

Views of Householders and Lay Disciples in the *Sutta Piṭaka*: A Reconsideration of the Lay/Monastic Opposition

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Many scholars have argued that early Buddhism was primarily an ‘other-worldly’ religion focusing on ascetics and monastics. In their view, the laity does not figure prominently, it was only centuries later that the laity’s involvement became more noticeable. By examining references to householders (*gahapati*) and lay disciples (*upāsaka*) in the *Sutta Piṭaka* section of the Pāli canon, this article challenges the view that the role of the laity primarily pertained to supporting the monastics with food, clothing, and shelter. © 1999 Academic Press

The traditional scholarly view of Theravāda Buddhism has always maintained a sharp distinction between the monastic and the lay communities. The distinction between these two communities is most often based on their religious activities and obligations. While the monastics are often identified as preservers of Buddhist doctrine and practice, the responsibilities and concerns of the laity are believed to be limited to the accumulation of merit through supporting the monastics with food, shelter, and clothing. For instance, Nalinaksha Dutt, in paraphrasing N. N. Law, excludes the laity from the religious practices associated with the monastics when he writes: ‘The principles of early Buddhism did not make any special provision for the laity . . . [and] it is evident that the new religion [i.e., Buddhism] was primarily meant for those who would retire from the household life’.¹

Another scholar who excludes the laity from the various forms of Buddhist learning and practice (besides donating to the monastic community) is Max Weber. He maintains, for instance, that the laity was viewed in a manner ‘similar to the tolerated infidels in Islam, [who] existed only for the purpose of sustaining by alms the Buddhist disciple who aspires to the state of grace’.² The laity’s support of the monks and nuns, according to Weber, ‘constituted the highest merit and honor available to the *upasaka* (adorer)’.³ Similarly, Etienne Lamotte, in his *History of Indian Buddhism*, writes that the ‘monk aims at Nirvāṇa and, in order to attain it, wearing the yellow robe, cultivates the noble eightfold Path (*ārya aṣṭāṅgikamārga*)’.⁴ While the monk strives to reach enlightenment or *nirvāṇa*, the lay householder, ‘involved in the troubles of his time, cannot be expected to grasp “the profound truth, which is difficult to perceive, difficult to understand, sublime, abstruse and which only the wise can grasp”’.⁵

Many later scholars continue to embrace this traditional view of Theravāda Buddhism. For instance, Akira Hirakawa writes that ‘The term “*upāsaka*” [i.e., layman] refers to one who waits upon or serves (another person). Thus an *upāsaka* served mendicants by supplying the items, such as food and robes, that they required for their religious lives’.⁶ Hirakawa then even more sharply divides the monastics from the laity when he argues that early Buddhism is ‘a monastic teaching for those who were willing to leave their homes to become monks or nuns, strictly observe the precepts, and perform religious practices’.⁷ He also states that, ‘Both doctrinal study and religious practice presupposed the abandonment of a person’s life as a householder. A strict line separated those who had been ordained from lay people’.⁸ Because of this sharp

opposition between the monastic order and the laity, Hirakawa argues that 'Buddhist laymen were not included in the Buddhist *saṅgha*'.⁹

Finally, this depiction of Buddhism is also maintained by George Bond, who writes that archaic Buddhism (as represented in the Pāli canon) is 'a religion of individual salvation—striving for ascetic monks'.¹⁰ While Bond acknowledges that Buddhism became markedly more social as time progressed,¹¹ he argues that the most that the laity could ever hope for and cultivate was a higher degree of morality (*adhisīla*): in order to cultivate higher wisdom (*adhipaññā*) and higher concentration (*adhisamādhi*), they had to abandon the household life.¹²

While the dominant view of early Buddhism still maintains a sharp distinction between the monastic order and the laity, some scholars have begun to challenge that perception. For instance, Gregory Schopen's work on early donative inscriptions in India questions this view by demonstrating that a considerable proportion of people who donated to sacred sites and were involved in merit-making activity were monks and nuns, including monks and nuns who were doctrinal specialists.¹³ As a result of the evidence from early donative inscriptions, Schopen concludes that 'None of this accords very well, if at all, with received views on the matter, with the views that maintain that there was a sharp distinction between the kinds of religious activities undertaken by monks and the kinds of religious activity undertaken by laymen, and with the view that cult and religious giving were essentially and overwhelmingly lay concerns in the Indian Buddhist context'.¹⁴

In this article, I also challenge the dominant view of Theravāda Buddhism that maintains a sharp dichotomy between the monastic order and the laity and that appears to be based on a rather limited reading of the Pāli canon. By examining the *sutta* section of the Theravāda Buddhist Pāli canon, I hope to show that the portrayal of the laity in these early texts is not limited to *merely* providing the monks and nuns with food, shelter and clothing. Alongside references in the Pāli canon that depict the laity's primary role as supporters of the monastics are a plethora of references in which householders and lay disciples are portrayed as practitioners of the Buddha's *dhamma*, proceeding along on the path to enlightenment. I argue that the Pāli canon contains a historically diverse group of viewpoints and attitudes towards religious practice and that the complexity of views contained in the canon actually undermines, to a large degree, the absoluteness of the categories of 'monastic' and 'laity'.¹⁵

Views toward Lay people in the Sutta Piṭaka

A close examination of the passages in the *Sutta Piṭaka* that refer to householders and lay people reveals a complex and multifarious depiction. These findings reflect two opposing views: 1) that the laity, as an important dimension of the Buddhist community or *saṅgha*, primarily functioned to serve and support the monks and nuns; and 2) that the laity were able to progress along the path to enlightenment by hearing Buddhist teachings and practicing certain forms of Buddhist meditation. Though the first view appears to coincide with the traditional reading of the Pāli canon, the second view challenges that reading.

Laity as Supporters of Monastics: the Superiority of Monastics

There are numerous passages in the Pāli canon lending support to the traditional interpretation of Theravāda Buddhism. In these passages, lay life is portrayed as inferior to monastic life, which is shown to be more conducive to progressing towards

enlightenment. For example, in a passage in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (or Fruits of the Wanderer), householder life is described as full of hindrances (*sambādho gharāvāso rajāpaho*), thereby making it difficult for householders to live the celibate life which is pure, complete and perfect.¹⁶ In this passage, a homeless person is portrayed as one who renounces all worldly ties, practices mindfulness and contentment, enters into and remains in the trance states, develops supernatural powers, and knows that the cycle of death and rebirth is cut off. What this passage suggests, then, is that the qualities conducive towards attaining enlightenment—for example, developing mindfulness and concentration—can only be cultivated after renouncing household life.¹⁷ The superiority of monastics over householders is also suggested in the *Sutta Nipāta* (v. 221), where it is stated that ‘just as a blue-necked peacock, flying through the air, never attains the speed of a goose, thus the householder does not imitate the monk who is a sage meditating in the forest’.

Though the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* primarily focuses on the benefits of homeless life, it also contains a description of the actions and teachings appropriate for lay people. For instance, after stating that household life is full of hindrances, we read that a graduate sermon on giving, morality and heaven was given to the householder.¹⁸ Moreover, in other *suttas* in the Pāli canon, there are individual discourses on the subjects of giving and morality taught to lay people,¹⁹ and these discourses often include a description of the rewards that ensue from such practices.²⁰

Lay Involvement

While these passages from various sections of the *Sutta Piṭaka* lend support to the traditional reading of the Pāli canon, other passages challenge the view that the highest function of the laity is to support the monks and nuns, and that progress to the goal can only be accomplished through abandoning the householder state. These *suttas* challenge the traditional view of Theravāda Buddhism by their portrayal of the laity as recipients of profound teachings on Buddhist doctrine and as practitioners of Buddhist training. There are even passages in which the laity are placed on an equal footing with monastics in terms of spiritual attainment.

Recipients of Teachings and Teachers of the Doctrine

Though it is true that a number of passages in the *Sutta Piṭaka* pertaining to householders portray them as recipients of discourses solely on morality and giving, other passages portray them as receiving the same profound doctrinal discourses as monastics. In one *sutta* in the *Paṭisaṃbhidāmagga* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the *Mahāvagge Maṇḍapeyya-kathā*, we read that the best recipients of the Buddha’s best teachings (*desanāmaṇḍo*) include monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen and gods. Similarly, in the *Nāgarasutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya* (II.107), the Buddha talks about his insight into conditioned arising (*paṭicasamuppāda*) and the eightfold path, and then concludes by pointing out that having come to this knowledge, he has taught it to monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. Finally, in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (II.132), there is a statement that Ānanda (as well as the Buddha)²¹ taught the *dhamma* to each of the four assemblies, monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen.

Two components of the best teachings of the Buddha given to the laity, highlighted in the *Mahāvagge Maṇḍapeyya-kathā*, are the four noble truths and the eightfold path.²² The fact that these teachings were given to the laity is further supported by other passages in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. For instance, we read in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (I.110) that after giving a graduated sermon to the brahmin Pokkharasāti, the Buddha then explained the

dhamma in brief: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path. A similar phrase is also found in conjunction with the laymen Kūṭadanta (D I.148), Upāli (M I.380) and Brahmāyu (M II.145). Moreover, in the *Rāsiyasutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, we find that the headman Rāsiya became a lay disciple by taking refuge in the Buddha, his doctrine and the monastic community after hearing a discourse from the Buddha on the eightfold path.²³

Other Buddhist doctrines that were of central importance and were sometimes taught to householders include the five aggregates and non self (*anattā*). In the *Nakulapitāsutta* (S III. 1ff.), for example, the old and ailing householder Nakula visits the Buddha and Sāriputta and asks for some comforting teachings. Rather than discussing with the householder the importance of faith, the benefits of being moral and the rewards of giving, the Buddha and Sāriputta teach Nakula about the five aggregates and how each of the five aggregates is not to be construed as the self or as being possessed by a self. In another *sutta* of the same *Nikāya* (S III.48ff.), moreover, we find a Socratic-like dialogue ensuing between the Buddha and the householder Soṇa on the subject of the five aggregates and non self. In this dialogue, which mirrors the conversation between the Buddha and his first five converts, the Buddha leads the layman Soṇa to the conclusion that the five aggregates are not to be taken to be the self or the self taken as the possessor of the five aggregates.

In addition, there are *suttas* that portray the Buddha teaching lay householders and brahmins about the abstruse doctrine of the twelve links of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). In the *Nidāna* section of the *Samyutta Nikāya* (II.22f., 75f., 76f., and 77), for example, there are a number of *suttas* addressed to lay people pertaining to the doctrine of dependent origination. In these cases, the householders and brahmins become lay followers after hearing the discourse on the causal relationship between each of the links as well as the way to break out of this chain binding one to rebirth and suffering (S II. 76).

Another manner in which the laity are portrayed in the *Sutta Piṭaka* is as teachers of the Buddhist doctrine. For instance, in the section of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* that recounts the achievements of certain laymen and laywomen (A I.126), we read that Citta is chief among the Buddha's laymen in terms of teaching the *dhamma* and that Khujjuttarā is foremost among the laywomen in terms of wide knowledge. Moreover, in the same *nikāya* we find references to two laymen, Anāthapiṇḍika and Vajjiyamāhita, who refuted the views of a group of wanderers by teaching them about dependent arising, impermanence, suffering, non clinging and non self. Their discourse on these subjects caused the wanderers to become speechless and led the Buddha to declare to his monks: 'A monk who dwells in the *dhamma* and *vinaya* for even one hundred years might, in this manner, have to censure heretical wanderers with the *dhamma* just as the ones who were rebuked by the householder Anāthapiṇḍika'.²⁴

Another passage that describes lay people as *dhamma* teachers is found in the *Dīgha Nikāya* and repeated in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. In this passage, Māra tries to encourage the Buddha to attain final *nibbāna* (*parinibbāna*). The Buddha responds that he can only attain *parinibbāna* after he has monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen

who are learned, trained, self-possessed, who have great knowledge, who know the *dhamma* by heart, who have reached complete righteousness, who are upright, who walk in perfect conformity, who are their own teacher, and who, *having learned [the dhamma], will describe it, teach it, declare it, give it, uncover it, dissect it, and will declare it to those who have arisen, who, having restrained and checked those who are in opposition with the teachings, will teach the marvelous dhamma.*²⁵

These passages, thus pose a challenge to some of the traditional distinctions made between the monastic order and the laity. For instance, while Dutt argues that ‘householders were as far as possible kept away from the deeper teachings, lest they should be frightened away from taking interest in the religion’,²⁶ and while Hirakawa states that ‘Nikāya Buddhist doctrine was a monastic teaching for those who were willing to leave their homes to become monks or nuns’,²⁷ the passages quoted reveal that the Buddhist attitudes expressed in the Pāli canon are far more complex than that ‘monastic’ versus ‘lay’. In particular, the passages that refer to Citta as the foremost of the Buddha’s disciples in terms of teaching the *dhamma*, to Khujjuttarā as the foremost of the Buddha’s disciples in terms of wide knowledge, and to Anāthapiṇḍika and Vajjiyamāhita as having great understanding of dependent arising, impermanence, suffering, non clinging and non self all suggest that there might have existed, in the Pāli canon, some ambiguity over the very nature of ‘monk’ versus ‘householder’ in regards to doctrinal instruction and understanding.

Practicing Meditation

There are also several passages in the *Sutta Piṭaka* where certain lay people are portrayed as engaging in Buddhist practices, especially those practices directed towards the development of mindfulness and concentration.

While the cultivation of mindfulness through practicing the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) is often associated with monastics (as it is in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta* of the *Dīgha and Majjhima nikāyas*),²⁸ there are also passages in the *Sutta Piṭaka* that show lay people following this same practice. For instance, in the *Kandarakasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (I.340), the Buddha points out to a wandering ascetic and a householder that his monks dwell in the four foundations of mindfulness. After the Buddha extols the virtues of the four foundations of mindfulness, the householder accompanying the wandering ascetic remarks, ‘We householder, oh sir, dressed in white, also practice the four foundations of mindfulness from time to time’. In another *sutta* in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (V.176ff.), the venerable Ānanda visits the sick and suffering layman Sirivaḍḍha. After they exchange greetings and Sirivaḍḍha informs Ānanda about his illness, Ānanda recommends that Sirivaḍḍha should practice the four foundations of mindfulness as follows: ‘I will dwell contemplating the body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas* in the body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas* ardent, with energy and mindful’. The householder then retorts that he is already dwelling in the four foundations.²⁹

Along with these passages in which there are several passages which lay people are shown to be proficient in entering into and remaining in the trance states. For instance, in the *Acelasutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the householder Citta who has been a disciple of the Buddha for thirty years, remarks to the naked ascetic Acela that he, Citta, is able to enter into the four trance states and is able to remain aloof from lust. In the *Dīgha Nikāya* (II. 186), moreover, we find reference to a king who is able to enter into the four trance states as well as cultivate the four divine abidings: compassion, friendliness, sympathetic joy and equanimity. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (IV.66), there is mention of how Nanda’s mother (Nandamātā) can enter into and remain in the four trance states. Finally, in the *Iddhikathā* of the *Paṭisaṃbhidāmagga* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (II.212), we find a discussion of the powers that ensue from abiding in the eight trance states. After this brief discussion, we find that the monks Sāriputta, Sañjiva and Khānūkoṇḍañña, as well as the laywomen Uttarā³⁰ and Sāmāvatikā, have all developed this power of pervasive concentration.

There are also references to lay people practicing other types of meditation in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. One example concerns a meditation focusing on the three characteristics of reality: impermanence, non self and suffering. In the *Dīghāvusutta* in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, for instance, the sick and suffering householder Dīghāvu is visited by the Buddha. After inquiring about Dīghāvu's health, the Buddha recommends that Dīghāvu cultivate faith in the three jewels and cultivate noble virtues. Dīghāvu then responds that he has already cultivated these qualities. The Buddha then instructs Dīghāvu to practice six other practices: 'Now, oh Dīghāvu, you should dwell observing impermanence in all constituent elements. [You should dwell] perceiving suffering in impermanence, perceiving non self in suffering, perceiving abandoning, perceiving the absence of desire, perceiving cessation. This is how you should train yourself, oh Dīghāvu'.³¹ In others suttas, we also find references to a king who guards his senses and mind,³² and to a group of householder brahmins who are being instructed on guarding the sense doors.³³

Yet another *sutta* where meditative practices are taught to a layman is the *Anāthapiṇḍikovādasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, where Sāriputta instructs the dying Anāthapiṇḍika to practice non grasping in relation to the six senses (the five senses and the mind), the six forms (shape, sound, smell, tastes, touches and mental objects) and the six consciousness associated with each of the senses. In addition, Sāriputta remarks that Anāthapiṇḍika should not grasp after feelings as well as the last four trance states. After describing the various types of non grasping meditation, Sāriputta remarks that this kind of meditation is usually given not to householders but only to monks. In response, the householder Anāthapiṇḍika points out that this teaching should be given to other householders who have little dust in their eyes.³⁴

Spiritual Attainments

By highlighting these passages in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, I hope to have shown that the sections of the Pāli canon that portray household life as full of hindrances are juxtaposed by passages in which householders are depicted as progressing towards enlightenment, as hearing and understanding profound teachings (such as non self and dependent origination) and as practicing various kinds of meditation. At this point, one question may be raised: while it is true that certain householders may 'progress' towards enlightenment and attain the first three fruits of the path (stream-enterer, once-returner and non returner), is it possible for them to attain complete freedom from suffering—i.e., to become an *arahant*? Unfortunately, there is not a single answer to this question, thereby further showing the complexity of views regarding the laity in the Pāli canon.

On the one hand there are many passages in the *Sutta Piṭaka* where the final stage of *arahantship* is shown to be unattainable by householders and where householders are depicted as having attained only the first three fruits of the path to enlightenment. In the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (D II.92f.), for example, the Buddha recalls those lay people who have become stream-enterers, once-returners and non returners; interestingly, there is no mention of fully enlightened lay people.³⁵ The *Naḷakapānasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (I.467) further supports the notion that one must become a monastic before attaining enlightenment. In this *sutta* the Buddha points out to Anuruddha the states attained by certain deceased people. First, the Buddha mentions the states attained by monks and nuns: having abandoned only the first three fetters (stream-enterer), having eliminated the first three fetters and reduced attachment, aversion and delusion (i.e., a once-returner), having eradicated the first five fetters (i.e., a non returner), and being

established in profound knowledge (i.e., *arahant*). This statement is followed by a discussion of the states attained by laymen and laywomen. However, there is only mention of the first three stages: stream-enterer, once-returner and non returner.³⁶ What is implied is that while monastics are able to reach all of the four fruits of the path, lay people are able to attain only the first three stages. Even though householders are able to progress along the path through hearing profound teachings and practicing meditation, the ultimate goal of cessation from suffering can be attained only by a monastic.

While these passages may lend support to the claim that the householder's life is 'ultimately' not conducive to spiritual progress and that lay people must abandon household life in order to cultivate higher wisdom and enlightenment, other passages suggest the contrary: that lay people can achieve the fourth fruit—*arahantship*. For example, in two *suttas* in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the 'prospect' of lay people attaining complete release from suffering (*dukkha*) and from the mental intoxicants (*āsavas*) is acknowledged. In the *Mahānāmasutta*, for example, the layman Mahānāma asks the Buddha the difference between those lay people who are possessed with morality (*sīlasampanno*), those lay people who are possessed with faith (*saddhosampanno*), those lay people who are possessed with generosity (*cāgasampanno*) and finally, those lay people who are possessed with wisdom (*paññāsampanno*). This last group of lay people, the Buddha responds, are those who are possessed with insight into rising and falling (i.e., impermanence), who are possessed with wisdom which is noble, who are discriminating, and who are moving towards the complete destruction of suffering (i.e., enlightenment).³⁷ In this passage, there is neither a portrayal of a layperson's life as being replete with hindrances nor an assertion that a lay follower (*upāsaka*) must become a monastic.

Of even greater interest is the *Gilāyanasutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*. In this *sutta*, the Buddha points out to the householder Mahānāma that lay people may be admonished to develop faith in the three jewels,³⁸ to develop noble virtues, and to eradicate all attachment to their parents, to their children, to the five senses, to the four godly realms and so on. Once the lay person eradicates all attachments, then the person should be instructed to direct the mind on the state of cessation (*nirodha*). The Buddha then points out that if the lay person is able to accomplish this feat, then there is no difference between the lay person and the monk who is freed from the *āsavas* (i.e., mental intoxicants preventing one from reaching enlightenment) and that there is no difference between the release of one and the release of the other.³⁹

Another passage pertaining to the issue of whether lay people can become enlightened is in the *Āṅuttara Nikāya*, where Māra asks the Buddha to attain *parinibbāna*. Though this passage repeats the passage found in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, there is one addition: not only should there be monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who are accomplished in the Buddhist teachings and can teach it to others, but there must also be monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who have attained perfect peace (*pattayogakkhemā*)—a word that Rhys Davids and Stede refer to as a 'frequent epithet of *nibbāna*'.⁴⁰

There are other passages in the *Majjhima*, *Samyutta* and *Āṅuttara Nikāyas* that correlate the attainment of *nibbāna* to lay people. In these passages another epithet for *nibbāna* is used: *ñāyaṃ*, or truth. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, for instance, the Buddha purports to have said to his monks that when 'a householder or a wanderer is rightly disposed, because of [his] correct mental disposition he is accomplished in the truth (*ñāyaṃ*), the teachings (or the norm (*dhamma*)), and the wholesome'.⁴¹ Though the word *ñāyaṃ*, or truth, may appear to be ambiguous in this phrase, certain post-canonical

texts gloss this word as a synonym for *nibbāna*. For example, in his *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa succinctly writes, ‘*Ñāyo vuccati nibbānaṃ*’ or ‘Truth is called *nibbāna*’.⁴² Moreover, in the *Questions to King Milinda*, King Milinda questions the monk Nagasena on this exact passage: ‘if householders and monastics can realize the truth (*ñāyaṃ*), then why should one give up the householder’s life?’ Though Nagasena skirts Milinda’s question at first by pointing out that the recluse is nonetheless superior because he attains the goal of *nibbāna* without delay,⁴³ he later remarks that the householder who is able to attain the highest peace of *nibbāna* is able to do so only because he has laid the groundwork in previous lives, when he followed the thirteen ascetic practices (*dhutaḅuṇas*).⁴⁴

In addition to this *sutta*, we find other passages that even refer to lay people who are enlightened. For example, near the end of the third book of the *Aṅuttara Nikāya*, we find the following:

Endowed with these six things, oh monks, the householder Tapussa who has attained perfection and who has seen *nibbāna* because of the Tathāgata, is one who has gone to the state of perfection having seen *nibbāna* with his own eyes; with which six: with perfect faith in the Buddha, with perfect faith in the *dhamma*, with perfect faith in the saṅgha, with noble morality, with noble knowledge, and with noble release. Because of these six things, oh monks, the householder Tapussa who has attained perfection and who has seen *nibbāna* because of the Tathāgata, is one who has gone to the state of perfection having seen *nibbāna* with his own eyes. (A III.450f.)

This same formula is then repeated for seventeen other householders (Bhallika, Sudatta Anāthapiṇḍika,⁴⁵ Citta Macchikāsaṇḍika, Hatthaka Ālavaka, Mahānāma Sakka, Uggā Vesālika, Uggata, Sūra Ambaṭṭha, Jīvaka Komārabhacca, Nakulpitā, Tavakaṇṇika, Pūraṇa, Isidatta, Sandhāna, Vijaya, Vajjiyamāhita and Meṇḍaka) and three other lay disciples (Vāseṭṭha, Ariṭṭha and Sāragga).

If we take these passages seriously, then it appears that Gananath Obeyesekere (1968:28) might have had a rather limited reading of the Pāli canon when he asserted that ‘Since *de facto* a layman is incapable of entering the true path, the *nirvana* quest is exclusively a phenomenon of elite religiosity’.⁴⁶ Though there are canonical passages that imply that lay people cannot become enlightened, these passages must be interpreted as applying only to particular situations. Certain lay people are shown, in the Pāli canon, to have attained the same degree of perfection as enlightened monks and nuns.

In highlighting the various passages pertaining to the laity in this paper, I am not arguing that the function of the laity did not include supporting monastics. I am arguing only that the Pāli canon contains a complex view of lay people and that the traditional limited reading of the Pāli canon misses this complexity. Moreover, the multifarious views of the lay community in the Pāli canon actually challenge the rigid categories of ‘monastic’ and ‘laity’. While these two categories appear distinct and separate to us today, these two categories might have been more indistinct and less meaningful during the period represented in the Pāli canon. For instance, in some of the passages highlighted, the lay community, like the monastic community, is shown to be given profound teachings, to have practiced various forms of Buddhist meditation and to have reached the highest goal of the tradition—enlightenment.

If the two communities are less distinct in the period of the Pāli canon, then it might be fruitful to question when and under what circumstances did the sharp distinction first arise. Is it possible that the early centuries of Mahāyāna Buddhism, with its posturing about the superiority of its own path because it includes the laity, may have prompted

the Theravāda tradition to define itself against the Mahāyāna school by posturing a distinct opposition between the lay and monastic communities? While such a question lies beyond the scope of this article, it is worth further consideration.

Notes

- 1 Nalinaksha Dutt, 'Place of Laity in Early Buddhism', *Indian Historical Quarterly* 21, p. 163.
- 2 Max Weber, *The Religions of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, trans. H. H. Gerth and D. Martindale, Glencoe, IL, Free Press 1958, p. 214. In a similar manner, Edward Conze denigrates the role of the laity in archaic Buddhism by referring to their beliefs and practices as 'bhaktic' (i.e., devotional) and 'magical' (*Buddhist Thought in India: Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy*, London, Allen and Unwin 1962, p. 32).
- 3 Weber, p. 214.
- 4 Etienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Śāka Era*, trans. Sara Webb-Boin, Louvain-Paris, Peeters Press 1988, p. 67.
- 5 Ibid., p. 74.
- 6 Akira Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*, trans. Paul Groner, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press 1990, p. 61.
- 7 Ibid., p. 106.
- 8 Ibid., p. 105.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 George Bond, *The Buddhism Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Traditions, Reinterpretation and Response*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press 1988, p. 23.
- 11 Ibid., p. 25.
- 12 Ibid., p. 27.
- 13 Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press 1997, p. 30.
- 14 Ibid., 31.
- 15 In this article, I am not arguing that the Pāli canon 'represents' early Buddhism. Rather, I am arguing that the Pāli canon contains all kinds of different ideas about the kinds of religious practices undertaken by the monastic order and the laity, and that this complexity undermines the common assumptions made regarding a strict monastic/lay opposition. I am not so concerned about the issue of the chronological layering of the texts. Instead, I am interested in looking at a body of texts (that Theravāda tradition has said belong together in some way) and examining what *the texts themselves* have to say on the issue of religious practitioners.
- 16 This phrase occurs numerous times in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. See, for instance, *Dīgha Nikāya* (hereafter D) 1.63, 100, 124, 147, 157, 171, 181, 206, 214, 232, 250; *Majjhima Nikāya* (hereafter M) 1.179, 267, 344, 412, 521; II.38, 162, 226; III.134; and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (hereafter A) II. 208. All translations of passages from the Pāli canon are mine unless otherwise noted. All references to the canon are based on the Pāli Text Society's Pāli edition.
- 17 This point is also made in the *Raṭṭhapālasutta of the Majjhima Nikāya* (II.56), where the householder Raṭṭhapāla, while listening to a Buddhist discourse, comes to realise that the only way to practice the Buddha's teachings is to go forth into the state of homelessness. In a number of other *suttas*, the same point is made. For example, in the *Mahāvachagottasutta* we find that only after Vacchagotta becomes a monk that he is taught by the Buddha about the two types of the meditative techniques that lead to enlightenment—*vipassanā* and *samatha*. While he was still a layman, however, the Buddha taught him only the importance of cultivating the 10 wholesome actions. Other *suttas* in which a discussion of the meditative and trance practices is limited only to monastics are the *Vesāli* and *Kāmabhū* *suttas* of the *Samyutta Nikāya* and the *Cūḷavedalla* and *Aṭṭhakanāgara* *suttas* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.
- 18 This idea of a gradual discourse is also found in D.I.148; II.41, 43, 44; A IV. 186, 209; M.I.379; and M.II.145; see, especially, A III.184, where the Buddha tells Ānanda that the gradual discourse on morality, giving and heaven should be given to lay people.
- 19 *Suttas* in which the importance of giving is established are the *Udayo*, *Devahito*, *Aputtaka* and *Puggala* *suttas* of the *Samyutta Nikāya* (hereafter S), the *Apaṇṇakasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, as well as numerous passages in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (see, for example, A II.65, 391; III.39, 49,

- 336; and IV.62, 239). *Suttas* in which the Buddha teaches lay people about morality include the *Soṇadaṇḍa* and *Mahāparinibbāna suttas* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the *Paccābhūmako*, *Veḷudvāreyyā*, *Puggala* and *Pañcaverabhayā suttas* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, *Apaṇṇakasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, as well as several passages in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (see, for instance, A I.56, 57, 62; III.203ff., 247). In addition to discussing the fivefold moral code with lay people, the Buddha also points out to certain lay people that they should cultivate the ten wholesome actions (see for instance, the *Mahāvachagotta* and *Esukāri suttas* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*).
- 20 The rewards correlated to giving and morality not only include attaining a favourable rebirth in heaven, but also becoming a stream-enterer, once-returned, and even a non-returned. This idea becomes the central focus of the *Vimānavatthu* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*.
- 21 A III.122 and A III.150.
- 22 *Paṭisaṃbhīdāmagga*, II.86ff. The other components of the ‘best teachings’ refer to the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four special powers, the five faculties, the five powers, and the seven factors of enlightenment.
- 23 This often occurring phrase of refuge is as follows: ‘I go to refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha; let the Blessed One take me who is going for refuge as a lay disciple from this day onward while still alive’.
- 24 A V. 189; this same story is repeated for Vajjiyamāhita in A V.192.
- 25 D II. 104ff.
- 26 Dutt, p. 178. Even though Dutt acknowledges certain householders who ‘took greater and greater interest in Buddhist religion and philosophy’, he is still drawn to the conclusion that the deeper and more profound Buddhist teachings were kept away from the householders. This same tendency to acknowledge lay adepts but then to under-emphasize their place in the early Buddhist community is also present in the writings of Gananath Obeyesekere (see, for instance, ‘Theodicy, Sin and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism’, in E. R. Leach (ed.) *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1968).
- 27 Hirakawa, p. 107. These passages also belie Hirakawa’s (p. 62) view that when the term ‘*saṅgha*’ was ‘used in early Buddhist texts, it usually indicated only the two orders of mendicants . . . The four groups of Buddhists were not referred to collectively as a single order (*saṅgha*)’. In the one section of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (I.23ff.), for example, laymen and laywomen are shown to make up 25 percent of the Buddha’s community of 80 great Disciples (*sāvaka-saṅgha*).
- 28 In both *nikāyas*, for example, the audience to which the teaching of the four foundations of mindfulness is addressed is portrayed as consisting solely of monks.
- 29 In addition to these passages, there are also several references in the *Sutta Piṭaka* which refer to lay people cultivating the quality of concentration (see, for instance, the *Saṅkha* (S IV 317ff.), and the *Brāhmaṇa* (S V.217ff.) *suttas*).
- 30 In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Uttarā is described as being the foremost laywoman in terms of meditative powers (A 1.26).
- 31 S V.345.
- 32 S IV.110ff.
- 33 S IV.116ff.
- 34 M III.258. Furthermore, in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (III.207) the Buddha suggests to Anāthapiṇḍika (who is shown to be surrounded by five hundred lay disciples), that he should abide, from time to time, in the joy of seclusion where he will not experience lust, pain and pleasure, and grief.
- 35 Similar passages may be found in the *Janavasabhasutta* (D II.218), the *Gīṇjakāvasathasutta* (S V.356 and 358) and the *Mahāvachagottasutta* (M 1.490).
- 36 In one section of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (V.83), there is also a passage in which only the first three fruits are described as being attainable by laymen and laywomen.
- 37 S V.395.
- 38 Though it is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning that even though the importance of cultivating faith is usually ascribed to laymen and laywomen, this is not supported by the textual data. For instance, we read that faith in the Buddha should be cultivated by monks, nuns and lay disciples (S V.161) and that monks, nuns and lay people should talk about the Buddha’s qualities to increase faith (D III.116).
- 39 S V.410.
- 40 T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *Pāli-English Dictionary*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal 1989, p. 558. The complete canonical passage is as follows: ‘I will not reach *nibbāna*

as long as there will be no laymen disciples of mine who are learned, trained, self-possessed, who have attained perfect peace, who have great knowledge, who know the *dhamma* by heart, who have reached complete righteousness, who are upright, who walk in perfect conformity, who are their own teacher, and who, having learned [the *dhamma*], will describe it, teach it, declare it, give it, uncover it, dissect it, and will declare it to those who have arisen, who having restrained and checked those who are in opposition with the teachings, will teach the marvelous *dhamma*'.

41 S V.19; see also M II.197 and A 1.69.

42 *Vism.*, p. 219.

43 *Miln.*, p. 342f.

44 *Miln.*, p. 352.

45 This appears to be the same person mentioned in S V.380ff.

46 Obeyesekere, p. 28. This point is similarly made by Louis de La Vallée Poussin. 'Laymen, however faithful, generous and virtuous they may be, even if they practice the fortnightly abstinence and continence of the Upavāsa, cannot reach Nirvāṇa. The only Buddhist, in the proper meaning of the word, is the monk who has broken all the ties of society' (*The Way to Nirvāṇa: Six Lectures on Ancient Buddhism as a Discipline of Salvation*, India, Sri Satguru Publications 1917, pp. 150f.). Dutt attempts to straddle the fence on this issue by first acknowledging 'that there were exceptional cases of householders who became so spiritually advanced that they *deserved* arhathood' (p. 183, emphasis added), but by later, in agreement with Louis de La Vallée Poussin, arguing that 'the fourth fruit *arhatta* is not attained by any householder' as well as that 'Upāsakas like Citta and Hatthaka, and Upāsikās like Khajjuttarā and Nandamātā were more spiritually advanced than many monks and nuns, but still they were *sekhas* and not *asekhas* (=arhats)' (p. 182f.).

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