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Mohan Wijayaratna

Excerpt

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Chapter 1

The origin of the Community

As a lotus is attached neither to water nor to mud, so the sage is attached neither to sensual pleasures nor to the world . . .
(Sn 625).

Buddhism first arose as a movement of “renouncers.” In common with a number of other such movements at the time, it was opposed to Brahmanism, which placed highest value on lay life and its rituals; and so the core of this new movement consisted of monks and nuns. But it was not long before lay people, both men and women, gathered around them as their supporters and followers. One can therefore distinguish two kinds of disciples of the Buddha: monks and nuns (*les religieux*¹), and lay people.

The word *saṅgha*, which literally means a crowd or gathering, came to refer specifically to the Community of monks and nuns in the terminology of Theravāda monasticism. In Pali texts the term *saṅgha* does not include lay-followers; these are included in the expression *cattāro parisā*, “the four-fold assembly”: *bhikkhu* (monks), *bhikkhunī* (nuns), *upāsaka* and *upāsikā* (male and female layfollowers). The monastic Community is made up of two groups: *bhikkhu-saṅgha* (the order of monks) and *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* (the order of nuns); together they are called *ubhatosaṅgha*, “the twofold community” (M III 255). To refer to the entire Community, in any and every place, another term is used: *cātudissa bhikkhusaṅgha*, “the Community of the four quarters.” This phrase is found in the *Vinaya* texts and in ancient inscrip-

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tions, to symbolize the Community's common spirit and common ownership of property.

According to the Pali Canon, the monastic Community was first established in Benares, in the Deer Park, after the first discourse of the Buddha to the five ascetics, Kondañña, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahānāma and Assaji (Vin I 12). A few days later, a wealthy young man named Yasa and some of his friends joined the new religious movement; they were soon followed by another group of young men, equally eager to become disciples of the Buddha (Vin I 19). Thus by the end of the first year the Community numbered several hundred members. Many of them, like the five ascetics, had previously been members of another religious group, but left it in order to become disciples of the Buddha. Great ascetic leaders such as Uruvela-Kassapa, Gāya-Kassapa, and Nadī-Kassapa, along with their disciples, abandoned their practice of fire-sacrifice to join the young movement (Vin I 31–34). Before becoming the Buddha's disciples, Pippali-Mānava, a young and wealthy brahmin (later to become the Arahant Mahā-Kassapa Thera), and his wife Bhaddā-Kapilānī (who later became a famous nun, the Arahant Bhaddā-Kapilānī) had been members of another religious sect (S II 215). Sivaka (Th 183–184), a brahmin from Rājagaha, had already renounced lay life and joined a group of *paribbājakā* (wandering religious mendicants); Vijaya (Th 92), a brahmin from Sāvatti, had lived as a lone ascetic in the forest. Bhaddā-Kuṇḍalakesā, the young daughter of a very wealthy family, joined the Nigaṇṭha (Jain) community after a very unhappy marriage, and became a Jain orator of great renown. She later told the story of the useless austerities which she had practiced as a Jain nun (Thī 107–111, Thī-a 99ff., A I 25, Mp 200). It was on being defeated by the Arahant Sāriputta Thera in a public debate that she became a member of the Buddha's Community. (Such public debates were not unusual among wandering mendicants in ancient North India.) Nanduttarā, a brahmin woman, was also a disciple of Jainism and given to the practice of austerities, but was persuaded to join the Community when she heard the Arahant Moggallāna Thera preach (Thī 87–91).

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Vacchagotta, whom we meet in several discourses in the *Nikāya* texts (A I 160, 180; M I 481, 483; S III 257, IV 401), had been a famous wandering mendicant, like Sāriputta and Moggallāna, who were known as Upatissa and Kolita; later they became the two greatest disciples of the Buddha (Vin I 38).

All these people were renouncers, members of one or another sect or religious group; so they had already renounced lay life before becoming disciples of the Buddha. This means that Buddhism had no influence on their original renunciation. The majority of the Buddha's disciples in these early days, however, abandoned lay life in order to enter the Community. Of the sixty disciples gathered around the Buddha in the first six months, fifty-five were young laymen who moved directly to religious life in the Community. The Buddha's teaching had therefore directly motivated their renunciation.

At first, many of those who renounced lay life to join the Community were young. Indeed Buddhist monasticism encouraged people to renounce family life as early as possible. A young monk called Soṇa Kuṭṭikanna (cf. Vin I 194; Ud. 57), a pupil of Mahā-Kaccāna Thera, came from Avanti to Sāvatti to see the Buddha. The Buddha had a long talk with him, noted with satisfaction that the young monk had a good knowledge of the Teaching, and asked him how long he had been in the Community. "A year, Blessed One," answered Soṇa. The Buddha then asked him, "Why did you wait so long before joining the Community?" The young monk answered, "Blessed One, I had been aware for a long time of the suffering and vanity of worldly life, but family problems prevented me from leaving it."

In this new "religion," the first stage of the monastic life was regarded as a period of training. This is why young people were always more welcome than older ones: when someone was old and feeble, he or she did not have the same strength to devote to renunciation and to the practice of the virtues. A passage from the Canon comments, "It is difficult to find these five important qualities in people who have renounced lay life in old age: they are not good at speaking,

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learning, understanding, preaching, and remembering" (A III 77). At that time the prevalent opinion was, on the contrary, that the religious life was best suited to older people who had put family life behind them. When a person grew older he or she was "doomed" to the religious life. For example, one day some young Buddhist nuns were bathing in the river Aciravatī (nowadays the Rāpti). Some courtesans mocked them: "What are you doing, venerable ladies, leading a life of purity (*brahmacariya*) while you are young? Is it not better to enjoy yourselves? Wait until you are old to embrace the religious life: that way you will know both kinds of life, one now and the other later" (Vin I 293, IV 278).

Nonetheless, despite this general opinion, many of the Buddha's disciples were young people. To join him, most of them had abandoned wealth, a life of luxury, and even a young wife. Young men needed their parents' permission to renounce lay life, even if they were married; but parents were not always happy to let them go. When Raṭṭhapāla asked his parents for permission to join the Community, they refused, saying "Why do you want to become a monk? Your hair is still black and you are still young." Raṭṭhapāla went without food and drink until he obtained permission. Once it was given, he renounced his home and received from the Community both the minor (*pabbajjā*) and the major (*upasampadā*) Ordinations. One day his father saw him walking in the street and said sadly to his wife, "Look, our only son, our beloved son! He has given up everything and taken on the practice of these shaven-headed priestlings" (M II 54–62). Such words reflect the sadness and disapproval of parents who had lost their son or daughter to the new religion. The Commentary to the *Dhammapada* (IV 164ff.) tells us that a rich Brahman woman called Rūpasāri (the mother of Sariputta Thera) complained that the Buddhist monkhood had taken all her children from her, one after another.

Among the Buddha's disciples there were many who had renounced lay life because they were attracted to his doctrine. After they heard him preach, they wanted to lead the religious life that the Master had showed them, and so re-

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nounced family life. The *Mahāvagga* (Vin I 23) tells the story of some rich young men used to “the good life” (*bhad-davagiya*). One day these young men, about thirty in all, had gone for a picnic in the forest with their wives. One of them, who had no wife, had brought along a courtesan. When everyone was merry, she took some valuables, jewels and other things, and stole away. The young men went to look for her and chanced upon the Buddha sitting at the foot of a tree. He said, “Tell me, young men, what is better for you, to look for this woman or to look for yourselves?” The result of this brief discussion was that the young men were persuaded to renounce lay life and enter the Community.

Two wealthy young men, Raṭṭhapāla (M II 61) and Sudinna Kalandakaputta (Vin II 11ff.), also renounced wealth and lay life simply on hearing the Buddha’s words. A young merchant by the name of Puṇṇa (or Puṇṇika) came to the town of Sāvatti on business and had occasion to hear the Buddha’s doctrine; he then renounced lay life (Th 70, Th-a I 156). Young Migajāla, one of Visākhā’s sons, who used to go to the monastery of Jetavana every day with his mother, left home after he heard the Doctrine preached (Th 417–422, Th-a I 452), as also did Rājadatta, one of the chief merchants in the town of Rājagaha, on the very day when he went to talk with the Buddha at Veḷuvana monastery (Th 315–319, Th-a I 402). In the same way, Kappa (Th 567–576, Th-a I 521), regional governor of the Magadha country, Kuṇḍadhāna (Th 62, Th-a I 146), a learned brahmin from Sāvatti, Dhammavaniya (Th 67, Th-a I 151), a son of good family, Kāsi-Bhāradvāja (Sn p. 12, Pj II 131), a rich brahmin from Dakkhinagiri, all renounced lay life to become monks simply on hearing the Buddha speak. Similarly, Sīhā, the niece of general Sīha from Vesāli, decided to renounce lay life on hearing a discussion between the Buddha and the venerable Sāriputta Thera (Thī 77–81). Vimalā, daughter of a courtesan from Vesāli, saw the venerable Moggallāna Thera, fell in love with him and decided to follow him. When she heard him preach she renounced lay life (Thī 72–76). Khemā, wife of King Bimbisāra, took the same decision on hearing the Buddha’s words (Thī 139–144). Am-

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bapāli, a famous courtesan from Vesāli, decided to renounce lay life when she heard a sermon preached by her son, the venerable Vimāla-Koṇḍañña Thera (Thī 252–270). Puṇṇā, a young woman of twenty, who lived in Rājagaha, was persuaded by a sermon given by the nun Mahā-Pajāpati Gotamī Therī (Thī 3, Thī-a 9f.).

All these people had had a life of comfort and luxury. They renounced the world to become monks and nuns under the influence of the Buddha's doctrine. If someone who is used to luxury chooses to renounce everything in order to live according to a philosophy or doctrine, he or she probably feels an intellectual need to do so. There is no doubt that the people mentioned above wanted to find a way to lead a more satisfying life. Their outlook was transformed when they heard the Master's doctrine; his words provoked in them a mental evolution or revolution which led them to change their way of life completely. No abnormal or miraculous phenomenon was involved. These people were persuaded that the Buddha's doctrine was the only path to deliverance or salvation, and simply reoriented their lives accordingly and renounced everything else.

The canonical texts tell us that many people renounced lay life because of the Buddha's personality. We might describe this as a form of "hero-worship"; that is, admiration for an inspiring character. In all religions and in all societies there are people who follow the example of an influential leader. According to the canonical texts, the Buddha had a very powerful personality. He was graceful, gentle, always in good spirits, full of energy and ever smiling. He was "the Blessed One, he who brings and spreads joy, whose senses are tranquil and whose mind is at peace, the supreme self-conqueror, he who lives in peace, the hero who has tamed himself, who keeps watch over himself and keeps a tight rein on his senses" (D I 88; II 16; M II 133–136). The disciples of Uruvela-Kassapa said, "Truly he is handsome, this Great Ascetic" (Vin I 25), an opinion shared by the people of Rājagaha (Vin II 195). Some brahmins were particularly struck by the Buddha's physical appearance (M II 135; Sn 837). An

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old brahmin called Māgandiya thought the Buddha so handsome that he wanted him to marry his daughter, who was a great beauty herself. The Buddha rejected the offer (Sn 835, Pj II 542–4, Dh-p-a III 193–7), and soon afterwards the brahmin renounced lay life to become his disciple. This refusal created a lifelong enemy of Miss Māgandiyā, who later married a crown prince and tried for revenge (Dh-p-a I 202, 210ff.). Vakkali, another learned brahmin, was so moved by the Buddha's charm that he followed him in the street for a long time, and finally renounced lay life to become a disciple of this "attractive man." Even after he had become a monk, he could not stop looking at the Buddha, who advised him on the contrary to concentrate on his Doctrine rather than on his body (Th 350–354, Th-a I 420).

It is perhaps for this very reason that some non-Buddhist ascetics did not want their followers to visit the Buddha. Thus Upāli, a devotee of Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputta (Jina Mahāvīra) was about to go and see the Buddha to discuss certain religious questions. But the ascetic Dīghatapassi, another disciple of Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputta, advised his master: "Venerable One, do not let your devotee Upāli go near the ascetic Gotama. Gotama is a deceiver. He has a charm which he uses to attract the disciples of other sects" (M I 375; cf. A II 193).

Some more examples will illustrate the spell cast by the Buddha's physical appearance on certain people. Sujātā, the young daughter of a merchant family in the town of Sāketa, happened to see the Buddha on her way home from a carnival. She was so impressed by his gentle and friendly air that she decided there and then to join the Community (Thī 145–150). Kaccāna, one of king Caṇḍa-Pajjota's ministers, came to take the Buddha to Ujjain. But as soon as he saw him he forgot his mission and decided to renounce lay life (A I 23, Mp 206). Sundara-Samudda, the son of a merchant family in Rājagaha, also decided to become a monk because he was delighted by the Buddha's appearance, (Th 459–465, Th-a I 476). The Buddha's attractiveness also influenced Sigāla-Mātā, a wealthy young woman of Rājagaha; as soon as she

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had had a child, she asked her husband's permission to renounce family life and join the Community (A I 5, Mp I 342–5). Paripuṇṇaka, from Kapilavatthu, was used to a life of luxury, but decided to renounce lay life when he saw the Buddha's grace and simplicity (Th 91, Th-a I 190). In another story, four friends called Uttiya, Godhika, Subāhu, and Valliya, princes of Malla in the Pāvā country, went to Kapilavatthu on political business. On the way they met the Buddha and decided to leave lay life, abandoning their mission (Th 51–54, Th-a I 133). When the Buddha stayed in Kapilavatthu, a great many young men from the Sākyan families wanted to become monks because they were attracted by his personality (Vin II 180). Prince Nanda, Gotama's cousin, renounced his home, not because he was attracted by the religious life or by the doctrine, but because of the respect which the Buddha inspired in him (Dhp-a I 116). The anecdote of Pukkusāti (M III 237–247) shows that some people renounced lay life in the Buddha's name even without ever having seen or heard him, but on the strength of what they had heard about him, of his reputation.

While some people were directly influenced by the personality of the Buddha, others were influenced by the example of friends or parents. Imitation is a powerful factor, in any society and in regard to all social contexts, particularly in the field of religion. In Buddhist monasticism, some cases of renunciation were motivated solely by a desire to imitate. Let us take some examples. After Yasa's renunciation (Vin I 19), several of his friends decided to follow his example, thinking "this can be no ordinary Doctrine and Discipline, no ordinary renunciation, if Yasa, the son of a good family, has shaven hair and beard, put on the yellow robe and left home for homelessness." The three sisters of Sāriputta Thera, Cālā, Upacālā and Sisupacālā (Thī 182–203, Thī-a 162–168) renounced lay life in imitation of their brother. When the Prince Gotama's foster-mother Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and his former wife Rāhulamātā became nuns, many women from the Sakyan families decided to follow their example. Amongst them there was the young Abhirūpi-Nandā

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(Thī 19–20, Thī–a 168), the greatest beauty in Kapilavatthu. According to the *Cullavagga* (Vin II 182), Upāli joined the Community in imitation of his friends Ānanda, Anuruddha, and others. When king Kappina in the kingdom of Kukkuṭavati renounced lay life, his wives and friends left the palace to go and see the Buddha; they in their turn entered the Community (Mp I 318). If the leader of a religious group accepted the Buddha's teaching, his devotees followed suit. For example, when the great ascetic Uruvela-Kassapa decided to become a disciple of the Buddha, not only his disciples but also his two brothers Gayā-Kassapa and Nadī-Kassapa, along with their disciples, took the same decision (Vin I 32). The desire to follow the example of a leader or of friends could thus lead large numbers of people, whole groups of ascetics or friends, to renounce also. There were exceptions, however. For example, when Sāriputta and Moggallāna decided to become disciples of the Buddha, they were opposed by their teacher Sañjaya of Rājagaha; but they did not heed his advice and went to see the Buddha. Many of Sañjaya's pupils, moreover, followed their example (Vin I 41). After hearing a sermon of the Buddha, the *paribbājaka* Sandaka sent his pupils to the Buddhist monastic community (M I 524). But in another incident, the *paribbājaka* Sakuḷadāyi was not able to enter the Buddhist monkhood because of his followers' objections, even though he wanted to do so (M II 39).

As we have seen, some people renounced lay life under the influence of the Buddha. Many of them did not do so because of problems in their lives, but simply felt the need for an ideal, for a more profound and purer way of life. On the other hand, some people embraced the new Doctrine and joined the Community because of their personal difficulties. They sought to avoid or resolve problems due to distressing physical or mental experiences, painful or disgusting, and difficult to forget. Thus Yasa, whom we have already met, a young man from a very wealthy family in Benares, came to see the Buddha and told him of his aversion to worldly life. This might seem surprising, as he was

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rich and lived in luxury: gold adorned his sandals, he was married, his father and mother loved him. What was his problem? His story shows that a life of luxury can also bring painful and unpleasant experiences. According to the canonical texts, one night after an evening of drinking and pleasure-seeking he had seen women lying around in his house in shameful positions, and the sight had upset him very much. He had realised the dangers arising from sensual pleasures and had felt a profound disgust for them. One might perhaps interpret his inner development in this way: Yasa was a sensitive young man; at the beginning of the night, sensual pleasure and the pleasant atmosphere created by those around him had awakened his sensibility. But as the night progressed, he had not been able to bear the offensive spectacle, and had left (Vin I 15–16). This story might only be a symbolic legend; but it expresses how some people might have renounced lay life because of unpleasant experiences occurring suddenly in an otherwise happy life. Yasa only regained his composure after meeting the Buddha; soon afterwards, he entered the Community.

Other types of experience could lie at the origin of renunciation. It was, for example, the unbearable grief of Kisā-Gotamī, a young mother from Sāvatti, at the death of her only child, which led her to renounce lay life (Thī-a 174; Dh-p-a 1 270). The princess Ubbirī, wife of King Pasenadi, could not console herself for the death of her daughter Jivā, on whose tomb she went regularly to shed tears. Her great sadness finally caused her to become a Buddhist nun (Thī 51–52, Thī-a 53–55). Vāsetṭhī, a young mother from Vesāli, ran away from home after the death of her child, and wandered aimlessly. She roamed the streets, not knowing where to go, until she chanced to meet the Buddha in the town of Mithilā; she listened to his words and decided to enter the Community (Thī 133–138, Thī-a 124). Sāmā, a wealthy lady from Kosambi, felt great despair after the death of a woman friend of hers; she too became a nun (Thī 37–38, Thī-a 44). After several marriages, all of which ended badly because of her husbands' mistreatment, Isidāsī heard a sermon preached by the nun