

THE EARLY BUDDHIST *SAMGHA* IN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT[†]

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Some of the most vexed questions in the history of Buddhism concern the relation between the order and the many lay folk who in varying degrees identified themselves with its values and standards and gave regular support. Inevitably, Buddhism became a part of the lives of the laity upon which it depended. To many it has seemed natural to suppose that, by its nature, the *saṃgha* was designed to serve the needs of the laity.

A fundamental issue in the scholarship on the later rise of Mahāyāna concerns just this problem: did the outreach of the *bodhisattva* teaching to all people, lay as well as monk, actually recover the actively evangelical spirit of original Buddhism, as it claimed, or was it something new and alien to the originally esoteric spirit of the Buddha's message?

In this article, it will be accepted for the purpose of discussion that the original programme, as embodied in the intentions of the Buddha when he formulated his distinctive teachings, was essentially for those who dedicated themselves to a higher quest. In an important sense, the original ascetic message which can be identified in the canonical scriptures as the most likely content of the Buddha's own programme was indeed esoteric; only an elect of homeless wanderers, cutting themselves off from normal social bonds, could seriously hope to aspire to enlightenment and an end of suffering.¹ In this sense, then, the teaching in its earliest form excluded most people, and the

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¹ This view is sustained by recent research not yet published: G. Bailey and I.W. Mabbett, *Early Buddhism and the Sociology of Religion*.

subsequent progressive involvement of Buddhism in social outreach, notably in Mahāyāna, was an importation

But this is only half the story. From the beginning, as soon as the Buddha attracted disciples, the Buddhist teaching had to find ways of accommodating itself to its social context. The meaning of the injunctions the Buddha was supposed to have declared was necessarily interpreted to accord with the assumptions of Buddhist communities at various later stages. This point, which ought not to appear controversial, is the springboard for the review of early Indian Buddhism in its social context which is offered here. Every religious teaching, no matter how abstract or universal its scope, is bound to respond to the social values and needs of the people among whom it gains a following. How did Buddhism reflect such values and needs in the first few centuries of its life, in pre-Mauryan and Mauryan India?

This period is not well served by useful historical sources. For the most part, it is necessary to use the canonical literature itself. Of course this literature cannot be uncritically read as a description of historical circumstances, and the attention so far given by historians to the social context of Buddhism has encountered problems of interpretation. The texts were subject to a process of selection and overhauling over a long period before any of them were written down; the picture of Buddhism which they present necessarily answered to the purposes of people living in later (much more urbanized) stages of culture.

It is necessary to recognize that, from the beginning, Buddhism was liable to change its character willy-nilly to the extent that it was successful and acquired a public role. As monks were drawn into the affairs of the royal court or the farming community, all parties to the interaction changed. There were pressures upon monks to turn into political agents, representing the interests of the state among villagers, or the interests of the village to state officials, and there were pressures upon the *samgha* as a whole to become more like brahmins in proportion as village and state gradually grew together.

The order of monks, the *samgha*, inevitably turned into something new as it succeeded, with a new role, or medley of roles, to play. This raises the question how centralized the order of monks was. The ultimately insoluble paradox was that a community constituted only by an idea could not indefinitely remain an unchanging and centralized community. The Buddha could say how he thought monks

should behave, but most of the time nearly all monks were scattered far and wide, free if they wished to ignore or modify what they had been told.

The story was told of the monk Subhadda who, after the Buddha's death, exclaimed with pleasure that now they could all behave as they pleased: 'Enough, sirs, Weep not, neither lament. We are well rid of the great *samaṇa*. We used to be annoyed by being told: "This beseems you, this beseems you not." But now we shall be able to do whatever we like.'² His was a lone voice, but that it should be recorded must mean something. The *Dīgha Nikāya*'s account of the episode is found duplicated, in a slightly different format, in the *Vinaya*.³ It may be questioned whether this incident, which fits awkwardly into its context, is a surviving fragment of genuine historical fact, reflecting the way in which some monks chafed under the Buddha's authoritarian discipline. But possibly the Buddha was not so much authoritarian as impatient with politicking. We cannot know. Another *sutta*, doubtless recorded for public relations purposes, emphasizes that what impressed outsiders about the *saṃgha* was its cheerfulness, unforced discipline, and sincere respect for the Buddha; these qualities are said to have appealed strongly to King Pasenadi.⁴

On the Buddha's death, the question was certainly urgent how the order should be held together. Famous is the saying attributed to the master that, far from lacking a teacher, the truths and rules of the order would stand as the teacher, and that if it wished the *saṃgha* could abolish all the lesser and minor precepts.⁵ What this means is not clear; we may be sure that struggles went on behind the scenes, but the *suttas* cannot be expected to describe them for us. The claim that the Buddha had willed that there should be no one Teacher in charge might represent a move by a group of monks objecting to the claims to inherited authority of a senior monk or monks. The equivocal references to Sāriputta's special status may mask a conflict of claims.⁶

² D.II.162.

³ See T.W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II, London (P.T.S.) 1977, pp. 73-76 comparing D.II.162f. with Vin.II.284.5.

⁴ M. II.1.118-26, *Dhammacetiyasutta*.

⁵ D.II.154.

⁶ *Suttanipāta* 557 (*Sela Sutta* 10): Sāriputta is the 'heir born', *anujāta*; cf. M. III.9f: Ānanda says that after the Buddha there is no designated leader, only the *dhamma*; cf. M.III.29: Sāriputta is praised as the 'son'. That Ānanda should be made to declare the absence of a leader may represent

Subhaddha's alleged outburst did not represent what became the official line; the monks could not follow their own sweet will, but good order would be maintained by mutual consultation and study of the principles of the *dhmma*. This, rather than central control, would produce harmony.⁷ The *saṃgha* decided not to take up the invitation to abolish lesser precepts since there was no clear way of distinguishing the lesser from the greater, and on various matters it was thought desirable to institute rules — for example, on eating, dress, housing and medicine — for the proper guidance of the monks. The Buddha is represented as prescribing some basic principles on these matters.⁸ with the formulation of the Vinaya, of course, the codification of rules became very elaborate, but the ultimate sanction could only ever be expulsion from the order by agreement among a local group of monks, and there was no over-arching authority with disciplinary powers. The model of the *gaṇa*, a republic or oligarchy whose government was subject to decisions made by assemblies, is often enough appealed to in Buddhist sources; the Buddha recommended the customs of the Vajjian *gaṇa*,⁹ and elsewhere he is said to have declared that on *uposatha* days the monks should be counted by 'the system employed in a *gaṇa*,' *gaṇamaggena gaṇetum*, or by collecting tickets, *salākā*.¹⁰

This lack of centralization or hierarchy has remained a feature of the *saṃgha* organization to the present, except (and from the point of view of history and sociology it is an important exception) to the extent that in states with a high degree of civil control rulers superimposed a political hierarchy of state-sponsored public service functions staffed by monks upon the *saṃgha*; in the villages, however, the old traditions persist. Through the centuries, authority has worked through the line of teacher and disciple. At least in various Theravāda contexts, this authority has been subject to the *dhmma* and younger

the outcome of a factional move against him. See also M.1.459, which appears to represent the Buddha sanctioning the leadership of Moggallāna and Sāriputta, but D.II.100, as already cited, has the Buddha telling Ananda that it does not occur to a Tathāgata to think that he will lead the order. Elsewhere, he is represented as telling Devadatta that he would not hand over the Order even to Sāriputta and Moggallāna - much less to such a one as Devadatta, 'a wretched one to be vomited like spittle': Vin.2.188.

7 D. III.127f.

8 D. III.130.

9 D. II.73-5.

10 Vin.I.117: 'Then it occurred to the monks: "Now, how should the monks be counted?" They told this matter to the Lord. He said: "I allow you, monks, on an Observance day to count by way of groups (*gaṇamaggena gaṇetum*) or to take (a count) by ticket (*salākam gaṇetum*)".'

monks could correct their seniors when necessary,¹¹ but respect for senior monks is enjoined, however,¹² and has been a natural part of the cultural values in Buddhist societies. Disputes are to be solved by elaborately detailed procedures including voting; but the status of respected experienced monks figures prominently in the methods of reaching a solution.¹³ Local *samghas* have been described as modified gerontocracies.¹⁴

As time passed and the order grew, problems of harmony and discipline inevitably became acute. Rules and principles of conduct, as they came to be formulated by senior monks, could not automatically be enforced rigidly; they were therefore given as much weight as possible by being attributed to the mouth of the Buddha, and indeed in the Vinaya all rulings are expressly attributed to him. *Suttas* discuss the ways in which problems should be solved, favouring careful thought about the priorities of the *dhamma*; one passage refers to the impossibility of right-thinking people suffering schism or proclaiming another teacher.¹⁵

An important dimension to the change that took place after the Buddha's death was the fragmentation of the *samgha* into local communities as the monks' way of life became more sedentary. This process could have begun even during the lifetime of the founder. Hence, with the monkhood divided into many subdivisions each with its own base area and internal communications, it is unlikely that any one leader could have controlled the whole order. Horner suggested that senior monks like Sāriputta and Moggalāna were aspirants for leadership of particular local *samghas* rather than the entire *Samgha* of the Four Quarters.¹⁶ This is a feature of Buddhism which probably needs to be recognized in the relationship between Aśoka and the *samgha* — the application of new rules, not to the whole, but to particular regional divisions.¹⁷

11 This is stressed by M. Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Śrī Lankā: an anthropological and historical study*, Delhi (O.U.P.), 1983, pp. 247ff. The informal and quasi-egalitarian principles documented here are not duplicated in all Buddhist contexts outside Theravāda.

12 M.I.22.

13 Vin.2.93-104.

14 Carrithers, *Forest Monks*, p.251.

15 M.III.65; cf. MII.238-243 (*Kintisutta*).

16 I.B. Horner, trans., *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, London (P.T.S.), Vol. III, 1977, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

17 See H. Bechert, 'The importance of Aśoka's so-called Schism Edict', in *Indological and Buddhist Studies. Volume in Honour of Professor J. W de Jong on his 60th Birthday*, ed. L.A.

The absence of strong central leadership contributed to the multiplication of rules designed to take its place. The Vinaya is full of legalistic provisions which can have had little meaning during the pioneering days of the Buddha's early wanderings, and there are signs even in the *Nikāyas* of regret at the incursion of more and more rules. An argument about the strict legalities affecting eating at night is said to have provoked the Buddha's impatience at 'higgling and haggling.'¹⁸ As a lament in the *Majjhima Nikāya* has it, 'What is the cause, revered sir, what the reason why there were formerly fewer rules of training but more monks who were established in profound knowledge? And what is the cause, revered sir, what the reason, why there are now more rules of training but fewer monks who are established in profound knowledge?'¹⁹ These words would strike a resonant chord in many institutions today, where the process described above as bureaucratization is setting in. It is easy to detect the operation of something like Parkinson's Law in the institutionalization that developed with the growth of coenobitic communities, and for that matter the growth of state control perhaps subtly exercised through patronage. Some things do not change much.

This, then, was the historical environment of the order. We can now turn to the question what social forces influenced its composition after the effective dominance of the Buddha's own preferences (whatever they may have been) had ceased to operate.

If the scriptural sources were historical records, they would offer quite good evidence that the appeal of the *dharma* was chiefly to well-off and well educated young householders, especially brahmans, with the leisure to seek spiritual goals instead of having to cleave to the routine of survival, for the individuals named as supporters and converts commonly answer this description. There is even a negative example given: a poor man with an ugly wife and little food to eat would like to wander forth as a mendicant, but cannot, beset as he is by the burden of his condition.²⁰ No doubt the Buddha, coming (it is normally supposed) from a cultured background, found it easy to speak to educated brahmans and people of leisure, and scholars have often supposed that, despite the egalitarianism which may in some

Hercus, Canberra (The Australian National University), 1982, pp. 61-68.

18 M.I.480.

19 M.I.444f.

20 M.I.450-52.

sense be perceived in Buddhist doctrine, such people were the bulk of his converts. Oldenberg thought that, despite the Buddhist theory of equality, the practice of the *dhamma* reflected a different temper: 'A marked leaning to aristocracy seems to have lingered.'²¹ Early Buddhist scholarship endorsed this interpretation. Fick considered that recruitment from the lower classes by the early Buddhists would not have been considerable; such cases are rarely mentioned in the texts.²² Bouglé argued that, though the Buddhist teaching appeared egalitarian, in fact it was a message for intellectuals dealing in abstract ideas, and addressed to superior *kṣatriya* groups rather than society as a whole.²³ Weber, referring to the wandering ascetics in general, said that the '*sramaṇa* ... came predominantly from distinguished circles of lay culture recruited from the city-dwelling *kṣatriya* patricians,' and suggested that Buddhism and Jainism reserved the status of full enlightenment to brahman and *kṣatriya* recruits.²⁴

More recent scholarship has similarly understood the early *saṃgha* to have catered for the aspirations of intellectuals.²⁵ Less radically, Sharma thought that though there is some unquantifiable evidence of recruitment to the order from low classes counting as *śūdras*, such recruitment must have been negligible.²⁶

No doubt many of the earliest recruits may have been drawn from the ranks of those already following an ascetic career; of these, a substantial proportion may indeed have been brahmans. Tsuchida has emphasized the distinction between brahmans by birth who engaged in often lowly secular occupations and those who followed the ascetic path; he considers that the former were rarely converts taken on by the Buddha, the latter frequently.²⁷

21 H. Oldenberg, *The Buddha: his life, his doctrine, his order*, London (Williams and Norgate), 1882, pp. 155-8.

22 Richard Fick, *The Social Organisation in North-East India in Buddha's Time*, Delhi (Indological Book House), 1972, (first ed. 1897), p. 51.

23 C. Bouglé, 'Caste and the Buddhist Revolution', in *idem, Essays on the Caste System*, tr. D.F. Pocock, Cambridge (Cambridge U.P.), 1971, pp. 63-79 at p. 74.

24 M. Weber, *The Religion of India*, trans. H. Gerth and D. Martindale, Glencoe, Ill. (Free Press), 1958/1962, pp. 226f.

25 For example, T. Ling, 'Max Weber and Buddhism: the rustication of an urban doctrine', in *A Net Cast Wide*, ed. J.L. Lipner, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (Grevatt and Grevatt), 1986, pp. 34-53, and B.G. Gokhale, 'The Early Buddhist Elite', *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. 43 (1965), pp. 391-402.

26 R.S. Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India: a social history of the lower order down to A.D. 600*, Delhi (Motilal Banarsidass), 1958/1990, p. 152.

27 Tsuchida, 'Two categories of brahmans in the early Buddhist period', *The Memoirs of the*

Certainly, we may suppose that the Buddha as acknowledged leader of a distinctive school might well have sought and found recruits among the free-lance wandering mendicants, sometimes of brahman birth, and that on occasion he successfully poached converts from other schools. But we must also recognize the testimony of frequent references to ordination of home-dwelling laymen.²⁸ Ascetics had to start their careers somewhere, usually following one teacher or another, and, to whatever extent the Buddha's school was successful at all, it was likely to become the locus of recruitment to mendicancy of increasing numbers. What sorts of people were these?

In the first place, it is altogether likely that the Buddha (and the senior teachers in the order in later generations) did indeed succeed in attracting into the order men (and women) from those social classes which could afford to spend time cultivating higher spiritual aspirations - especially brahmins. Wagle has studied the Pāli Canon and found evidence that 'even within the *saṃgha* a person retains his past group affiliation to some extent', on the evidence of apparent cases of brahman monks retaining their *gotta* affiliations; according to him, in practice even secular household brahmins could still get high social respect in the order.²⁹ However, it must be acknowledged that the texts are not historical records, and the references to conversions of brahmins and ascetics must be seen for what they are — a concern by later redactors to demonstrate to a critical audience that their master had been successful in impressing his superiority upon those classes which were the most dangerous potential opponents of his teaching. It is clear enough that the stories told in the *suttas* play fast and loose with a stock of floating anecdotes which are pressed into service for didactic purposes, and the line between fact and fiction is impossible to draw. Gombrich has pointed out the way in which a single brahman may appear in the canon in a number of different episodes which contradict each other.³⁰

Toyo Bunko, Vol. 49 (1991), pp. 51ff.

28 On the conversion of lay supporters, see M. Wijayaratna, *Le moine bouddhiste selon les textes du theravāda*, Paris (Cerf), 1983, pp. 169f.

29 N. Wagle, 'Social groups and ranking: an aspect of ancient Indian social life derived from the Pali canonical texts,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 10 (1967), pp. 278-316 at pp. 310, 316.

30 R. Gombrich, 'Three souls, one, or none: the vagaries of a Pāli pericope', *Journal of the Pāli Text Society*, Vol. 11 (1987), pp. 73-78.

Stories of low-class recruitment to the *samgha* can be found, chiefly in the *Jātakas*,³¹ but such stories are exercises of the imagination, besides belonging to a perhaps much later time, and for the present purpose they are of little historical weight. What needs to be brought into the discussion more than it has so far is, on the other hand, the evidence that early Buddhist teachers had to cope with substantial numbers of fellow-monks who did not form part of the stream headed for salvation at all but had much more modest purposes. The point is that, whatever the ideal may have been, many humble monks and nuns joined the order for the most mundane of reasons.

At several points occur lists of motives monks or nuns had for ordination. The *Majjhima Nikāya*, for example, gives at one point four motivations: age, illness, poverty and loss of relatives.³² Elsewhere it is said that one should not turn to the Buddha for the sake of robes, or almsfood, or lodgings, or ‘*bhavābhava*’ (an obscure category, taken by early commentators as referring to medicines).³³ Again, there is a suggestion that sometimes recruits joined the order at the instance of kings or thieves; on any interpretation, such people are likely to have been in trouble.³⁴ Some might enter the order from fear of persecution by kings or robbers, or to escape debt, or after losing family members or their means of livelihood.³⁵ In the *Pātimokkha* rules kings and thieves are cited as hindrances to the *uposatha*.³⁶ It is not fanciful to suppose that in its early days many recruits came from under the shadow of tax gatherers, press gangs or police. There are references to deserters joining the order. In the Vinaya, soldiers of King Bimbisāra are represented as deciding to join the *samgha* because their present profession engendered too much bad *karma*; on their disappearance, the generals and ministers raised the question which went straight to the heart of the matter: ‘How can these recluses, sons of the Sākyans,

31 For example, a potter: Jāt 3.375-383 (the *bodhisattva* is born in a potter’s family).

32 M.II.66.

33 M.II.238; cf. I.B. Horner, trans., *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, London (P.T.S.), Vol. III (1977), p. 25 n. 1.

34 M.I.463, and see I.B. Horner, trans., *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, London (P.T.S.), Vol. II (1975), p. 136 n. 1: commentaries suggest that kings or thieves, apprehending victims, would give them the option of undergoing punishment or joining the order.

35 M.II.66; It 89 recommends those monks who are *not* ‘led thereto by fear of rājahs, by fear of robbers, not because of debt, not from fear, not because of having lost a means of living’, categories which would not be mentioned if they were empty.

36 J. Gangopadhyay, *Uposatha Ceremony*, Delhi (Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan), 1991, p. 35 ad n. 7.

let one who is in the king's service go forth (to become a monk)?³⁷ In the sequel, the king approached the Buddha, and the Buddha laid it down that people in the king's service should not be accepted as monks. Following passages imagine cases of criminals, debtors and slaves similarly entering the order, prompting the Buddha to declare in each case that such people should not be admitted.³⁸ Notably, though, King Bimbisāra is supposed to have had no objection to criminals entering the order: 'There is nothing to do against those who go forth among the recluses, sons of the Sākyaans. Well preached in *dhamma*, let them fare the Brahma-faring for making an utter end of ill.'³⁹ Needless to say, little is to be inferred from all this about the actual historical background except that, by the time the Vinaya was codified, it was felt necessary to exclude various classes of undesirable recruit who would bring the monkhood into disrepute or cause political trouble.

Other recruits had equally mundane motives. In one case, monks were said to have taken ordination because they were ill and hoped to obtain the skilled doctoring of the physician Jīvaka.⁴⁰ Once the order took nuns, the many factors of social distress among women came into play: many are likely to have become nuns to escape the 'misery of the mortar and pestle'.⁴¹ Fear, homelessness and debt are also mentioned, suggesting that recruitment into the order could be a response to personal crisis of one sort or another. It was acknowledged that bad people might go forth as monks just for the sake of a living.⁴²

There are various indications that the Vinaya represents in many ways a later stage of development than do the *Nikāyas*, whatever the relative chronology of their redaction. One of the clearest is the discrepancy between the free entry of all categories of recruits acknowledged in the *suttas* and the legalistic restrictions imposed by the rules of the order as they were subsequently codified. In the *Dīgha Nikāya*, King Ajātasattu is represented as saying that if a slave of his

37 Vin.I.74.

38 Vin.I.74-6; at Vin.1.76 a debtor appealed to a ruling by King Bimbisāra that anyone should be free to become a monk, but the Buddha declared that a debtor should not be admitted.

39 Vin.I.74f.

40 Vin.1.72.

41 U. Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, Delhi (O.U.P.), 1987, pp. 31-5, especially 34.

42 M.I.32.

left to become a monk, he would, if the occasion arose, treat the former slave with great honour;⁴³ as we have noticed, however, the Vinaya declares that slaves along with other classes of unqualified ordinands were not to be admitted.⁴⁴ These others included those suffering from severe chronic illnesses, criminals, soldiers, debtors, sons lacking their parents' consent, and minors under twenty years old.⁴⁵ In the meantime, no doubt, trouble had been caused by abuse of sanctuary when such people had taken robes as a form of refuge from the travails of life in society.

But legal exclusions of specific types of refugee could not exclude from the dignity of the monk's robe people who were suffering from no more than poverty or old age, and whose lot was so disagreeable that the austere but respectable life of a follower of the Buddha would be a change for the better. Here, culled from the major canonical sources, are some of the miscellaneous conditions mentioned in which people were believed sometimes to turn to the Buddha, apart from the quest for *nirvāṇa*: finding household life claustrophobic; destitution; idleness; exile or fear of retribution from the government or other agencies; sheer bad luck; debt; exile; loss of employment; the helplessness of old age; seeking to assuage the grief of bereavement; widowhood.⁴⁶ We can add the special case of avoiding or escaping marriage: in the *Therīgāthā*, we read of Isidāsī becoming a nun because of the unhappiness of marriage, and Sumedhā renouncing and going forth on her appointed wedding day.⁴⁷ These cases are mentioned here and there in the Pāli scriptures. Sources such as the *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthā* and commentaries indicate that converts as described were often young, often from wealthy families, and often had suffered bereavement, unhappy marriage, poverty, or banishment from home; significantly, though,

43 D.I.60f.

44 Vinaya, I.76.

45 The *Mahāvagga* deals in detail with rules governing ordination: Vin. I.56-95, with many grounds for exclusion mentioned; the minimum age for recruitment into the order as a novice was fifteen, and for the higher ordination twenty: Vin.I.49f.; cf. Vin.IV.130, Vin.I.85-90. The list includes children, lepers, people with boils, eczema, epilepsy, soldiers or officials not officially discharged, robbers, escapees, criminals, those punished corporally with traces remaining, slaves, those without parents' permission (Vin.I.83), those mutilated for punishment, people suffering from goitre or elephantiasis, the hunchbacked, the very ill, very ugly, one-eyed, crippled, maimed, paralysed, very old, blind, deaf or dumb; also (Vin.I.85-9): eunuchs, matricides, parricides, snake spirits, slayers of Arhants, hermaphrodites and schismatics.

46 I.W. Mabbett, 'Buddhism and Freedom', in A. Reid and D. Kelly, eds, *Asian Freedoms*, Cambridge (Cambridge U.P.), 1998, pp. 19-36.

47 *Therīgāthā*, 400-447, 448-522.

some were said to be of lowly birth, such as Sunīta the roadsweeper, who began his recitation: 'I was born in a humble family, poor, having little food; my work was lowly — I was a disposer of (withered) flowers.'⁴⁸ Sharma counted in the two texts just named at least ten out of 259 theras, and eight out of fifty-nine therīs, who were likely to count as *śūdras* by his criteria, including an actor, a trapper, a basketmaker, a *caṇḍāla*, a prostitute and a female slave.⁴⁹ A list of such cases has no census value; what counts is the fact that relief from the hardship of a life of menial toil is acknowledged along with more spiritual goals among the motivations of those entering the order, and acknowledged in many places. D.D. Kosambi lists named individuals attesting that disciples came from different *varṇas*, high and low.⁵⁰

All this creates the presumption that, as indeed certainly happened in other better documented phases of the history of Buddhism, the Buddhist order, though not offering a life of comfort or self-indulgence, could provide a career of last resort for people in difficulties and without any pretensions to unusual holiness or scholarship.

It was necessary for the Buddha and his chief disciples, as it is necessary for us, to recognize in the motivations of the rank and file an intrusion of concrete historical circumstances upon an ideal. The ideal was the lonely path of the ascetic seeking an end to suffering in detachment and meditation; the historical circumstances were those created by public success. As an idea, Buddhism could be consistent and univocal; as a process in history, it had to be a number of different things to different people, and it could not be these things without stresses and strains.

So far we have been looking at the order from the inside; what is clear is that it cannot be conceptually isolated from its outside, for the people who entered it brought with them many of the concerns of the society beyond the cloister. In the early peripatetic days, there were no cloisters and there was constant interaction with the wider community; when there were cloisters, the interaction became if anything more important, because the monasteries acquired a variety of social roles

48 *Theragāthā*, 620-31; Cf. Wijayaratna, *Le moine bouddhiste*, pp. 19ff; p. 28.

49 R.S. Shama, *Sudras in Ancient India*, p. 148.

50 D.D. Kosambi, 'Early stages of the caste system in northern India', *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 22 (1946), pp. 33-48 at pp. 33f.

and depended intimately upon the continuing support of a dedicated laity.

The close relationships that developed between the order and the committed laity upon which it depended deserve more study than they have so far received. The bonds which united the order and the local community in a sort of symbiosis required, not just that great men should from time to time bestow property upon the *samgha* as a whole, but that ordinary people in small communities should accept the responsibility of keeping the monks in their locality fed every day, and should make the maintenance of Buddhist *vihāras* their special business.

The monks could not, and obviously did not, treat their supporters with aloof disdain, having nothing to do with them except passively accepting their offerings in the prescribed spirit of detachment. On the contrary, they participated in an ongoing relationship. They regularly taught the *dhamma* to laymen, and inevitably the traffic between village and *vihāra* came to be institutionalized in a round of merit-making activities that provided satisfaction to all parties.

Buddhism, like other teachings on offer from holy men, was not an exclusive church, and laymen could seek spiritual benefit from the patronage of any number of different schools simultaneously. Nevertheless, there must have been many who attached themselves specially to the Buddhist *samgha* without any idea of ever taking the robe, and these people sought ways of sanctifying and confirming their special relationship. Various passages give evidence of lay involvement in the maintenance of the Buddhist order.⁵¹ According to the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the participation of the lay followers was essential to the success of the order.⁵²

Familiar in more recent times, of course, is the common practice of taking layman's vows and living a modified version of the ascetic life for prescribed periods, or indefinitely. There is, however, suggestive evidence of another way in which a layman could give

⁵¹ Mil.94f declares ten special qualities of a lay devotee: finding the same pleasures and pains as the monks, subjection to the *dhamma*, making gifts, preventing any decline in the *dhamma*, having right views, giving up traditional celebratory feasts, seeking no other teacher, working for peace, not being envious or hypocritical, and taking the three refuges of the Buddha, the *dharma* and the *samgha*. Cf. B.G. Gokhale, 'The Buddhist Social Ideals', *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 32 (1957), pp. 141-7.

⁵² M.I.493f.

evidence of special commitment in ancient times. Some of Aśoka's inscriptions include a claim to have passed 256 nights; this has been seen as an institutionalized form of lay observance entailing attendance at the night-long *uposatha* vigil, fasting and listening to *dhamma* sermons, on days 8, 14 and 15 of the long fortnights, and 8 and 14 of the short - 67 in a year.⁵³ According to H. Falk, a reference in the so-called 'Schism' edict to a command given to officials means not, as conventional translations would have it, that these officials were 'dispatched', but that they were to supervise the conduct of these night-long vigils.⁵⁴ Falk also suggests that perhaps the total of 256 nights could have had special significance as a lay qualification.⁵⁵

Being a lay supporter could carry very serious responsibilities. In proportion as the *samgha* flourished, the interaction between laity and monks increased. Did this interaction serve as a vehicle for deliberate involvement by the *samgha* in social problems? After all, the internal values of the order quite clearly reject the social categorizations and status discriminations embedded in the brahmanical orthodoxy; it might therefore be argued, and often has been, that in many ways Buddhism was an active proponent of social protest and reform.

Such a characterization certainly fails to apply to the ascetic programme which appears to have been central to the original message legible in the texts, for the Buddha was concerned to offer a way towards spiritual salvation for an elect class of ascetics who abandoned the distractions and responsibilities of the householder's life and sought an end to suffering in lonely contemplation, not a programme of social reform. Some scholars have seen in this aspect of Buddhist history an indication that the *dharma* was, if anything, the opposite of a movement of social protest; it was apt, rather, as a dampener upon disaffection: it taught that suffering is part of the fabric of life, that wrongs endured in this world are fruits of inevitable *karma*, and that therefore men should pin their hopes upon a future consummation in another world or in no world rather than complain about their present lot. 'It lifts no standard of revolt; it sounds rather

53 H. Falk, 'Die 246 Nächte Asokas', *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Vol. 140/1 (1990), pp. 96-122.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 120f.

55 *Ibid.* Falk points out that $256 = 4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4$.

the signal for flight. Let us not talk of reconstructing the edifice of the divided classes, this would be to build clouds upon clouds.’⁵⁶

This represents one understanding of the meaning of the Buddhist message. But it is, after all, only one Buddhism; others supervened early, and were easily superimposed upon the founder’s first intentions, possibly during his lifetime and conceivably (though perhaps unlikely) even with his co-operation. The universal values implicit in the objectives of the *śramaṇas* could, in principle, lend themselves to reformist programmes, for they appeared to deny the validity of the old brahmanical orthodoxy. Truth was to be sought outside the institutionalized Vedic framework. Such a doctrine could no doubt inspire a social programme. Certainly, it can be argued that Buddhist ethical values — truth-speaking, keeping to the *dhamma*, liberality and non-violence — formed integral parts of the teaching constantly and quietly imparted to all lay supporters, and that such values had in the long term a tendency to work against social discrimination. B.G. Gokhale claims that the Buddha’s objections to social discrimination were not just internal matters of monkish discipline but tended ‘to create an equalitarian ethos which would cut across tribal lines and distinctions of caste and race.’⁵⁷ Thus the *samgha* became a social force and a custodian of ethical values.

In an immediately obvious sense, however, principles of social reform are inconsistent with the original programme of ascetic withdrawal. To whatever extent the *śramaṇa* movements became involved in society, they could have gone either way — favouring equality by denying the validity of privilege, or conserving inequality by denying the value of social action. What sort of influence did the order actually exert?

In the first place, an attitude of easy tolerance to people of varied backgrounds marked off the *śramaṇa* from the householder. The

⁵⁶ Bouglé, ‘Caste and the Buddhist Revolution’, in idem, *Essays on the Caste System*, tr. D.F. Pocock, Cambridge (Cambridge U.P.), 1971, pp. 63-79 at p. 74; Bouglé also (*Ibid.* p.78) quotes Pillon, in the *Année Philosophique*, 1868: ‘Thus the conscience becomes the accomplice of all natural and social fatalities; it will no longer object to anything, will not protest against anything, will not revolt against anything.’ See also R. Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the Mid-First Millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley*, Bombay (O.U.P.), 1984, p. 150.

⁵⁷ B.G. Gokhale, ‘The Buddhist Social Ideals’, *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 32 (1957), pp. 141-7 at p. 146. He cites Dhp verses 84, 129, 142, 223, 256, 257 for these social values. The verses cited laud selflessness, non-injury, serenity and calmness, generosity, and the wise and discriminating judgment of cases. Some of these qualities are specifically attributed to good ascetics, brahmins or rulers. By themselves, they do not look like a programme for social reform. (On this point, see also M.II. 128. M.II.147-157.)

wandering ascetics or *śramanas* moved among all classes of people and accepted recruits from any of them. All people were alike in the Buddha's eyes too. In some passages he is represented as distinguishing between physical and moral or psychological criteria of real status: an outcast or a brahman is made such not by birth but by behaviour; 'name' and 'family' are just empty words.⁵⁸ In the *saṃgha*, there is no distinction of wealth, and respect is given to all;⁵⁹ ultimately there is no question of birth or lineage.⁶⁰ Within the *saṃgha*, there must be no insulting speech referring to monks' former natal status, occupation or condition.⁶¹ The inclusion of such a rule in the Vinaya is telling; it reminds us that monks, being fallible humans, could not easily forget the distinctions of social status current in the outside world which they had left, and needed to be restrained from importing them.

Here then is a clear doctrine of personal worth according to individual merit, not inherited social position. The Buddha appears in the texts consorting with mendicants of all types, including people of low class and dark skin, for which he was criticized by the orthodox.⁶²

The claims of the brahmins to social eminence are roundly criticized. Their pretensions are analysed by the Buddha and dismissed. All people are alike in potential, with good and bad qualities among those born in all classes; so far as purity of birth goes, brahmins are in no position to give themselves airs, for they cannot be sure who they are.⁶³ (This casts interesting light upon the transmission of social status, suggesting that people of brahmin stock often took wives from families without claims to good Aryan descent.)

It is important, though, to recognize that this absence of social discrimination belonged originally in the context of a programme for

58 *Suttanipāta, Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. X, p. (23) 135/141; cf. pp. 462, 620-650.

59 A4.210; see *P.E.D.* s.v. *appaṭivibhatta* '(not eating) without sharing with others'.

60 In respect of wisdom and righteousness there is no question of birth or clan, *jāti* or *gotta*: D.III.99: *Na kho Ambaṭṭha anuttarāya vijjā-carāṇa-sampadāya jāti-vādo vā vuccati, gotta-vādo vā vuccati...*

61 Vim.IV.4-1 1: all forms of jeering and scoffing are condemned, especially jeering at monks on the score of their birth (*jāti*), occupation (*sippa*) or condition (*kamma*).

62 D.III.81.

63 M.II.147-157; cf. D.I.92f.: the Buddha was of pure descent, but there were brahmins whose ancestry included anonymous slave-girls.

personal spiritual discipline, not of social reform or political management. Where the Buddha is represented as teaching non-discrimination, the concern is with the equality of all truth-seekers at the same stage on the road to enlightenment, regardless of their origins, not with the merits of social distinctions in the world outside the *samgha*.⁶⁴ There is no evidence to suggest that the Buddha sought to work for the abolition of hierarchical social relationships; indeed, it has been argued that, in finding a basis for an individual's status in past *karma* rather than birth, he was legitimizing rather than discrediting social differentiation.⁶⁵

One important area of social action and ethical values that is a pressing topic of modern concern is that of attitudes to women. Buddhism has already been examined by a number of scholars from this point of view. Pāli sources have been thoroughly examined, and there is no need here to repeat at length what has already been said elsewhere. The evidence can be used to argue that Buddhism either gave women an improved status or denied it to them. Some earlier writers emphasized the increment in equality, status and respect enjoyed by women in the early Buddhist system.⁶⁶ Diana Paul found some particularly misogynistic attitudes in Theravāda, but by comparison found Mahāyāna overall quite favourable to women.⁶⁷ Liz Wilson sees as pervasive throughout a male-centred vision which focuses upon women's bodies as objects only of distaste suitable for meditation upon the theme of transience.⁶⁸

64 M.II.147-157 (*Assalāyanasutta*): brahmins are like other people by birth; cf. M.II. 1 28. The Buddha here obliquely teaches non-discrimination; he seems concerned to specify that this non-discrimination is only in respect of the ascetic career, not social status.

65 See Y. Krishan, 'Buddhism and the Caste System', *J.I.A.B.S.*, Vol.9, No. 1 (1986), pp. 71-83, especially p.82: the Buddha's teaching affirmed, not weakened, the *varṇa* system, finding a new basis for it in *karma*, rather than in Vedic myths (X.90), while providing for non-discrimination within the *samgha*.

66 See Caroline A. Foley (C.A.F. Rhys-Davids), 'The women leaders of the Buddhist reformation as illustrated by Dhammapāla's commentary on the *Therīgāthā*', *Transactions of the Ninth International Congress of Orientalists*, Vol. 1, Indian and Aryan Sections, ed. E. Delmar, London (Committee of the Congress), 1893, pp. 344-61; I.B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Lay Women and Alms Women*, New York (E.P. Dutton), 1930/Delhi (Motilal Banarsidass), 1975. The latter work is based on a study of the Pāli canon (especially the Vinaya, and within this especially the Cullavagga and the Bhikkhuni-Khandaka), the commentaries, the *jātakas*, and the *Milindapañha*.

67 Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: images of the feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, Berkeley (Asian Humanities Press), 1979; 2nd ed. Berkeley & Los Angeles (U. of California P.), 1985. See pp. 6, 303. The author found that the texts most favourable to women tended to be the most popular.

68 Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers. Horrific figurations of the feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature*, Chicago/London (University of Chicago Press), 1996. On women in

Familiar is the evidence that the early Buddhists evinced a greater tolerance than brahmanical codes imply. The Buddha's followers and patrons included women: he was visited at Vesāli by the wealthy courtesan Ambapālī.⁶⁹ The *Therīgāthā* must be used with caution here, for it represents a later stage of Buddhist history, but for what it is worth, of sixty nuns figuring in this text whose background is described, five are low-born, as noted above.⁷⁰ (This is suggestive, for the sample represented by the individuals figuring in this collection is likely to be weighted towards the better educated.) Nevertheless it is clear enough that, if one takes late twentieth century values as standard, the Buddha (unsurprisingly, perhaps) fails to earn a high score. There is, of course, the story that the Buddha was reluctant to admit women to the order, and predicted that its life would be shortened by this move, which he approved nevertheless.⁷¹ As K.T.S. Sarao has said, 'Nowhere do we see Gautama making favourable comments on women's property rights, choice of husband, female education or against their being ill-treated.'⁷² The same author points to the Vinaya rule that nuns must pay respects to monks, however junior,⁷³ collects references from various sources, especially *Jātakas*, suggesting disdainful attitudes to women, and concludes that 'Early Buddhism sees women as destructive, elusive, mysterious, treacherous, sensual and not much higher than animals.'⁷⁴

Buddhism see also Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: a feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism*, Albany (S.U.N.Y. Press), 1993 (offering an 'androgynous' interpretation of the Buddhadharmā); Jonathan Walters, 'A voice from the silence: the Buddha's mother's story', *History of Religions*, Vol. 33 (1994), pp. 358-79 (who argues that, for a substantial period after Aśoka, women in Buddhism were influential and relatively little disadvantaged); J.I. Cabezón, ed., *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, Albany (S.U.N.Y. Press), 1992 (see particularly A. Sponberg, 'Attitudes toward women and the feminine in early Buddhism', pp. 3-36, emphasizing the 'multivocality' of a Buddhism that contained a variety of interests and attitudes).

69 D.II.95.

70 See T.W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha*, London (P.T.S.), Vol. I (reprint, 1973), p. 102.

71 Vin.2.254: the Buddha acknowledged that women were as well able as men to realize the states producing enlightenment; Vin.2.256: the Buddha said that having women entering the houseless state would result in the *dhamma* lasting for five hundred years instead of a thousand. I.B. Horner (*Women*, p. 103) saw this latter passage as a possible interpolation: 'Monks edited the sayings attributed to Gotama, and they would naturally try to minimise the importance which he gave to women'.

72 K.T.S. Sarao, 'Early Buddhist Attitudes towards Women', *Z.D.M.G. Supplementa 9. Proceedings of the Thirty-Second International Congress for Asian and North African Studies*, Stuttgart (Steiner), 1992, pp. 150-152.

73 *Ibid.* p. 151.

74 *Ibid.* p. 152.

For the purpose of understanding the dynamics of Buddhism's interaction with lay society, however, later twentieth-century standards and concerns are likely to be of limited value. One thing that inevitably strikes the reader of the Pāli canon is that, among the references to women that figure there, an enormous proportion is concerned to teach the monks about the dangers of sexual temptation which must be avoided. From the point of view of the original *samgha*, involvement with women was fraught with danger, for long-suppressed sexual feelings were more likely than anything else to threaten a monk's loyalty to the values of his ascetic calling.

Thus, in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, a monk who is claimed never to have observed the characteristics of women, to have taught *Dhamma* to nuns or any other women, or approached nuns' quarters, is held up as a role model.⁷⁵ The foulness of women's bodies is repeatedly emphasized: the corpses of women are 'full of worms, ... diseased, impure, rotten, oozing, trickling, the delight of fools'.⁷⁶ An alluring female body prinked out with cosmetics and adornments will delude a fool, but not the one who seeks transcendence.⁷⁷ Elsewhere, in the *Theragāthā* it is apostrophized as a chain of bones, evil-smelling:

You little hut made of a chain of bones, sewn together with mesh and sinew.

Fie upon the evil-smelling body. You cherish those who have another's limbs.

You bag of dung, tied up with skin, you demoness with lumps on your breast.

There are nine streams in your body which flow all the time.

Your body with its nine streams makes an evil smell and is obstructed by dung.

A bhikkhu desiring purity avoids it as one avoids excrement.

If any person knew you as I know you, he would avoid you, keeping far away, as one avoids a cesspit in the rainy season.⁷⁸

Monks are repeatedly warned about contact with women: the sight of a scantily clad woman may overwhelm a monk with lust and he may return to lay life, which is why another name for women is

⁷⁵ M.3.126; cf. Vin.4.21., where the rule is made that a monk should not teach the *dhamma* to women.

⁷⁶ Thag.393f.; cf. Thag. 315f.

⁷⁷ M.2.64f.; cf. Thag.769-774.

⁷⁸ Thag.1150-1153.

'the peril of fierce fishes.'⁷⁹ Women are naturally prone to misconduct;⁸⁰ the approach of a dancing girl or of a prostitute is a 'snare of death'.⁸¹ Concentration on one's routine as a monk may be wrecked by 'nicely adorned women' coming to look round the monastery.⁸² Sages (*muni*) sleep peacefully only if they have no bonds with women.⁸³ In all sorts of ways, women are dangers to see, to talk about, to think about; they are captivating and alluring to men.⁸⁴ When King Prasenajit of Kośala rides out in the park, he has with him his favourite lovely wives, and

the fragrance of their bodies is so sweet. It is just as if a casket of scent were opened - these royal ladies are so sweetly scented. Lord, the touch of those ladies is as a tuft of cotton-wool, so delicately are they nurtured. Well, lord, at such time we have to ward the elephant, and we have to ward ourselves as well.⁸⁵

A monk should be careful not to go into a village for alms at a time when he may catch sight of the wrong things, such as women with dishevelled clothing.⁸⁶ A woman should be thought of in the same way as a mother, sister or daughter.⁸⁷ But, despite all warnings, there could be ascetics so misguided as to think that

there was no fault in sense-pleasures and that happiness lies in the young, soft and downy arms of a girl-wanderer.⁸⁸

What is shown by such passages is that the content of the canon must be understood primarily in the light of the lessons it held for monks, who in the first instance, in the oldest texts and many later ones, were supposed to be dedicated to an ascetic peripatetic way of life. Whatever may have happened to the *dhamma* as it became an

79 M.1.462.

80 Dhp.242.

81 Thag.459-463, 267f; cf. Thag 769ff. A monk saw the approach of his own wife, comely and well dressed, as a snare of death: Thag.299f.

82 S1.185.

83 Thag.137.

84 S 5.319; Thag736-739; Dhp284; Thig77; A 1.1; S 4.238.

85 S 5.351.

86 Sn 386f; cf. Mvu 3.328.

87 S4.110.

88 M1.305.

influential force in lay society, it is not immediately apparent from the content of the texts that it was in origin conceived of as a social programme, and references to women should not be seen as social doctrines. They merely pick up the assumptions current in Indian society at the time, adding to them the unease and distrust felt by monks professionally required to see women as dangerous.

Thus women are supposed to be obsessed with having numerous children,⁸⁹ they are prone to be dragged down into hell by the bad *karma* of their selfishness, their jealousy and their lust for sense-pleasure;⁹⁰ they cannot obtain enlightenment because they have a limited 'two-finger' intelligence.⁹¹ They are expected to find their fulfilment in the devout observance of their family roles; one passage identifies as causes of bad rebirth for women an absence of faith, of a sense of shame, and of a fear of reproach, when these are conjoined to anger, grumbling, envy, selfishness, adultery, immorality, and indolence.⁹² Perhaps it is for such reasons that nuns had to observe many more rules than monks.

Texts acknowledge that the lot of a woman is not a happy one: she must endure separation from her family to go to that of her husband, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and subservience to a man.⁹³ A verse in the *Therīgāthā* says that some women commit suicide after childbirth.⁹⁴ Constant humble subservience to her husband and his family is clearly expected.⁹⁵ She had to wait like a servant upon her husband:

Arising in good time I approached my lord's house; having washed my hands and feet, upon the threshold I approached my husband with the *añjali* salute.

Taking a comb, decorations, collyrium and a mirror, I myself adorned my lord, like a servant-girl.

89 Ud 91;A 1.78.

90 S4.240.

91 S 1.129 = Thag 60; the various commentaries explain this by reference to the way women need to judge whether rice is cooked by pressing it with two fingers, or the way they take cotton fibre with two fingers and spin the thread: cf. A 1.28, M 3.65f. (Note by Peter Masefield).

92 S4.240.

93 S4.239.

94 Thig 216f.

95 S 16; M 1.253. The age of sixteen appears to have been regarded as normal and desirable; see Thig 445f.

I myself prepared the rice-gruel; I myself washed the bowl; as a mother her only son, so I looked after my husband.
 My husband offended against me, who in this way had shown him devotion, an affectionate servant, with humbled pride, an early riser, not lazy, virtuous.⁹⁶

Sometimes good things are said about the female sex, but they are equivocal: a husband disappointed that his wife has given birth to a girl is consoled with the assurance that a woman can be better than a man because if she is clever and virtuous she might give birth to a 'valiant emperor';⁹⁷ woman is described as the 'utmost commodity', perhaps because (as the commentary puts it) 'all *bodhisattvas* and *cakkavattis* come into being in none other than their mothers' womb'.⁹⁸ A really good woman might be reborn (like a man) in one of the divine realms of the gods, but only in those belonging to the *kāmaloka*, the plane of desire, which is subordinate to the planes of pure form and formlessness.⁹⁹

A review of early Buddhist treatment of women, then, reminds us, unsurprisingly, that in matters of custom and tradition the Buddhist norms did not step outside the framework of constraints and presuppositions that had evolved in contemporary society. What they could do, however, was to endorse whatever features of current values were the most consonant with spiritual insight. In practice, this meant the promotion of peaceful and respectful relationships between individuals and groups. The concept of merit, *punya*,¹⁰⁰ as a bond between monks and laity, and as a device by which ordinary people could benefit spiritually from the presence of monks in their midst, was a potential eirenic influence upon social relationships which developed early. The original soteriological quest may have offered no place for lay activity within the scheme of life leading to salvation, but the Buddhist doctrine of *karma* could easily be interpreted so as to provide such a link. Unlike the Jain idea of *karma*, which made of it a sort of personal spiritual hygiene unable to legitimize any social

96 Thig 406ff.

97 S 1.86.

98 S 1.43.

99 A 1.213f.

100 Mayrhofer, *Etymological Dictionary*, cites the derivation from the root *pr*, 'fill', but suggests the possibility of another root *pr* related to *nipuna* 'clever', or a possible **prnya*, 'förderlich'.

activity, the psychological Buddhist version of it gave it a fundamental role in a system of ethics; the progression through liberality (giving offerings to monks), good conduct (following the precepts of the *dhamma*) and spiritual cultivation associated lay supporters with the order and met a social need.¹⁰¹ In its public face, Buddhist morality was a force for stability and order, embodied in precepts encouraging people to carry out their responsibilities assiduously:

Great learning and skill, well-learnt discipline, and well-spoken words, this is the highest blessing.

Waiting on mother and father, protecting child and wife, and a quiet calling (*anākulā ca kammantā*), this is the highest blessing.

Giving alms, living religiously (*dharmacariyā*), protecting relatives, blameless deeds ...

Ceasing and abstaining from sin, refraining from intoxicating drink, perseverance in the *Dhammas* ...

Reverence and humility, contentment and gratitude, the hearing of the *Dhamma* at due seasons ...

Patience and pleasant speech, intercourse with *Samaṇas*, religious conversation at due seasons ... ¹⁰²

Eventually, certainly in the stable institutions of rural Buddhism familiar in more recent times, monk and layman alike could be drawn into a single integrated scheme, within which the principle of merit may show Hindu influence.¹⁰³ It has been debated how far the *dhamma* taught by Aśoka in his inscriptions was intended to correspond specifically with the Buddhist teaching; the very ambiguity is significant, for Aśoka's *dhamma* focuses not upon *nibbāna* (which is not even mentioned) but upon harmonious and orderly social relationships, in which respect and reverence are always to be rendered to social superiors.

101 R. Gombrich, 'Karma and social control', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 17 No. 2 (1975), pp. 212-220.

102 Sn.261-266 (p. 47). Probably the most commonly cited homily on social virtues on these lines is the Sigālovāda Suttanta, D.3.180-193 (redefining the cult of the six quarters as a metaphor for the practice of social virtues); cf. A3.37-8 (wives should work hard at running the household for the benefit of their husbands).

103 H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics*, London, 1970, traces the evolution of moral ideas in the Vedic literature, leading to a rudimentary notion of karma and rebirth based on merit; see especially pp. 121f. Cf. R. Gombrich, 'Notes on the brahminical background to Buddhist ethics', *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Hammalaya Saddhatissa*, ed. Gatare Dhammapala et al., Nugegoda, Sri Lanka (University of Sri Jayewardenepura), 1984, pp. 91-102 at p. 91.

If we wish to picture the relationships of the early Buddhist order with encompassing lay society, no simple generalization is likely to be adequate. The *samgha* was not always working purposefully to subvert the social order; nor was it regularly engaged in supporting the existing socio-political structure in the kingdoms where it was generously patronized. Its members played a variety of parts, as wandering ascetics, shamans (in a broad sense), scholars and (above all, in some circumstances) mediators between metropolitan and local culture and community. As they travelled, monks could enter into different relationships in different contexts.

In particular, to add a final touch of depth and realism to our picture of the order in its social context, we should notice that they were not necessarily always revered and respected wherever they went. Far from it. Fundamental to the complex array of different Buddhisms at work in society is the ambivalence of the monk's image.

It is often overlooked that there were, as indeed there still are, stresses and strains at times in the relations between monks and laymen. Not all monks were well fitted to play the dignified, aloof role demanded by their station; further, many of those who were so fitted had ideas about the way they should teach the *dhamma* to laymen that did not meet with a happy reception.

It is not as if all sects of wandering ascetics were respected and supported. We have evidence that other *śramaṇa* sects besides the Buddhists could earn distrust or contempt. The Ājīvikas, for example, were seen as weird, goblin-like creatures, and their opponents claimed that, though strict in public, they were self-indulgent in private, behaving without chastity or frugality.¹⁰⁴

'Those unrighteous people the Ājīvas, as ordained by the gods, are the confusers of *varṇa* and *āśrama*, a people of workmen and craftsmen. Goblins are the divinities in their sacrifices, which they perform with wealth (stolen) from beings who resemble the immortals (i.e. brahmans) and (gained by acting as) police spies, and with much other ill-gotten wealth ...'¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ A.L. Basham, *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas: a vanished Indian religion*, Delhi (Motilal Banarsidass), 1981 (reprint) pp. 162, 278.

¹⁰⁵ *Vāya Śrīkṣetraurāṇa* 69. This follows the translation by A.L. Basham, *History and Doctrines*, p. 162.

Among the more extreme of the ascetics, there were always those who deliberately mortified themselves by making themselves disgusting to mainstream society; mediaeval *saṃnyāsa* texts, even, advise the renunciant to be indifferent to honour and insults alike; 'Let a yogin act in such a manner that people will despise him and never associate with him;'¹⁰⁶ dishonour is to be deliberately courted in various ways; recommended lifestyles include behaving exactly like a madman, or like a cow.¹⁰⁷

The Buddha's followers were always likely to be tarred with the same brush as other ascetics who disdained the ways of ordinary people and seemed to insist upon perversity in their profession and practice. The Buddhist texts do not dwell on these aspects, but at various points they allow us to see that bhikkhus were not always given respect by the community. There were ugly rumours about the order; it was claimed by some that followers of the Buddha had killed a woman in the Jeta Grove, and the Pāli scriptures allude at several points to tension between householders and monks; in one passage in the *Dīgha Nikāya* the Buddha advises his followers how to respond to hostile criticism of the Buddha, the doctrine or the order, and in another passage in the *Udāna* is told an unsavoury story of trouble stirred up by jealous ascetics of other schools who killed a woman and sought to pin the blame for the murder upon the Buddha and his followers. It is difficult to know what historical basis may underlie such a story, but clearly it reflects an environment of rumour-mongering and slander.¹⁰⁸

It is clear that the followers of the Buddha were often enough regarded as bad elements,¹⁰⁹ and sometimes they were abused and mistreated. It was recognized that if they went to Mathura or the borderlands they should not expect to get on well there.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ P. Olivelle, *Samnyasa Upanisads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*, N.Y. (O.U.P.), 1992, pp.107f.

¹⁰⁷ Olivelle, *Samnyasa Upanisads*, pp.108f; see especially p. 108 n.10. It is worth recalling that the Raghuvamśa has an episode in which the hero must behave like a cow to expiate an offence. See also Tatia, 'The Interaction of Jainism and Buddhism and its Impact on the History of Buddhist Monasticism', in *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, ed. A.K. Narain, New Delhi (B.R. Publishing), 1979, pp. 321-338 at p. 322.

¹⁰⁸ D.I.2f; Ud. 43f. See also P. Masefield, 'The Muni and the Moonies' p. 145.

¹⁰⁹ This aspect of the *saṃgha*'s relationship with society is discussed by Peter Masefield, 'The Muni and the Moonies.'

¹¹⁰ A 3.256 (the disagreeableness of Mathura); A 4.225f. (in the outlying countries there are unintelligent barbarians; the Buddha's followers cannot get on there). At D.III.264 is a reference to rebirth in border countries, among unintelligent barbarians, where the *dhamma* cannot prosper.

The Buddha and his followers were liable to various forms of harassment.¹¹¹ The *suttas* at several points represent brahmins speaking to the Buddha contemptuously, treating him or his followers with lofty disdain or abrasive scorn.¹¹² For example a brahman who has been impressed by the Buddha rejects his former attitude to 'little shaveling recluses, black, offscourings of our kinsman's heels' (a stock phrase appearing in many places).¹¹³ An Ājīvika taunted the Buddha, or one of his lay supporters, as a 'shaven householder' (*mundagahapatika*).¹¹⁴ In another story is a reference to villagers having been induced by Māra the evil tempter to harass and despise monks.¹¹⁵ Such allusions would not be made if contemptuous treatment of Buddhist monks did not seem plausible. Vinaya rules are sometimes introduced by stories of monks misbehaving in ways that required a judgment by the Buddha, and such misbehaviour is occasionally said to have earned the order a bad reputation;¹¹⁶ such stories are unlikely to record historical episodes but reflect a probably well grounded concern that irregular behaviour on the part of monks was all too likely to bring the order into disrepute.

As the story of Saṅgāmaji suggests,¹¹⁷ the Buddha and his order were likely to fall foul of the relatives of new ordinands, whose families may sometimes have had their lives seriously disrupted by the loss of their kinsfolk being recruited into the monkhood.¹¹⁸ In the Vinaya there is a reference to people in Magadha being angry at the Buddha for his teaching which caused the breaking up of families; the Buddha is blamed for depriving people of children, making widows,

111 B.G. Gokhale cites a number of these: see his 'Early Buddhism and the brahmins', in *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, pp. 68-80 at p. 72 n. 28.

112 D.I.90; M.I.334, S4.117, D.I.103. In this last, for example, a brahman teacher scoffs at the idea of base mendicants such as the Buddha having any traffic with brahmins. See also F.L. Woodward, trans., *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Vol. 4 (Pāli Text Society), 1927, p. 74 n. 1: non-brahmins such as the Buddhist monks were assimilated to *śūdras* in their relatively dark complexion and their origin (in the well-known creation myth) from Brahmā's foot.

113 M.II.177: this is something of a stock phrase attributed to brahmins; cf. M.I.334.

114 Vin.IV.91.

115 M.I.334.

116 E.g., Vin.1.191.

117 *Udāna* 8.

118 Bareaux has analysed the evidence bearing on the attitudes of ordinands' families to *saṅgha* recruitment.. A. Bareaux, 'Réactions des familles dont un membre devient moine selon le canon bouddhique pali', in O.H. de Wijesekera, ed., *Malalasekera Commemoration Volume*, Colombo (The Malalasekera Commemoration Volume Editorial Committee), 1976, pp. 15-22.

and destroying families.¹¹⁹ Suddhodana is represented in one passage as remonstrating against the Buddha for making so many members of his family take ordination; this episode is represented as the occasion for the introduction of the rule that ordinands must have their parents' permission.¹²⁰ Another Vinaya passage tells of a monk living with a woman, and then leaving her, to her fury;¹²¹ this occurs as part of a series dealing with monks committing sexual misdemeanours; nothing can be inferred from them except that, by a certain stage in the history of the order, it was thought worth-while to hold up bad examples of such behaviour.

Buddhism might have had to endure the worst of both worlds in that, while as a *śramaṇa* movement it could be blamed for the character earned by extreme ascetics practising repellent penances, its deliberate moderation and avoidance of the severer forms of self mortification could earn distrust. A passage in the *Majjhima Nikāya* refers to other sects being ignorantly treated as superior, Buddhism as inferior, by a householder.¹²² Other sects could look down on Buddhists as spurious ascetics. Ājīvikas called Buddhist monks jeeringly 'shaven-headed householders', and a group of them mocked a group of bhikkhus who were carrying parasols, saying that they looked like treasury officials, *ganakāmahāmatta*.¹²³ Some of the stories in the *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthās* suggest that Buddhist monks could be regarded as idlers, living on charity and fond of taking their ease.¹²⁴ Certainly it was important to the leaders of the order to keep up the standards of deportment of less experienced followers; one *sutta* emphasizes the need for a forest monk living on his own to avoid any display of uncouthness, laziness or ignorance of *dhamma* in public.¹²⁵ The Buddha was sometimes on the defensive; after declaring the rebirth states of deceased disciples, he had to explain that this was done not for the sake of his reputation but wholly for the

119 Ud. 5f.; Vin.1.43 (cited above).

120 Vin.I.82f.

121 Vin.III.131f.

122 M.I.376f.

123 Vin.2.130.

124 Thag 219, 342, 705; Thig. 88, 237, 273, and see B.G. Gokhale, 'The image-world of the Thera-Therī-Gāthās', in O.H. de Wijesekera, ed., *Malalasekera Commemoration Volume*, Colombo (The Malalasekera Commemoration Volume Editorial Committee), 1976, pp. 96-110.

125 M.I.469-73 (*Gulissānisutta*).

sake of the *dhamma*.¹²⁶ No doubt criticisms of such practices had been received.

In the following centuries, too, it appears that Buddhist monks could be seen as socially contaminating; the *Arthaśāstra* records a fine of 100 *paṇas* for inviting any Buddhist mendicants (*śākya*), Ājīvikas, *śūdras* or wandering ascetics (*pravrajita*) to dinners honouring gods or ancestors.¹²⁷

In modern times, where attempts have been made to revive the forest tradition, it is notable that monks forsaking the domesticated mainstream career can encounter distrust and suspicion as often as they earn reverence for their superior sanctity. Writing about the movement begun by Acharn Mun, Acharn Tate mentioned the problems encountered by the first monk of *maha* grade (having passed Grade 3 in the Thai monastic education scale) to take to solitary wandering practising *thudong*: 'Most of the academic monks considered the going off on *tudong* a disgraceful thing to do.'¹²⁸

What this shows is that, in modern as in ancient times, Buddhism has had to find a place for itself in the different cultural environments of real people struggling to survive in the real world; different cultures nurture different world views, values and prejudices. Recruits into the Buddhist order came from secular society and brought with them much of that cultural baggage. Buddhism has had to learn to survive too. The chief lesson that emerges from this review of the topic is that we must learn how to use the sources sensitively. The scriptures were compiled as manual and inspiration for those who wished to look beyond life in society; the challenge is to find in the texts the tell-tale traces of this life in society which the authors wished to transcend.

SOURCES

For the present study, the focus has been on the Pāli canon. The editions consulted are the texts and (except where otherwise noted) the translations published by the Pāli Text Society. The abbreviations used are as follows:

126 M.I.465.

127 A.Ś.3.20.

128 Ajahn Tate, *The Autobiography of a Forest Monk*, tr. Bhikkhu Ariyesako, Wat Hin Mark Peng, 1993. On pp. 200-203 the author refers to the bitter criticism of a forest group by local settled monks.

THE EARLY BUDDHIST SAMGHA

A	<i>Anguttara Nikāya</i>
A.Ś.	<i>Arthaśāstra</i>
D	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
J.I.A.B.S.	<i>Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies</i>
Jat	<i>Jātaka</i>
M	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
Ml	<i>Milindapañha</i>
Mvu	<i>Mahāvvyutpatti</i>
P.E.D.	<i>Pali English Dictionary</i> (Rhys Davids & Stede, P.T.S.)
S	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
Thag	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Thig	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya Pitaka</i>
Z.D.M.G.	<i>Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

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