

Sangha

By Dharmavidya

The term sangha originally referred to the leading council of elders in a tribe or country. At the time of the Buddha, in India, some countries were oligarchic republics and some were monarchies. The monarchies were gradually displacing the republics. It is interesting, therefore, that Buddha chose this term to refer to his company of monks.

We know that the Buddha was in some degree motivated by a desire to establish a cadre of monks who were more genuinely worthy of respect than the priests who enriched themselves by conducting sacrifices. Perhaps he also wanted to create a group who were worthy of more respect than the politicians of his day too. There can be little doubt that he was not simply offering a path of salvation for the individual, but intended that his disciples, well trained and restrained by faith, wisdom and compassion, would collectively exercise an influence for good upon society as a whole. They brought a spirit of unconditional goodness - love - into a world that was greatly in need.

The early history of the movement following the Buddha's death is somewhat shrouded in mystery. We know that eighteen schools emerged, but we do not know exactly how nor much about the relations between them. We do know that Shakyamuni's immediate disciples were men and women of great diversity of character, and that different ones were renowned for different things - this one for meditation, that one for ethics, the other for discipline, another for good works and so on. The Buddha taught for five decades and acquired, in that time, a very large number of followers, so it was not practical for him to teach them all directly. When he had sixty arhats he sent them forth to spread the Dharma and they traveled widely, many of them acquiring disciples along the way. Putting these two factors together we can see that there would, in effect, have been differing schools of Buddhism even within the lifetime of Buddha himself.

In the West we are accustomed to the idea that different schools arise out of dispute and division. There has certainly been some of this in the history of Buddhism, but it is likely that the main way in which different schools came into being was simply a function of the different characters of different teachers, who were all disciples of Buddha, but who had, as it were, different specialisms. In many periods of history it has been customary for seekers to do the rounds and spend a period with one teacher after another in order to acquire different perspectives, different practices and different forms of exemplary inspiration.

In China, where many great monasteries came to be established, it was an established custom for monks to travel, generally on foot, and to make much of their training into a pilgrimage. Arriving at a new monastery, an itinerant monk would be met by the guest master who would interview him and find out what he was good for. He would be given a place in the meditation hall and duties in the work schedule of the monastery. Qualifications were not demanded. If a person could get up at four in the morning and recite the sutras, then it was accepted that he was a monk. If he showed promise the monastery might, after a trial period, offer him a more permanent

position. Some would take up the offer. Others would go on their way, walking and begging their way to the next monastery. This custom meant that even a high ranking monk could sometimes take to the road incognito and spend a time going from centre to centre, being treated as a junior, and thus both deepening his own training and having a break from administrative responsibilities back in his home monastery.

In the modern world, the term sangha has taken on a broader meaning. When we say sangha nowadays we are generally referring to the whole Buddhist community including lay people as well as priests and monks and a good deal of experimentation with different forms of organisation is going on as Buddhism becomes established in a modern cultural setting. The fundamental principles remain the same however. The sangha is a fellowship of people intent upon practising and transmitting the Dharma in a variety of ways and styles so that people today and future generations shall have the possibility of liberation.

In our Amida Shu we have gathered people who have a karmic affinity with Amitabha Buddha, whose practice is nembutsu, and who follow the other power. Within the Shu we have the Order of those who dedicate themselves to leading and organising this community; and within the Order we now have the Lotus Sangha of teachers. Thus we are creating a structure to support the practice. We should not think that such structures have ultimate value, but they do provide an auxiliary support that helps to convey the message of Buddha in the present and future. All this is a work of love. No doubt the form will change over the years; what matters is that the loving spirit continue. There is no less need for this spirit today than there was in the time of Buddha himself.