



## Lifestyles and Spiritual Progress

Newcomers to Buddhism often ask whether a person's lifestyle has any special bearing on their ability to progress along the Buddha's path, and in particular whether the Buddha had any reason for establishing a monastic order governed by guidelines quite different from those that hold sway over the lay Buddhist community. Doesn't it seem, they ask, that a lay person who follows the Buddhist precepts in daily life should be able to advance just as rapidly as a monk and attain the same level of enlightenment? And, if this is so, doesn't this mean that the entire monastic lifestyle becomes something superfluous, or at best a mere matter of personal choice no more relevant to one's capacity for spiritual development than whether one trains to become a doctor or an engineer?

If we suspend concern for questions of status and superiority and simply consider the two modes of life in their ideal expression, the conclusion would have to follow that the monastic life, lived *in the way envisioned by the Buddha*, is the one that conduces more effectively to the final goal. According to the Pali Canon, the ultimate goal of the Dhamma is the attainment of Nibbāna: the destruction of all defilements here and now and ultimate release from saṃsāra, the round of rebirths. This attainment comes about by eliminating craving and ignorance through the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is open equally to both monastics and lay followers; monastic ordination does not confer any privileged access to the path or an empowerment that enables a monk to make more rapid progress than a lay follower. But while this is so, the fact remains that the monastic life was expressly designed by the Buddha to facilitate complete dedication to the practice of the path in its three stages of virtue, concentration, and wisdom, and thus provides the optimal conditions for spiritual progress.

The monastic lifestyle does so precisely because the final goal is a state of renunciation, "the relinquishment of all acquisitions" (*sabb'upadhi-paṭinissagga*), and from the outset the monk's life is rooted in renunciation. In "going forth," the monk leaves behind family, possessions, and worldly position, and even the outer marks of personal identity, symbolised by hair, beard, and wardrobe. By shaving the head and donning the yellow robe, the monk has given up—in principle at least—any claim to a unique identity of his own. Outwardly indistinguishable from a hundred thousand other monks, he has become simply a "*Sakyaputtiya samaṇa*," an ascetic who follows the Sakyan son (i.e., the Buddha). The life of the monk involves radical simplicity, contentment with the barest requisites, the need to be patient in difficulty. The monastic lifestyle places the monk in dependence on the generosity and kindness of others, and imposes on him an intricate code of discipline, the Vinaya, designed to foster the essential renunciant virtues of simplicity, restraint, purity, and harmlessness. These virtues provide a sound basis for the higher attainments in concentration and insight, which are essentially stages in the progressive purification of the mind and the deepening of insight.

Of prime importance, too, is the external freedom ideally provided by the monastic life. The monastic schedule leaves the monk free from extraneous demands on his time and energy, allowing him to devote himself fully to the practice and study of the Dhamma. Of course, as the monastic life is lived today, monks take on many responsibilities not originally mentioned in the canonical texts, and in a traditional Buddhist country the village temple has become the hub of

religious activity, with the monks functioning as virtual priests for the wider Buddhist community. But here we are concerned with the canonical picture of the monastic life. If the monk's life so conceived did not promote smoother progress towards the goal, it seems there would have been no compelling reason for the Buddha to have established a monastic order or to have encouraged men and women so inclined to "go forth from the home life into homelessness."

While the attainment of Nibbāna is the ultimate goal of early Buddhism, it is not the only goal, and one of the shortcomings in the way Theravada Buddhism has been presented to the West is the one-sided emphasis placed on the final goal over the provisional aspect of the Teaching. In traditional Buddhist lands few Buddhists see Nibbāna as an immediately realistic prospect. The great majority, both lay and monastic, regard the path as a course of "gradual practice, gradual progress, and gradual achievement" extending over many lives. Their practice as Buddhists centres around the performance of meritorious deeds and methodical mental purification, rooted in the confidence that the kammic law of causality and the spiritual power of the Dhamma will sustain them even through the succession of lifetimes in their quest for enlightenment and deliverance.

To make clear the choices facing the lay follower we might posit two alternative models of the Buddhist lay life. On the first model lay life is seen as a field for gradual progress towards the goal through the development of wholesome qualities such as generosity, moral virtue, kindness, and understanding. The immediate aim is not direct realisation of the highest truth but the accumulation of merits leading to a happy rebirth and gradual progress towards Nibbāna.

The second model recognises the capacity of lay followers for reaching the stages of awakening in this life itself, and advocates strict moral discipline and strenuous effort in meditation to attain deep insight into the truth of the Dhamma. While there are in Buddhist countries lay people who follow the path of direct realisation, their number is much smaller than those who pursue the alternative model. The reason should be obvious enough: the stakes are higher, and include a capacity for inward renunciation rare among those who must raise a family, work at a full-time job, and struggle to survive in a ruggedly competitive world. We should note further a point of prime importance: this second model of the Buddhist lay life becomes effective as a means to higher attainment precisely because it emulates the monastic model. Thus, to the extent that a lay follower embarks on the practice of the direct path to realisation, he or she does so by conforming to the lifestyle of a monk or nun.

These two conceptions of the lay life need not be seen as mutually exclusive, for an earnest lay follower can adopt the first model for his or her normal routine and also stake out periods to pursue the second model, e.g., by curtailing social engagements, devoting time to deep study and meditation, and occasionally going on extended retreats. Though a monastic lifestyle might be more conducive to enlightenment than a busy life within the world, when it comes to individuals rather than models all fixed preconceptions collapse. Some lay people with heavy family and social commitments manage to make such rapid progress that they can give guidance in meditation to earnest monks, and it is not rare at all to find sincere monks deeply committed to the practice who advance slowly and with difficulty. While the monastic life, lived according to the original ideal, may provide the optimal outer conditions for spiritual progress, the actual rate of progress depends both on individual effort and on the store of qualities one brings over from previous lives. Often it seems that on both counts those deeply enmeshed in the world are more adequately equipped than those who enter the Sangha.

In any case, whether for monk, nun, or lay person, the path to Nibbāna is the same: the Noble Eightfold Path. Whatever one's personal circumstances may be, if one is truly earnest about

realising the final goal of the Dhamma one will make every effort to tread this path in the way that best fits the particular circumstances of one's life. As the Buddha himself says: "Whether it be a householder or one gone forth, it is the one of right practice that I praise, not the one of wrong practice" (SN 45:24).

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Notes and News

**Administrative Changes at BPS.** In mid-June Mr. T.B. Talwatte, our long-term executive director, retired after nine years of dedicated service to the Society. Mr. Talwatte had assumed the post of executive director in May 1989 and used his past professional experience in administration and finance to guide the BPS to its present successful position. A man of upright character, high standards of personal integrity, and equity in his dealings with others, he was much appreciated by the staff and the many visitors to the BPS from both

**In Memoriam.** We sadly report the death, on 18 April 1998, of Maurice Walshe. Born in London in 1911, Walshe was one of the staunchest supporters of Theravada Buddhism in Britain and had been instrumental in the founding of the Cittaviveka and Amaravati monasteries. He was also a long-time member of the BPS and a frequent contributor to our Wheel and Bodhi Leaves series. Though best known in the Buddhist world as the translator of the Dīgha Nikāya (under the title *Long Discourses of the Buddha*), in his professional career he was a scholar of medieval German and had published a new edition and translation of the works of the German mystic Meister Eckhart.

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## Book Review

*Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth Century.* Kamala Tiyavanich.

*Forest Recollections* is both a highly informative study of the historical evolution of modern Thai Buddhism and an inspiring account of the tradition of the wandering "thudong" monks who roamed the forests of northern and north-eastern through much of the present century. The author, a research scholar at Cornell University (U.S.A.), unites these two focal points of her book in her thesis that the prevalent picture of Thai Buddhism as a "centralised, bureaucratic, hierarchical religion emphasising vinaya (discipline)" (p.2) is a misleading stereotype fostered by an urban, literate elite. This picture, she claims, obscures the richness, diversity, and egalitarian character of the local Buddhist traditions which flourished in Thailand early in this century, before the Bangkok-based prelates launched their campaign to promote religious standardisation.

Kamala argues that far from being endemic to Thai Buddhism, this ecclesiastical system was created under the auspices of the Bangkok court, largely in subservience to a political agenda. Before Siam became a modern state in the early nineteenth century it consisted of a number of loosely affiliated principalities inhabited by peoples of different ethnic and linguistic stocks—Thai, Lao, Shan, Khmer, Yuan, Mon. Though united under the common banner of Theravada Buddhism, these people practised their religion in ways that were as diverse as the flora in a tropical forest. Their religious practices had grown organically over long periods, acquiring features that were precisely suited to their unique cultures, temperaments, and social conditions. To create a modern state under the dominion of Bangkok, the Thai rulers felt that

religious uniformity was as critical a need as linguistic unity and centralised political control. Hence the prelates—mostly members of the small, royally supported Dhammayut sect—enacted a series of measures that established a complex system of monastic administration built upon a uniform educational curriculum and common standards of religious practice. The net effect of this policy, in Kamala's view, was to weaken and ultimately undermine the diversified regional forms of Buddhism that for centuries had provided solace and spiritual support for their local communities.

While the Sangha authorities in Bangkok framed an ideal of the bhikkhu as textual scholar and administrative lackey, a small band of monks, chiefly in the Lao regions of the Northeast, hearkened back to the ideal of the bhikkhu as a homeless renunciant seeking liberation from the round of rebirths. This was the ideal that, early in this century, inspired Ajan Mun Bhuridatto and his followers, and it is this lineage of monks that stands at the centre of Kamala's study. Drawing upon the records left by the thudong monks themselves, Kamala paints for us a fascinating picture of their lives, struggles, and achievements. In the core chapters of her narrative (3–6) she takes us with the monks on their treks through remote jungles, showing us how they respond to encounters with tigers and elephants, revealing their intimate struggles with sexual temptation, celebrating their courage, fortitude, and patience.

Although the thudong monks saw themselves as the true heirs of the Buddha's monastic legacy, the Sangha authorities in Bangkok framed an ideal of the bhikkhu as textual scholar and administrative lackey, a small band of monks, chiefly in the Lao regions of the Northeast, hearkened back to the ideal of the bhikkhu as a homeless renunciant seeking liberation from the round of rebirths. This was the ideal that, early in this century, inspired Ajan Mun Bhuridatto and his followers, and it is this lineage of monks that stands at the centre of Kamala's study. Drawing upon the records left by the thudong monks themselves, Kamala paints for us a fascinating picture of their lives, struggles, and achievements. In the core chapters of her narrative (3–6) she takes us with the monks on their treks through remote jungles, showing us how they respond to encounters with tigers and elephants, revealing their intimate struggles with sexual temptation, celebrating their courage, fortitude, and patience.

Despite my admiration for *Forest Recollections* as a whole, I did have critical reservations about Kamala's portrayal of pre-reformation regional Buddhism, which struck me as one-sided. Admittedly regional folk Buddhism had its social and cultural beauty, but reading between the lines of her account one comes off with the impression that apart from a few Jātaka stories the village monks during this period had very little knowledge of the Dhamma and Vinaya. This impression is confirmed by the reports of the thudong monks themselves. For example, Ajan Thate states in his autobiography that when he was a boy he had been going to the monastery regularly for six years and yet had never been taught the Five or Eight Precepts "because the Sangha of that time was seriously deficient in learning." It seems Kamala draws the contrast between the Bangkok Sangha and the regional monks in such stark terms that she seriously underrates the important measures to promote pure discipline and learning that originated with the formation of the Dhammayut sect. The mistake the Sangha officials made was not to elevate textual scholarship and monastic discipline above village tradition and folklore, but to make learning a passport to status and a clerical career rather than a foundation for spiritual progress in accordance with the classical triad of learning, practice, and realisation (*pariyatti, paṭipatti, paṭivedha*).

Apart from this minor reservation, I found this a most interesting study. Well written and carefully organised, *Forest Recollections* preserves for us the legacy of one of the most robust and worthy Buddhist lineages of modern times.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## BPS Publications

### *Bhikkhu Tissa in Dialogue*

On a warm summer evening somewhere in the American countryside a car pulls into the driveway of a small Buddhist temple. The driver is a youngish man named Gene who has come to visit the redoubtable Buddhist monk, Bhikkhu Tissa. Gene has a problem weighing on his mind. Having just passed a major birthday, he has become increasingly aware that he has been frittering away his life on trivial matters, growing older without getting wiser. For Gene this is above all a question of meaning: Does life have any higher meaning or purpose beyond the everyday routines of working, relaxing, and seeking transient pleasures? Is there any prospect of a deeper fulfilment and peace? In his characteristic manner the monk does not offer Gene any easy dogmatic answers. Instead he leads him, with probing questions and astute observations, to a keen understanding of the human condition and the prospect of enlightenment and liberation. Their conversation continues over the full evening and the following morning, and by the time they have finished Gene has been treated to a most lucid and convincing exposition that covers the entire groundwork of the Buddha's teachings. These dialogues—lively, witty, and well crafted—bring to the fore the timeless relevance of the Dhamma, even in the comfortable dreamland of middle American suburbia.

The author, Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano, is an American Buddhist monk ordained in Thailand in 1987. His *Two Dialogues on Dhamma* ([BPS Wheel No. 363/363](#)) features Bhikkhu Tissa.

### *Also from BPS*

*The Questions of King Milinda: An Abridgement of the Milindapañha*. Edited by N.K.G. Mendis

*The Questions of King Milinda* is an imaginative record of a series of discussions between the Bactrian Greek King Milinda, who reigned in the Punjab, and the Buddhist sage Bhante Nagasena. Their spirited dialogue—dramatic and witty, eloquent and inspired—explores the diverse problems of Buddhist thought and practice from the perspective of a probing Greek intellectual who is both perplexed and fascinated by the strangely rational religion he has discovered on the Indian subcontinent. The present abridged edition has been adapted from existing scholarly translations and includes in an easily readable style the most essential passages of the original classic.

*The Buddhist Outlook*. Francis Story

Francis Story (Anagarika Sugatananda) was a British Buddhist who lived in Asia for twenty-five years, studying and deeply absorbing the Buddhist philosophy of life. His writings, brilliant in style and always stimulating, show the vital significance of Buddhism in this modern age. The present book is made up of essays, dialogues, and poems covering a wide range of topics. From the contents: A Westerner's Road to Buddhism, The Gift of Science and the Gift of Dhamma, The Search for Self, Meditation and the Layman, Morality in Modern Life, Buddhism and Birth Control, Buddhism and Meat-eating, etc.

## Guidelines to Sutta Study

Vatthūpama Sutta (Simile of the Cloth, concluded)

The Buddha praises this monk thus: “If a monk of such virtue, such concentration, and such wisdom eats almsfood consisting of choice rice and various sauces and curries, even that will be no obstacle for him.” Reading between the lines, we see that these words imply that the monk is a non-returner. The reason is that a non-returner has eliminated all sensual desire, i.e. all desire connected with the “five cords of sensual pleasure,” and thus has no attachment to delicious tastes. Since the monk can eat choice food without encountering any “obstacle” (*antarāya*)--namely, any craving for tastes--this means he has overcome the fetter of sensual desire, which implies he is a non-returner. Thus elsewhere (SN 12:63/II 99) the Buddha says: “When the nutriment of edible food has been fully understood, the lust based on the five senses is fully understood; and when the lust based on the five senses is fully understood, there is no fetter bound by which the noble disciple will come back to this world.”

In the last instalment, we saw that the Buddha praises the monk who has partly purified himself of the mind’s defilements by saying that even eating choice almsfood would be no obstacle for him. The implication we read into this is that the monk is a non-returner (*anāgāmi*), for he cannot be fettered by sensual desire occasioned by delicious food.

The next paragraph lends support to this hypothesis. Here the Buddha says that this monk abides pervading the whole world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity. This is the practice of the four *brahmavihāras*, the “divine abodes” or sublime states. Although any meditator can practise the brahmavihāra and even reach the *jhānas* through them, the practice becomes especially natural for the non-returner. The non-returner can practise the divine abodes with special ease because he has eliminated the major impediments to this method of meditation. The major obstacles to the first three divine abodes are ill will, cruelty, and envy, mental states all rooted in hatred (*dosa*), which has been fully eliminated by the non-returner.

Thus the two descriptions the Buddha offers of this monk establish his identity as a non-returner. First, the fact that he can partake of delicious food without being fettered by craving shows that he has overcome sensual desire. Second, the fact that he can easily develop the four brahmavihāras shows that he has overcome ill will. As sensual desire and ill will are the two fetters eliminated by the non-returner, we can see that the ancient commentators had sound reasons for identifying this monk as a non-returner.

But though he has removed the two most powerful emotional obstructions to liberation—sensual desire and ill will—the non-returner is not yet fully released, for the subtle fetters still remain embedded in his mind: craving for existence, the conceit “I am,” restlessness, and ignorance. Thus in the next portion of the sutta the Buddha shows how the non-returner advances further to the final stage of awakening, arahatship. The exposition is extremely concise, even to the point of obscurity, but by applying valid principles of interpretation we can draw out its meaning.

The Buddha simply says: “He understands: ‘There is this, there is the inferior (*hīna*), there is the superior, and beyond there is an escape from everything connected with perception’.” The first hint to draw upon in making sense of this statement is the context. The statement immediately precedes the stock passage, found in countless other suttas, describing the liberation of the mind from the taints. Usually the theme of the Dhamma to be understood to attain final liberation of mind is the Four Noble Truths. When we turn to our passage we can see at once that it consists of four portions, and this reinforces the hunch that the Four Noble Truths are being indicated.

The commentary makes the meaning explicit. The phrase “there is this,” it says, signifies the truth of suffering. The meditator, having attained a jhāna on the basis of one of the divine abodes, emerges from the jhāna and examines it carefully. He sees that the jhāna, as lofty as it is, is still impermanent and conditioned, and thus bears the mark of dukkha, suffering. Since even such a lofty state as a boundless meditative absorption is imperfect and bound up with suffering, he extends this realisation to all the “five aggregates” and sees that there is nothing among the aggregates that is immune from these qualities of impermanence, suffering, and voidness of selfhood.

The phrase “there is the inferior” points to craving, the truth of the origin of suffering, which is called “inferior” precisely because it lies at the root of all the misery of the round of rebirths. “There is the superior” indicates the Noble Eightfold Path, the way to liberation, especially the supreme path of arahatship, which eliminates the final residue of defilements. Finally, “the escape from everything connected with perception” is Nibbāna, the ultimate release from the entire conditioned world.

After giving this brief indication of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha states that the mind of one who “knows and sees thus” is liberated from the taints. This passage has been analysed in a previous issue of these Guidelines and the explanation need not be repeated here (see Newsletter No. 34). In the version found in the Simile of the Cloth, however, the Buddha adds another sentence unique to this sutta: “This bhikkhu (the arahat) is called ‘one bathed with the inner bathing’ (*sināto antarena sinānena*). The expression “inner bathing” alludes to the brahmanical belief that spiritual purification can be achieved by a ritual bath, and its use shows how the Buddha adapted the terminology of the brahmins to his own ends. Whereas the brahmin scriptures extolled bathing in sacred rivers, the Buddha stressed instead the importance of “inner bathing,” the purification of virtue and understanding to be achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

The contrast between the two points of view is acted out in a little debate recorded at the end of the sutta. When the Buddha spoke of “inner bathing,” a brahmin named Sundarika Bhāradvāja, who was listening to the discourse, asked if Master Gotama goes to bathe in the sacred Bāhukā River. When the Blessed One said no, the brahmin declared that many people regard bathing in the Bāhukā River as very beneficial, a means of washing off one’s sins. The Buddha then responded with a poem in which he proclaimed his radically ethical understanding of the entire process of purification. It is not, he said, by cleaning the body in holy rivers that one becomes pure, but by abstaining from evil deeds and purifying one’s conduct. The cleansing waters are non-injury, truthfulness, honesty, faith, and generosity, which bring happiness within and safety to all beings.

At the end of the poem the brahmin applauds the Buddha’s words, declares himself a follower of the Master, and requests ordination as a monk. Then, we are told, not long after his ordination, the Venerable Bhāradvāja went into seclusion and realised for himself “that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from the home life into homelessness.”

—Bikkhu Bodhi

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