

Profiling the Sangha

Institutional and Non-Institutional Tendencies in Early Buddhist Teachings

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Read the **Conclusion** (page 11 of this article) as an "abstract".

1) Introduction

Students of Buddhism use to discover early on in their studies that it is misleading to speak of a 'church' in early Buddhism. Christian ecclesiastical phenomena like priests, Sunday services, sermons, parishes and communal prayers, let alone a centrally organized institution like the Roman catholic church, did not exist in what we know of early Buddhism. Instead of a church, one is tempted to say, early Buddhism possessed the sangha, the monastic community. Basic religious functions the church fulfils in Christianity seem to be fulfilled by the sangha: as a member of this group, one follows the ideal path to salvation, and it is the task of the community to preserve and hand over the teaching of the Buddha (the dhamma) to following generations. It seems obvious that the sangha constitutes the central, if not the only religious institution of early Buddhism.

To support these statements, many passages can be found in the Pali canon, the oldest completely preserved canon of early Buddhism. Especially the vinaya, the voluminous lawbook for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis (which are often rendered 'monks' and 'nuns'), gives the impression that the sangha is a well-organized community, structured in detail in order to enable its members to follow the ideal path to awakening proclaimed by the Buddha.

Besides the organisational structure, however, religious institutions use to have a doctrinal basis, a conceptional framework which legitimizes them in the faith of the adherents.¹ Christian theologians call this framework 'ecclesiology'. The question I want to raise in this article is: Does any 'ecclesiology' - or, as one should better say: 'ordology' - exist in the teachings of early Buddhism? Since there is no single work dedicated specifically to this topic in the canonical Pali texts, one is forced to investigate into the texts in order to seek for relevant statements. Given the fact we find such statements, and I will try to present some examples below, what does this 'profile' of the

¹ See Georg Kamphausen, "Institution", in: H. Cancik, B. Gladigow, M. Laubscher (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, vol. 3, Stuttgart, 1993, pp. 260-269. Concerning the sangha, Heinz Bechert summarizes some general observations in his article "Samgha: An Overview", in: M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 13, New York, 1987, pp. 36-40, esp. p. 38.

sangha as a religious institution look like? Do we recognize even exclusivistic aspects up to the extreme form of the Cyprianic 'extra ecclesiam nulla salus' ('no salvation outside the church')? >From this point, we can even go one step further to examine whether the described 'profile' of the sangha remains undisputed in the texts.

Inquiring for doctrinal concepts, the textual basis of this article is restricted to the talks in the Suttapitaka of the Pali canon. The arguments, supported with evidence only by selected, paradigmatic passages, are developed in detail in my forthcoming book "Der Orden in der Lehre. Zur religiösen Deutung des Sangha im frühen Buddhismus".² Since for technical reasons, it is not possible to reproduce diacritical marks, the Pali terms appear in a somewhat 'incomplete' transcription, and the relevant passages are presented only in English translation.

1) "Belonging to the Sakyan's Son." The Buddha as the point of reference

A simple, and probably very old way to define the community of Buddhist ascetics is to refer to their mutual teacher, the Buddha. This method is apparent in the introduction to a dialogue between a wandering (non-Buddhist) ascetic and the bhikkhu Ananda in a passage of the Anguttara-Nikaya. The ascetic asks:

"Who are you, friend?"

(Ananda:) "I am a bhikkhu, friend."

"One of what bhikkhus, friend?"

"One of the ascetics that belong to the Sakyan's son ('samana Sakyaputtiya')."

(AN V 196,11-13)³

As in many other passages, the expression 'samana Sakyaputtiya' serves to determine the Buddhist group of ascetics.⁴ Interestingly, the wandering ascetic mentioned in this passage is obviously not aware of the inner-Buddhist, technical meaning of "bhikkhu", i.e., "fully ordained member of the sangha" - probably, he understands it literally as "beggar". To specify the term, Ananda has to refer to his teacher, "the Sakyan's son", i.e. the Buddha. This constitutes the identity of the bhikkhus in a simple way: being an ascetic that belongs to the Buddha. The expression 'samana Sakyaputtiya' (plural in Pali) can thus be understood as an early equivalent for 'sangha' - an alternative term that serves to specify the sangha outwardly.

In profiling the sangha, the Buddha is presented as the point of reference in other contexts as well. Looking at the concept of former and future Buddhas,⁵ we find that the foundation and leadership of a sangha is regarded as an essential feature of a "fully enlightened one" ('sammasambuddha'). In the

2 Oliver Freiburger, "Der Orden in der Lehre. Zur religiösen Deutung des Sangha im frühen Buddhismus", Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000 (Studies in Oriental Religions) [Diss. Göttingen 1999].

3 Abbreviations in this article follow Heinz Bechert (ed.), Abkürzungsverzeichnis zur buddhistischen Literatur in Indien und Südostasien, Göttingen, 1990 (Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden, Beiheft 3).

4 Cf., e.g. DN III 84,14-25; AN I 185,9-12; AN IV 202,7-21; Ud 44,18-21.

5 Cf. Richard Gombrich, "The Significance of Former Buddhas in the Theravâdin Tradition", in: Somaratna Balasooriya et al. (eds.), Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula, London et al., 1980, pp. 62-72; Padmanabh S. Jaini, "Stages in the Bodhisattva Career of the Tathagata Maitreya", in: Alan Sponberg, Helen Hardacre (eds.), Maitreya, the Future Buddha, Cambridge et al., 1988, pp. 54-90.

Majjhima-Nikaya, for instance, the Buddha states:

"Those who in the long past were arahants and fully enlightened ones, these Lords had an equally excellent bhikkhusangha that they led properly, even as the bhikkhusangha is now being led properly by me. And those who in the distant future will be arahants and fully enlightened ones, these Lords will have an equally excellent bhikkhusangha that they will lead properly, even as the bhikkhusangha is now being led properly by me."
(MN I 339,22-29)⁶

Compared with the concept of the 'paccekabuddha', it is especially that characteristic which distinguishes the two concepts: while the paccekabuddha has attained enlightenment but remains 'silent', the sammāsambuddha proclaims the dhamma and thus rallies a community of pupils round him - the sangha.⁷ In this concept, it is not only the teacher of the own ascetic community that serves as the point of reference, but furthermore, one of the few 'fully enlightened ones' in history that teach the world the true dhamma. This notion, of course, has soteriological implications. Being a member of the group which is led and taught by a sammāsambuddha means to be in a most profitable position - as close as possible to salvation.

The prominent status of the sangha is laid down also in the buddhological concept of the 32 marks of a "great man" ('mahapurisa').⁸ This concept is elaborated in detail in the Lakkhana-Sutta of the Digha-Nikaya. The Buddha describes the retinue of a great man who leaves the world and becomes a Buddha:

"Many are they that surround him: bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen, devas, men, asuras, nagas, gandhabbas."
(DN III 148,17-21)

It is stated later that this retinue admires and reveres the great man because of his supernatural marks and is well affected to him. In this buddhological concept, the sangha appears once more as the closest circle around that 'great man'. In categorizing the beings by declaring their respective distance to the Buddha the authors of the sutta make clear that they assign the most prominent status concerning the vicinity to the source of dhamma (and thus to salvation) to the sangha.

Apart from this 'positive' way to give the sangha a distinct profile, we can find also - and even more often - 'negative' ways. To define the sangha more clearly, the authors of the texts declare in what respect it is separate from other groups - from other ascetics as well as from the laity. One remarkable feature of these profiling strategies is the emphasis on the soteriological aspect: the

⁶ Almost the same is said of the future Buddha Metteyya in DN III 75,30-76,21.

⁷ Martin G. Wiltshire describes this categorization (in sociological terminology) as an expression of the routinization of the Buddha's charisma, an interpretation by which the early Buddhists were able to declare the uniqueness of the Buddha and to distinguish him at the same time from persons revered as "enlightened ones prior to the advent of the Buddha": the 'paccekabuddhas'. See Martin G. Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures Before and In Early Buddhism. The Emergence of Gautama as the Buddha*, Berlin/New York, 1990, pp. xvi-xviii and pp. 296f.

⁸ For general portrayals of the early Buddhist 'buddhology' see G.P. Malalasekera, "Buddha" in: G.P. Malalasekera (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 3, Colombo, 1977, 357-380 (esp. the chapter on "The Buddha Concept", pp. 370-373); Upali Karunaratna, "Buddhology", in: Malalasekera (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 3, 490-503; Frank E. Reynolds, Charles Hallisey, "Buddha", in: M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2, New York, 1987, 319-332; Claudia Weber, *Wesen und Eigenschaften des Buddha in der Tradition des Hinayana-Buddhismus*, Wiesbaden, 1994.

assertion that it is necessary to be a member of the sangha in order to attain salvation.

2) "Void of ascetics are other doctrines". The separation from other ascetics

The texts leave no doubt that the early Buddhist sangha was competing with other ascetic communities of its time - in matters of doctrine as well as concerning the dependance on the support of householders. Against this background, it is not surprising that in the Buddhist texts, other ascetic teachers and their communities are frequently and severely attacked. It is a common feature to state that other ascetics are "blind" since they refuse to realize that the path proclaimed by the Buddha leads to salvation. Instead of becoming members of the sangha, they stick to their odd and, of course, false doctrines.⁹

One striking example for this attitude is the well-known simile of the elephant and the blind. In the story of this simile, a king indicated one respective part of an elephant to each person who was blind from birth, explaining that an elephant was "of such a nature". As expected, each one then described the elephant differently, according to the respective part of the animal touched before. Those who were born blind began to quarrel, and the king was amused. After relating this simile, the Buddha states:

"Even so, bhikkhus, wanderers following other doctrines are blind, unable to see. They do neither know what is useful nor what is not useful. They do neither know dhamma nor what is not dhamma. And these (...) dwell quarrelsome, disputatious, engaging in contention, attacking one another with the forces of the mouth, (saying:) 'Dhamma is of such a nature; dhamma is not of such a nature. Dhamma is not of such a nature; dhamma is of such a nature.'"

(Ud 69,10-12; added from 67,34-68,3 und 67,22-25)

Like those who have been blind from birth other ascetics do not have the ability to understand the true dhamma. In the light of this simile, their quarrels appear fussy and useless, and the Buddha as well as the listening audience can easily be amused being aware of the whole truth - just like the king of that story.¹⁰ In another passage the Buddha gives reasons for the 'blindness' of other ascetics while talking to the wandering ascetic Vacchagotta:

"For sure you don't know, Vaccha, for sure you are bewildered! For, Vaccha, this dhamma is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, pure, excellent, beyond doubts, subtle, intelligible to the wise. (This dhamma) is hard to perceive for you who are of another view, another allegiance, dependent upon another (doctrine), of a different observance, and under a different teacher."

(MN I 487,5-9)

According to this passage, the lacking ability to perceive the dhamma is grounded simply on the fact

9 Cf., e.g. DN III 40,8-12; MN I 510,2-17; MN II 202,3-6.

10 In a wider theoretical scope, one can take this simile as an example for a certain concept of perceiving a different religion within a model of interreligious hermeneutics. See Andreas Grünschloß, *Der eigene und der fremde Glaube. Studien zur interreligiösen Fremdwahrnehmung in Islam, Hinduismus, Buddhismus und Christentum*, Tübingen, 1999, esp. pp. 202-205.

that the ascetics are members of other religious communities and therefore follow other (i.e. misleading) teachings.¹¹ Implicitly, it is said that, as a member of the sangha, one dwells close to the source of dhamma, i.e. the Buddha, and has thus the possibility to understand his teachings and to follow the path to salvation.

Not only the (lacking) ability to understand but also the behaviour of other ascetics is criticized and rejected. There are many statements in the texts that illustrate this attitude (sometimes presented in a polemical manner) - be it the refusal of extreme ascetic practices or just of the loud and childish talk about inferior things. Occasionally, a comparison is drawn between these modes of behaviour and that of the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. Needless to say that the members of the sangha turn out to be superior in any respect: they live a pure life as earnest ascetics, quiet and secluded, without tormenting others or themselves.¹² They have a superior teacher¹³ and are well-honoured, revered and supported by householders - in contrast to other ascetics.¹⁴

These ways of separating the Buddhist ascetics from others serve to profile the sangha in the eyes of the authors of those passages. One feature which may be regarded implicitly in these instances is the soteriological argument: the connection of sangha membership and salvation. This is clearly explicated in a passage from the Anguttara-Nikaya:

"Here (in Buddhism) the first ascetic is to be found, also the second, third, and fourth ascetic. Void of ascetics are other doctrines.' Thus, bhikkhus, do you rightly roar this lion's roar."

(AN II 238,8-11)

The text then explains what is meant by these 'four ascetics': the first one is the 'streamwinning' bhikkhu, the second one the 'once-returning' bhikkhu, the third one the 'non-returning' bhikkhu, and the fourth one is the bhikkhu who has won arahantship. The four ascetics thus represent four stages of 'spiritual' development in Buddhism. The phrase 'other doctrines' (or, literally: 'other systems holding contrary views') refers to other ascetic teachers and their communities.

According to this passage, other communities are 'void of ascetics', i.e., void of the four 'true' or 'ideal' ascetics. This normative application of the term 'ascetic' is used to declare that the ideal of 'what an ascetic ought to be' is realized only in the Buddhist sangha. And, furthermore, this ideal is expressed on the soteriological level. The four stages of 'spiritual' development refer to the path to salvation, which can thus be walked on exclusively within the Buddhist sangha. Other ascetics are void of those four stages and have therefore no access to salvation.

11 See also DN III 40,8-12; MN I 225,6-21; MN I 510,2-17; SN II 33,7-34,15; AN V 150,2-12; Ud 33,5-10.

12 MN I 342,23-349,3; MN I 513,19-514,12; MN II 120,8-19; AN I 240,25-242,29.

13 DN I 116,16-22.

14 MN I 367,36-368,6; SN II 119,23-28.

3) "An unsurpassed field of merit." The separation from the laity

The authors of the canonical texts sought to profile the sangha not only by contrasting it with other ascetic communities but also by separating it from the laity. Occasionally, the Buddha exhorts the bhikkhus to avoid close contact with householders, to be unobtrusive and undemanding while begging for alms.¹⁵ A bhikkhu behaving this way was popular with the laity.¹⁶ A familiar relationship with laypeople, however, led the bhikkhu to evil deeds or to the abandonment from the higher life.¹⁷ The modest behaviour of the bhikkhu is complemented by the friendly and generous attitude of the laypeople.¹⁸

According to the texts, the two central acts between the sangha and the laity are the donation of gifts and the religious instruction. In order to profile the sangha, the rôles of both groups in this relationship are exactly defined: the members of the sangha live a secluded and remote life, seeking for nibbana, and instruct the laypeople so that these support the sangha in order to earn merit for rebirth in a heavenly sphere.¹⁹ One passage in the Anguttara-Nikaya portrays the ideal layman in this view:

"He does not fail to see the bhikkhus, is not careless in listening to the good dhamma, trains in the higher virtue, puts much trust in long, shortly and halflong (ordained) bhikkhus and listens to the dhamma with flawless mind and without seeking faults. He neither seeks a gift-worthy outside (the sangha) nor serves him."

(AN IV 25,21-25)

This passage summarizes some frequently mentioned qualities of laypeople and is thus paradigmatic for a certain attitude towards the laity. First of all, it is emphasized that the layman should keep the contact with the bhikkhus going, should follow the instructions closely and live a life of virtue. Then the authors demand of the laity to trust *all* members of the sangha, regardless whether they are old and experienced or newcomers. The laypeople are thus explicitly exhorted not to make distinctions between bhikkhus concerning their trustworthiness. This remark reveals an ontological view: every bhikkhu is trustworthy just because he is a member of the sangha, irrespective of his individual 'spiritual' progress - it is obvious that such an ontological approach can contribute much to profile the sangha on the doctrinal level. This holds true also for the next point: the layman should listen to the instructions "without seeking faults". This demand for an abstention from any critique is obviously based on the same ontological premise. It is guaranteed that laypeople can rely on the instructions of the bhikkhus simply because these are members of the sangha. The final point appears to be in the same line: the ideal layman does not seek for other gift-worthy ascetics than the bhikkhus. In the light of the preceding remarks, this restriction on the sangha concerning the donation of gifts is nothing but consistent. It is needless for those who put all their trust in the bhikkhus to examine the instructions critically and to weigh them up against doctrines of other teachers. Just in the same way it is needless to support other ascetics - their influence can even be

15 SN II 197,29-198,25; SN II 201,4-17.

16 AN III 136,22-24.

17 AN III 259,9-13.

18 AN IV 387,29-388,3.

19 This definition of the two groups is also very common in most scholarly books on Buddhism.

rearded as detrimental.

Another notion which is very frequent in the texts can be regarded as a kind of soteriological justification for that last point. The sangha is described as the "unsurpassed field of merit", which means that a gift to the sangha brings more religious reward than a gift to any other person or community:

"The agghittha is the foremost among sacrifices; the Savitti is the foremost of metres; the king is the foremost of men; the ocean is the foremost of waters.

The moon is the foremost of nightlights; the sun is the foremost of shining things; for those who offer gifts, looking for merit, the sangha is indeed the foremost."

(Sn 111,12-19, verses 568-569)

The topos of the "unsurpassed field of merit" is mentioned explicitly in another frequent passage:

"Bhikkhus, a bhikkhusangha such as this community is a community worthy of veneration, of honour, of gifts, of salutation with joined palms, (with the thought:) 'It is an unsurpassed field of merit for the world'. Bhikkhus, a bhikkhusangha such as this community is a community to which if a little is given it becomes much, if much is given it becomes (even) more."

(MN III 80,8-14)²⁰

In these passages, we find the same ontological approach as above. The sangha as such is worthy of gifts, and one who supports the sangha can hope to get a big reward - the more he donates the bigger the reward. The 'spiritual' progress of the individual recipient is completely out of sight in this view. Being a member of the sangha comprises sufficient potential to cause a big reward for the giver.

The merit one earns by supporting the sangha can be manifold, e.g., beauty, wealth, growth etc.²¹ However, the best and most frequently mentioned reward one can get by donating gifts is the rebirth in a heavenly world.²² The texts of the Suttapitaka appear to be unanimous in that point.

The soteriological aim of laypeople indicated here is connected with a common way to instruct the laity. In many passages as, e.g., in the Sigalovada-Sutta of the Digha-Nikaya,²³ laypeople are taught how to behave according to Buddhist ethics - in order to be reborn in a heavenly world. The instruction in these modes of conduct is very common in the texts, i.e., in abstention from killing, theft, lying, sexual misbehaviour, intoxicating drinks, idleness etc., as well as the virtue of generosity towards ascetics, especially towards the sangha. Practising these modes of conduct, one is said to be ready to attain heaven after death.

This way of instructing the laity is based on the notion that laypeople - because of their worldly life - do not possess sufficient capacity to understand teachings that are more subtle and lead one directly to the ultimate salvation (nibbana). Here again, the above mentioned ontological premise comes into play. In a sutta from the Samyutta-Nikaya, this is stated in the context of two similes. Like a farmer sowing his three fields, it is stated, the Buddha instructs his followers:

20 Also in DN III 5,22-24; SN IV 272,9-12; AN II 34,31-33; It 88,11-13.

21 AN II 204,14-23; AN III 77,30-78,2; AN III 172,13f.

22 MN III 205,11-15; SN I 90,10-12; AN II 65,1-20; AN III 259,27-29.

23 DN III 180-193.

"Just like that excellent field are my bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. (...) Just like that moderate field are my laypeople. (...) Just like that field that is poor, hard, saltish, of bad soil, are the wandering ascetics holding other views."

(SN IV 315,18-316,7)

This is followed by a second, parallel simile, comparing these three groups with three waterpots: one not cracked, not leaky, not letting water run to waste; one not cracked but leaky, letting water run to waste; and one both cracked and leaky, letting water run to waste. Again, the middle one stands for the laity.

In both similes, the sangha is presented as the preferred addressee for the Buddha's instructions. The selected objects for comparison (field and waterpot) reveal the underlying concept of the status of the laity: it is a basic trait of laypeople as such to possess an inferior capacity of comprehension than members of the sangha. This ontological distinction serves to separate the sangha from the laity on the soteriological level and thus helps to profile its concept once more.

All the above mentioned issues contribute to profile the sangha on the doctrinal level. To sum up, I try to sketch this profile:

First of all, the sangha is understood as the closest circle around the Buddha, who is one of the few sammasambuddhas in history. Since it is a most central feature of a sammasambuddha to teach and thus to lead a community of ascetics, the sangha is bound up with the Buddha. This separates it from other ascetic communities as well as from the laity. Other ascetics are naturally 'blind' because they follow other teachers and doctrines. Therefore, no 'true' ascetics can be found in other communities - only as a member of the sangha one has the possibility to follow the direct path to salvation. The laypeople, because of their worldly life, do also not possess the capacity to understand the most subtle teachings that lead to nibbana. If they live a life of virtue and support the sangha, however, they can hope to be reborn in heaven. Consequently, also the contents of the instructions for the laity arise from that underlying soteriological concept for laypeople. The way to attain not a heavenly world, but ultimate salvation, nibbana, is open only for the members of the sangha. This roughly sketched profile is more of an attitude than of a concept. As the few examples have shown, it underlies statements in several areas of Buddhist 'apologetics'. The last question I want to raise is whether that profile remains undisputed in the texts - the answer is a simple "No". I will try to show in the last paragraph that in the same text corpus (the Suttapitaka), we can find an alternative attitude towards the sangha and towards the necessity of sangha membership in the above mentioned areas, especially concerning the soteriological aspect.

4) "Through the entire destruction of craving only." The non-institutional tendency

In a dialogue with the Buddha, Sakka, the ruler of the devas, asks whether all ascetics were 'complete' in their ability to attain the final goal of perfection. The Buddha replies:

"Ruler of the devas, only those ascetics who are set free through the entire destruction of craving are complete concerning the goal, the finding of salvation, the pure way of life and perfection."

(DN II 283,9-11)

This passage illustrates a notion of the ideal ascetic which is different from the one described above. Here, the institution of the sangha is not mentioned at all. Any ascetic is 'complete' not because of his sangha membership but because he has entered the path to salvation. The 'ideal' ascetic is not the bhikkhu in the institutional sense but the individual salvation-seeker. This notion can also be found in the well-known description of the 'two extreme attitudes':

"These two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth from the world: devotion to sense-pleasures (...) and devotion to self-mortification (...). Not following after these two extremes is the Middle Way, fully known by the Tathagata, that produces insight and knowledge, leading to calmness, understanding, enlightenment and nibbana. And what is that Middle Way (...)? It is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely right view, etc., right concentration."²⁴

In the introduction to this passage, the Buddha explains that he did not censure any ascetic who lives a rough life - he refused only the 'extreme' forms. Consequently, it is the Middle Way between the two extremes which is regarded as ideal asceticism (tapa). Here again, sangha membership is completely out of sight - what counts is only the right practice and the 'spiritual' progress of the individual. The ideal ascetic is not the 'bhikkhu as such' (as above) but any ascetic who follows the Middle Way, the right path to salvation.²⁵

That 'individualistic' attitude is found also in the Samannaphala-Sutta of the Digha-Nikaya, where the path to salvation is presented in a list of issues which are described as respective 'fruits of the ascetic life'. This list of 'fruits' consists of a detailed description of the 'outward way' of the ideal ascetic life, i.e. of the modes of behaviour an ascetic has to realize or to avoid, and the 'inward way', i.e., the 'spiritual' development of the ascetic resulting from his meditation practices. The final and highest 'fruit' at the end of that list is the arahantship.²⁶ Since every 'fruit' is regarded as 'higher and sweeter' than the preceding one, the whole account appears to be a presentation of a gradual path that culminates in the attainment of salvation. In this description, the sangha does not appear at all. Undoubtedly, a Buddhist interpretation could identify the ideal ascetic of that sutta with the bhikkhu, but the text itself deals only with the 'life of ascetics' in general. An ascetic who follows the proposed path will reap the fruits and attain arahantship - irrespective of his institutional

24 SN IV 330,28-331,9.

25 In other passages, the doctrinal aspect (i.e., to follow the right teachings) is even more emphasized (e.g. SN II 15,6-17). Another striking example for this concept of the ideal ascetic is the simile of the four herds of deer (= four types of ascetics) in the Nivapa-Sutta of the Majjhima-Nikaya (MN I 151-160).

26 DN I 60-85.

affiliation.

In view of the laity, we find a similar non-institutional or 'individualistic' attitude. In a number of passages, the picture of laypeople differs considerably from the one sketched above. They are presented to be self-confident in many respects, e.g., in criticizing and even 'sanctioning' certain misbehaving bhikkhus.²⁷ In the context of gift-giving, the giver and the recipient appear on an equal footing regarding the requirements for this act:

"Bhikkhus, what offering is purified both by the giver and by the recipient? Herein, bhikkhus, the giver is virtuous and of good behaviour, and the recipients are virtuous and of good behaviour."

(MN III 256,34-257,2; AN II 81,16-19)

In this view, the ideal recipient is not automatically regarded as the member of the sangha in general, but as an ascetic who possesses certain individual qualities. This is stated more clearly in another passage that describes a highly meritorious 'sixfold-endowed offering', which contains a threefold part of the giver and a threefold part of the recipient:

"What is the giver's threefold part? Herein, bhikkhus, before the gift he is glad at heart; in giving the mind is calmed; and he is delighted when he has given. And what is the recipients' threefold part? Herein, bhikkhus, the recipients are free from craving, hatred, and delusion, or they strive to put an end to craving, hatred, and delusion."

(AN III 336,16-22)²⁸

Again, the ideal recipient is qualified not by the institutional classification but by his individual 'spiritual' progress. To give gifts to such an ascetic means to make 'immeasurable merit'. It is obvious that the underlying concept of merit-making differs from the above mentioned one: the amount of merit is not determined by the amount of gifts given to the sangha (as above: 'the more gifts, the bigger the reward') but by the 'spiritual' grade of the recipient.²⁹ In this view, the sangha as such cannot be regarded as the "unsurpassed field of merit" a priori. Statements which encourage the laity to support non-Buddhist ascetics as well - claiming that it brings big rewards - corroborate that interpretation.³⁰

Apart from the fact that the authors of these passages put the meaning of the sangha into perspective (compared to the above sketched profile), also the laity appears in a different light. However, laypeople are not only regarded as self-confident concerning their ability to select the most promising recipient, but also concerning their own 'spiritual' development.³¹ As mentioned above, it

27 They can express their disapproval (appasada) of a bhikkhu (AN IV 345,21-25), or send him away (AN III 366,2-26).

28 Cf. also MN III 292,11-15, where the Buddha declares that those ascetics are to be revered who are free from craving, hatred, and delusion.

29 Cf. also AN I 161,32-162,8, where the ideal recipient is described in a similar way. See also Sn 88,3-90,4. Those two alternative conditions of earning merit are described as 'contradictory' by Torkel Brekke in his article "Contradiction and the Merit of Giving in Indian Religions", in: *Numen* 45 (1998), pp. 287-320, esp. p. 312. In a recent article, I argue that one can view these notions also as different concepts standing side by side within the Pali canon being even harmonized in some passages (Oliver Freiberger, *The ideal sacrifice. Patterns of reinterpreting brahmin sacrifice in early Buddhism*, in: *Bulletin d'Études Indiennes* 16 (1998), 39-49.

30 Cf. AN I 161,13-16; in respect of Jains: MN I 379,16-18; AN IV 185,22-24.

31 Cf. AN I 189,6-15.

is undisputed in the texts that the biggest reward arising from gift-giving is rebirth in heaven. In a number of passages, however, laypeople are encouraged to go beyond: to strive after final salvation and nibbana. The very specific instructions connected with this attitude differ from the instructions that exhort the laypeople only to live a life of virtue and generosity in order to be reborn in heaven.³² Laypeople are even encouraged to 'enter seclusion' from time to time.³³ And in fact, we find accounts of laypeople instructing not only other laypeople but also ascetics and even members of the sangha,³⁴ and in a number of accounts certain laypeople are said to have attained several 'spiritual' states, even arahantship.³⁵

5) Conclusion

I hope to have shown that one can find many passages in the canonical texts revealing the intention of the authors to profile the sangha and thus to legitimize its existence by emphasizing its soteriological relevance. First of all, the sangha is connected with the Buddha, not only as 'his' ascetic community, but also as an essential characteristic of a 'fully enlightened one' on the conceptual level: no Buddha without sangha.³⁶ In the endeavour to lay down the distinction between the sangha and other ascetic groups as well as laypeople, the authors state that, compared with the members of the sangha, those possessed an inferior and insufficient capacity to understand the true dhamma. This notion culminates in the exclusivistic claim that one is able to attain final salvation only as a member of the sangha. This claim is similar indeed to the Christian "no salvation outside the church".

Besides this institutional attitude, we can also find statements that express a contrary view. In these passages, the 'ideal ascetic' is described as the one seeking for salvation - if or not the person is a member of the sangha. Likewise, each layman and laywoman is encouraged to support those ascetics who possess the highest 'spiritual' qualities (not only members of the sangha). Furthermore, they are even encouraged to go beyond the wish for rebirth in heaven and to strive after higher 'spiritual' development - up to nibbana. Compared to the above sketched profile of the sangha, these statements reveal an alternative tendency, a non-institutional (or 'individualistic') concept of Buddhist soteriology. It may well be that the two tendencies reflect the views of different circles within the early Buddhist community.

Being aware of our lacking knowledge of the emergence, growth and development of the early

32 Cf. e.g., MN III 258,2-261,28; MN III 144,26-152,22; SN II 104,6-107,5, esp. 107,1-5.

33 AN III 207,1-3.

34 Cf. SN IV 281,11-283,19; SN IV 302,20-304,20; AN V 185,2-189,8.

35 Four jhanas (states of meditation): DN II 186,12-25; SN IV 301,11-20; AN IV 66,18-67,6; state of the once-returner: AN III 347,17-351,26; state of the non-returner: SN V 176,12-177,28; arahantship: SN V 408,7-410,2; AN I 130,6-131,35; AN III 451,8-25. This view of the laity was also brought out in a recent article by Jeffrey Samuels, "Views of Householders and Lay Disciples in the Sutta Pitaka: A Reconsideration of the Lay/Monastic Opposition", *Religion* 29 (1999), pp. 231-241. As to the point in question, Samuels arrived at the same conclusion as I did in my book. Analysing early Indian inscriptions, Gregory Schopen found another record that shakes the common view of a clear-cut distinction between the sangha and the laity: not only laypeople, but also members of the sangha (even learned ones) donated gifts in order to earn merit. See Gregory Schopen, "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit", *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 10 (1985), pp. 9-47, here: pp. 24-33.

36 As shown above, this applies only to sammasambuddhas, not to paccekabuddhas.

canonical texts, it is almost impossible to reconstruct the way those concepts were integrated into the canon. In any case, it seems inappropriate to speak of a 'contradiction' in the texts. This would mean to presuppose a (Buddhist) claim of consistency and the 'common source', which is more of a religious construction than a finding of modern philology. As long as we do not know more about the early development of the canonical texts we should speak of different tendencies or concepts standing side by side in the texts: one profiling the sangha by laying down its soteriological relevance; the other proclaiming only the individual, non-institutional path to salvation.

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