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**A Level Buddhism – The Sangha**

The Sangha - Introduction;

The term refers to the whole Buddhist community, traditionally composed of four groups: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. The sangha is a part—together with the Buddha and the dharma (teaching)—of the Threefold Refuge – the Three Jewels.

The sangha originated in the group of disciples who renounced the worldly life to wander with the Buddha and listen to his teachings. After the Buddha’s death his disciples continued to live together as a community, wandering from place to place, living off the receipt of alms. Fortnightly, at the time of the full and new moon (the uposatha days), followers of the Buddha would gather to reaffirm their sense of community and purpose by reciting their basic beliefs, such as the Threefold Refuge and the codes of conduct. The custom of spending the rainy season in one place in a study retreat (see vassa) led gradually to the settling of the community and the modern day tradition of spiritual and study retreats.

The modern sangha is governed by disciplinary rules (vinaya) that form part of the sacred canon (Tipitaka). Generally, the monastic order is dependent on the lay community for economic support in the form of alms or gifts of money and property, since Buddhist monks, notably those of the Theravāda tradition in Southeast Asia—do not engage in commerce or agriculture.



The Role of Monastics.

 Monks and nuns play a very important role in Buddhist societies. It was

 Buddha that initiated the practice of ordaining people into monastic life and

 the rules monastics follow (as set out in the Vinaya). Therefore monasticism

 links to the very earliest days of Buddhism and to the authority of Buddha

 himself.

Monastics maintain Buddhism as a living religion. They study the scriptures, practise meditation everyday, teach Buddhism to others, perform ceremonies and rituals and offer advice according to Buddhist values. In their personal lives they are expected to uphold the ethical values of Buddhism and exemplify the qualities required for living according to the Buddhist path. In other words, monks and nuns are living examples of the religion. Buddhists usually consider, that without monastics, their religion would be reduced to just words and books, with no real guidance from learned individuals.

It follows that by taking refuge in the Sangha, a lay person is acknowledging the vital role that monastics play, not only for the continuation of the religion as a whole, but also for the welfare of the community.



Quick Questions and reminders;

1. What is the Fourfold Sangha?
2. How did the Sangha originate?
3. What happens on uposata days?
4. What are vassas?

 5. What affect did vassas have on modern

 Buddhism?

1. How does the monastic sangha support itself?



The Mahayana understanding of Monasticism.

Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism is believed to be key to attaining enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhists see things quite differently and there is variation in practice in different Mahayana schools. A distinction is made between the lay and monastic sangha, as it is in Theravada Buddhism, however Mahayana places more emphasis on the scriptures, particularly the Sutta Pitaka as a vehicle towards enlightenment. This obviously makes enlightenment a greater possibility for Mahayanans, however, the monastics are still help in great respect.

A big difference in Mahayana concerns of the nature of monasticism is with the role of the monks, their way of life, their discipline and their relationship with the wider community. In China, and especially Japan, the Vinaya evolved and changed as Buddhism became established. For example, in Japan, Pure Land had no monks at all and instead had priests who were allowed to marry and have families, take jobs and earn money. They are therefore integrated into the community in a different way to Theravada monks. In Soto Zen, monks may live a communal life of poverty and simplicity, similarly to Theravadan monks, but in both Soto and Rinzai Zen, Buddhist teachers have the option to marry.

The other key difference in the Mahayana understanding of refuge in the sangha is that bodhisattvas, in whom one can take refuge, are included in the idea of the Sangha. The practitioner aspires to emulate them and become lie them, developing their particular enlightened qualities, and prays to them for help and protection.

Buddhist attitudes to family life

Buddhism is not a strongly family-centred religion. It does not have formal models of family or family life, or base its teachings around a family model. This is partly due to its strong focus on personal responsibility for one's own behaviour, on detachment and the individual's pursuit of enlightenment. However, in Buddhist societies families often worship and visit the temple together.

Roles of men and women in the family

Buddhists believe the Buddha left his family to pursue his quest to find out why we suffer.

Buddhist monks believe that they should be detached from the duties of family life. Only then can they focus on reaching enlightenment. However, the lay community is valued in Buddhism for the support it provides to the Sangha.

Not everyone will want to live the life of a monk and most Buddhists want to have a family. Therefore, the importance of family life in Buddhism is acknowledged and integrated into the temple and festival life, and Buddhists believe that they can practise their beliefs within the context of the family.

Buddhist family life tends to reflect pre-existing cultural and religious values, customs, and socially recognised ways or traditions within particular countries. Within Asian Buddhist cultures, for example, the male-lead family is the typical structure, with clearly defined gender roles. British Buddhists, however, might be more equal in their family roles.

Most Buddhists believe that men and women are capable of spiritual development and ultimately enlightenment.

According to the Sigalovada Sutta, within the family both the husband and wife are expected to treat each other respectfully. Them wife should manage the home and family and the husband should share authority with his wife. Partners should be monogamous (have just one partner).

a) The significance of Māhapājapatī Gotamī and the development of the role of women in the ordained sangha; the role of men in the sangha. b) Family life and the role of men and women in Buddhism in the dhamma, history and contemporary society. c) Feminist approaches in contemporary Buddhism. With reference to the ideas of N S Salgado and T Bartholomeusz.