sanskrit.<sup>53</sup> Its early territorial expansion was unmatched as it spread into Central Asia and along the Silk Road, and was probably the first sect to reach China. Its Vinaya is still in use throughout East Asia.<sup>54</sup>

The propagation of the Sasana was reportedly given its first really big boost through the very early missionary zeal of Emperor Ashoka (304–232 BCE),<sup>55</sup> who sent missions to various places within and beyond his empire – to Sri Lanka, to Kashmir, to Persia and as far as the Mediterranean. With time Buddhism spread westward across what is now northern Pakistan and Afghanistan into Persia and Central Asia, southward and eastward through Southeast Asia and island-hopping as far as Java. From Central Asia it spread in both directions along the Silk Road, eastward into China in the first century CE, from whence with time it would gain the bulk of its adherents. There is

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52 See, for instance, Dutt 1978.

53 Gandhari fragments, incidentally, are the oldest known surviving Buddhist manuscripts, dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE.

54 Warder (2000), p. 278, 280.

55 Strong, 1983.

some tenuous speculation of the influence of the Buddha-Sasana on early Christianity at the far western end of the Silk Road. In the eighth century Buddhism became firmly established in Tibet through Kashmir. In recent years the Sasana has spread over much of the world outside Asia from almost every sect through Asian diaspora. The growth in literacy and communications in recent times has also sometimes allowed Buddhism to precede qualified sandals-on-the-ground Buddhist teachers in extending the influence of Buddhist philosophy and life into uncharted lands.

The great variety of people from the most diverse regions traveling hither and fro along the Silk Road and producing an ample trickle of Buddhists at the eastern end, eventually made China heir to almost every sect or later movement and philosophical school of Buddhism active in India or elsewhere, such that the early sects no longer retained their individual identities except to inject their own characteristic scriptural teachings into the Chinese mix. As history marches on, the West is now experiencing a repeat of this process as virtually every form of Buddhism found in Asia is adding its characteristic heritage to the Western mix.

Buddhism eventually largely died out in India, in the regions west of India and in Indonesia and Malaysia, where it has been largely supplanted by Islam and Hinduism. The only early (that is, pre-Mahayana) sect that has retained its early identity is the Theravada of Southern Asia.

## ***Evolution***

A combination of variation and natural selection has produced over many centuries many established varieties of Buddhism. Variation arises at other times by adopting alternative understandings – at worst erroneous interpretations of traditional teachings, and at best insightful products of great minds – able to shape a Buddhism more effective in a regional culture, or to streamline certain practices or understandings. Evolution is typically driven by the pressures of human nature, of local cultural and environmental factors and occasionally of external intervention, such as governmental decrees.

Early differences in interpretation are found in the varying codifications of a formalization of Buddhist philosophy called the *Abhidharma* (Sanskrit, or *Abhidhamma* in Pali, meaning higher teaching), which developed rather independently but in parallel in many of the early sects and took their final forms after the time of Emperor Ashoka. The *Abhidharma* projects sometimes became highly speculative and other early sects abstained from an *Abhidharma* project altogether, including a Sautrantika (Sutta Only) sect that

branched off of the Sarvastivada. This gave rise to differing ontological stances on ultimate existence. The Theravada *Abhidhamma* project continued long after the canonical *Abhidhamma* was closed. Difference in *Abhidharma* contributed to the disagreements among various sects.

Starting in the first century BCE or the first century CE and continuing for a few centuries thereafter, monks in India and later in Central Asia began composing texts that were most often based on the model of the early discourses, but that were generally longer and mythically fortified. Examples were the apocryphal *Prajnaparamita Sutras*, *Lotus Sutra*, *Flower Ornament Sutra* and so on. This was the beginning of the *Mahayana* movement, whose scriptures echoed a number of common doctrinal themes. As if this were not enough, the first millennium CE in northern India seems also to have been an era of very liberal thinking, of free Buddhist inquiry, the era of the great scholar-monks, Nagarjuna, Shantideva, Vasubandhu, and others, and the era of the great Buddhist monastic universities where they lived, studied and taught, most famously Nalanda, which brought thousands of students and teachers together in one place or another to discuss and debate the whole spectrum of Buddhist and non-Buddhist thought, both orthodox and modern. I picture this era as much like what developed much later in the Western post-Enlightenment intellectual milieu or in beatnik coffee shops of the 1950's, in which almost any philosophical proposition was worthy of discussion or debate.

In China, the Sasana was suddenly propelled into a radically different culture that placed new selective evolutionary pressures on it, much as if flower seeds were propagated by wind or defecating birds to a region of distinctive conditions of wind, soil or water, or, for that matter, if a flock of penguins were to come into contact with a colony of humans for many generations: the tradition either evolves or perishes. With much colder weather, clothing and housing, the basic requisites of monks, would have to be more substantial. This was a land whose cultural life was largely rooted in Confucianism and Taoism, which included a very strong ethical code governing every aspect of life, from the behavior of the emperor to familial relations, which had a basis of high literacy and intellectual astuteness, and which had a particular appreciation for the cycles and beauty of nature. Here the family was valued highly and there was no previous tradition of wandering mendicants. The Chinese way of thinking has been called synthetic where the Indian is analytic. The emperors were divine. There was much more social mobility than in India; a farmer's son could, through passing government examinations, become employed in the government system and be eventually promoted to become a minister to the emperor.

China was culturally about as far from India as possible, and so in China the Sasana evolved under quite novel influences. First, the Chinese popularized those scriptures and philosophical treatises appearing at the mouth of the Silk Road that most appealed to Chinese tastes, giving Chinese Buddhism a distinctive quality through a first round of natural selection. For instance, the long obscure Pure Land Sutras from India seem to have gone viral in China. China developed its own schools and ordination lineages, such as *Ch'an* and *T'ien Tai* (*Zen* and *Tendai* in Japan), each generally on the basis of a particular transmitted Mahayana scripture. Then China's own indigenous scriptural corpus developed, such as the rather unique poetry and koan collections found in the Zen school that bear a much clearer affinity to Taoist literature than to anything found in Indian Buddhism.

We will have occasion to look at some of these Chinese adaptations as our discussion progresses. Those of us in the West who are trying to understand the ongoing historical process of assimilating Buddhism into the Land of the Fork, do well to consider the perhaps even more monumental ancient passage of Buddhism from India to the Land of the Chopstick. The forces at work in both transitions make it clear that the Sasana, the living Dharma, is more than a systematic association of like-minded people; it is a *culture*, a system of values, symbols, conceptualizations, behaviors and taboos and rites that define a people.<sup>56</sup> As such the entry of Buddhism into an alien culture, even when welcomed into that culture, can be a dramatic event, a clash of cultures requiring cultural realignment on both sides as Buddhism settles into its new home, where Buddhism seems repeatedly to prove itself a major civilizing force, even while Buddhism is also bent and reshaped by the local folk culture.

### ***Cross-fertilization***

Innovations once introduced into individual traditions often spread laterally from one tradition to another, much as a dance craze or a disease, such as the Jitterbug, the Macarena or the Spanish flu, readily jumps over national borders. The *Jataka* tales, stories of the previous lives of the Buddha, originated (with a couple of exceptions) in the centuries after the Buddha, at least partially under the cross-breeding influence of non-Buddhist traditions, walzing through Buddhist traditions so widely that they can be regarded as part of the common heritage of all of Buddhism. The parallel development of various *Abhidharmas* are indicative of a form of cross-fertilization, a kind of Buddhist Foxtrot, that also encompassed schools of Brahmanism, particularly by the second century BCE the highly categorial *Vaiśeṣika* school, and

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56 Geertz (1993) looks at religions as cultural systems.

probably came under the influence of the early Indian grammarians.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, the Mahayana Jitterbug spread readily from pre-Mahayana sect to another, as scholars now agree. As a result, within a single Sarvastivada or even early Theravada monastery some monks would take to this new craze and others would not. This apparently entailed little discord, since the *Vinaya*, historically much less susceptible to the effects of cross-fertilization or evolution than the Dharma, tended to ensure harmonious relations within sanghas. However, the incipient craze may have been nipped in the bud in Sri Lanka through the intervention of King Voharikatissa in the early third century.<sup>58</sup> But throughout much of the Buddhist world this was a craze that was here to stay and gradually some devotees began to self-identify as Mahayanists, even though a self-identified Mahayana monastery would not exist in India until relatively late, and the earliest inscriptions that make use of the word “Mahayana” date from the sixth century CE.<sup>59</sup>

With the Mahayana movement and with the rise of scholarship at large monastic institutions, Sanskrit by default became the common language of Buddhism in northern India in support of a broader dissemination and livelier interchange of ideas. Meanwhile the southern lands of Sri Lanka and adjacent areas of Southern India, somewhat isolated removed from this rich intellectual world of Northern India geographically and linguistically, had fewer opportunities for cross-fertilization.<sup>60</sup>

As China seems to have fallen heir much of what was published in Northern India in the first millennium CE, the Chinese took a particular selective interest in the Mahayana teachings and much of the philosophical thought that continued to flow out of the Indian universities. Due to the tenuous communication between India and China, Chinese Buddhists, anxious to gain access to additional Buddhist texts, dispatched a series of pilgrims, fifty-four that we know about between the third and the eleventh century, to make the perilous journey over the Silk Road back into India to learn Indian languages, to acquire texts and to have a look around.<sup>61</sup> In China major translation projects were set up to make these texts accessible, often headed by Indian or Central Asian scholar-monks who had ventured into Chinese territory.

In eclectic China, as elsewhere, mutual cross-pollination resulted in various

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57 Ronkin (2011), p. 50.

58 Williams (2008), p. 5.

59 Williams (2008), p. 29.

60 Gombrich (2006), p. 19, attributes the archaic nature of Theravada Buddhism to this isolation.

61 Foltz (2010), pp. 53-56.

hybrids of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, with Confucianism dictating ethical norms, with Taoism harmonizing and naturalizing and with Buddhism working on mental cultivation. Ch'an/Zen, for instance, exhibits all three influences. From China a Sinicized Buddhism would penetrate the remaining chopstick-wielding world: Korea, Japan and Vietnam.

What of the fragile flower that once thrived on the slopes of the lush Ganges Valley in ancient times? How have its descendants fared in the thin soil on the Steppes of Central Asia? Have they endured the harsh winters of northern China or Mongolia? Do they still blossom as brightly? Or has the whirlwind of Buddhist history scattered their petals and uprooted them? Has the Sasana survived in its full integrity and authenticity?

### ***The History of the Buddha Gem***

Among the most distinct changes in the Sasana, as the flower of the Sasana evolved from its early stages, was an increased requirement for sunlight, an enhancement of the first Gem and Refuge. The attitude toward the Buddha and the very concept of the Buddha experienced embellishment and elaboration in almost all of Asia, and would in turn trigger further doctrinal changes. I speculate that the primary driving force was the seemingly universal human proclivity of latching onto objects of veneration and making them bigger than life, as is found in most of the world's religions and in modern celebrity worship. Although the Buddha Gem grew, its basic function remained the same.

We have seen that the Buddha endorsed, during his life, veneration of himself, of his qualities, of the example of his life and Awakening and of his teachings. The function of such veneration is inspiration, the opening of hearts to his influence. The practice of veneration of the Buddha was defined in terms of quite modest conventional cultural means of respect, through recitation of the qualities of the Buddha, through pilgrimage to the four sites associated with his life, through the distribution of his relics among various lay communities for future veneration.

The Buddha recognized that he had attained rare qualities and put himself forward as someone to emulate, not as a deity or a messenger of God, but as an Awakened human. To appreciate his clarity about this, it should be borne in mind that in India people rather casually attributed divinity to that which is venerated: to brahmins, to famous ascetics, to cows, sometimes to trees and to

the fires in people's hearths,<sup>62</sup> but the Buddha never claimed this honor for himself. Nonetheless he would frequently have been naïvely regarded in his culture as divine during his life and have been accorded the supernatural powers that are, in fact, mentioned in the early discourses, powers like jumping up and touching the sun.<sup>63</sup>

The physical mainstay of veneration from the earliest days is *anjali*, a ubiquitous expression of respect or greeting in Indian culture often taking the form of prostrations, applied from earliest times to venerate the living Buddha and also the Sangha. Remarkably, this Indian gesture was subsequently carried into every land I am aware of in which Buddhism has taken root. No culture seems to have chosen either to abandon it according to local custom, nor to substitute for it an indigenous expression, such as a wave, a salute, a nod or a hearty hand clasp. Its adoption in Christian prayer speaks faintly of some not yet fully understood instance of ancient cross-breeding in distant lands.<sup>64</sup>

An early enhancement of this practice of veneration concerns the burial mounds (*stupas*), used to inter the Buddha's relics after his death and implicitly authorized, as we saw in Chapter 3, for the laity before his death. These became a primary symbol of the Buddha and were venerated as such in the early centuries and became a particular hallmark of the Dharmaguptaka sect, to the extent of infiltration into monastic practice: That sect's monastic code includes rules for proper behavior around *stupas*. This practice was further encouraged by Emperor Ashoka when he reportedly redistributed the original relics to thousands of locations throughout his empire. Stupas of increasingly imposing design and size were constructed, sometimes even by embedding an older *stupa* within a newer, to produce the *cetiya*s of South Asia and eventually the pagodas of East Asia. Along with the proliferation of *stupas* came an endorsed means of increasing the availability of relics through creating replicas that "count as" genuine relics of the Buddha, and of supplementing these with relics of conveniently deceased *arahants*.

Starting in the first century BCE, statuary representations of the Buddha in South Asia, but with possibly Greek roots, gave a more personal and portable object toward which to direct one's veneration for the First Gem. Such statues are striking in their aura of inspiring calm, leading one to experience what it

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62 Williams, 2008, p.174

63 People in ancient India, not possessed of a modern understanding of what jumping up and touching the sun would entail, seem to have thought this would be fun.

64 Gruber and Kersten (1995) speculate on the Buddhist-Christian connection with some compelling but sometimes overstated evidence. In any case the Christian prayer mudra is apparently not of Jewish origin.

might have been like to sit in the presence of the living Buddha. As if personally to enact befriending the Buddha, adherents began to make offerings to these statues of light, water, incense, flowers and/or food, then to bow to such statues, a practice that would ruffle the feathers of early European explorers to no end, who would see in it idol worship of graven images pure and simple. A further step in the long process of elaboration was reached in the actual attribution of miraculous properties, such as bringing protection or good fortune, to the Buddha statue, to the *stupa*/pagoda or to the relics. It is common among Burmese Buddhists today, for instance, to attribute such properties to the “power of the Buddha” that inheres in such an object once it is properly consecrated by monks so as to “count as” the Buddha.

Beginning apparently in the early Mahasanghika sect, then in the Sarvastivadin sect and taking off among the Mahayanists, the Buddha himself became larger than life. The Jataka stories from the centuries after the death of the Buddha traced his previous lives as a *bodhisattva*, one who has vowed to become a buddha in a future life. The view arose of the Buddha living out a prearranged mission on earth, through an early vow to someday become a buddha. It was said that he was born in his final life with the marks of a great man, such as webbed toes and fingers, and that he was in fact stepping into the footprints of buddhas who preceded him, who realized the same things and who taught the same Dharma.

In an influential Mahayana sutra the Buddha is presented as a cosmic being who had come to earth as a kind of cosmic ruse to instruct mankind in the form of a man:

“In all the worlds the heavenly and human beings and asuras all believe that the present Shakyamuni Buddha, after leaving the palace of the Shakyas, seated himself in the place of practice not far from the city of Gaya and there attained anuttara-samyak-sambodhi [complete perfect Awakening]. But good men, it has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood.”<sup>65</sup>

In fact, he has been teaching and training disciples, *bodhisattvas*, for many eons and continues doing so presently, only pretending to be born and die as a human for a brief period.<sup>66</sup> The discerning reader will have surmised that the person of the Buddha is becoming step by step more exalted.

With his new level of exaltation came a greater level of Awakening, now

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65 Kato, et al. (1975), Chapter 16.

66 Kato, et al. (1975), Chapter 15.

qualitatively different from that of the mere *arahants*. In the Mahayana movement *bodhisattvas* became those who like the Buddha in his previous lives aspired to buddhahood rather than to mere arahantship. Such *bodhisattvas* began to appear and sometimes reappear as major characters in the Mahayana sutras, each typically embodying one particular outstanding character trait or another, for instance, Avalokiteshvara of many arms to represent compassion, Manjushri wielding a sword to cut through delusion to represent wisdom, Samantabhadra atop his multitusked elephant to representing virtuous action, and Maitreya with an appointment to become the *next* Buddha on earth. The Buddha now gained companions with whom to share altars and pagodas; sometimes these companions even displaced him in the zeal of adherents. In China Avalokiteshvara became Guan Yin, a female figure, and Maitreya was identified with an historical chubby monk and became the Happy Buddha (-to-be). In Tibet, Avalokiteshvara came to be regarded as the person of the Dalai Lama, returning life after life.

Many buddhas were envisioned of similar disposition to ours, dispersed over many realms throughout the universe. Once the Shakyamuni Buddha became disassociated from his human embodiment, then it seemed that one exalted buddha could pretty much be swapped with another. In Chinese Pure Land the role of Shakyamuni was largely assumed by Amitabha Buddha, the chief resident of a non-earthly realm (the Pure Land), who makes space for those on earth who aspire to join him in their next life. Meanwhile back on earth, monks were apparently living rightly because the world did not lack for Awakened ones, but in the Mahayana lands these were often referred to as buddhas in their own right rather than simply as *arahants*.

It should be noted that although veneration of the Buddha Gem took on radical new forms, some of which are capable, for various reasons, of raising skeptical modern eyebrows two by two, the original function of this veneration seems seldom to have been violated, and may often have been enhanced. The function of such veneration is inspiration, the opening of hearts to the influence of the Buddha (or a reasonable surrogate).

### ***The History of the Dharma Gem***

The Buddha's greatest accomplishment, aside from Awakening, is the exposition of the Dharma. The function of veneration of the Dharma is likewise inspiration, the opening of hearts to its influence. Perhaps the most complete way to honor the Dharma, available to all from the earliest days, is to actually study, practice and live according to Dharma. In the earliest days oral

recitation and memorization of a vast scriptural corpus was also indicative of reverence for the Dharma, even while distributing the memorization effort communally over many monks or monasteries, often each specializing in a certain tract. Remnants of this practice are found to this day in the daily devotions of millions of adherents, even after written language has rendered this inefficient purely as means of preservation. In Burma and other lands the practice of memorization is highly valued to this day and many monastics can recite large numbers of scriptures from memory.

Veneration of the Dharma can carry over to the language in which it is preserved. In particular, the Theravadins early on decided to preserve the canonical literature in Pali, the Indic language in which it had arrived in Sri Lanka and which, it was assumed, by the time of the Commentaries, must have been the original language of the Buddha, while elsewhere the equivalent literature was largely translated into local vernaculars. Accordingly, the status of Pali grew over the centuries such that it became in the minds of adherents the original or most perfect human language, and the language spoken by all buddhas of every era. In East Asia, *dhāraṇīs*, certain short texts assumed to have magical or protective qualities, have been preserved over the centuries in original Indic languages transliterated into Chinese characters to capture the sounds but not the meanings of the texts.

A remarkable development within Buddhism is the gradual augmentation, and sometimes complete supplanting, of the scriptural corpus in virtually every tradition. Some of these later texts are apocryphal, that is, they purport to be early texts spoken by the Buddha, this claim made either in the text themselves or in subsequent tradition. This is the case in the Theravada *Abhidhamma* and for many Mahayana sutras. Often an origin story has survived alongside newer texts that clarified for an earlier audience why no one seemed to have heard of these texts from the beginning. Typically these involved preservation by deities, dragons or simply concealment in caves for later rediscovery. Characteristically, the Theravada *Abhidharma* was delivered by the Buddha in a heavenly realm. The great philosopher-monk Nagarjuna was purported to have special access to ancient secret documents preserved underwater by dragons (*nāgas*) that formed the basis of his system of thought.

The variety of the vast scriptural corpus to which the Chinese were heir must have bewildered the early Buddhists there, who would have had little notion of what was early and what was later. As a result distinct schools formed, each giving allegiance to a favorite sutra. Of the four major schools in Tang China, the foundational scripture of the Hua Yen School was the voluminous *Flower Ornament Sutra*, that of the T'ien Tai School was the *Lotus Sutra*, that of the Ching T'u (Pure Land) School was the *Amitabha Sutra*. The Ch'an (Japanese,

Zen) school couldn't make up its mind, apparently vacillating initially between the *Lankavatara Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*, then declaring itself “a transmission beyond words and letters.” In this way, veneration of the Dharma began in some schools to mean veneration of a specific text. Particularly prominent in this regard has been the *Lotus Sutra* which claims in the text itself to be original, and which offers little in the way of practice aside from recitation and transcription of the text. Within this text we find the Buddha proclaiming,

“... after the extinction of the Tathagata, if there be any people who hear even a single verse or a single word of the Wonderful Law-Flower Sutra, and by a single thought delight in it, I also predict for them Perfect Enlightenment. Again, let there be any who receive and keep, read and recite, expound and copy even a single verse of the Wonderful Law-Flower Sutra, and look upon this sutra with reverence as if it were the Buddha, and make offering to it in various ways with flowers, perfume, garlands, sandal powder, perfumed unguents, incense for burning, silk canopies, banners, flags, garments, and music, as well as revere it with folded hands, ...”<sup>67</sup>

These devotional practices around the *Lotus Sutra* entered T'ien Tai Buddhism in China and eventually many of its offshoots in Japan, for instance, in the recitation of the name of the *Lotus Sutra* in Nichiren Buddhism, including modern Soka Gakkai.

As with the the evolution of the Buddha Gem, the Dharma Gem developed in ways that easily appear excessive to the sober Western mind. Nonetheless, the development seems always to have maintained the Sasana function of that Gem: veneration as a means of opening the heart to the influence of the Dharma. The authenticity of the content, that is, roughly the Path function, will be taken up momentarily.

### ***The History of the Sangha***

The Monastic Sangha has been historically the most stable and conservative element of all in Buddhism, in contrast to the wildly evolutionary tendencies of its sister Gems. The *Vinaya* in at least three recensions is still preserved and observed to this day in very archaic form throughout Buddhist Asia (except only marginally in Japan), unlike any particular sutta/sutra corpus. The *Patimokkha*, the master lists of monks' and nuns' precepts, is almost invariant. (The wayward Japanese case is instructive of the need for this particular kind

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67 Kato, et al. (1975), pp. 186-7.

of stability, as we will see in later chapters.)

Nonetheless, a common change in the monastic role, almost across the board, is the assumption by monastics of *priestly* functions largely expunged in early Buddhism, roughly mediation with deities or mysterious forces through the performance of rites and rituals. For instance, it is now very common for monastics to offer blessings, spells of protection, or good luck, to dispel ghosts or evil spirits or to work miracles in most traditions, even while the Buddha clearly intended that such things be left to the Brahmin priests. In the Theravada tradition, which is relatively more orthodox in this regard than most, monastics wield the eleven verses of protection (Pali, *parittas*), each one specific to offsetting its own type of unfortunate eventuality, from complications in childbirth, through fire, to snakebite. Such functions are only *largely* absent in early Buddhism, for the Buddha himself seems to have opened the door a crack to priestly functions, through which a crowd of human demands subsequently forced its way. Once, after a monk had died from snakebite, the Buddha explained that if this monk had developed kindness toward snakes the snake would not have bitten him, and the Buddha even recommended a verse for this purpose, which is recited to this day.<sup>68</sup>

China provided some direct challenges to monastic department of a different kind that required some adaptations. Monastics in India were home-leavers by definition, yet family and home enjoyed a solid place at the center of Chinese social values. The Monastic Sangha seems to have deflected social criticism on this point through the expedient of tracing *ordination lineages*, which publicly established an analogy between the layperson's parental relations and the monastic's relationship to his or her preceptor/teacher. Monastics were given the surname *Shi*, for *Sakyamuni*. With a little fudging and creative imagination, family trees reaching indeed all the way back to the Buddha were drafted, spanning far more generations than almost any indigenous Chinese family history. The Sangha, now organized by ordination lineage, became in effect a really big family, such that a new monk or nun not so much *left* family as *swapped* family, thus appeasing otherwise bruised Chinese familial sensitivities. Perhaps as a consequence of the emphasis on family lineage, monks seem to have developed closer relationships with their teachers, traveling less freely from monastery to monastery. Teachers began to protect their students from the influence of other teachers, introducing a strong tendency toward sectarianism at a local level.

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68 *Ahi Sutta*, AN 4.67. This particular case might, for all I know, have to do with snake psychology than with the manipulation of more mysterious forces. For instance, such an attitude of kindness seems to manifest a difference in one's relations with people, dogs and cats.

Furthermore, while monastics in India lived, as mandated in the *Vinaya*, on alms, beggars in China were pariahs. As a result, it seems, monks and nuns in the Land of the Chopstick became more self-sufficient than the *Vinaya* mandates, relying more on large donations than on small daily alms, often in the form of land grants through which monasteries could earn wealth through renting land to farmers. Often monastics became farmers themselves, forcing modifications of the otherwise cumbersome monastic robes or of their abandonment in certain situations in favor of monastically appropriate work clothing. On the other hand, as monastics became more self-sufficient, monastic discipline was actually tightened in other ways: monastics, now freer to choose their own diet, stopped eating meat altogether, and fifty-eight additional precepts were undertaken in a supplementary ordination, the Bodhisattva Precepts.<sup>69</sup>

The governance of the Monastic Sangha in India, as mandated in the *Vinaya*, had been designed as a consensual democracy operating at the monastery or regional level, with relative freedom from outside interference. The government in China seems habitually to have interfered in the governance of any nongovernmental organization, relegating it to a place in the authoritarian hierarchy. As monasteries became more integrated into this system, seniority within the Sangha seems to have become more pronounced, as reflected in the color, design or quality of the attire of senior monks. Similar changes in monastic governance under governmental influence have arisen in other lands as well.

Nonetheless, the monastic institution has remained remarkably archaic right up to the present day. Consider attire, as an exception that proves the rule. It might make rational sense for modern Buddhist monks to wear uniform modern clothing, for instance, saffron-colored double-breasted suits with sleeves and zippers, maybe tasteful epaulets with little Dharma wheels. Such modern attire would still retain the function of distinguishing monastics from laity or from the clergy of other faiths, and would in addition spare monastics the mortification of being millennia out-of-fashion. Although adaptations to attire have occurred, by necessity, in colder climates, the traditional robe has been retained in something like its original form everywhere, albeit sometimes only for use in formal contexts. The lack of central authority in the Sangha in most of the Buddhist world probably played a role in this conservatism, since a small local sangha would be disinclined to make such a change without coordination with many other sanghas, knowing that few in the broader community would understand what a locally adopted uniform would mean.

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69 Lok To (1998).

The Sangha has also almost everywhere retained the authority as the holder of the unblemished Dharma. However in a few instances that role has been extended to others. There have occasionally appeared outstanding lay teachers, for instance, in recent times, famed meditation teachers U Ba Khin, Dipa Ma and S.N. Goenka. In Tibet an academic degree conferred along with the title *geshe* created a new class of authorities. This degree is traditionally only conferred to monks, but a monk who disrobes continues to hold the degree, thereby becoming a lay *geshe*. Sometime *tulkus*, reborn teachers (*lamas*), chose not to enter the Sangha in their present life, yet retained the authority as *bodhisattvas* along with the rest of the merit they had earned in their previous lives as teachers and monks. In modern times academic degrees carry a certain degree of specialized authority, and in the West the preponderance of Buddhist teachers so far are non-monastics. In short, non-monastics do, in some traditions, enjoy recognition as Buddhist *adepts*.

At times the monastic Sangha has been the target of deliberate government interference, both well-intentioned and hostile. Sometimes a swing in the direction of diminished Sangha excellence has brought forth not only diminished alms offerings from a less faithful laity, but also the intervention of devout kings and other government authorities. This seems to have first happened under Emperor Ashoka, who was reported to have overseen the forced expulsion of many monastics in an effort to purify the Sangha, many of whom may have entered during a period of his own earlier perhaps all-too-enthusiastic support of the Sangha.<sup>70</sup> In the nineteenth century, King Mongkut of Siam, a former monk, despairing at the poor state of monastic discipline, initiated a reform of the Sangha to create the almost papal institutional alliance of Sangha and King found in Thailand today. The Sangha was subject to perhaps its greatest hostile interference in Japan at different points in its history. The result is that the Sangha there had been by the mid-twentieth century almost completely replaced by a priesthood, a non-renunciate clergy largely specializing in rites and rituals, even in the once strongly monastically oriented Zen school. This also affected Korea to a limited extent during Japanese colonial rule.<sup>71</sup>

Nonetheless, the Sangha has on balance remained the most stubbornly orthodox Gem historically, subject to relatively little embellishment. This is an essential quality to note, since the Sangha is, after all, the lynchpin of the

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70 This is the account provided in the classical *Mahavamsa*. See, for instance, Strong (1983), p. 23, Dutt (1978), p. 237.

71 Richard Jaffe's (2001) book *Neither Monk nor Layman* provides a gripping account of this history. We will also discuss the consequences of this development in the remaining chapters.

Sasana. In every case where it has evolved, it seems that some unsurmountable external contingency is involved, either a deeply held cultural trait (love of family), an environmental condition (weather), or a government mandate.

### ***The History of the Goal and of the Path***

We've noted an impressive historical shift in the contents of the scriptural corpus in almost every Buddhist tradition. The early *Abhidharmas* certainly arose very early in an attempt to catalog and systematize the Buddha's conceptual vocabulary. Beyond this each tended toward a speculative metaphysics that eventually shifted away from the Buddha's focus on epistemology and toward ontological issues.<sup>72</sup> in the end with little concern for empirical reality.<sup>73</sup> The canonical *Abhidharmas* varied in how far they carried this trend, the Sarvastivadin and its offshoot Vaibhāṣika sect going the furthest in its reification of experience. The Theravada *Abhidhamma* was much more modest, but the project deepened into the post-canonical commentarial period. It should be noted that the *Abhidharmas*, unlike most innovations, were certainly not driven by popular concerns (these are difficult texts), but by intellectual penchants of the scholarly monastics or most adept Buddhists. Insofar as they deviate from Early Buddhism they represented for the most part a distraction from the authentic Dhamma more than a contradiction of it, producing a chubbier Buddhism that retains its skeletal authenticity within. Nonetheless, this development is likely also responsible for much unnecessary early Buddhist sectarianism.

The Mahayana movement represented a displacement of most of the canonical corpora by new sutras as they came on line. Gombrich (1990) suggests that this was facilitated by the circumstance that Buddhist texts were now appearing commonly in hard-copy rather than oral form, which offered opportunities for new or obscure texts to “go viral,” in modern parlance (though “viral” here would describe, given the technology of the time, dissemination in a matter of centuries rather than of hours or days). Texts would not be so dependent as before on the editorial influence of the monastics who had preserved scriptures through communal recitation, and, as a result, the contents of such texts would have begun to reflect increasingly the practices and inclinations of the general folk population rather than strictly the interests of the most adept members.

The themes characteristic of the Mahayana included compassion, the

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72 Ronkin (2011), p. 4.

73 Warder (2000), p. 288.

bodhisattva ideal, an elevated notion of buddhahood, a rejection of the speculative excesses of the *Abhidharma* projects and the doctrine of emptiness. Moreover, the mythical *bodhisattvas* and the fantastic imagery associated therewith provided many with a good read. Although the early discourses of the Buddha were available in Chinese translation, in the Land of the Chopstick the study of the Mahayana sutras eclipsed that of the early discourses. Although the Mahayana sutras were new, and not early, that does not necessarily mean they were not, in our terms, authentic. Aside from those of popular appeal, many of them developed and clarified very sophisticated and subtle core themes introduced in early Buddhism with great skill.

The most dominant theme to characterize the Mahayana is the *bodhisattva* ideal. Early Buddhism embeds the life of the practitioner in a greater epic story, a path toward personal Awakening, toward becoming an *arahant*, a path that spans many lives of sincere practice. In the Mahayana the storyline took a bit different form: The Path now led toward becoming a *buddha*, conceived as a far more exalted state. Entering the path toward buddhahood one becomes a *bodhisattva*, which is what the Buddha is called in his previous lives as represented in the early Jataka stories. As a *bodhisattva* one's primary concern is the well-being of others and one works for the Awakening of others as much as for one's own Awakening.

The *bodhisattva* ideal probably helped make lay practice more respectful, given that the Buddha lived most of his previous human lives, according to the Jataka tales, as a layman, and yet was presumably making respectful progress toward buddhahood. Although the Mahayana appears more lay-oriented than the early Buddhist sects, this is not to say that Mahayana is a movement *against* monastic authority as many have suggested. First, monastics have almost always thrived in the Mahayana. Second, it is now widely agreed among scholars today that monastics, at least those sympathetic to lay modes of practice, were the driving force of the Mahayana and seemingly without exception composers of the Mahayana sutras.<sup>74</sup> Third, a shift in focus from adept or monastic concerns toward more folksy or lay concerns in the Mahayana, may reflect a shift in the means of preservation of texts – from monastic recitation to writing (with consequences for the kinds of texts that have survived from different eras) – as much as a shift in the contents of the body of understandings actually current in Buddhist communities during the different eras.

In any case, many of the Mahayana schools put more emphasis in their texts on common attainments than on the benchmark goal of Awakening. For the

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74 Williams (2008), pp. 21-7.

most part these have to do with merit making towards ensuring a felicitous rebirth or well-being in this life. Merit-making is already present in early Buddhism, but innovations allowed transferring merit to dead ancestors and – as emphasized in the bodhisattva ideal – and took to heart the care for the well-being of all living things.

Nonetheless, the singular goal of Awakening is rarely dismissed altogether in favor of a common attainment, but is rather at worst put aside as unattainable, either in practice or in principle. For instance, the hugely popular Pure Land movement is clearly oriented toward felicitous rebirth, in fact, into a particular heavenly realm (the Pure Land). It has, nonetheless, upheld the principle of Awakening through most of its history in allying itself, and sharing its monastics, with schools that are more clearly oriented toward Awakening, for instance in the common modern syncretism of Pure Land with Ch’an in Chinese temples. On the other hand, other movements, such as Nichiren Buddhism, assume we have entered a *degenerate age* (Japanese, mappo) in which Awakening is impossible in principle.<sup>75</sup>

While the benchmark goal of Awakening has generally held steady historically, the common attainments and the mechanisms whereby they are realized have proven much more elastic. The common attainment of rebirth in the Pure Land, for instance, is facilitated by the power of the vow of Amitabha, a Buddha who presides over the heavenly Pure Land and whose past reserve of merit is readily shared with those who exhibit sufficient devotion to Amitabha. This dependence on an external agent for salvation contrasts rather markedly with the Buddha’s early teachings. *Subitism*, the doctrine *sudden Awakening* might also be mentioned in this regard. Early Buddhism teaches a gradual Path of progress toward Awakening, step by step, with full attention toward all foundations and requisites. Sudden Awakening occurs quite spontaneously, often with little preparation, like a lightning bolt, during meditation.

### ***Has the Sasana Upheld the True Dharma?***

Trees once domesticated for their sweet, plump and nutritious fruit but long entrusted to nature, might eventually produce fruit scrawny, sour and barely digestible. Flowers once domesticated for their fragrance and brilliant blossoms but then allowed to grow wild where abundant water, sun and good soil are lacking, could be expected to evolve into more scraggly forms, perhaps soon no longer to represent flowering plants at all. If the plant metaphor recruited to understand propagation and variation in Buddhism is

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75 These matters will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

apt, one might expect the merciless process of natural selection likewise to degrade the pristine values, practices and understandings of Buddhism, once the Sasana has been let loose to grow wild in an arbitrary culture, for instance, in a culture that sees no virtue in renunciation or in which patience is denigrated and harmlessness regarded as impractical. What does this metaphor suggest about Buddhism's chance of survival in a capricious and often hostile folk-cultural environment?

Indeed, with all of the changes sweeping back and forth through Buddhism – the swapping out of old scriptures and swapping in of new, the expanding levels of devotion to a founder increasingly deified then sometimes displaced, the blending in of folk culture and folk religion, preoccupation with an elaborate mythology, priests running around blessing people – one might expect Buddhism variously to have morphed into paganism, witchcraft, devil worship, a force in the battle of Good vs. Evil, philosophical speculation or New Age sagecraft, and certainly not to be capable of upholding the integrity of the extremely sophisticated and therefore fragile understandings and remarkably high standards that otherwise characterize the teachings of the Buddha. The question for us is: How far has the Sasana evolved in the wild from its original intent? Far enough to lose its early functional authenticity?

What we discover in Buddhist history are, in fact, the following:

First, the Sasana is malleable. It has taken on new practices and understandings through cross-fertilization from new cultural influences, sometimes forming hybrids that might as well be classified as something like “Tantric Hinduism” or “Taoism” equally as well as “Buddhism.” The Sasana has likewise encouraged innovation from within. It seems quite willing to absorb the wacky along with the sublime.

Second, alongside its liberalism, the Sasana seems to have some very conservative or orthodox elements that rarely budge. In particular it has preserved the primary elements of the flower of the authentic early Sasana remarkably well in almost every tradition. These include Refuge in the Triple Gem and the distinguished role and mission of the monastic Sangha. It includes even certain small functional elements such as gestures of respect that one might easily expect to have preferred equivalences in new cultures.

Third, the benchmark goal of Awakening, or at least provisional attainments of mental development in the direction of Awakening, is repeatedly articulated in diverse traditions. Even traditions that have come largely to eschew practice toward the goal of Awakening in favor of a lesser common goal, tacitly recognize the ultimate significance of the benchmark goal. Moreover, many

diverse traditions claim to have produced a series of Awakened beings or at least of Noble Ones who have attained preliminary levels of Awakening. Although it is difficult to quantify these claims directly, it is reasonable to assume that the time and energy devoted towards the singular attainment would hardly have persisted over the centuries if these claims were not true.

Fourth, the Path of practice is nearly ubiquitously at hand, at least in broad outline. One can in every Buddhist land recognize each of the factors of the early Noble Eightfold Path, or at least a formulation of the primary three trainings of virtue, cultivation of mind and wisdom. However, these factors are often seen in highly innovative regional forms. Consider, for instance, how virtue and mindfulness practice get folded together in the ritualization of everyday conduct in Ch'an Buddhism. In any case, it is reasonable to assume that if a tradition is producing a series of Noble or Awakened Ones, the authenticity of its Path has been upheld.

Where does the remarkable resilience of the Sasana come from? How does an authentic Buddhism manage repeatedly to shine through the centuries of relentless evolution and through the miasma of extraneous and wayward fashion? To answer these questions we need to consider the dynamics of the Sasana in its social or cultural context. This will be the task of the next two chapters. This will also allow us to understand that authenticity resides not in strict adherence of all Buddhists to a particular understanding of Dharma as much as it resides in a healthy Sasana, in the preservation of a culture of Awakening.



## Chapter 6

# Folk Buddhism

Each weekend many people set out to conquer the mountain in the middle of the state park, a large and very mixed group of people of every age, state of health, type of footwear, size of backpack or picnic basket, degree of inebriation or caffeine fortification. The group that appears on any particular day will naturally spread itself out from the trail head just beyond the parking lot along the trails that weave and intersect throughout the park and that occasionally empty a weary hiker to the top of the mountain for the rather singular attainment of a final ascent up its rocky peak.

The strongest, healthiest, be-hiking-booted, light-backpacked, boldest, most persistent and most enterprising make the best progress. These are recognizable even in the parking lot: They generally drive all-terrain vehicles with bicycle racks, are slim and fit and carry high-tech water bottles. They are recognizable later as the ones walking in the opposite direction with bright and open faces, inspiring others with their retelling of mountaintop experiences. Some of them, but not all, have made that last climb up the abrupt final cliff.

In the middle range there is inevitably a mutually infatuated teenage couple that makes energetic progress in spurts, but keeps getting side-tracked and disappearing from the path and into the brush for periods of time. There are some chubby middle-aged people who huff and puff, sip frequently from canteens and eat sandwiches. And there are some relatively fit but ancient binocularized birdwatchers. These will return home with some sense of attainment, even if a common one.

Falling way back are parents and their young kids who “cannot walk another step,” a couple of people sitting on a rock drinking beer, an elderly gentleman watching fire ants devour his cane that he had to abandon upright after it sank into a soft spot in the ground, and an alluringly attired young lady who broke a heel on the first rock past the parking lot.

The Buddhist Path is defined with the bicycle racks and cutting-edge water bottles in mind and the rest of us try our best to keep up but then straggle to varying degrees. We do what we can, and often the accomplishments of the leaders and tales of panoramic views from lofty heights inspire us to try a bit harder. The field guides, trail maps and high-tech hiking boots are primarily designed with these young and fit scalers of peaks and surveyors of views in mind, though those assets that carry the famous Mahayana® logo are, they say, a bit more middle-group- and way-back-group-friendly.

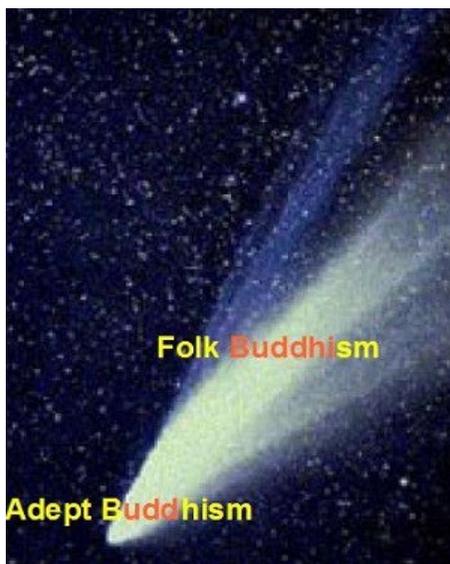
It is important to recognize that Buddhism is not a cookie-cutter enterprise. Most religions tend to be. That is, a typical religion defines a set of practices or standards that all adherents are equally responsible for upholding, producing rather standardized norms of behavior and understanding. These take a common attainment as a benchmark, and so will not put as much emphasis on the aspirations and needs of the hotshots and rocket scientists as Buddhism does. In fact, Buddhism *cannot* be a cookie-cutter enterprise because its benchmark is *extraordinarily* high: the singular attainment of perfect purity in action and thought, penetrating insight and imperturbable serenity, of Awakening. Those adepts of highest attainment understand and live something extremely sophisticated and rare, beyond the reach of the typical among us.

The other side of the story is that straggling is quite permissible in Buddhism. Nobody requires that we undertake five precepts, least of all God; it is our choice. No one requires that we drop anything into alms bowls, nor that we attend Dharma talks, nor that we cultivate the mind; we choose to, individually or as families. Buddhism provides choices at every level, hopefully with the support and advice provided through our communities, to make these with due deliberation on the basis of Buddhist wisdom. We Buddhists spread ourselves out on the Path based on our choices, on our determination and on our aptitude. But the stragglers can always rely on adepts for guidance and encouragement, for the scalers of peaks inspire us all in a wholesome direction.

### ***Adept Buddhism and Folk Buddhism***

Let's get sociological. I think we can gain a better feel for the dynamics of the living Dharma, for the functioning of the various parts of the Sasana, from a demographic perspective. This begins with the simple truism that attainment and understanding, interest and commitment, time and energy, differ significantly from the more adept members of the Buddhist community to the more common members. Although few members of a culture of Awakening

are even partially awakened, most tend to be drawn more-or-less in that direction. Community ensures there are Noble Ones, Refuge ensures that the Noble Ones are heard. Taking the botanical metaphor one more step, the adepts tend to be the cultivators and breeders of an authentic Buddhism, beyond the full comprehension of much of the larger community. The adepts serve as horticulturists who ensure a well nurtured and domesticated Sasana.



*The Comet of the Sasana*

A corollary is that in virtually any healthy Sasana we can distinguish two kinds of Buddhist practice and understanding living side by side: The first is *Adept Buddhism*, a refined practice and understanding, cultivated through artificial selection to maintain an authentic Dharma aimed at the singular attainment of Awakening. The second is *Folk Buddhism*, a popular understanding and practice, produced through natural selection to include many compromises, simplifications and misunderstandings of Buddhist practice and understanding, typically strongly influenced by the prevailing folk culture. One flower is fragrant and produces a bright blossom, the other is much plainer, blending in with the landscape. More accurately, the two Buddhisms are ends of a continuum running through adept, more-or-less adept, adeptish-folkish, more-

or-less folk and folk, just as domestication and wildness are ends of a continuum of more or less narrowly refined gene pools.

I find it helpful to visualize the community, of either plants or adherents, as a comet, all of us oriented in the same direction but with some clustered closer to the head and others trailing out along in the tail, much as hikers intent on mountaintops.<sup>76</sup> This is a demographic depiction of the Sasana, showing how the members of the community distribute themselves according to their influences, one dimension representing distance from an authentic understanding and the other dimension representing the alternative understandings. This metaphor is a way of looking at the social dynamics of a particular Buddhist community.

I am not a sociologist, nor for that matter an historian, though I purport to know something about Buddhist doctrine. However, I have found that sociological and historical research on Buddhism normally fails to appreciate the distinction between Adept and Folk Buddhisms and their social implications. However, this distinction is necessary, for instance, to account for how resilience can exist alongside malleability in the Sasana, that is, how the integrity of authentic Buddhism tends to be preserved in spite of ongoing change. This distinction is necessary even to define what it *means* to preserve the integrity of authentic Buddhism in the midst of a multiplicity of understandings and misunderstandings, practices and malpractices. I hope that by recognizing this distinction we will better understand the history of the Sasana and resolve much of the interminable back-and-forth between Theravada and Mahayana, Eastern and Western, early and traditional, secular and religious and other dichotomies we tend to read into Buddhism.

### ***Adept Buddhism***

Consider how domesticated flowers and fruit trees that manifest those fragrant, colorful, sweet and plump traits so valued by humans, first arose and have been sustained over the centuries, even when propagated to different parts of the world: There has been an ongoing process of *artificial* selection, of deliberate human intervention into the evolutionary process, that has served continually to re-domesticate Buddhism, to preserve, to enhance or where necessary to restore Buddhism's radical message in its pristine functional authenticity, which might otherwise quickly degrade in an environment where its qualities might otherwise count little toward its survival. The result is an

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76 The adept scientists among my readership will appreciate that this simile depends on a *folk* scientist's understanding of how a comet works, not an adept scientist's understanding.

Adept Buddhism that runs counter to the prevailing expectation that something as sophisticated as Buddhism will degrade under the onslaught of the embedding folk culture. Adept Buddhism is the authentic practice and understanding upheld through deliberate cultivation and breeding by members of the adept community. Adept Buddhism is what some scholars have also named *normative Buddhism* or *high Buddhism*.

Who are these adepts? Roughly they are the rocket scientists, the surveyors of views, the bearers of high-tech water bottles, those capable of comprehending and ensuring the authenticity of Buddhist practice and understanding even as Buddhism takes on new forms. Clearly those of the highest attainment and understanding are found in the Noble Sangha, the Noble Ones who have reached at least the first stage of Awakening, at which self-view and doubt have fallen away, who see clearly Nirvana and the Path that leads there. Those *formally* entrusted with the task of domesticating Buddhism are the Monastic Sangha, institutionally charged with guarding the Sasana. The most relevant points for this chapter of their ten-point *Vinaya* mission statement are the last four points which we learned in Chapter Four:

“The arousing of faith in the faithless,  
The increase of the faithful,  
The establishment of the true Dharma, and  
The fostering of Discipline.”

It is the Monastic Sangha that tends to spin off Noble Ones, so we can therefore regard the *Vinaya* as the primary basis of Adept Buddhism, along with the Path. But additionally there may be non-noble non-monastics who can be considered part of the adept complex, particularly dedicated lay scholars and practitioners who contribute their own peculiar expertise to the process of cultivation and breeding the Sasana. In short, adepts are roughly, but not entirely, associated with the Sangha, in both senses of “Sangha.”

Adept Buddhism is radical in its vision of the perfected human character and the singular attainment toward which it is directed. This accounts for the resilience of the Buddha-Sasana: the content of Adept Buddhism is orthodox in upholding its basis in a singular attainment, not nearly so subject to innovation nor to culture-specific understandings, trends or fads as Folk Buddhism. Resilience is therefore a prominent property of Adept Buddhism. This means also that Adept Buddhists are very likely to share most of their understandings and practices with the Adept Buddhists of other lands, cultures, traditions and eras, and so to possess what is most universal about Buddhism. However, the content of Adept Buddhism is itself also, gradually over time, shaped by the local culture, since its adepts sometimes adapt, always in a

deliberate manner, expressions of that culture into their adept understanding or practice, while preserving functional authenticity. A primary example of a later cultural intrusion into Adept Buddhism comes from the Far East as the fashioning of formal and ritual elements under Confucian influence into the Buddhist practice of mindfulness.

In brief, this is the profile of Adept Buddhism:

*Adept Buddhism*

<i>Adherents</i>	2 Sanghas, specialists, “Adepts”
<i>Basis</i>	<i>Vinaya</i> + Path
<i>Quality</i>	Authentic, resilient
<i>Content</i>	Orthodox, limited folk adaptations

It should be noted that adepts are typically conversant with a local Folk Buddhism, having typically been raised as Folk Buddhists before becoming adepts. Such are effectively bi-religious. When some of Suzuki Roshi's American students traveled back to Japan with him they found him engaging with Japanese Folk Buddhists in a way that was quite distinct from what they had learned from him, and in fact incomprehensible to them. Although he imparted Adept Buddhism in America he could also become a Japanese Folk Buddhist on demand, keeping the two Buddhisms separate in his own mind, alongside the two languages he used to render them. Other adepts seem to have more trouble knowing where the Adept Buddhism stops and the Folk Buddhism begins. This is rarely a problem as long as there is no contradiction between the two, or until one is required to teach Buddhism outside one's own culture. (I suspect that the Asian masters who became successful teachers in the West, such as Suzuki Roshi and Chögyam Trungpa, are by and large those best able to keep their Buddhisms straight.)

Although we all share democratic ideals, the idea of adepts in Buddhism should not puzzle or concern. Almost every area of human endeavor has its adepts. Many people can change the washer in a faucet, or turn off the main valve if there is a leak, but when something gets more difficult than that they call a plumber, because *she* is the expert. Even in routine things that almost everybody does, like driving or vacuuming, some people are more adept than others. As the depth of understanding and practice in particular fields gets very sophisticated, humankind inevitably sorts itself into adepts and regular folk. And the regular folk will, as needed, appeal to the *authority* of the adepts for advice, service, or (should they desire to become adepts themselves) training.

Consider art or music, birdwatching or hiking. The depth or sophistication of Buddhism is of the order, say, of a science, of music or of medicine, and Awakening is of the order of genius. Buddhism will (and must!) have its adepts.

### ***The Example of Burmese Adept Buddhism***

Burma is largely representative of most of Asia. Moreover, Burma is within the range of Indian cultural influence, and also has so far to no great extent suffered the flings and narrows of outrageous modernity, so its Buddhism is particularly archaic. Monks still fill the early morning Burmese streets, bowls in hand as they go for alms. Winston King describes the shape of the Buddha-Sasana in Burma as follows:

There is a traditionally orthodox centre represented *literally* by the scriptures, *doctrinally* by the conservative tradition expounded by the Sangha and the orthodox core of lay followers, and *practically* by the conventional Buddhist morality for laymen and meditational practice by the spiritually elite in both Sangha and lay ranks. Living cheek-by-jowl with orthodoxy, often frowned upon but never rigidly excluded, and hence become a nearly integral part of “Buddhism”, is the religion of folk-lore and the popular devotional cultus of adorational worship of the Buddha image and prudential reverence to the nats [tree spirits].<sup>77</sup>

This relationship between an orthodox center and the folklore cultus is typical of the adepts and the folks in traditional Buddhist lands. The particular strength of Adept Buddhism in Burma is evident in Burma in meditation practice, in the large proportion of monastics in the population, in the relatively high standards of monastic discipline and education, and in the widespread study of the scriptures. A number of Burmese monks in recent years have been widely regarded as *arahants* and certainly Noble Ones are common. Monks and nuns are ubiquitous; everybody knows them and almost everybody in fact is related to some of them. Even the smallest village has a small monastery. Furthermore there are a number of prominent lay scholars and meditation teachers. The Sangha is the most respected segment of Burmese society and the locus of Dharmic authority. It would generally be improper to contradict a senior monk on Dharmic matters.

Doctrinally, the Burmese adepts, as Theravadins, have a high regard for the Pali *Tipitaka*, consisting of the *Vinaya*, the *Suttas* and the *Abhidharma*, of very

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<sup>77</sup> King, 1990, p. 67.

early origin preserved in a very early Indic dialect, giving the most direct access available to the early teachings of the Buddha. Scholarship for the Burmese adepts is largely based on memorization of these Pali texts, and competence in Pali is widespread; there are monks who can recite hundreds or even thousands of pages from memory. There is, on the other hand, almost no tradition of scholarly debate as we are used to in the West.

### ***The Example of Western Adept Buddhism***

In its formative period, the West is quite dissimilar to the Burmese case. I will write of Western Buddhism quite a bit in the rest of this book, so let me clarify that “Western” is a rather inadequate designation of a vaguely defined culture, not of a geographical area. Others have used “convert,” “modern” and “non-Asian” at least as inadequately, pairing these variously with “ethnic-,” “cradle-,” “traditional-” and “Asian-Buddhism.” “Western” can be variously correlated, aside from physical presence in the geographical West, with the influence of the European Enlightenment, scientific rationalism and Romanticism, with car and iPhone ownership and, perhaps most reliably, with the use of forks as a primary eating utensil. When brought together with “Buddhism,” “Western” is further correlated with new “converts” (first-generation Buddhists), a very high level of education, and social status. Notice that an Indian or Singaporean can be remarkably Western in all of these senses, when we put aside geography.

In the West, the traditional Sangha is as yet almost completely absent! Very few Western Buddhists have direct contact with monks or nuns, and few have ever even met one. The rest wouldn't know what to feed it if they did. Nonetheless prominent monastic teachers and authors known at a distance through books and other media are highly influential and active in the West: Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Pema Chodron, Bhante Gunaratana, Thubten Chodron, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajahn Sumedho, and so on. All of these are widely regarded as extraordinarily wise people, excellent resources for conveying the Dharma and exemplary role models, just not generally physically present.

At the local level, the role of adepts among Westerners is probably most closely represented variously by ordained priests in the Japanese or Korean Zen traditions (typically with some training in a monastic setting), by certified lay lamas in the Tibetan tradition (many of whom have lived alone in a cave for three years), by a number of *ex-monastics* (primarily trained in the Theravada countries of Asia), and by various Buddhist scholars who also *practice* Buddhism. Unfortunately, this does not constitute a set of adepts that

is consistently recognized as such by the wider community, and in fact the value of any kind of clerical authority is dismissed by many in the West, even in the best of circumstances. Moreover many in the Western Buddhist community are confused by the conflicting standards concerning teacher qualifications, by the only rough conformity among the views and methods of the teachers trained in diverse Asian traditions, and by the strong admixture of charismatic but totally self-qualified lay teachers, popular bloggers and even self-certified *arahants*.

The Third Gem, to muddle issues even more, has no appropriate referent for most Western Buddhists. It is widely assumed by default that “Sangha” applies to the community at large, contrary to any Asian usage of which I am aware, for instance, lending this word to names for informal weekly meditation and discussion groups like “Sofa So Good Zen Sangha,” or “Muddy Lotus Sangha.”<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, the Western Buddhist community as a whole enjoys, given the current demographics, extremely high levels of education and inclination toward study of Buddhist source texts and toward meditation practice as compared to its Asian counterparts. Adept knowledge, in short, is less intensely concentrated and more widely distributed than in the Asian context. It is as if, in the opening scenario of this chapter, almost no one were to have the fortitude to scale the final peak, yet *everyone* would show up at the state park trailhead wearing cutting-edge shoes, so that young kids, for instance, *can* take another step, and so on.

## **Folk Buddhism**

We are all physicists, at at least a naïve level, insofar as we must deal with the world of mass and motion, light and liquids, gravity and gyrations. Try asking some folk physicists things like: What keeps the moon and airplanes *up* but us *down*? Why is the back of the refrigerator so *warm*? How can radio waves carry sounds and pictures? What makes water freeze? ... and you may receive in return an astonishingly imaginative array of *folk* understandings that trail off into total misunderstandings, superstition and “old wives' tales,” alongside some rather sound guesses. Music, philosophy, art and engineering are other areas in which expert or adept knowledge or skill exists side by side with naïve or folk understandings. Buddhism, because of its utmost sophistication, is no

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78 I have not been able to pinpoint the origin of this generalized usage of the word *sangha*. During my onetime research of this very issue, the late scholar John McCrea, a specialist in East Asian Buddhism, emailed me, “I agree that the western usage of 'sangha' to include ordained and lay practitioners/believers is unusual, or idiosyncratic.”

different, never has been since the earliest days, and never will be.

Folk Buddhism is a wilder, less domesticated and more popular understanding of Buddhism than Adept Buddhism, an understanding, or rather range of understandings, that manifests in a particular social, cultural or regional context. It is the attempt to harmonize the radical message of Adept Buddhism with the conventionality of the prevailing folk culture. Malleability is therefore a prominent property of Folk Buddhism. Folk Buddhism includes many elements found also in Adept Buddhism but also a hefty admixture of folk beliefs, highly devotional practices, elements of non-Buddhist religious, ethical and philosophical traditions, many colorful elements from myth or popular entertainment, and many false understandings of Buddhist teachings to boot.

It should be understood that, far from being a perverse anomaly, Folk Buddhism plays a necessary role in the Sasana. First, it overlaps with Adept Buddhism. Its defining characteristic is not spuriousness, but its relative popularity among the general Buddhist population. Non-Path Sasana elements are particularly common to adepts and folks alike. Certain Path elements may also be; witness the relative popularity of meditation practice in both Burmese and Western Buddhism. Second, Folk Buddhism holds Adept Buddhism in high regard and is drawn to approximate it. Folk Buddhists are generally aware in outline of the Path as something they might someday pursue. Third, it is Folk Buddhism that makes Buddhism comprehensible for most Buddhists and virtually all non-Buddhists. Particularly as Buddhism enters a new culture, it is Folk Buddhism that softens the clash of cultures and mediates the give and take that can bring these into harmony. It is the oil between piston and cylinder, the wheel between axle and road. We see that Folk Buddhism is a *necessary* part of a healthy Buddha-Sasana.

If Adept Buddhism is resilient and Folk Buddhism is malleable, what holds Buddhism together? Folk Buddhism is tethered to Adept Buddhism by Refuge! As Buddhists who have taken Refuge in the Triple Gem, those in the tail know in which direction the head is found and are open to the strengthening and shaping influence of Adept Buddhism. For this reason, Folk Buddhism is not Buddhism in decay, eaten at by the prevailing folk culture. Rather it is something suspended between countervailing forces, the domestication of Adept Buddhism and the wilds of the folk culture, and in the eternal process of reconciling itself with both. Refuge, veneration for Buddha and Dharma, and for the Sangha that represents them, keeps Folk Buddhism firmly under the influence of Adept Buddhism and lends authority to the word of the adepts. Ideally Folk Buddhism is strongly conditioned by admirable friendship (*kalyanamitta*), sustained through close and frequent association with the

example of the Noble Ones.

Folk Buddhism differs from Adept Buddhism but it is drawn into rough *consistency* with it. As fads and fashions come and go, this relationship ensures that trends that run counter to Buddhist values are noted, admonished or nipped in the bud. A *healthy* Folk Buddhism is one that is relatively consistent with Adept Buddhism in the values and practices it promotes, but generally represents much simpler understanding, often bordering on misunderstanding, and practice, rarely bordering on malpractice, with many admixtures and oftentimes distortions that originate in the embedding folk culture.

This is much like the popular relationship of general folks to science. For instance, if I don't have much of an understanding of how the weather works, I might have some odd notions about it and even share these with other people. If someone argues with me, we generally have a way to resolve the disagreement: look it up or ask an expert. If I habitually refuse to be corrected by the experts in such matters, my understanding will likely degrade, as it loses its mooring in science altogether and floats off into supposition and superstition. It is more normal in our society to defer to scientists as authorities and thereby at least open ourselves to an improved understanding of science. Similarly, the Folk Buddhist will defer to adepts lest he float off in a wildly devotional *cultic bubble*. In short, the adepts occupy the soapbox.

Here is Folk Buddhism, contrasted with Adept Buddhism:

	<i>Adept Buddhism</i>	<i>Folk Buddhism</i>
<i>Adherents</i>	2 Sanghas, specialists, "adepts"	General Buddhist community, "folks"
<i>Basis</i>	<i>Vinaya</i> + Path	Refuges
<i>Quality</i>	Authentic, resilient	Consistent, malleable
<i>Content</i>	Orthodox, limited folk adaptations	Fusion of Buddhist & folk-cultural elements

It is inevitable in Folk Buddhism that, alongside some proper understandings of authentic teachings, there will also be naïve misunderstandings, for instance, that there is a soul or a fixed self that acquires merit through good deeds, and that Nirvana is a particularly felicitous realm where that self can be reborn to dwell forever. It is likewise common in Folk Buddhism to seek protection from outrageous fortune in amulets or in special chants or in the

simple presence of monks or nuns. Folk Buddhism is highly conditioned by the embedding culture, as well as by universal human needs. Many Asian cultures have had strong animist and shamanic influences since before the advent of Buddhism, and these have since become blended with Buddhism in the popular mind. In East Asia, for instance, ancestor worship is very much integrated into Folk Buddhism with its many traditional expressions, such as the symbolic burning of money. Folk Buddhism serves as a middle way between Adept Buddhism and the general embedding folk culture, and is an enduring part of a healthy Sasana.

### ***The Example of Burmese Folk Buddhism***

A frequent Burmese visitor to the monastery in which I live in Texas, a laywoman who likes to come on weekends to prepare food for the monks, was up late one night and spotted a monk standing in the sky above one of the new buildings near where a new pagoda was about to begin construction. She called other people hither, also Burmese laypeople, who indeed verified the presence of this monk in the sky, but by this time he was sitting in meditation posture. It was generally agreed among the witnesses that this monk had teletransported from Burma. A couple of weeks later I heard the story retold by another layperson who was not an original witness to this event, and in this retelling, the monk in question was our own founder, who lives in Burma, undoubtedly checking out the new construction site. I personally often feel in many such circumstances like Clark Kent, who never happens to be present when Superman appears, never present for the occurrence of such miracles.

The average Burmese Buddhist knows maybe a little about meditation but does not practice it regularly, knows basic teachings of Buddhism largely from *Jataka* tales (primarily a Children's literature), but is mostly informed by a vibrant Folk Buddhism. Burma is a land of pagodas, statues of the Buddha, and numerous monks and nuns, before all of which people bow, fully touching their foreheads to the ground in reverence. The average Burmese Buddhist, at the same time, inhabits a world of tree spirits, miracles and magic, largely of pre-Buddhist origin but often blended in her mind seamlessly with Buddhist practices and doctrine. Appeasing tree spirits (*nats*) is a common duty of monks.

In Burma, blessings are routinely sought from monks. As in other Theravada countries, the chanting of any of the *Parittas*, a set of eleven suttas or composites from the suttas, by monks on one's behalf is widely believed to be efficacious in protecting one's welfare. This practice has parallels in many religions and other Buddhist traditions, which sometimes, unlike the Burmese,

use talismans or amulets to bestow blessings. A revealing study reports that in fact the vast majority of monks, all of whom provide this priestly service routinely, believe such practices have no special power other than to produce self-confidence in the patient.<sup>79</sup> I have often heard monks pointing this very thing out, but folk beliefs persist, as does the chanting of *Parittas* by the monks.

In Burma, many lay people have daily contact with monastics when they offer alms in the morning, rice and a little curry. People have a particular regard for those monks who are accomplished meditators, have impeccable discipline, are recognized scholars or excel in social welfare. Although monks rarely mingle in social gatherings, alms rounds or visits to the monastery on quarter moon days, provide the laity an opportunity to learn some Dharma or ask questions. Although all monks are respected as representatives of the Sangha, people learn of individual monks' reputations as teachers. Moreover, in this electronic age many people listen to recordings of Dharma talks and *Paritta* chanting at home, featuring their favorite famous *sayadaws* (teachers), as routinely as Americans listen to talk shows.

Part of the Burmese system of veneration of the Buddha and of *arahants* involves relics, a practice that the Buddha himself endorsed at some level. In Burma these generally take on the form of crystals which are capable of spontaneously reproducing like bunnies: Left overnight, the next morning they will have increased in number and mass. A museum has been built in a temple in Burma where a local arahant had lived and died. Pictures in the museum reveal he had very intense eyes, which, it is reported, did not burn during his cremation but were found among the relics. I am not aware that the eyes have multiplied with time.

Relics, and also consecrated statues of the Buddha, have special powers.<sup>80</sup> Kyaik Tiyo, the golden rock, is a huge boulder, maybe 40 or 50 feet in diameter, perched on top of a sheer cliff, at the very top of a tall mountain in southern Burma, in such a way that it has been just about to roll off for maybe the last several hundred thousand years or so. However, the folk story is that some of the Buddha's hairs are contained inside of the rock and that the rock remains in place by the unexplained "power of the Buddha." Once upon a time, some non-Buddhists tried to push the rock off the cliff in order to undermine people's trust in the Triple Gem, but they were turned into monkeys. In an inspiring, hopefully not foolhardy, display of faith, there is

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79 Spiro (1982) Ch. 6.

80 Almost all monks, according to Spiro (1982) Ch. 6, agree that relics have special powers, though images of the Buddha do not.

now a nunnery directly below the rock, exactly at the point of first bounce.

### ***The Example of Pure Land Buddhism***

How often does a particular school or regional variant of Buddhism lose its authenticity? If Buddhism loses its horticulture, its adepts, it cannot expect to remain fully authentic. We will see some examples where this seems to have occurred, but I think we will find it is far less common than might be imagined. Buddhism has shown itself to be extremely resilient.

Let's consider Pure Land Buddhism, which we encountered in the last chapter as a huge movement over the last many centuries in East Asia, but which is also widely criticized as promoting an inauthentic *devotional* path of practice, the *nien-fo*, the invocation of the name of Amitabha Buddha, with the promise of rebirth in the Western Pure Land, as the primary goal. What sets off alarms for the adept or reasonably literate Buddhist is the appeal to an *external* power for salvation, bypassing the Buddha's teaching of karma, that our *own* deeds determine our attainments or future well-being. Pure Land's appeal to a higher power has been compared to the Abrahamic faiths and has provided a sitting duck for Theravadins who seek to disparage the Mahayana, for indeed it represents a large proportion of the entirety of Mahayana practice throughout East Asia.

The point I want to make here is that Pure Land is Folk Buddhism pure and simple, and therefore need not bear any responsibility for authenticity. The only thing that makes Pure Land distinct from other Folk Buddhist understandings and practices is its immense popularity and its organization as movement with an independent identity. On the one hand, the Pure Land movement has the hallmarks of Folk Buddhism: Its single-focused practice, its devotional quality, its easy-answer, easily comprehended and implemented approach, and its popular appeal. For much of its history in China it has been promoted through specifically lay organizations, often called White Lotus Societies, and grown through proselytizing among the laity.

On the other hand, the Pure Land movement does not seem to be a cultic bubble that has dislodged itself from Adept Buddhism. The Pure Land has historically almost never been a separate school but has rather taken hold within and across non-Pure Land schools that have sustained an Adept Buddhism alongside a Folk Buddhism. For instance, scholars can make out no commonly recognized monastic lineage of Pure Land patriarchs analogous to that found in Ch'an, T'ien-T'ai or other major schools in East Asia, and many of the monastic names historically associated with Pure Land turn out to be

affiliated with non-Pure Land schools. Even today the Ch'an/Pure Land syncretism is the norm for Chinese temples.<sup>81</sup> In short, Pure Land is a Folk Buddhist practice almost always tethered to, and recognizing the authority of, a domesticated Adept Buddhism. Like many Folk Buddhist practices and understandings, Pure Land has been promoted *within* the various schools, even by and for monastics, as a part of a healthy Sasana. Its existence is no more evidence for the inauthenticity of some part of Mahayana Buddhism than the belief in forest spirits is for the inauthenticity of Burmese Buddhism or, for that matter, than a nearly majority belief in creationism in America is for the backwardness of American science. Nonetheless, we will see in the next chapter what happens when Pure Land, in Japan, cuts itself off from its adepts to become an independent folk school.

### ***The Example of Western Folk Buddhism.***

Buddhism has by norms of Buddhist chronology only begun to blend with Western folk culture. Tweed (2000) examining the first wave of this process, ending some hundred years ago, identifies three types of early adherents, each with its own focus of interest: The *esoterics* were attracted to the occult metaphysical and experiential aspects of Buddhism, the *rationalists* to almost the opposite, to the discursive, scientific and non-religious aspects, and the *romantics* to the exotic aspects of Buddhist cultures, to their art and architecture. Each of these had a distinct understanding of what Buddhism is all about, all found what they were looking for, and all of these are still with us. McMahan (2008) provides an excellent catalog of a broader range of trends in current Western Buddhist practice and understanding that have clearly traceable Western cultural roots, roots generally in Protestant Christianity, in the European Enlightenment and scientific rationalism, in Romanticism or in psychotherapy. Let me consider just one example of this kind.

A popular understanding in the West is that Buddhism is about freeing one's authentic (or innermost or true) self (or nature or voice or heart), a self that has been suppressed by social conditioning and other unnatural factors, but when unleashed is the source of creativity, spirituality, virtue and wisdom. This authentic self is typically accorded the following qualities:

- The authentic self exists independently of social roles, culture and conventions.
- Social roles, culture and conventions are oppressive to the authentic

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81 Sharf (2003) reviews this evidence for the historical dependence of Pure Land on other schools of Buddhism.

self.

- Creativity, spontaneity, goodness and art are external expressions that flow out from the authentic self. This is known as self-expression or being natural.
- Spirituality adheres in the authentic self, while religion is found in external rules, conventions and dogma.<sup>82</sup>
- We must learn to trust the inner experience and inner vision of the authentic self, that which comes naturally, that which is true to ourselves.

Although such statements have a long and venerable history, they have only a short Buddhist history. In fact, this authentic “self” is far more metaphysical than what an Adept Buddhism generally endorses. The idea of the authentic self *does* bear a vague kinship to practices of introspective examination in authentic Buddhism, but we would be hard pressed indeed to find any of the rather specific statements above represented in Buddhist literature of any tradition.

If the notion of the innermost heart does not have a Buddhist origin, where did it come from? The answer is: from European Romanticism and its later expressions.<sup>83</sup> It is found in people like Rousseau, Schiller and Schleiermacher, representing the idea of human thought free from social constraints, of morality and wisdom coming directly from the human heart, of naturalness. The outflow of the inner self is often taken up in the art of the Romantic era; Wordsworth, for instance, stated that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”<sup>84</sup> Such Romantic themes can be traced forward through the American Transcendentalist movement and through turn-of-the-last-century metaphysical movements, where they played a role in the early attempts to comprehend Buddhism in the West,<sup>85</sup> then later entered the American countercultural movements of the middle twentieth century, which provided the fertile soil in which Buddhism began to take root in the West.<sup>86</sup>

The authentic self is probably useful in highlighting the importance of interior or introspective experience in pushing up and ascending the stem of the flower. The Path is in many ways a solitary one. I don’t want to dismiss its

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82 That is, the authentic self is spiritual, not religious.

83 McMahan (2008), pp. 76-87, also Thanissaro (2002).

84 McMahan (2008), p. 82.

85 Much as Taoism provided the lens through which Buddhism was interpreted in China almost two millennia earlier.

86 McMahan (2008), p. 85.

useful role in Western Folk Buddhist understanding out of hand. However, from the perspective of authentic Buddhism it has some problematic inconsistencies as well. First, until one has reached a degree of attainment, the uninstructed worldling is assumed, in the Buddha's understanding, to be enormously deluded, mired in greed, hatred and delusion. Under this condition, trust in any inner voice would seem most ill-advised indeed. Second, the authentic self does not seem particularly helpful in the project of deconstructing the self and in fact contains its own potential for self-centeredness. Third, the inner self would seem to dismiss the role of the Buddhist community and the importance of the Sasana as social constructs, inimical to the authentic self, and therefore irrelevant to "real" Buddhism.

In short, the authentic self, while a pervasive and popular understanding in Western Folk Buddhism, lacks a firm basis in authentic Buddhism. To a great extent, the popular understanding of Buddhism in the West is a patchwork of many analogous understandings sewn in with some pieces of authentic Buddhist cloth.

### ***A Western American Wanders into a Chinese Temple***

How did it happen that Western Buddhists so quickly gained a monopoly on *real* Buddhism? We in the West certainly don't seem to have gained much of a handle on Christianity over many centuries, and the average citizen of my country is poorly informed about science, history, and almost everything else outside of popular entertainment. Yet we meditate and study Buddhist philosophy, while people in Asian temples burn money and appease spirits through elaborate rituals. How were *we* the ones to arrive at this precise understanding of something as sophisticated and refined as Buddhist thought and practice?

A culturally European American once walked into a culturally Asian Chinese temple. He had been reading books on Buddhism, primarily by Asian adepts, had been favorably impressed and wished to develop his personal experience in the matter. Upon entering, he was taken aback by the peculiarity and anomaly in the practices and beliefs of the people he encountered, by the formal style of, and insistence on, liturgy, by the presence of unfamiliar dramatic figures in temple statuary, by unfamiliar rites at temple altars, by chanting the name of some guy he had never heard of and by hocus pocus all around. The devout temple laity witnessed yet another dismayed European American run out the door and into the street yelling something about an "egregious corruption of the Dharma." What gives?

It is not much different when a culturally Chinese walks into a culturally European Buddhist center and immediately encounters a congregation intent on discovering their true selves, casual and disrespectful of demeanor, sitting in a circle expressing themselves openly and freely, with no visible clergy or leader present, before what seems to be an altar, but on which a rock stands where the Buddha should be. He sees that the devotees are engaged in some kind of modern dance practice involving an exchange of papier-mâché masks constructed the previous week, which everyone is instructed to wear and then to act “spontaneously.” These casual free spirits are about to witness yet another polite Asian American excuse himself respectfully and depart never to be seen again. What gives?

The physical center of a comet is not the head but somewhere in the tail. Wild flora outnumbered domesticated. When we encounter someone else's Buddhism, we tend to see not its Adept Buddhism but its Folk Buddhism, since this is the most outwardly visible part of Buddhism, upheld by the most people. On the other hand, when we regard our own Buddhism, we identify with our Adept Buddhism, because our own aspirations head in that direction but may be limited. Even while we realize that Adept Buddhism preserves an understanding that our own cultural assumptions and faulty understandings makes obscure to us, that Adept Buddhism nonetheless belongs to us and is there when we need it. In this way, the impression arises of a Buddhism fragmented into East and West, Mahayana and Theravada, secular and religious, and beyond repair. Yet these sustain cultures of Awakening. The core of Buddhism is fine! The integrity of the authentic traditions has been retained with remarkable resilience, yet Buddhism has proven itself at the same time highly malleable in its cultural and regional context. Are we as tolerant?

## Chapter 7

# Negotiating the Dharma

The whole world is talking about Buddhism.

People debate points of doctrine in the tea shops of Burma, citing Jataka tales or fragments of scripture remembered from recently attended Dharma talks. Monks pass by their homes on alms round, mindful and dignified, silent until someone poses a Dharmic question. People listen to Dharma talks on-line and buy books by the Dalai Lama in the bookstores of America. Students attend lectures on textual analysis of Buddhist scriptures in the universities of Germany. Tibetan monks debate points of doctrine in the monasteries of Bhutan, clapping their hands together each time they make an incisive point. People show up to pay respects to the nuns in the temples of Taiwan then pose questions about Buddhist life. Punx in Texas pull up on motorcycles at a Buddhist center where they will sit in a circle and relate their personal meditation experiences to other Mohawks, tattoos and pierced noses. Deep in a forest in Thailand, a young monk, after weeks of search, approaches the legendary meditation master he had sought to request instruction. Someone on a subway spots a copy of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* in a young woman's hand and is curious enough to ask.

Just as people expound Buddhism in many languages – Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Thai, Spanish, Malay – they expound Buddhism blended and washed over with elements of many different cultures – Animist, Taoist, Confucian, European Romantic, Materialist. Moreover, Buddhism has always been at the cutting edge of communication technology! Recited for centuries in the monasteries and forests of Asia as their sole means of preservation, the scriptures then rode the wave of inscription chiseled in stone and text brushed onto strips of cured palm leaf. A Buddhist text became the world's earliest dated published book!<sup>87</sup> Today adepts and folks, monks and geeks run

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87 A copy of *the Diamond Sutra* block-printed in China is dated 868 AD.

Buddhist blogs, while documentaries about Buddhism run on TV and people run to theaters to watch Hollywood movies with Buddhist themes. Buddhist entrepreneurs make a living by offering counseling sessions by telephone.

The sum total of these conversations, projected through time and space, gives form to the Buddha-Sasana, the practice lives of the Buddhist community, born of the Buddha, who first turned the wheel to begin the conversation, who demanded of the monastics that they follow the discipline, who asked of all Buddhists that they find Refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and who then let the Sasana loose in the world. These conversations have negotiated the Dharma ever since, producing the enormous variety of traditions we find today, acting out both the malleability and the resilience of a culture of Awakening. These are the life-processes of the living, self-regulating organism of the Sasana.

In the last chapter we saw the natural and continual tension in a culture of Awakening between Buddhist authenticity and popular but non-buddhist elements, how authenticity is firmly upheld by the adapts and how authenticity continually gains or regains the upper hand. I want here to look at specific examples of this negotiation. We will see that these conversations verify the overall trend, but also that they often get quite scrappy in practice. These negotiations are expectedly most contentious as the Sasana flows into a new land and culture, as it is now seeping into the Land of the Fork. Let's listen in on some of these conversations, both modern exemplars and ancient precedents.

### ***The Agents of Negotiation***

Buddhism is radical in *any* culture. It is a counterculture of Awakening. It goes "against the stream." The Noble Ones understand that virtually all progress toward peace, happiness, virtue and understanding that one will make on the Buddhist Path, will be directly correlated with what is given up or curtailed: the physical trappings of life, relations and obligations like fame and car ownership, self-view, identity, trying to be somebody, partying flirtatiously, and particularly behaviors under the sway of the clinging emotions rooted in greed, anger or fuzzy-headedness. The practice of the Noble Ones has been for them no more nor any less than a long process of disentanglement, strand by strand, from soap-operatic existence, a process of progressive renunciation. The Noble Ones extol Awakening as the benchmark attainment, one that entails not only the complete eradication of personal desire and aversion as life's motivating factors and ultimately the elimination of intentional action altogether, the complete relinquishment of the quest for personal advantage.

They practice kindness to their worst enemies, for Pete's sake!

This makes little sense to normal folk. People of virtually any folk culture will scratch their heads and blink their eyes in bewilderment. People of the Folk *Buddhist* culture, nevertheless, have learned to venerate these radicals walking in their midst, rather than dismiss them as kooks, and have thereby opened themselves to understanding the great truths their lives and teachings might reveal, even if they might not yet quite get it.

There is thereby a chasm to be negotiated before the civilizing influence of the highest Buddhist principles find their way into the world at large. The Buddhism of the Noble Ones mixes with virtually any general folk culture as oil with water. In the thick of this palpable contradiction of values, nestled between the general folk culture and the Buddhism of the Noble Ones, is Folk Buddhism, in direct dialog with each. If the Buddhism of the adepts is the oil and folk culture the water, then Folk Buddhism serves as an emulsifier, carrying civilizing bubblets of Buddhist wisdom into the society at large.

Folk Buddhism *is* in a very real sense a kind of “watered down” Buddhism, making use of a means of expression accessible to the folk culture and obscuring the less approachable teachings. Folk Buddhism thereby plays an essential role in making Buddhism culturally relevant and accessible to the general culture. Folk Buddhism has one foot in Adept Buddhism, because it places its trust and veneration in the Triple Gem, and its other foot in the folk culture, because this, through constant engagement in the workaday world, informs most of its values and defines most of its behaviors. Folk Buddhism is important.

### ***Elucidating the Dharma***

The adepts are involved in a certain conversation whose theme is authenticity, its recognition, its realization and its preservation. The Noble Ones are those who fully realize what is authentically required to reach an initial level of Awakening. They do this through a kind of personal dialog between what they have been taught, on the one hand, and what they have experienced directly through practice, on the other. This is the conversation of *ehipassiko*, between *come* and *see*. The monastics, if their aspirations are sincere, are ideally of perfect Refuge; they are willing to *come* but might not yet *see*; they thereby turn readily away from folk influences and toward the influence of the Dharma (or rather *Dharma-Vinaya*) and of the Noble Ones, to fully engage in the conversation of authenticity. However, any layperson can make the same commitment, to be of perfect Refuge and thereby to become part of the

conversation of the adepts. It is simply a matter of choosing one's influences.

There has been, since the beginning, a degree of specialization among the adepts, particularly between *come* and *see*. Some have chosen to be purely scholars of the Dharma to the neglect of practice, while others have chosen to emphasize practice (in Theravada Buddhism this is recognized in the distinction between *pariyatti* and *patipatti* monks, respectively), and others to balance the two. Teachings guide practice even as the experience of practice serves as a corrective of one's understanding of the teachings. Often new ways of teaching emerge from the reconciliation of teaching and experience, faults are corrected and innovations are introduced. If a tradition produces Noble Ones, its scriptures and scholarship cannot stray too far away from an authentic Buddhism. With that many people *seeing*, maps to their vantage points will be preserved, or will reemerge, so that others might *come*.

Scholarship has always been an important part of the adept conversation and has taken many forms, from memorization of scriptures, to exegesis, to debate. Almost any Adept Buddhist tradition will regard some textual corpus as authoritative, but generally each a different one. Modern scholarship has taken on new roles, including textual analysis to determine the actual ages of texts or of specific passages, comparative analysis to reconstruct the history of texts, and reconstruction of ancient cultural contexts as a way of gaining insight into obscure meanings. Many texts that have been attributed directly to the Buddha for centuries are revealed to be of more recent origin, and many traditional accounts of the history of the various Buddhist schools have been discredited. These trends frame scriptural corpora in new and insightful ways.

We should not be dismayed when the adepts argue among themselves. First, this a common symptom of corrective pressure, as one way of teaching or of understanding is revealed as inadequate. Second, adepts of different schools, of different historical and cultural lines of development, with radically divergent conceptualizations of still authentic teachings, today commonly find themselves in conversation with each other. A similar thing happens when academics of different research fields get together to talk about what should be a common interest, for instance, when philosophers, linguists, psychologists and computer scientists talk with one another about language. Third, philosophical speculation has always had an allure in Buddhism that the Buddha scrupulously resisted. As a result much debate among the adepts is much ado about nothing. In the end, where Noble Ones arise, we can assume that authentic Buddhism is being practiced and understood.

### ***Nudging toward the Dharma***

It is the adepts' preservation of an authentic Buddhism that anchors Folk Buddhism. Folk members of Buddhist societies traditionally rub shoulders with admirable adept friends, often daily, bringing themselves under their influence. The Buddha asked his monks to enter the villages on daily alms rounds, and to store no food, in order to ensure that level of contact and dependence. Folks most reliably approach the adepts when they have a question or have been debating with a friend about a matter of Dharma and would like expert advice, or alternatively when they wish to air issues in their personal lives or moral dilemmas. Folks notice that the adepts, and particularly the Noble Ones, are different from the rest of us and find in their deportment and behavior eye-opening examples of what the Buddha must have been getting at. Adepts may sometimes take the liberty of admonishing folks, as well as each other, when faced with views or behaviors that are decidedly un-Dharmic. Adept Buddhism is an inward force that tends to hold and shape lives of all to approximate accord with the Dharma.

Folk understandings and behaviors, on the other hand, can be expected to fall roughly into three groups:

- (1) suitable, i.e., wholesome and Buddhism-friendly,
- (2) tolerable, i.e., of little consequence to Buddhist functions,
- (3) unsuitable, i.e., unwholesome and Buddhism-unfriendly.

The teachers among the adepts are those who cultivate the suitable, rectify the unsuitable, and more than likely tolerate the tolerable. (1) and (2) are both *consistent* with the Dharma-Vinaya. Even while the noble and pure among the adepts cleanse the Folk Buddhist with what is suitable, at least ideally, the ruffians, marketers and ubiquitous influences among the common people might sully her with what is unsuitable. Suitable are the Refuges, generosity, virtue, kindness, merit-making, an appreciation of the highest aspirations of Buddhist practice, wisdom, refined cultivation of mind and simplicity. Unsuitable are slaying, slaughter, swiping, swinging, swindling and swigging, desire, ire and mire (the triple-fire), excessive exposure to advertising or hate speech, multitasking and shopping 'til dropping. Incessant exposure to adepts generally shapes values, views, conduct and character, away from what is unsuitable.

Most significant among the tolerable factors in the present context are many of those “cultural accretions” found in virtually any Buddhist tradition. For example, it is common among the Burmese, representing a fundamentally animist culture, to attribute special powers to monks, and particularly to senior monks of great attainment. Just the fact of ordination makes one immune to

the scourge of angry tree spirits. The presence of monks on auspicious occasions such as weddings and birthdays, as well as during periods of misfortune, is regarded as enormous good fortune, and people go out of their way to make offerings to monks when a karmic boost is likely to get them past an impending danger. The body of a deceased monk of great attainment will not decompose in the familiar way and when cremated will leave behind crystalline relics that then proceed to multiply.

Now, in the “more rational” West such beliefs would be unsustainable, but for reasons of scientific rationalism rather than of Buddhism, that is, for reasons of *Western* folk-culture. They are tolerable from a Buddhist perspective because they do not conflict with authentic Buddhist functions; in fact they express a well-meaning if exuberant veneration of the Sangha. And so they endure. Neutral elements of Folk Buddhism seem to mix even with Adept Buddhism quite readily. Since Adept Buddhists generally start out as wee Folk Buddhists and in their studies of authentic Buddhism would see no reason to evict these elements, this is hardly surprising. Accordingly we find monks generally offering blessings, consecrating Buddha statues, sprinkling wisdom water on people, engaging in elaborate rituals, even exorcising ghosts as part of their routine tasks, or simply incorporating folk customs and artifacts into the manner of performing various tasks.

As for the unsuitable, certainly the recognized adepts constitute traditionally a moral voice, admonishing folks to avoid what should be avoided: violence, theft, adultery, deceit and intoxication. Monastics are expected to represent, for emulation, standards of conduct in their behavior that exclude what is even mildly unsuitable for the Buddhist: gossip, mindless distraction, backbiting, judgment, anger, etc. Adepts will tend to correct misunderstandings of Buddhist teachings and views that cause harm. Although they traditionally have been tolerant of what in the West would be widely regarded as supernatural or superstitious, on some key points – for instance, with regard to the efficacy of rituals and blessings – they commonly point to psychological alternatives to folk explanations.

In these ways, the Noble Ones bring into a world perpetually insane, their civilizing influence, gently nudging the culture toward greater kindness and wisdom, producing a culture of Awakening.

### ***Assimilating Folk Practices***

Although the adepts have traditionally spoken with great authority, they are not authoritarian. One of the effects of the Buddha’s creation of an absolute

daily dependence of the Monastic Sangha on the laity, simply to be able to eat, is that the laity have always served as a check on the monastics, particularly as a check on the *behavior* of the monastics. When monastics stop living the pure life, when they party, flirt, gamble, drink beer, seek amusements and don top hats, that is, when they are perceived to “act like lay people,” then the laity tends to become disenchanted and ceases to provide support.

This also applies when the monastics become *too* aloof or uptight for Folk Buddhist standards. The Buddha was much concerned about harmony between the two parts of the Buddhist community, and once relented to Folk Buddhist demands with admirable discretion with words that still echo from yesterchapter, “Monks, householders need blessings.” Blessings, even if not directly efficacious, are an expression of caring that people respond well to. We do the same thing in a secular context when we push medications and home remedies on the ill or allergy-beset in excess of what we would consider sensible for ourselves.

Even in Burma, many monks eschew worship of tree spirits and of relics as not pure Buddhism. In one instance a monastic sect that tried to eliminate pagoda worship and worship of images of the Buddha, were met with hostility on the part of a disgruntled laity until the sect disappeared.<sup>88</sup> It is easy to see, in contrast, how the give-and-take between adept and folk understandings and practices would tend to *broaden* the norms of what adepts consider acceptable Buddhism, or even turn what is initially only tolerable into what the adepts themselves teach or promote. The priestly functions of bestowing blessings, or exorcising spirits, with time came to be performed by monastics in virtually every Buddhist culture. The term *doctrinal widening* has been used to describe making respectable that which monks formerly excluded from their purview.<sup>89</sup> Notice that this does not have to undermine the authenticity of Adept Buddhism; it just produces a chubbier Buddhism that retains Buddhism's skeletal functionality embedded within it.

The Mahayana movement is perhaps the largest-scale example of doctrinal widening as a result of negotiating between Adept and Folk Buddhisms in response to the persistent needs of the lay community.<sup>90</sup> The path of the bodhisattva brought forward many of the elements that were attractive to laypeople, particularly devotional practices of veneration or worship along with good works, and assimilated indigenous religious practices as more respectable parts of Buddhist life. It was within the context of the Mahayana,

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88 King (1990), p. 59.

89 Williams (2008), p. 26.

90 See, for instance, Skilton (1994, pp. 96-7); Williams (2008, p. 26).

for instance, that reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha or of the *Lotus Sutra* became established as a Buddhist practice.

Often folk features are assimilated into Adept Buddhism from Folk Buddhism that just happen to be suitable to practice or understanding. For instance, when Buddhism came to China it encountered a highly ritualized culture which provided rich resources for the practice of mindfulness, and were taken up with time as an integral, almost essential, part of Adept Buddhism.

### ***Championing Path Practices***

Alongside devotional and lyrical folk practices there have also been a number of adept-driven movements to popularize meditation, a high-level Path practice, among a broad and generally non-adept population. The most successful of these in recent years has probably been the lay vipassana movement, which started in Burma with monastic encouragement, and which has since gone global.

A much earlier movement of this kind was associated with the *Lin-Chi* (*Rinzai*) *Ch'an* (Zen) monk Ta Hui Tsung Kao (1089-1163), who promoted a method that we now call *koan introspection*. Koans, quizzical interchanges between teacher and student, had been a part of Zen literature and lore for hundreds of years before Ta Hui. The innovation Ta Hui taught was to use the punch lines of koans as meditation objects, a method he promoted as a fast track to Awakening suitable for lay students. Many of Ta Hui's students were apparently eager lay scholars and aristocrats who did not have the time and discipline enjoyed by monks for gradual practice.<sup>91</sup> Significantly, once koan introspection seemed to produce desirable results, eager monks, without lay commitments, quickly applied their even greater reserve of time and energy for such concerns, to soar to even greater heights. Koan introspection is now characteristic of *Lin-Chi/Rinzai* Zen and is often considered primarily a *monastic* practice. More recently, Japanese Zen Master Yasutani Roshi (1885-1973) revitalized koan introspection in the establishment of an explicitly lay school called *Sanbyo Kyodan*, which focuses rather single-mindedly on producing breakthrough experiences through intensive meditation. Although this school is marginal in Japan, it has been very influential in North American Zen ever since the publication of Philip Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*.

Sharf observes some characteristic features of such lay meditation movements.<sup>92</sup> First, they tend to be single-mindedly obsessed with achieving

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91 Sharf (1995b).

92 Sharf (1995a, 1995b).

special “mystical” *experiences* – *kensho*, *satori* (breakthrough or “Awakening” experiences), *jhana* (absorption) or stream entry (the first glimpse of Nirvana). Second, they tend to involve constant assessment and verification students' attainments by teachers, often publicly, and *testimonials* from successful students to encourage others in their practice.<sup>93</sup> Although meditative experiences are referred to in the earliest Buddhist scriptures, they offer little precedent for external assessment as a routine part of a meditative method. Moreover, Sharf points out, independent teachers who evaluate the same student's achievements seldom agree.

The danger of the emphasis on spontaneous experiences is the loss of the gradual path of personal development of skillful behaviors and thoughts through sustained repetition and rehearsal.<sup>94</sup> *Sanbyo Kyodan*, in particular, has reduced the complex doctrinal, devotional and ethical teachings of Buddhism to a simple meditation practice on the *Mu* koan. It focuses on cultivating the experience of *kensho*, the initial experience of “Awakening,” entirely divorced from its soteriological context.<sup>95</sup> Practicing for mystical experiences is analogous to studying in order to pass tests rather than to learn, and seems to have been rare historically among monastics, who have traditionally followed a gradual organic path of development, not a single-minded pursuit of mystical experiences for their own sake. It is a kind of lottery-ticket Buddhism, which cheapens Awakening into a common attainment, a *half-promise* of Awakening.

Although adepts will generally encourage meditation practice as beneficial, the downside of any single-minded focus, in spite of its gratifying results, is that it does not produce a well-rounded Buddhist. It sacrifices breadth for depth while giving the impression of constituting a complete practice in itself. In the West, for instance, vipassana meditation is commonly taught in a manner completely divorced from its larger Buddhist context, even from its integral role within the Path. Single-minded focus on meditation practice probably bears some kinship to the “easy answer” of a single-minded devotional practice such as reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha, except (1) it is not easy – meditation retreats are a lot of work – and (2) one would be hard put to say what the question is that it answers – meditative experiences gain meaning only in the proper context.

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93 In fact if meditation is about evoking special experiences it comes noticeably close to many non-Buddhist religious practices intended to induce ecstatic states, for instance in Charismatic Christianity.

94 Sharf (1995a, 1995b).

95 Sharf (1995a).

Much of this chapter is cautionary. My advice here: Beware of overreaching for a singular attainment, of trying to attain something sublime, when resources are limited, as they typically are in common lay life. The danger is not that these practices are unwholesome, but that frustration may result from inflated expectations. Fortunately, a healthy Sasana thoughtfully supports those of high aspiration with an option in which resources are abundant for a well-rounded practice with all of its requisites: Entering the Monastic Sangha.

### ***Creolizing the Dharma***

At the special time that Buddhism enters a new culture, as it did in China in the early centuries of the first millennium, and as it has now begun to in the West, incipient Buddhists must wrap their heads around many foreign concepts, but to do so they rely on an indigenous matrix of conceptual, behavioral and affective categories understood in the existing folk culture. A kind of hybrid that is only part Buddhist is bound to arise, in a process like that which produces a creole language from the absorption of a foreign vocabulary into an indigenous grammar.<sup>96</sup>

The lifeline to the foreign adepts in early Chinese Buddhism seems to have been tenuous indeed, and almost entirely based on the written word, yet an indigenous Adept Buddhism would eventually emerge from the early folk depths. Sharf<sup>97</sup> relates that after Buddhists began trickling into China from the Silk Road about the first century CE, early efforts at translating Buddhist texts of Indian and Central Asian origin made use of a largely Taoist conceptual scheme and vocabulary, a system of *concept matching* (*ko-i*). Buddhism seems as a consequence to have been commonly mistaken for a form of Taoism in which the Buddha served as a god with certain supernatural powers. There was little evidence that teacher-monks made the long journey into China from Indian or Central Asia in great numbers, nor that any schools of Buddhism were founded by such monks.<sup>98</sup> Instead a handful of translator-monks that did arrive set to work producing Chinese versions of scriptures, which then circulated, were read and discussed by and among educated Chinese in the Chinese language, mixed in with apocryphal scriptures of Chinese origin that embedded Buddhist ideas into Taoist cosmology. A very occasional Chinese pilgrim would make the decades-long trip into India and back to train with the

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96 The use of this creole simile is borrowed from Prothero (1996).

97 Sharf (2001), pp. 1-25.

98 Bodhidharma would be the exception, but his story is undoubtedly largely mythical. McRae (2003, Ch. 2) traces the evolution of the Bodhidharma myth in parallel with the development of Ch'an in China.

adepts and fetch scriptures back. Early Chinese Buddhism was remarkably insular with little in the way of guidance from foreign adepts.

An analogous Western creole developed some seventeen hundred years later under quite different circumstances. In this case the grammatical matrix was largely of Christian Protestant and scientific rationalist origin and the result is in fact commonly called by scholars “Protestant Buddhism.”<sup>99</sup> Interestingly the development of this Protestant-Buddhist hybrid began not in Europe or America, but in Asia, particularly in Ceylon and Japan. In both of these nations, Buddhism was challenged to modernize according to Western standards because of Western colonial and imperial pressure. In both of these nations a Western-educated elite was in the making and in Ceylon many Protestant schools had been educating the youngsters for decades. The challenge to these cultures was the presumption of superiority of Western culture in general, along with Western science and technology, and of the non-heathen Christian faith in particular. In these desperate times for a dispirited East, Buddhists with Western educations began to promote the idea of a Buddhism that was compatible with Protestant values, yet of superior rationality and of greater compatibility than Christianity with science.

Now, Protestant sensibilities, once born in response to the excesses of the Catholic Church, typically run something like this:

“Organized religion, hierarchy, bah!”

“Religious authority, priests, monks, rules, humbug!”

“Religious imagery, sacred objects, twaddle!”

“Rituals, bows, balderdash!”

McMahan<sup>100</sup> writes that in accord with the Protestant Reformation:

“... each individual could have unmediated access to God and hence had no need for special places, priests, icons, or rituals. Sacredness began to withdraw from things ... and to be pushed to two poles: God himself, beyond the world, and the individual in his or her own faith. This aspect ... was then pushed further by scientific rationalism.”

The creole that emerged was a kind of Buddhism scrubbed of its religiosity and thereby spotlessly suitable for the Protestant-influenced West. It was successfully applied in Ceylon where Buddhism survived a rising tide of Christian missionary exuberance: In a well publicized series of debates between the “silver-tongued orator” Ven. Mohattivatte Gunananda and the

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99 This term comes from Obeyesekere. See Gombrich (2006), p. 174.

100 McMahan (2008), p220.

Wesleyan clergyman David DeSilva from the mid-1860's to early 1870's, the Buddhist protagonist was able to position his religion as *more* rational and modern than that of his interlocutor.<sup>101</sup> Shaku Soen Roshi of Japan and Anagarika Dharmapala of Ceylon presented and made a big splash at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.<sup>102</sup> Dharmapala described Buddhism for his Western audience as,

*“... free from theology, priestcraft, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heavens, hells and other theological shibboleths.”*<sup>103</sup>

D.T. Suzuki, at that time a young disciple of Soen Roshi, would help splash the emerging creole into the twentieth century. Results that might well be attributed in part to this presentation were a renewed confidence for Asians in the strength of their own culture and faith, and an cascade of interest in Buddhism for the West.

Of course, almost any Buddhist tradition could use a good scrubbing and can afford to lose much of its religious muck, but certainly in the hands of many a nursemaid authentic functions have been inadvertently thrown out with the bathwater. This is “spiritual but not religious.” The danger is that the Sasana perspective might be lost altogether, ironically, for the most irrational of reasons, that is, for looking like something vaguely disagreeable to the framers of the debate. If anything, I hope in this book to have shown that the Sasana is remarkably rational in conception and implementation, in terms of achieving a well-defined function.

Probably most Western Buddhism today, certainly the “Secular Buddhist” wing, is a variant of Protestant Buddhism, much of it scoured to the bone. Sharf expresses surprise that Western Buddhism seems to share the insularity of early Chinese Buddhism, that, in spite expanding possibilities of communication in the modern world, Westerners read books by each other and only infrequently appraise the fidelity of their understanding against any Asian norms. Sharf, by induction, wonders if improved contact with India would have really made any difference in the development of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>104</sup> The danger of a Buddhist creole is that the resulting Sasana may be a kind of botanical monster missing essential functionality and clinging precariously to existence in a crag ... after an initial flash of unprecedented popularity.

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101 Prothero (1996), p. 95.

102 Fields (1992), Chapter 7 describes this conference.

103 McMahan (2008), pp. 91-7.

104 Sharf (2001), p. 23.

## ***Compromising the Dharma***

At critical points, elements of the folk culture are really-really non-negotiable, where unsuitable values, even those contrary to Buddhist functions, are so entrenched in the culture that they cannot be dislodged and must be accommodated somehow even within Adept Buddhism. Toe meets stone. We have seen one such point that was reached in China, where the core Buddhist value of home-leaving ran right up against the unshakably rock-solid value of family in Chinese folk culture. We saw that the resolution seems to have been a clever side-step, a high point in the annals of early public relations: Represent the Sangha as a great big family, with family lineages, heritages and a very long history. Just as a young bride leaves one family to join another, so does the aspiring monk leave home to join a Sangha lineage.

Another such point seems to have been reached even at the time of the Buddha or shortly thereafter, and also, I feel confident, entailed a similar clever side-step, engineered either by the Buddha himself or later by his close disciples. As far as I can see, gender equality is as fundamental in Early Buddhist thought as caste equality. However, it was inevitable that this way of thinking would stub itself on the rock of patriarchy endemic in Indian folk culture at the time of the Buddha, and up to the present day, for that matter. I have written of this elsewhere,<sup>105</sup> but let me summarize.

Evidence of the absence of gender bias in the Buddha's thought, is that the Buddha made clear that women were as capable of Awakening as men, that he created a women's Sangha, thereby granting participation in the privileges, obligations, independence and expectation of veneration of the laity that that entails, that he took great care, in the monastic code, to ensure the safety and well-being of the nuns, so that the ascetic life would be feasible, and – perhaps most tellingly – to ensure that they do not fall into conventional subservient gender roles with respect to the monks.

However, the Buddha's great concern would have been guaranteed the comfort of the nuns' Sangha. This entailed securing the acceptability of this arrangement within the prevailing folk culture and even among *his* folk following, particularly since the nuns, like the monks, would be dependent on receiving daily alms, and since the kind of independence he secured for nuns would be what in that culture was commonly associated with “loose women.” The resolution, I contend, was *symbolically* to put the nuns under the thumb of the monks, without ceding real *power* to them, through the now infamous *Garudhamma* Rules. If this analysis is correct, then *early* Buddhism itself, as

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105 Cintita (2012).

laid out in the scriptures, was not pristinely *authentic*. It was compromised for practical reasons, to sustain harmony with Folk Buddhism at a critical juncture. The irony is that the *Garudhamma*, which once appeased folk Buddhists at one time and place in history, now vexes them in the modern West, like an unwanted fruitcake one cannot graciously dispose of.

A final and far-reaching kind of non-negotiable influence on Adept Buddhism is government interference in Buddhist affairs, particularly in Sangha affairs. Emperor Ashoka, in the early centuries of Buddhism, undertook to reform the Sangha during his reign, which he felt had become corrupted and divided, by expelling wayward monks, or at least allegedly wayward monks. In the nineteenth century King Yul Brynner of Thailand<sup>106</sup> undertook to reform the Sangha, actually creating a hierarchy with government involvement at all levels in Sangha affairs, which persists to this day. In ninth century Japan, the government strictly regulated monastic ordination in an attempt to reduce the number of monks, forcing many monks into a lesser non-*Vinaya* ordination from which it has never recovered. In nineteenth century Japan, a hostile Meiji government reformed the Buddhist clergy even more substantially by disallowing the requirement of celibacy. None of this is envisioned in the *Vinaya* and most government interference seems to have in the end disrupted the proper functioning of the Sangha. But, as they say, you can't fight city hall.

### ***Marketing the Dharma***

Professional scientists often disparage their colleagues who are intent to popularize science. The ivory tower and the institutions that support it, the tenure system and the tradition of academic freedom, ensure that scientific results are not biased by popular taste or current affairs, so that scientists remain excellent. The Buddhist adepts cannot afford to be aloof in quite the same way; they are expected to teach the regular folks and make a direct difference in their lives through routine contact. To a limited degree, they *should* popularize. Yet they also require a similar degree of isolation from popular taste and current affairs, lest these draw them away from the authentic teachings of the Buddha. And, in fact, the Buddha specified a degree of aloofness: A series of monastic rules of etiquette ensure that the monastic not teach to someone, for instance, who does not show the proper respect. This is probably at least partially why Buddhism has had a scant history of proselytizing and why monks don't physically hold forth on soap boxes.

Nonetheless there are sometimes deliberate attempts on the part of adepts or

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106 Sometimes known to historians as King Mongkut or Rama IV.

Buddhist leaders to promote the Sasana, a particular movement or institution, or simply the welfare of a particular teacher, by deliberate accommodation of Folk Buddhist elements. The danger here is that the integrity of authentic Buddhism might be sacrificed. Zen Master Keizan (1268-1325) is widely considered the second founder of Soto Zen after Dogen, largely due to his success in popularizing the young movement. He continued to scrupulously promote meditation and monastic discipline as taught by the master, yet at the same time syncretized this Zen with folk practices concerning Shinto spirits (*kami* and *ryūten*) which could become either protectors of Soto temples or their adversaries. Often Soto monks would actually compete with local village spirits in displays of power, sometimes converting the spirits to the Soto cause. Over time, Soto monks succeeded in this way in occupying many abandoned Tendai and Shingon temples, assimilating spirits and villagers alike into local congregations.<sup>107</sup>

Many of the accommodations to Folk Buddhism described above may analogously involve deliberate, targeted marketing, though one would hope that more often a tolerant familiarity would suffice to inspire folks in their wholesome practices. Doctrinal widening and promotion of devotional and meditative experiences represent perhaps a bit of marketing. However, the Buddha certainly set limits on the extent to which monastics were to market themselves personally to the laity: They were allowed no claims of high states of attainment (particularly if false), and were disallowed from making teaching into a livelihood. Teaching was in this way kept honest and direct, unbiased by folk understandings.

Yet today we live in a mass marketing consumer culture. Buddhists and would-be Buddhists in the West encounter a media-enabled onslaught of teachings, practices and teachers from which American Folk Buddhists are free, at a cost, to select those that carry the most appeal, then mixing and matching the various options much as they do optional features of cars or choice of kitchen utensils. This is the way of the modern marketplace. Teachers and authors correspondingly fall easily into the role of promoting and selling particular practices and teachings as commodities, for a price, taking care how they are packaged and presented, for instance, in the form of popular self-help books, lectures, seminars, CD's, stage performances and personal hourly consultations. Here in America, where we are used to having it our way, we are offered many flavors of Buddhism: We have “beat,” “punk,” and “geek,” “formal,” your basic “upper-middle way,” and now even “hold the

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107 Heine (2008), pp. 83-85.

religion!”<sup>108</sup> At the same time information – good information – about Buddhism is widely available as never before.

Charismatic teachers who claim personal Awakening and experiences are all the rage in Buddhism, just as they are outside of Buddhism. One highly trained, authorized and “awakened” teacher has developed a remarkable breakthrough to impart “awakening to your true self,” apparently a genuine *satori* experience in an expensive group context that thereby circumvents the hours on the meditation cushion one would need to get the same experience. Testimonials indicate impressive results that not only rival what the most skilled itinerant tent revivalists are able to accomplish in group settings, but that also seem to be accessible also by telephone for an hourly fee. Although it is still unclear that this particular technique is an “answer” to anything, that it is now “easy” is certainly a significant breakthrough.

The real danger in entrusting the Sasana to the consumer market is that the market inevitably vulgarizes whatever it sells. The danger is that Buddhism will go the way of fast food, pill popping and televangelism. How can a radical Buddhism, one that teaches the way of renunciation and restraint, one challenges the most fundamental assumptions of the folk culture, avoid becoming commodified, mixed and matched and accommodated into something that has little in common with the Buddhist teachings that once passed quietly from the adepts to the folk, to those whose hearts had opened to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, who encountered monastics on their alms rounds, or approached them at their monasteries with questions, or simply learned to emulate their demeanor, their behavior, the simplicity of their lives and their kindness?

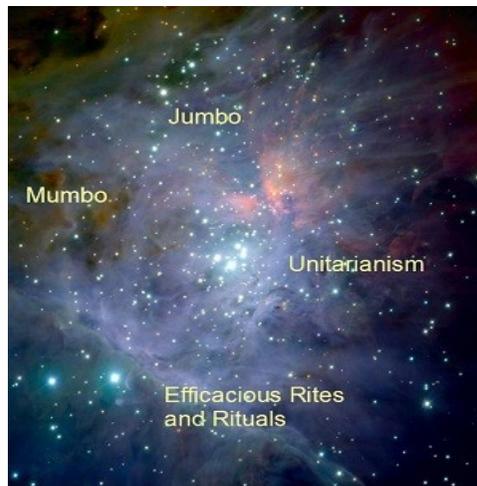
### ***Losing One's Head***

We have examined a series of negotiations between Adept Buddhism and Folk Buddhism. What is noteworthy is that the soapbox of Adept Buddhism dominates these discussions; it is, after all, the authority on all things Dharmic, and in this way Folk Buddhism tends to more or less fall in line behind Adept Buddhism, giving the Sasana its characteristic comet shape. But what happens if there is no Adept Buddhism? The short answer is not surprising: the Sasana dissolves and floats off in a whirl of cultic bubbles. I will call a Folk Buddhism that is not anchored to an Adept Buddhist an *Independent Folk Buddhism*.

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108 Tweed (2000, Preface) additionally describes the broad influence Buddhism currently enjoys in the fashion and trinket industries.

An early example of an Independent Folk Buddhism is found in the history of East Asia in connection with *mo-fa* (in Chinese, *mappo* in Japanese), the teaching that Buddhism had entered its final stage of decline, in which it is harder if not impossible for monastics to maintain discipline, for yogis to attain *jhana* or for the dedicated and devout to attain any semblance of Awakening.<sup>109</sup> *Mo-fa* led to two divergent attitudes toward practice, short of dismissing this teaching altogether. The first was to intensify one's efforts to overcome the *mo-fa* handicap, as Hsin-hsing (540-594) advocated. The other was to lower one's sights, to make do with practices that would fall short of the aspirations of old, yet would be manageable and of some minimal efficacy. The latter attitude may have encouraged the popularity of Pure Land Buddhism and the practice of calling on the external aid of Amitabha Buddha.



*The Comet Loses Its Head.*

In Japan, Buddhist schools fell definitively on either side of the *mappo* issue. At one extreme was Dogen Zenji (1200-1253), founder of the Soto Zen school in Japan, who considered *mappo* total nonsense, yet advocated intensification of efforts anyway. *Mappo* also had little currency in the Japanese Tantric *Shingon* school.<sup>110</sup> On the other side were Honen (1133-1212), the founder of

109 Jaffe (2001), 128-131, Nattier (1992), 90-118.

110 Jaffe (2001), p. 131.

Pure Land in Japan and Nichiren Daishonin (1222-1282), founder of the school that bears his name. The expected and unfortunate consequence of taking *mappo* seriously is the disassociation of Folk Buddhism from its Adept Buddhist head, since *mappo* entails that neither the aspirations nor the example of would-be adepts should be taken seriously. Japan accordingly provides a number of examples of what happens when Buddhism loses its head.

Recall that Pure Land in China was essentially a folk movement within other schools, that were themselves under monastic guidance. Under Honen, Pure Land in Japan became a distinct *school*, the *Jodo Shu*, in which all scriptures were discarded except the original vow of Amitabha, and adherents were expected to devote themselves to the single-minded practice of *nembutsu*, recitation of the name of Amitabha Buddha, a characteristically *folk* practice. Honen's disciple and monk Shinran (1173-1263) decided in 1207 to get married, and thereby founded an order of married clergy known as the *Jodo Shinshu*. For many centuries the *Jodo Shinshu* would be the bane of the Japanese Buddhist clergy, until a married priesthood became the norm throughout Japanese Buddhism, beginning with a Meiji government edict of 1872 that sought to restructure Buddhism in Japan, and succeeded.<sup>111</sup>

Nichiren, similarly, advocated a single-minded devotional practice to carry us through the *mappo*, this time *gohozon*, a devotional practice based on the second rather than the first Gem, in particular the chanting the name of the Mahayana *Lotus Sutra*. Out of the Nichiren school arose much of today's New Buddhism in Japan, sects, such as *Soka Gakkai*, that have eliminated clergy altogether<sup>112</sup> and, as Robert Sharf describes,<sup>113</sup> rely for their authority not on lineage, not on any special training or study, but on charismatic lay leaders who claim some special experience, much as found in many evangelical or charismatic Christian sects in America, that also tend to disappear or splinter with the loss of a leader. The priesthood of the other schools, in the meantime, reserves the right to perform rites and rituals, but are generally not expected to provide pristine examples of conduct, nor to be adepts or Buddhist virtuosos.<sup>114</sup> Such seems to be the lot of an Independent Folk Buddhism.

Similar trends have been observed in Sri Lanka, where in colonial times an urban Western-educated class had developed, that had begun to hold the Sangha in contempt, for two reasons: First, because of its largely rural origin,

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111 Jaffe (2001) provides a comprehensive account of this development, its precedents and its consequences.

112 See Jaffe (2001), p. 231-2 on New Buddhism in Japan.

113 Sharf (1995a).

114 Jaffe (2001), p. 232.

it lacked of Western education and knowledge of the Western world. Second, the educated elite had learned to map Buddhism to Protestant standards that minimized the role of clergy. The result was the development of lay Buddhism with many of the weaknesses of much of Protestant Christianity: the creation of sects by charismatic self-authorized individuals, who sometimes claimed to possess special insights and to represent “true Buddhism.”<sup>115</sup>

Although there seems generally to be a sense in Japan that authentic Buddhism is out of reach, that certainly the priests do not uphold it, Jaffe reports on the continuing resilience of the monastic *ideal* in the minds of Japanese Buddhists, for instance, the lack of public arguments in *favor* of clerical marriage and the continued official, but unobserved, prohibition of sexual relations for priests within certain schools, such as Soto and Obaku Zen, even while over ninety percent of clergy in these schools is married, along with a widespread nostalgia for old-time monastics. A common attitude is that the clergy *should ideally* observe monastic practice even if it *can't practically*.<sup>116</sup>

What happens if a form of Buddhism has never had a head? I fear this might well characterize the current reality of Buddhism in the cultural West, and most especially Creole or Protestant Buddhism, as it once characterized early Chinese Buddhism. Whatever adepts there are in the West, are primarily non-monastics; the entire institutional Sangha of European, American, Australian, etc. ethnicity, probably numbers altogether no more than a couple or a few hundred, by my own estimation. Some of the other adepts are ordained and trained in the priesthood of the Japanese tradition, certified in one way or another through training in other Asian traditions, or else have advanced academic degrees in Buddhist Studies. Although there are undoubtedly lay teachers of great accomplishment, few of the general Buddhist population know who they might be among the many charismatic self-qualified teachers who claim special insights and who advocate single-minded meditation in the quest for breakthrough experiences. Although there are undoubtedly adepts in the West, the firm anchor that is the role of Adept Buddhism, or of the Sangha, is missing. The absence of a Third Gem is like a boat without a rudder, a car without a steering wheel, a coupon without a store in which to redeem it, a comet without a head. This constitutes an Independent Folk Buddhism. Today we take Refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and, I fear, the Market.

I make these observations not to impart a sense of alarm or despair, but rather to underscore that we are in the West in a formative stage, one in which the Buddha's Sasana has yet to establish firm roots. We are all pioneers with a

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115 Gombrich (2006), pp. 193-201.

116 Jaffe (2001), pp. 234, 240-241.

shared responsibility for the historical and epic emergence of a thriving Sasana. I make these observations in order to inspire a sense of urgency in assuming that responsibility. This is not the time of the spiritual-but-not-religious!

### ***Negotiating with the Broader Folk Culture***

A challenge to Folk Buddhism is the danger of succumbing to the onslaught of those personal and cultural factors of the wider society that cause the distress and suffering authentic Buddhism is intended to resolve in the first place. Rather than following the direct path advanced by Adept Buddhism, unwary followers of Folk Buddhism may come under distracting or unsavory and opprobrious influences, inimical to the teachings, practices and values of authentic Buddhism. Folk Buddhism might begin to assume much of the materialism, acquisitiveness or intolerance from the embedding culture, and, in the worst case, even think some of this belongs to the Buddha's teachings! It may even come under manipulation of special interests who exploit Folk Buddhism, for instance, of commercial interests or governments who seek to control public opinion to legitimize the illegitimate. It is the Adept Buddhist's role to tether Folk Buddhism, as firmly as possible, to an authentic Buddhism. It is the Folk Buddhist's role to tame, as well as it can, the unwholesome influences of the broader society.

For instance, in moments of distraction, Folk Buddhists may lose their exemption from the allure of the consumer culture, which deliberately stimulates irrational, emotional and delusive aspects of human cognition, and subdues clear rational thinking, in order to manipulate patterns of consumption. From the authentic Buddhist perspective, such consumerism is an, uh, abomination. Modern consumerism is of an order that goes beyond satisfying human need to feeding human greed, which Buddhism teaches will never ever be satisfied and will in fact plunge all those singed by it into bottomless depths of human misery.

### ***Conclusion***

In case we don't yet have enough metaphors floating around: The negotiations of Dharma pull in every direction like unruly horses. The adepts are the charioteer whose arms take up the reins of authority to steer the chariot of the Sasana over an unsteady landscape in the authentic direction, toward the Awakening of the entire society. The reins are implicit in the Triple Gem. The charioteer is there, by virtue of the Sangha and the Buddhist community that

sustains him. The chariot manifests the communal meaning of our practice and understanding. And the Folk Buddhists are passengers hanging on, and sometimes falling out, during a rather bumpy ride. This is the Buddha-Sasana.

I can scarcely do justice to the many conversations that have at different times and places constituted the Buddha-Sasana, the living organism of Dharma, but I hope in this chapter to have illustrated how an authentic Buddhism manages to shine through in the midst of evolution and variation. I think the tools are in place for a critical understanding of what current trends contribute to or undermine the overall health of the Sasana in the great confluence of Buddhism and folk culture currently playing out in the Land of the Fork.

As we listen in on these conversations in the twenty-first century, we at first see a Buddhist landscape extremely diverse, constituting an impossible range of doctrinal positions, beliefs, practices and rituals, cultural influences, and manifold religious admixtures, with little apparent consensus and a very weak adept head. For the newcomer to Buddhism, it is easy to see how one might throw one's hands up in despair and perhaps entertain the hope that Baha'i or Sufism is easier to sort out. I hope to have shown that there is far more order here than at first appears, that malleability is a remarkable feature that has always characterized the Sasana, even while the Sasana has retained the ancient integrity of the Buddha's Dharma-Vinaya. I hope that the individual explorer of this landscape might find, through the understandings developed here, a personal dwelling place, somewhere between the mountains of the adepts and the plains of the folk, attaining something between a panoramic view of the entire unfolding Sasana and the spiritual seclusion of the narrowly targeted Buddhist Path, that suits her particular aspirations.



## Chapter 8

# Navigating the Sasana

The Springdale Buddhist Center held a lavish banquet for its members, and offered the whole fare, from hors d'oeuvre to dessert. To their great dismay, few seemed to eat lavishly. The festival committee (Bob, Carol and Skipper) asked around and discovered that most guests who were failing to eat well, were doing so for what they felt were unreasonable reasons, and as a result failed to benefit fully from what was offered.

“Is this the future shape of Buddhism in the Land of the Fork?” they thought collectively.

They identified the following feeding patterns, which they put up on a white-board, each with its own bullet:

Some guests were “● *simply uninformed*” about food. Some people, Bob observed, would ignore items simply because they did not recognize them, or they misperceived them, or they were unsure about the proper manner of eating them. They could have asked, but most of the people around them didn't seem to know either.

Some guests were simply “● *stuck in the familiar*.” Fish eggs, or lychees, or octopus would make them cringe. These mostly ate rolls, cold cuts, and cole slaw.

Some guests, in contrast, “● *seek out the exotic*.” One or two people, as Skipper identified, will not intend to stay long, but will maybe take some reindeer paté on a rice cracker or something likewise exotic or appealing. They could be heard sharing the recollection of their experiences with friends the following day.

Some guests seem “● *more analytical than daring*” in their approach to eating. These people, Carol explained, are always quite informed of recent

incidents of salmonella poisoning, tainted shellfish, misidentified mushrooms, typhoid. They know all about trichinosis, cancer, and how all of these relate to the food we eat. They also carefully calculate calories; fat, protein and carbohydrate levels; and the amounts they are getting of each vitamin and mineral. They eye unidentified foods with great suspicion. All of these people are terribly skinny.

Some guests can only stay long enough to “• *grab something to eat,*” as Bob observed, generally a sandwich or couple of egg rolls, because they have to rush to put in some overtime at work, or they are on their way to the opera or a lecture and have just come from a workout at the gym. Even in the buffet line they talk on their cell phones. These are busy people, people with lifestyles.

Some guests, whether they eat a lot or not, nonetheless “• *eat but do not help with cleanup.*” Some could be seen slinking past the wash area, others seemed to think they were at a restaurant with paid bus staff, in one case even imperiously asking another guest, who happened to be clearing some tables, to refill her coffee cup.

But then there were some guests who “• *try everything,*” and even take great pleasure in the cleanup. Skipper pointed out that there are still rare individuals who come with big appetites, know their foods, have let go of all destructive preconceptions and are curious and daring about what they’ve been invited to enjoy, who are capable of savoring the sublime and valuing the simple. Furthermore, these people generally give themselves ample time to enjoy food and company.

“They have a fork and they know how to use it,” Carol added with regard to the last group.

The following year the committee met to consider again holding a Second Annual Buddhist Banquet. There were different opinions about what to offer.

At one extreme was Bob’s suggestion. Bob’s proposal was to offer the “whole Buddhist fare, from embodiment to realization,” exactly as they had done last year. However, before the banquet they would send out abundant information on the various foods, along with detailed descriptions of how to eat lobster and some of the more difficult dishes, with photographs and diagrams. Guests would be asked to arrive by 5:00 pm, after which the doors would be locked from the outside and not reopened until all the food was eaten. Also pocket calculators, cell phones and other electronic gear would be collected at the door.

At the other extreme was Carol's suggestion. The other two members of the committee could not determine if Carol was more forgiving than Bob or not. Her proposal was to offer spaghetti, marshmallow salad and dinner rolls. And beer.

“The greatest common denominator,” Carol called it.

### ***Picky Eaters in the Land of the Fork***

Let's get personal: What does this all mean to *you*, as a hopefully eager, but perhaps perplexed, navigator of the modern Buddha-Sasana? What choices do *you* make at the buffet?

For consistency with the running metaphor – which I hope has served well for explaining doctrinal, historical and sociological aspects of the Sasana – you might expect to personally encounter what has evolved, been cultivated, grown and harvested, in a flower shop. But the buffet counter is a similar, and likely even more familiar, realm of personal engagement. For many in the West, first stepping up to Buddhism is much like surveying the daunting range of options at an elaborate buffet. You may be tempted to throw up your hands up in despair and perhaps entertain the hope that the menu at a cafeteria or pizza restaurant might be easier to sort out.

An appropriate strategy for navigating any buffet table depends on your aspirations and opportunity: taste, health, unique experiences, sharing with others, putting on or taking off weight, leisure to linger. As you graze along the various counters you might look for the gourmet or the folksy, for the Path dishes or the Sasana, for the challenging or the simple, for the foreign or the native cuisine.

For a while, at least, we can anticipate that your understanding will tend toward folksy, blended with partial- and mis-understandings, along with highly attractive notions of no Buddhist pedigree whatever. Nonetheless you can align yourself from the beginning in the direction of an adept understanding by taking Noble Ones, along with the Buddha and the Dharma, as your primary influences and the most reliable sources of understanding. Or you might alternatively find hope in some defined folk tradition that some friends have latched on to, trusting that it will develop in you wholesome qualities capable of taking you at least half-way toward becoming a Noble One yourself. Almost any proper folk tradition is at least *consistent* with the understanding and practice of the Noble Ones. You might aspire to anything from complete Awakening to pleasant this-worldly abiding in relative psycho-therapeutic

comfort.

The Path practices will be more challenging, like putting a lobster or an artichoke on your plate. Devotional practices, like chanting *nembutsu* or mindfulness of the Buddha as a way of strengthening Refuge, are more like pudding or chips. I hope that the reading this book has awakened in you both gratitude, and a sense of responsibility that highlights the non-Path dishes and that will make you a much-needed supporter of the Sasana.

I hope that you also appreciate that it is a mistake to limit your buffet grazing range on the basis of accustomed tastes, for even Adept Buddhisms have come through foreign cultural filters, even while others' Folk Buddhisms might in their abstruseness serve little to improve your understanding. However, you might personally *like* exotic cultures for their own sake, or a particular culture, whose exploration can be as expansively illuminating for you as mastering foreign tongues. I suggest that you be willing to try anything at least once, to eat sumptuously but with discrimination, to consider the full Buddhist fare without upsetting the stomach. Your accustomed feeding patterns may hinder or help you. Let's review these:

### ***Simply uninformed***

You might feel quite "in the know" at the samadhi dishes, quickly picking out a couple alternative objects of meditation for your dinner plate and moving on. You might have a bit more trouble telling a perception from a formation as you pass by the aggregates of clinging. Then you get to the area where you are to seek admiral friends, most of whose attire is mortifyingly out of fashion, and the alleged best of whom won't even watch a football game with you, nor share celebrity gossip nor investment advice, or even a drink. And you are supposed to take Refuge in, and bow to them? Won't they get lodged between your teeth or give you heartburn?

Living in the West, you have an unprecedented quantity of information about Buddhism readily available, but it is lopsided. This book was written largely to help correct a particular deficit in this regard, for almost all information available in the West is about the narrower Path perspective, almost nothing about the broader Sasana perspective, with its leaves and roots, blossom and sources of nutriment: sun, water and soil. But without a strong basis in Refuge and in community you will be ill-prepared and not likely inspired to take up the Path. *With* a strong basis in Refuge and in community, you can develop many wholesome qualities, gradually, starting at a tender age (if you still happen to be at one), already long before even considering entering the Path.

You will naturally help to sustain and promote the Sasana, generously and for the benefit of many. And, hey, you will commune with, and be inspired by, Noble Ones of radical and subversive influence almost on a daily basis, who stand as a persistent reality check for all of your samsaric inclinations.

### ***Stuck in the familiar***

One morning the abbot of a Burmese monastery in Texas announced that the monks were, that very day, to appease the tree spirits who had happily inhabited two trees until these trees had been cut down during an ongoing construction project. They were to chant a bit of Pali and then the abbot would talk to the spirits. It seems that the *nats* had been up to some mischief, since losing their homes, at the expense some members of our larger community. Your author had never heard of such a thing, but after several years in Burmese monasteries there was little that surprised him. Nonetheless, a cloud of skepticism passed over his face on this particular occasion:

“When you talk to the *nats*, are you going to talk to them ... in Burmese?”

“Yes.”

“Well, this is Texas. They are *Texan* tree spirits. How can they understand Burmese? They probably have names like Dusty, Clem and Pedro.”

“I think tree spirits can understand any language. But just in case, ... *you* talk to them in English as well.”

You might *like* dinner rolls, cold cuts and cole slaw, and live in a comfort zone which makes you disinclined to step beyond the preconceptions, the views, values and patterns of thought and behavior you grew up with, into that realm where people are a bit weird and unable to think so “freely” as you. You might find yourself, as you scan the buffet, thinking things like, “Rules are for stupid people who don’t already know how to do the right thing,” or “There is no such thing as karma,” or “Buddhism is about discovering your true self so that you can act natural.” For you are a “freethinker.”

Generally we do not recognize that we are conditioned by our folk culture any more than we recognize that we speak with an accent. You might not yet fully realize the tacit and indiscriminating trust you place in your own folk culture. Any culture has its gems of caprice waiting to be discovered. In ours we believe in an innermost heart that seeks to express itself unhindered by, uh,

cultural constraints. In someone else's they have equally fanciful notions. This mandates Refuge. Without grasping the lifeline of the Triple Gem you have almost no chance to reconsider the bias of your upbringing, nor to place your trust instead in the Buddha, in his teachings and in the Noble Ones. Trust in something is unavoidable. Discernment in your trust is nonetheless an ever present option, while freethinking is, alas, very rare thing.<sup>117</sup>

Your comfort zone is likely to be violated in two ways. One is an almost inevitable result of deeper Buddhist practice. Once you enter the Path with full determination, begin to explore the deep and previously unacknowledged regions of your own mind and experience, and discover that many of your most deeply held assumptions and habit patterns don't hold water, the world becomes like a foreign land, much less substantial than you had imagined. This can be scary, like the floor suddenly giving out under you. More than ever you will need the Noble Ones to hold you, the ones who warned you that this might happen. However, the more immediate violation of your comfort zone might be the encounter with those very exotic cultures that have been the caretakers of Buddhism in the course of the last one hundred generations, the same cultures that have brought peculiarity and anomaly to the practices and beliefs of local traditions, to the garb of monastics, to the style of liturgy, to the presence of unfamiliar figures in temple statuary, to unfamiliar rites at temple altars, to unknown scriptures on temple bookshelves, and to hocus pocus all around.

You might not have intended to become Indiana Jones in pursuit of your spiritual aspirations, but the most worthwhile artifacts are to be found in exotic places, even on geographically Western soil. I think of the beatniks of San Francisco who first sought out "Zen Master" Shunryu Suzuki Roshi at the Sokoji Temple and were quick to peg him as "like, squaresville." Fortunately they, at least some of them, revised their first impression and dared to place their trust beyond the familiar, and they returned to the temple. You too should consider venturing into Asian temples, because at least 99% of the world's adepts are there, and particularly because examples of a fully functional, sustainable Sasana are still extremely rare outside of Asian communities, the kind of place in which your kids, for instance, can play among the leaves and be nourished by sun, water and soil.

At the same time, it makes almost no sense whatever for you to learn someone *else's* Folk Buddhism, unless you happen actually to be an anthropologist or have a strong inclination in that direction, since someone else's Folk

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117 I think I may have experienced a brief free thought just last month, the content of which I cannot seem to recall.

Buddhism is an attempt to harmonize with someone else's folk culture, which cannot help *you* in *yours*. You do well to respect someone else's Folk Buddhism, with all its cultural accretions, but need not make it your own. On the other hand, while Adept Buddhism can seem remarkably modern, it always has culturally-conditioned factors of its own, such as *anjali* – present from the time of the Buddha – and the intensely ritualized conduct of Zen. You do well venerate Adept Buddhism, even with its cultural accretions, and should be willing at every opportunity to make it your own.

As someone stuck in the familiar, your first inclination might well be to try to expunge your Buddhism of all foreign cultural influences, but this unnecessarily arbitrary act will throw out the Buddha with the bathwater. A bit of Indiana Jones' daring is called for, at least a willingness to explore exotic places. Playfulness is also apt. Your kids will love it.

### ***Seeking the exotic***

There are days in which you seem to swing in the opposite direction, to reach out for unfamiliar contexts and unique experiences, to eat of octopus or of mountain oysters, to sip of kop luwak coffee, or of bird's nest soup, to seek mystical and peak experiences or simply, through Buddhist channels, to enter into exotic cultures. This attitude can be an asset, and if you begin your explorations in Buddhist temples in the geographical West you can become a tourist in exploring exotic places, while sparing yourself air tickets, hotel rooms and jet lag. However, take care not, in a relentless search for special experiences, to flit around from one opportunity to the next, to attend a seminar one weekend in which an initial Awakening experience is promised in a comfortable group setting, and a Sufi dancing workshop the next, to chant *nembutsu* the weekend after that. And don't be a sucker for snake oil.

What is in danger of being lost in the quest for experiences is the well-rounded development of your complete human character. The bread and butter of the gradual Path taught by the Buddha do not come with peak experiences attached; they are more humdrum than that. You do best to begin with Refuge, generosity, kindness and renunciation and move on from there. Higher attainments, which *do* often involve uncommon experiences, are generally reserved for those who work at it full time for many years, particularly for those who take advantage of the monastic path. Slow and steady wins the race. Lining up unintegrated peak experiences that do not have a history of working together will produce something like a centipede who is unable to coordinate its myriad feet. Wriggle as you might, you will make no progress along the

Buddhist Path. This is often a pitfall in the New Age movement.

To make matters worse, you live in a consumer culture which markets not products and services but *experiences*. You do not simply buy an iThingy or a potato chip, but a special experience, one that will transform *you* into one of the gleeful smiling models in the ads. This is dangerous when it intersects with Buddhist practice. As noted, Folk Buddhist movements already have a bit of a history of extolling experience. With the help of modern marketing it is bound to create the very acquisitiveness that Buddhist practice is intended to overcome. Rather than renouncing one thread of samsaric life after another as you make progress along the Path, you may end up adding one marketable product or service after another to an already karmically overburdened life.

I suggest that you pursue a middle-way between the familiar and the exotic, swinging too far neither to the one or the other extreme.

### ***More analytical than daring***

“Religiosity” might well frighten you; it is the world of of terrorists, of hypocritical opportunists, of pedophiles, of blindly faithful suckers, and of people who knock on your door to tell you stuff, won’t go away and keep coming back. These are scary things. “Religiosity” at the same time might remind you too closely of the root religion that you had managed to analyze your way *out* of. But saying, “I’ve had it with religiosity!” is a little like surviving an earthquake and declaring in a descending voice, “I’ve had it with ground!” Where will you stand?

Maybe you were initially attracted to Buddhism because it appeared refreshingly more rational than your root religion, much of it is almost scientific, valuing personal investigation, seeing things as they are, and reasonably well avoiding metaphysical speculation. However, it also mandates trust, and veneration, of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Refuge might once have been too daring for you, placing far too much trust in uncertainties, and as a result you may have spent years *thinking* about becoming a Buddhist. Perhaps you ran up and down along the shore for a time, while others plunged into the community, into Refuge, and into practice and study, to emerge wiser, kinder and more equanimous on the other shore. Observing the positive results of their choices, you might eventually have reached your tipping point, and taken the plunge, as an act of discerning trust to bring you into the Buddha-Sasana, among the leaves, nourished from sun, water and soil.

On the other hand, many have found it hard to reach that tipping point and

have remained nominal Buddhists of no Refuge. They have kept their trust (generally without even realizing that trust is involved) fixed in whatever culturally transmitted influences were alive in their lives *before* they were mature enough to fear uncertainty. With such preemption of trust in the Triple Gem, they have refused to listen to the voice from the mountaintop telling them of vistas they have not already seen with their own eyes. Instead, they imagine a Buddha in their own cultural image, a science-inspired rationalist, Romanticism-inspired individualist and a humanistically-inspired secularist, standing down here with them, on the flatlands. Representing an almost tidal Folk Buddhist movement in the West today, without Refuge, those among the analytic but not daring, are fated to drift off eventually into a very large cultic bubble.

One quite remarkable, vexing, but common manifestation of such timidity is the withholding of “indoctrination” in Buddhism from the next generation. Already excluded by adherents of the Path perspective by quickly tiring of meditation, the kiddies in this way should make up their own mind about religion when they reach adulthood. I suppose the logic is that the young ones will remain free-thinking blank slates completely untainted by rampant unwholesome cultural influences, if only parents refuse to instill the fundamental values and skills endorsed in something like Buddhism, such as generosity, kindness, serenity, mindfulness and discernment in trust. However, the parents’ most fundamental duty, it seems to me, is precisely to apply their own discernment as best they can in choosing their children’s influences until the children’s own discernment matures, lest the TV chooses those influences for them. The same logic behind this timidity would also reserve for the children the right to choose their own mother tongue until adulthood by withholding language from them, though I have heard of no actual instances of this.

### ***Grabbing something to eat***

We are a consumer culture; we accumulate but do not let go. We clutter our houses with things and our lives with commitments: opera tickets, gym membership, psychotherapy sessions, automatic bill payments. Buddhism becomes another commitment: Membership in a Buddhist center commits Grabbing’s time to meditation on certain mornings or evenings and to an occasional Dharma talk. The problem is that Buddhism never becomes foundational for him, but instead floats on the surface until it is buried under the next consumer accretion in his busy life. Buddhism is most properly the *foundation* of the Buddhist life, not just another room or closet built on a

growing domestic footprint.

Often Grabbing seeks depth by narrowly focusing on a single practice, because that is what he imagines he has time for. In Asia that would be most typically a devotional practice like *nembutsu*. At the same time, Western culture has another dynamic going on: Many of us like to excel, even when we know we are overreaching. Get a gym membership and we imagine ourselves as Charles Atlas. Join a “sangha” and we imagine ourselves as Dogen Zenji. Meditation, the highest Path practice, naturally dominates, and with it an expectation of sudden Awakening. In spite of its benefits, this approach misses the breadth of Buddhist practice and understanding, and therefore cannot hope to reach the depth of Buddhist attainment. Missing are not only Sasana practices, like generosity, veneration and rubbing shoulders with admirable friends, but even most Path practices as well, like virtue and renunciation.

### ***Eating but not helping with the cleanup***

These are the spiritual but not religious among us. To the extent that they embrace the Buddhist Path, that is good; I certainly do not intend to discourage that. But from the Path the view of the Sasana can be narrow. What the merely spiritual overlook is an appreciation of, and a responsibility to, the Sasana, for it is the Sasana that has sustained the Dharma these hundred generations, supported by countless adepts who have kept the flame of Dharma alive, supported institutionally and socially by the gratitude and generosity of normal folks, that our present lives might intersect with the teachings of the Buddha.

Losing the Sasana perspective represents not only a loss to society and to the Buddhist community, it represents a loss to individual practice, and ultimately will represent the disappearance of the Dharma. The Sasana produces Noble Ones to serve as admirable friends, to inspire and inform us in our practice and understanding. The Sasana sustains a community whose lifeblood is generosity. The Sasana entails Refuge and veneration as a source of influence and also of humility. The Sasana provides a family-friendly context in which even children can acquire healthy values and influences. The Sasana supports special opportunities for higher practice for those of higher aspiration as they walk the Path. The Sasana sustains a culture of Awakening.

### ***Trying everything***

Many are the picky eaters in the Land of the Fork. Even while we rarely fully escape our own cultural upbringing, we do not need to let it obscure the

Sasana, nor much of the Path. We can be daring enough to try it all.

Bowing is a good place to start, precisely because it is readily met with both bewilderment and resistance in the Land of the Fork. Try standing bows, Zen or Theravada style bows in which you touch your head to the floor, and Tibetan bows in which you lie flat on your stomach with arms outstretched. Try chanting the praises of Amitabha Buddha or put on a mask and try to act spontaneously with the best of them. Try it all, because none of it is harmful and most of it is probably beneficial and fun.

This willingness will open up much more than you can possibly make use of in your Buddhist life, but it will keep you from overlooking what is important out of self-image or cultural bias. What you ultimately embrace will become more discerning as you try to match your aspirations to your opportunities, but a willingness to try everything creates a larger space in which to make your choices.

My recommendations:

- Take advantage of communal resources in your area, otherwise your Buddhist life may be limited to the Path and uninspired.
- Identify the range of communities – temples, monasteries, centers and informal meeting groups, both Western and Asian – in your area and begin visiting some. You might be pleasantly surprised how many there are. The primary question to bring with you on your visits is, Is the Sasana healthy and thriving here? Bring along a sketch of the Flower of the Sasana from Chapter Two to check what might be missing. As an ever quicker check ask, Is this a generous community? and, Is this community child-friendly?
- Assess the Folk Buddhism in each particular site you visit. In any community, Western or Asian, Folk Buddhist practices and understandings will likely dominate, and will, perhaps, be all you will encounter. It is important to begin with a respect for *all* Folk Buddhism, no matter how exotic it may appear. Folk Buddhism virtually always provides a wholesome context for development in its own particular cultural context, if not in yours.
- Seek out admirable friendship or a source of teachings that will point you toward an adept understanding and practice. In particular, meet the Sangha or the teachers of the particular community with a sense of humility and respect. Try to find an adept who communicates well with you. With adept advice, begin life-style changes, a program of

study and a meditation practice.

- Support the Sasana as much as you can, so that the living Dharma will survive for the welfare and happiness of the people and the benefit of the multitude. This is in itself at the same time one of the most immediately effective, satisfying and yet in the West overlooked forms of Buddhist practice.

You will find that your own language and culture are critical limiting factors in this exploration. In general, the health of the Sasana and the presence of adepts is far greater in the Asian communities. However, if you are a Westerner, the Folk Buddhism and teaching are likely far more compatible with your cultural comfort-zone and language in Western centers. An Asian Folk Buddhism will not serve you as well as it serves the cultural Asian, and you may not even share a language in common with the top Asian adept. These are the reasons Asians join Asian communities, Westerners join Western communities. Here a little boldness may be in order. I've know Asians, for instance, who have joined Western communities because of the presence of an outstanding and very adept meditation teacher.

The bold explorer open to trying everything is very rare.

“A rare bird indeed,” says Carol.

### ***The Basic Buddhist Life***

Ajahn Suwat from Thailand, leading a meditation retreat in the USA, once commented to his American host,

“I notice that when these people meditate they're awfully grim.”

He quickly attributed this to the lack of preparation of the meditators in the other Buddhist teachings, in particular, in trust, in generosity and in virtue, which in Asia would generally precede training in meditation, and as Thanissaro Bhikkhu suggests, would help develop a sense of spaciousness and happiness as an appropriate context for meditation.<sup>118</sup>

For a Western newcomer, Buddhism as a whole might appear at first as a vexing tangle of bushes with a few edible berries, but with no clear path or order. A unified concept “Buddhism” might seem irretrievably lost to history, now broken up into Mahayana and Theravada, Eastern and Western, secular and religious, spiritual and religious, and all these regional ethnic forms. Scholars are also known to find it jaw-droppingly so, and some are even

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118 Thanissaro (1999), p. 7.

beginning to insist on “Buddhisms” as a plural, a bit too hastily, in my view.

The individual or collective Western response to the vexing tangle has often much like that of the new landowner who discovers an overgrown but still potentially productive corn field on his property and with limited understanding of both corn and non-corn, dauntlessly hacks away with a machete only to destroy half of the corn and to leave half of the undergrowth, and then plants one row of Monsanto super-corn and row of squash to make it look right. It looks pretty good, so he calls it Western Buddhism and expects it to save Buddhism from centuries of Asian misunderstanding and cultural accretions. He, with all the hubris and discernment of a rowdy teenager, has created yet another Folk Buddhism and has attributed to it authenticity.

I hope this book has provided a more orderly perspective on the diffuseness of Buddhism, one that shows the Sasana, much like a palm tree, both resiliently and tolerantly holding that diffuseness. It does indeed grow wild where it is most under the influence of the many diverse cultural factors, but it nonetheless holds firm in its Adept Buddhism, with its adherence to a Path that culminates in the singular attainment of Awakening. Refuge is what keeps the tangle of the tail in rough alignment with the solidity of the head, in that it recognizes the ultimate authority of the adepts and enforces some degree of consistency with what they teach. There is therefore a pattern in the great range of variance in Buddhist understanding and practice even as the authenticity of the Sasana in all of its functional components is retained. Nonetheless, what we find in the West is the dominance of a Buddhism radically pruned back to a local Folk Buddhism.

“That’s what I mean by spaghetti,” exclaims Carol.

In the emerging Western Folk Buddhism, a single-minded focus on meditation is frequently regarded as the entirety of Buddhism. The cultural reasons for this can be found at the buffet table. For *Simply Uninformed*, meditation is recognizable; Western yogas have meditated for years and the Buddha almost always clearly sits in meditation posture. For *Seeking The Exotic*, meditation is the most reliable source of peak experiences. For *Stuck in the Familiar*, something like meditation is common to many religious traditions at some level, similar to prayer and to other other contemplative practices. For *More Analytical Than Daring*, meditation has some solid science behind it, verifying certain beneficial qualities, physical as well as psychological, while direct benefits of other aspects of the Path and Sasana are often more difficult to quantify. For *Grabbing Something To Eat*, meditation fits well with the accrued composition of the Busy Life. For *Not Helping*, meditation is a solitary practice. For *Trying Everything*, meditation is a very sumptuous dish

indeed for an active fork, but does not exhaust the opportunities for Buddhist practice by a long shot.

The common zeal for meditation is certainly a strength of Western Buddhism, while the dearth of complementary practices is a weakness. Indeed, generosity, veneration, humility and renunciation are rarely even recognized as fundamental Buddhist practices in the Land of the Fork, substantially simplifying one's life receives little encouragement, the Refuges are poorly understood, and many centers have removed the perceived religiosity of altars, chanting and bowing completely. Even virtue and wisdom are woefully neglected as factors that will eventually arise out of meditation practice, rather than embraced as foundations for meditation. Many wonder why nuns and monks don't just go out and get jobs.

“What's left is marshmallow salad,” explains Carol.

### ***If Aspiration should Get the Better of You, ...***

The option of ordination into the Sangha is something of a birthright, wherever the Sasana is strong.<sup>119</sup> Should you go off the deep end in your practice, that is, should your progress toward Awakening and all that that entails become *the* dominant concern of your life, then the monastic life is the ideal container for your aspirations. It is also the best way to support the Sasana, *especially* in the West where it is still so weak.

The institutional Sangha is the lynchpin of the Buddhist community and the mainstay of the Sasana:

1. The Monastic Sangha ensures the existence of Noble Ones, saints, admirable friends and adepts. As long as monastics live rightly, there will be Awakened people in the world.
2. The Monastic Sangha is responsible, by the Buddha's authority, for preserving the integrity of the Dharma, for maintaining the authentic adept understanding.
3. The monastics are the visible symbol of the Third Gem, in which we take Refuge, to inspire, exemplify and instruct.
4. Monastic discipline defines the life of the entire Buddhist community, particularly in that it provides a basis for the practice of generosity and the opportunity for intense practice and study for those whose

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<sup>119</sup> I realize this statement highlights an impairment of health in a number of existing traditions, unequal access for women.

aspirations are high.

5. The monastic code, the *Vinaya*, is half of *Dharma-Vinaya*, the expression the Buddha consistently used in reference to the entirety of his teachings.

These functions together define the shape of both the flower and the comet of Buddhism and are therefore responsible for the Sasana's characteristics of both resilience and malleability. Walpola Rahula, author of *What the Buddha Taught*, wrote:<sup>120</sup>

“It is the members of the “Institutional Sangha,” the bhikkhus, who have been the custodians of the Dhamma, and have transmitted it throughout these twenty-five centuries for the perpetuation of the Sasana (Buddhism). It is the “Institutional Sangha” that can be established in a country as an organized, visible representative body of the Sangha of the Three Jewels. So those interested in the establishment and perpetuation of the Sasana in the West must be concerned with the establishment of the Bhikkhu-sangha there.”

This simply restates an ancient sentiment. Venerable Mahamahinda, ordained son of Emperor Ashoka of Magadha, was asked if the Sasana could be considered established in Sri Lanka.

“The Dispensation, Great King, is established, but its roots have not yet descended deep.”

“When, Sir, will the roots have descended?”

“When, Great King, a youth born in the Island of [Sri Lanka], of parents belonging to the Island ..., enters the Order in the Island ..., learns the Vinaya in the Island ... itself and teaches it in the Island ..., then indeed, will the roots of the Dispensation have descended.”<sup>121</sup>

The same text, Buddhaghosa's fifth century *Vinaya* Commentary *Samanta-Pāsādikā* makes the following rather remarkable assertion:<sup>122</sup>

“The Vinaya is the life of the Sasana: if the Vinaya endures, the Sasana will endure; if the Vinaya disappears, the Sasana will disappear.”

It also reports that the *Vinaya* was placed at the beginning of the canonical

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120 Quoted in Heine and Prebish, 2003, p. 60.

121 Jayawickrama (1962).

122 Jayawickrama (1962).

scriptures during the First Council after the death of the Buddha *because* of this key function. Going a bit farther, we could nearly say that there is no Buddhism without monastics; it would not long remain viable.

We may assume that Sasana has been established in the West, but the roots of the Sasana are just beginning to descend, for the institutional Sangha and the *Vinaya* are so far very slim indeed. Hopefully Buddhism is not experiencing in the West a flash of unprecedented popularity, as the Sasana indulges the most appealing and easily assimilated folk notions with no adept oversight over their authenticity. I am encouraged, on the other hand, that the Western monastic order is beginning in recent years here and there to come into its own. I am also encouraged by the relatively high aspirations and pure standards exhibited by the Western Sangha.<sup>123</sup>

Although scholars and lay teachers probably still constitute the majority of the (hidden) adept community, I know of no alternative to the traditional Sangha for ensuring the viability of a Western Buddhism. As Edward Conze puts it, "The continuity of the monastic organization has been the only constant factor in Buddhist history."<sup>124</sup> There is no evidence that we have suddenly discovered a superior model in the West. Buddhism without the institutional Sangha would be like science without professional scientists. Certain individual amateurs do very good science, but as a whole science would fizzle, perhaps after a flash of unprecedented popularity.<sup>125</sup>

As we navigate the Buddhist buffet counter, with an eye either to individual development or to development of the Sasana, we should keep the Sangha in mind. The health of the Sangha results from a collaboration between lay and ordained. It does not exist without aspirants, nor does it exist without support. Its character depends on its members, and its members should have entered without mixed motivations. However, the purity of its membership depends

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123 The author may be an exception.

124 Conze (1959), p. 54.

125 This is not to say that the monastic Sangha will not have to adapt. A number of indicators from a quickly modernizing Asia speak to the need for adaptation. For instance, the disenfranchisement of the Sangha from traditional social roles as intelligentsia and educators by governments as they actively promote literacy and higher education speaks of the need for promoting higher education in the Sangha. (So far the Western Sangha seems to be extremely highly educated; this is not so in Asia.) That gender inequality is as intolerable among Western Buddhists as gender equality seems to have been in Buddha's India, speaks of the need for promoting the status of women as monastics. Disruptive changes in general society seem to be bringing individuals with impure incentives into The Sangha. (This is not yet a problem in the West where there are rarely occasions for such mixed incentives.)

on who the laity considers worthy of support. The practice of generosity typically begins in the context of supporting the Sangha, and proliferates from there. The Sangha represents admirable friends, who exemplify the Buddhist life and inspire others to enter the higher Path of practice and study. When the Sangha endures, the Sasana will endure to brighten any landscape with its civilizing influences. Such is a culture of Awakening.

In the discussion of the Second Annual Buddhist Banquet of the Springdale Buddhist Center, Skipper represented the Middle Way and prevailed. They decided as a group to provide a variety of dishes very similar to the whole Buddhist fare from embodiment to realization, of the previous year (and again not to serve beer). In addition, they decided to put effort into educating people beforehand about what they will find at the banquet. They hope that if they are steadfast in offering the same each year, maybe they will gradually become a community of *non*-picky eaters in the Land of the Fork.

“It’s going to be a long haul,” suggests Carol.



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111, 113, 122, 123; *Sanbyo Kyodan*  
school, 102-103

## ***About this Book***

The *Buddha-Sāsana*, is the *living Dharma*, that is, Buddhism in its personal, cultural, social and historical dimensions, something organic, located in time and space, that can grow, thrive, self-regulate, propagate, uphold authenticity, and brighten any landscape with its civilizing influence. It was explicitly propounded in the early teachings of the Buddha and set in motion in a form and functionality that it has maintained surprisingly well over a span of a hundred generations. The Buddha-Sasana is the source of the malleability and resilience that once made Buddhism the first world religion and that is characteristic of Buddhism to this day. It has been the basis of a culture of Awakening in many Asian lands.

This rather unique book lays bare the inner life of the Buddha-Sasana to reveal why Buddhism has proved so adaptable to cultural influences yet so faithful to its original message. Significantly, it explores the condition of the Buddha-Sasana as it is taking root in the West. It will be an aid in developing healthy and inclusive Buddhist communities, in instilling a sense of responsibility for upholding the Sasana, in understanding and navigating the many varieties of Buddhist doctrine, and in making sense of the variety of “religious accretions” in Buddhism.

## ***About the Author***

Bhikkhu Cintita, formerly John Dinsmore, is an American-born Burmese-ordained Theravada monk who lives in a monastery in Austin, Texas USA. He received a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of California at San Diego, and was in his younger days successively a scholar of linguistics, cognitive science and artificial intelligence, a professor, an inept businessman and a corporate researcher and developer. He dropped out of professional life to become a Soto Zen priest for some years, before entering fully into monastic life. He posts writings on-line at <http://bhikkhucintita.wordpress.com>.