

The Sangha (Community)

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

"The Sangha of the Lord's disciples is worthy of offerings, worthy of hospitality, worthy of gifts, worthy of veneration—an unsurpassed field of merit in the world."

—Gautama the Buddha
cited in the *Mahâ-Parinibbâna-Sutta* (2.9)

"I allow you, monks, to wander abroad for the good of the many, for the welfare and happiness of deities and humans
. . . There are beings with little dust over their eyes who are perishing by not hearing the Dharma; they will become knowers of the Dharma."

—Gautama the Buddha
cited in the *Mahâ-Padâna-Sutta* (3.26)

Every Buddhist takes refuge in the Triple Gem (*tri-ratna*) consisting of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

The **Buddha** is the original teacher by the name of Gautama to whom all other Buddhist teachers trace their own teachings. He is venerated not only as the founder of a spiritual tradition but as its unceasing ideal and inspiration. The Buddha is also the ultimate Reality, or Buddha Nature.

The **Dharma** is the teaching, as first formulated by the Buddha and subsequently developed by great masters like Nâgârjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Padmasambhava, Atîsha, Tsongkhapa, and a host of others.

The **Sangha** is the community or "assembly" of practitioners, both lay and monastic, who endeavor to live by the Buddha's Dharma. The Buddha himself made clear that anyone following his teaching—wherever he or she might be—can be considered a member of the Sangha. He also pointed out to his contemporaries that even though someone might constantly be in his company, unless that individual actually practices the teaching, he or she would not be a member of the Sangha.

The Sangha is the spiritual family (*kula*) of the Buddha. Only noble (i.e., spiritually engaged) individuals are members of that family; hence the Buddha often spoke of the *ârya-sangha*, or "noble community." The word *ârya* here does not have any ethnic meaning but simply expresses nobility of mind and heart, as indeed it did in pre-Buddhist (Vedic) times. The opposite of an *ârya* is an *anârya* or *prithag-jana*, an ordinary person lacking spiritual commitment.

According to Hînayâna Buddhism, the community of *âryas* comprises

- the *shrota-âpannas*, or "stream entrants," who have taken refuge in the Triple Gem and are now firmly committed to practicing the Dharma as vigorously as possible; their moral life is pure and they have abandoned the three fetters of self-illusion, uncertainty, and clinging to mere rules and ritual

- the *sakridâgâmins*, or "once- returners," who have in addition conquered lust, anger, and delusion, and who therefore need to return only once more to this world of change (*samsâra*) before attaining liberation
- the *anâgâmins*, or "non- returners," who have achieved perfection in controlling his mind and hence will never again be reborn
- the *arahants* (or *arhats*), or "worthy ones" (lit. " foe destroyers"), who have achieved perfection in wisdom and overcome even the most subtle attachment and ignorance; who are said to "touch *nirvâna* with the body" in the state of flawless concentration (*jhâna*), though their enlightenment is not equal to the full and perfect enlightenment of a *buddha*
- the *buddhas*, or "awakened ones," who have attained perfect enlightenment (*samyak-sambodhi*)

There are two types of Buddha—the solitary realizer (*pratyeka-buddha*) and the enlightened being like Shakyamuni (the historical founder of Buddhism). The solitary realizer has attained enlightenment without the means of the Buddhist Dharma and does not feel moved to teach. He is not self-centered in the conventional sense, but does pursue the path rigorously until *nirvâna* is reached, benefiting only those who come into his immediate company. Since the Buddha's Dharma is available in our own time, this type of realizer apparently does not exist at the moment. A Buddha, by comparison, is characterized by the impulse to teach the Dharma as widely as possible and for the benefit of all beings.

Mahâyâna Buddhism adds to these the type of the *bodhisattva*, the spiritual practitioner who is completely dedicated to the ideal of liberating others. He aspires to attaining *nirvâna* but with the pure thought of introducing other beings into it.

The Sangha, or spiritual community, is the sociocultural context in which the Buddha's teachings are practiced. It functions as a support network of likeminded and likehearted spiritual practitioners.

On the occasion of the Buddha's very first sermon, Kondanna acquired the "eye of truth," and thus became the first *ârya-sânghika*. When the Buddha formally ordained him, he became the first member of the *bhikshu-sangha*, or monastic order. Thus the lineage of the Gautama the Buddha came to be established, and it continues to be a great spiritual force in the world.

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