

Lifestyles and Spiritual Progress

by

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NEWCOMERS to Buddhism often ask whether a person's lifestyle has any special bearing on their ability to progress along the Buddha's path, and in particular whether the Buddha had a compelling reason for establishing a monastic order governed by guidelines quite different from those that hold sway over the lay Buddhist community. Doesn't it seem, they ask, that a lay person who follows the Buddhist precepts in daily life should be able to advance just as rapidly as a monk or nun and attain the same level of enlightenment? And, if this is so, doesn't that mean that the entire monastic lifestyle becomes something superfluous, or at best a mere matter of personal choice no more relevant to one's spiritual development than whether one trains to become a doctor or an engineer?

If we suspend concern for questions of status and superiority and simply consider the two modes of life in their ideal expression, the conclusion would have to follow that the monastic life, lived *in the way envisioned by the Buddha*, is the one that conduces more effectively to the final goal. According to the Pāli Canon, the ultimate goal of the Dhamma is the attainment of Nibbāna: the destruction of all defilements here and now and ultimate release from saṃsāra, the round of rebirths. This attainment comes about by eliminating craving and ignorance through the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is open equally to both monastics and lay followers; monastic ordination does not confer any privileged access to the path or an empowerment that enables a monk or nun to make more rapid progress than a lay follower. But while this is so, the fact remains that the monastic life was expressly designed by the Buddha to facilitate complete dedication to the practice of the path in its three stages of virtue, concentration, and wisdom, and thus provides the optimal conditions for spiritual progress.

The monastic lifestyle does so precisely because the final goal is a state of renunciation, “the relinquishment of all acquisitions” (*sabb’upadhi-patinissagga*), and from the outset the monk’s life is rooted in renunciation. In “going forth,” the monk leaves behind family, possessions, and worldly position, and even the outer marks of personal identity, symbolized by hair, beard, and wardrobe. By shaving the head and donning the yellow robe, the monk has given up—in principle at least—any claim to a unique identity as his own. Outwardly indistinguishable from a hundred thousand other monks, he has become simply a “Sakyaputtiya samaṇa,” an ascetic who follows the Sakyān son (i.e., the Buddha).

The life of the monk involves radical simplicity, contentment with the barest requisites, the need to be patient in difficulty. The monastic lifestyle places the monk in dependence on the generosity and kindness of others, and imposes on him an intricate code of discipline, the Vinaya, designed to foster the essential renunciant virtues of simplicity, restraint, purity, and harmlessness. These virtues provide a sound basis for the higher attainments in concentration and insight, which are essentially stages in the progressive purification of the mind and the deepening of insight.

Of prime importance, too, is the external freedom ideally provided by the monastic life. The monastic schedule leaves the monk free from extraneous demands on his time and energy, allowing him to devote himself fully to the practice and study of the Dhamma. Of course, as the monastic life is lived today, monks take on many responsibilities not originally mentioned in the canonical texts, and in a traditional Buddhist country the village temple has become the hub of religious activity, with the monks functioning as virtual priests for the wider Buddhist community. But here we are concerned with the canonical picture of the monastic life. If the monk’s life so conceived did not promote smoother progress toward the goal, it seems there would have been no sound reason for the Buddha to have established a monastic order or to have encouraged men and women so inclined to “go forth from the home life into homelessness.”

While the attainment of Nibbāna is the ultimate goal of early Buddhism, it is not the only goal, and one of the shortcomings in the way Theravāda Buddhism has been presented to the West is the one-sided emphasis placed on the final goal over the provisional aspect of the Teaching. In traditional Buddhist lands few Buddhists see Nibbāna as an immediately realistic prospect. The great majority, both lay and monastic, regard the path as a course of “gradual practice, gradual progress, and gradual achievement” extending over many lives. Their practice as Buddhist followers centers around the performance of meritorious deeds and methodical mental purification, rooted in the confidence that the kammic law of causality and the spiritual power of the Dhamma will sustain them in their quest for deliverance.

To make clear the choices facing the lay follower we might posit two alternative models of the Buddhist lay life. On the first model lay life is seen as a field for gradual progress toward the goal through the development of wholesome qualities such as generosity, moral virtue, kindness, and understanding. The immediate aim is not direct realization of the highest truth, but the accumulation of merits leading to a happy rebirth and gradual progress toward Nibbāna.

The second model recognizes the capacity of lay followers for reaching the stages of awakening in this life itself, and advocates strict moral discipline and strenuous effort in meditation to attain deep insight into the truth of the Dhamma. While there are in Buddhist countries lay people who follow the path of direct realization, their number is much smaller than those who pursue the alternative model. The reason should be obvious enough: the stakes are higher, and include a capacity for inward renunciation rare among those who must raise a family, work at a full-time job, and struggle to survive in a ruggedly competitive world. We should note further a point of prime importance: this second model of the Buddhist lay life becomes effective as a means to higher attainment precisely because it emulates the monastic model. Thus, to the extent that a lay follower embarks on the practice of the direct path to realization, he or she does so by conforming to the lifestyle of a monk or nun.

These two conceptions of the lay life need not be seen as mutually exclusive, for an earnest lay follower can adopt the first model for his or her normal routine and also stake out periods to pursue the second model, e.g., by curtailing social engagements, devoting time to deep study and meditation, and occasionally going on extended retreats. Though a monastic lifestyle might be more conducive to enlightenment than a busy life within the world, when it comes to individuals rather than models all fixed preconception collapse. Some lay people with heavy family and social commitments manage to make such rapid progress that they can give guidance in meditation to earnest monks, and it is not rare at all to find sincere monks deeply committed to the practice who advance slowly and with difficulty. While the monastic life, lived according to the original ideal, may provide the optimal outer conditions for spiritual progress, the actual rate of progress depends on personal effort and on the store of qualities one brings over from previous lives, and often it seems individuals deeply enmeshed in the world are better endowed in both respects than those who enter the Sangha.

In any case, whether for monk, nun, or layperson, the path to Nibbāna is the same: the Noble Eightfold Path. Whatever one's personal circumstances may be, if one is truly earnest about realizing the final goal of the Dhamma one will make every effort to tread this path in the way that best fits the particular circumstances of one's life. As the Buddha himself says: "Whether it be a householder or one gone forth, it is the one of right practice that I praise, not the one of wrong practice" (SN XLV.24).

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