



# The Sangha

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

## The fourfold sangha

In the West, our image of Buddhist monks tends to be that they sit in meditation virtually all day long. Many people think that monks remain within the monastery walls and have little or no contact with the rest of the community. Since they do not take ordinary jobs and earn money we imagine there is nothing for them to do but meditate! In addition, many people in the West imagine that all Buddhists are monks. It is surprising how many people believe that to be a Buddhist means you have to give up your possessions and all your attachments to life – in other words, becoming a monk. Some even think that becoming a Buddhist means having to give up sex entirely. All these views are mistaken.

*Sangha* is the word for the community of those who follow the Buddhist path. Very often, *sangha* refers to the monastic community – the monks and nuns who have abandoned worldly life to lead an exemplary life of virtue. But these days the term refers to laymen and laywomen as well. Laypeople are ordinary people who follow a religion but who have jobs, families and other social responsibilities. This is known as **the fourfold sangha: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen**. In almost every country where Buddhism is practised, a follower has the choice of either being a householder or taking the special commitment of becoming a monastic. Buddhists include both monastics and laypeople.

## The role of monastics in Theravada

Monks and nuns play an extremely important role in Buddhist societies. The practice of ordaining people into monastic life was initiated by the Buddha himself, and the rules they follow were set out by the Buddha in what later became the Vinaya scriptures. The authority of monasticism as an institution is therefore linked to its antiquity and to the authority of the Buddha.

First and foremost, monastics maintain Buddhism as a living religion. They study the scriptures, practise meditation every day, teach Buddhism to others, perform ceremonies and rituals and offer advice according to Buddhist values. Furthermore, in their personal lives they are expected to uphold the ethical values of Buddhism and manifest the qualities that are to be developed on the path. In other words, monks and nuns are living examples of the religion. Buddhists usually consider that without them, their religion would simply be reduced to a collection of words in books. It follows that by taking Refuge in the Sangha, a layperson is acknowledging the vital role that monastics play, not only for the continuation of the religion as a whole but for the welfare of the community.

Being of exemplary conduct, members of the Sangha are worthy of respect and of gifts. Indeed, they are thought of as an excellent 'field of merit'. The idea is that one gains merit or virtue by any act of generosity, but just as a seed planted in better ground yields better fruit, so a gift made to a virtuous person brings greater merit. Buddhists take Refuge in the Sangha because they appreciate the way monastics benefit the world by offering this special opportunity to gain abundant and purifying merit.



On a practical level, laypeople take refuge in the monastic sangha by honouring them with respectful behaviour, by supporting them with gifts of food, clothing and medicines, and by relying on them for advice and encouragement.

### **The Mahayana understanding**

Refuge in the sangha is understood and practised quite differently in Mahayana, and there is variation in practice from one Mahayana school to another. Mahayana generally accepts the classification of the fourfold sangha, and the distinction is made between monastics and laypeople. Even though Mahayana is said to place more emphasis than Nikaya Buddhism on the status of laypeople, in practice monastics have tended to be more highly respected than laypeople in Mahayana communities.

The big difference in Mahayana concerns the nature of monasticism: the role of monks, their way of life, the discipline they follow and their relation to the larger community. In China and especially in Japan, the Vinaya evolved and changed as Buddhism became established. In Japan some Buddhist schools such as True Pure Land have no monks at all and instead have priests who are allowed to marry and have families, have jobs and earn money. They live as householders and perform their priestly duties on certain occasions only. They are therefore integrated into the community in quite a different way to a Theravadin monk. In Soto Zen, however, monks may live a communal life of poverty and simplicity akin to the lifestyle of Theravadin monastics, but in both Soto and Rinzai Zen Buddhist teachers also have the option to marry.

The other key difference in the Mahayana understanding of Refuge in the Sangha is that bodhisattvas are included within the idea of sangha. This refers to Sambhogakaya buddhas and bodhisattvas in whom one can take refuge. In doing so, the practitioner aspires to emulate them and become like them by developing their particular enlightened qualities, and he or she also prays to them for help and protection. So in Mahayana, the idea of sangha or spiritual community extends to those who no longer live on this Earth.

