

1. The Arya Sangha

From the Dhammapada:

Month after month for a hundred years someone may worship the sacred fire in the forest. But if someone, only for a moment, pays reverence to a self-conquering person, that reverence would have greater value.

Introduction to this week's notes

These notes cover a few inter-related topics:

- spiritual hierarchy (ie. the principle that at any given time not all people are equally spiritually mature).
- irreversibility (ie. at a certain level of spiritual maturity someone will not regress, irrespective of what circumstances they encounter in the years ahead)
- the three fetters (ie. three deeply rooted unwholesome tendencies deeply rooted in human beings. People who break through these three fetters become "irreversible")
- the Arya Sangha or "community of holy persons"

All this will prepare the way for the following weeks of this unit when we will look at the lives of a small selection of Buddhist sages.

Spiritual hierarchy

Although there may be times of breakthrough in particular departments of spiritual life, maturity comes progressively. Whether in the field of ethics, meditation, or even transcendental insight things develop gradually. There are different degrees of insight. You can get a feeble flash of insight. If your meditation is weak it will not support more than a feeble flash of insight. But you can also have a very brilliant flash of insight which illumines as it were far into the depths of reality.

So at any given time some people will be more advanced than others. Although this principle of spiritual hierarchy is very important, it is not a question of a simple ranking system; not like the ranking that government ministers are given in order of their importance. Some people may be more developed in one particular aspect and less developed in another. And there is never going to be a perfect correlation between peoples' genuine spiritual attainment and their place in some sort of religious organization. You cannot, for example, say that person X is more developed than person Y because the former is an Order member and the latter is not.

When a sense of hierarchy emerges naturally and is freely acknowledged within a spiritual community this is very helpful. This happens when there is genuine receptivity to those who are wiser, and when this is not

marred by ideas of pseudo-egalitarianism or competitiveness. Acknowledging a natural spiritual hierarchy makes it easier for wiser and kinder people to help others come up to their level.

Irreversibility (stream entry)

It can be difficult to make progress on the spiritual path. Although it can be difficult to put one foot in front of the other, it seems rather easy to backslide. For example in the sphere of meditation we may get on quite well for a few months, and then it happens that we get a bit stressed and do not sit for a week or two. When we do take up meditation again we may find we are right back where we were months before.

However the good news is that after we reach a certain level of maturity spiritual progress is irreversible and we are no liable to backslide. The Buddha mentions this time and again. For example the Dhammapada says "the awakened one's victory cannot be turned into defeat". If there were no such point beyond which progress is irreversible, then we would never really escape "the endless round" of the Wheel of Life. We would be doomed to play forever a game of spiritual "snakes and ladders".

In terms of Hinayana Buddhism the point of irreversibility is known as the point of "stream entry". Mahayana Buddhism sees the bodhisattva as the highest form of attainment, and speaks of becoming an irreversible bodhisattva when the eighth of the ten stages of spiritual progress (bhumis) have been attained. In his later thinking Sangharakshita equates the stage of irreversibility described in Hinayana Buddhism with that described in Mahayana Buddhism. [This was covered in an earlier unit of the course.]

The three fetters

According to Hinayana Buddhism the point of "stream entry" or irreversibility is achieved by breaking the first three of the 'ten fetters', that bind us to the Wheel of Life. We will now look at each of these three fetters.

(a) The fetter of self-views (*sakaya-drishti*)

The Buddha countered self-view with his "no-self" (anatman) teaching. Basically the teaching of "no-self" (anatman) says:

1. Each of us experience ourselves: our activities, thinking, feeling, seeing, willing and imagining, so we all have an "empirical self" (svabhava). Associated with our "empirical self" is a natural desire and energy. This basic energy is the material we work with. We can transform it into something beautiful, something beyond its present experience. This "empirical self" is as necessary to the Buddhist as clay is to the potter.
2. However there is nothing ultimate in our present (unenlightened) experience - in our "empirical self".

3. Although there are other, deeper, dimensions of being that we can grow towards, these other dimensions are beyond our present mode of experience. At present, they are inconceivable to us. [If it was not for this deeper, eternal dimension of being, the “no-self” teaching would be pessimistic or even nihilistic.]

The “no-self” teaching also warns us against thinking we are the centre of the universe. It may be hard to picture how you can have an “empirical self” without any unchanging element in that empirical self; so perhaps an analogy will help. Imagine you are a cloud up in the blue sky, perhaps surrounded by a few other puffy clouds. There is a gentle breeze and so the cloud (that is you) gradually changes its shape and position in the sky. It also changes its colour, becoming brighter and brighter. Eventually it is unrecognizable from what it was some time previously. On the other hand the process of change is continuous, and there is a strong resemblance between how the cloud is now and how it was a moment ago. This image conveys how we exist as a continuous process, without an unchanging element that we can identify.

(b) The fetter of doubt (vicikitsa)

This is not doubt in the sense of an objective, cool, critical enquiry: that sort of doubt - if you like to call it doubt - is to be encouraged. This second fetter really comprises a sort of soul-corroding skepticism that won't settle down in anything. Not wanting to commit ourselves or to try to get to the bottom of things.

(c) The fetter of attachment to rules and observances (silavrata-paramasa)

Something may be good as a means to an end - meditation is good, a moral life is good, charity is good, studying the scriptures is good. But as soon as you set them up as ends in themselves, then they become hindrances.

We should therefore ask ourselves whether a particular observance or practice is actually doing any good. Sometimes undue importance is given to an observance that has no real value. Or we may wrongly assume that by “going through the motions” there will automatically be a benefit.

An example of this sort of attitude was the dispute in the Burmese Sangha about whether a monk should cover his shoulder or leave it bare when he leaves a monastery. This dispute rent the Burmese Sangha for a century. There were many books and articles about this, even though it is a trivial matter.

Arya Sahgha

The word Aryan was originally applied to a certain ethnic group that entered India from the north west.

But it gradually acquired a cultural and spiritual significance. In Buddhism Arya always means holy, in the sense of being in contact with the transcendental. So the Arya Sangha is the Holy Sangha of people who have some degree of ‘transcendental’ experience in common. [It is the Arya Sangha, rather than the wider community of Buddhist practitioners that constitutes the third of the “three Jewels”.]

[According to Hinayana Buddhism, there are four general categories of people in this Arya Sangha. In increasing order of spiritual attainment there are (1) , stream entrants; (2) once returners; (3) non-returners; and (4) Arahants. I mention this because you may hear people referring to one or more of these groups. However it seems rather an abstract system of classification.]

A description of the sage from the Tibetan tradition

The following passage (from the Precepts of the Gurus”) is one description of what a sage looks like as observed by ordinary people:

The Ten Signs of a Superior Man”

1. *To have little pride and envy is the sign of a superior person.*
 2. *To have but few desires, and satisfaction with simple things, is the sign of a superior person.*
 3. *To be lacking in hypocrisy and deceit is the sign of a superior person.*
 4. *To regulate one’s conduct in accordance with the law of cause and effect as carefully as someone guards the pupils of their eyes is the sign of a superior person.*
 5. *To be faithful to engagements and obligations is the sign of a superior person.*
 6. *To be able to keep alive friendships while (at the same time) regarding all beings with impartiality is the sign of a superior person.*
 7. *To look with compassion rather than anger upon those who live evilly is the sign of a superior person.*
 8. *To allow others victory, and taking defeat for oneself is the sign of a superior person.*
 9. *To differ from the multitude in every thought and action is the sign of a superior person.*
 10. *To observe their vows/precepts faithfully and without pride is the sign of a superior person.*
- These are the ten signs of a superior person.*

Acknowledgement

These notes contain edited excerpts from the lectures: “the bodhisattva hierarchy”, the Sangha or Buddhist community” and “stream entry”