

# The Lay Zen Buddhist Sangha in the West

by Robert Aitken

The Buddha Sangha in Western Mahāyāna centers is not the same in organizational form as that in traditional Far Eastern cultures. It is different again from Buddhist communities in South and Southeast Asia, and still again from those which developed in the Buddha's time. A quick survey of all these past forms is useful in understanding what the Buddha Sangha has become in the West, and how it might evolve.<sup>1</sup>

Democracy, it seems, was firmly in place in the Śākya clan when the Buddha was born. Generally speaking, the Śākyas and nearby clans were governed by assemblies. An elected facilitator presided over these gatherings, and served as administrator in intervals between them. The Buddha's father was apparently such a leader.

These administrators, the constitutions of the clans, and the assemblies were natural secular models for the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, as the metaphysics of Buddhism began to take form. The Buddha's injunctions to his followers to work out their own salvation had important sociological roots. Where there is no supreme ruler, personal responsibility emerges. Where there is no God, the monks are on their own.

However, from our perspective, we can see flaws in the earliest Sangha. Women did not have equal status, and their "wiles and ways" were condemned by the Buddha himself in the sermons which come down to us. It seems that women were only admitted to the Sangha after it was well established, and even then as subordinate to monks.

After the Buddha's death and as his religion

found acceptance, wealthy men and kings began patronizing the Buddhist elders, and democracy within the Sangha started to break down. Spiritual self-reliance weakened to some degree, and responsibility for Sangha administration became more and more the job of the teachers. At first, "Refuge in the Sangha" was among the laity an altruistic investment in people who devoted themselves to the Dharma, but it became tainted with existing Hindu beliefs that giving monks economic support was a way of accumulating merit for rebirth into circumstances conducive to ordination in the next life. This was one factor in the development of the Sangha as a venerated class.

Another factor was the separation of the Sangha from the lay community. Though Buddhism has never been a worldly religion, and the Buddha's concern in establishing monasteries was to teach his monks the deepest spiritual truths in this world, monks "left the house" for secluded living arrangements, rigorously guided by the Vinaya to avoid worldly impurities. Thus while communication with the lay community was carefully structured into the earliest Sangha guidelines, the development of exclusive fellowship began with the first ordination ceremonies. Hierarchy is the natural form of an exclusive class, so democracy never really had a chance. A similar breakdown can also be traced in Indian society generally, with trust placed more and more in distinguished leaders.

Yet the Buddha's own teaching was egalitarian and democratic to the core. The doctrines of no-self and impermanence point directly to śūnyatā and the complete absence of distinctions. Full ex-

pression of *śūnyatā* is found in the *Prajñāparamitā* compendium of sutras in the *Mahāyāna*, which states unequivocally that things pass away because they are essentially empty.

The history of the *Mahāyāna* is the account of how this revelation gradually sank into the consciousness of Northern Buddhists. The distinction between laity and monks eroded little by little, and in Japan we can distinguish milestones that mark this change—the appearance of Saichō and the Bodhisattva Precepts which can apply to both lay and clerical classes, the Kamakura Reformation which brought religious practice within the reach of all people and which permitted priests to marry, and finally Western influences that brought new archetypal tools to justify further changes. All this change was possible with the realization that fundamentally there are no dichotomies: no birth-and-death; no priest-and-lay person.

Also implicit in the Buddha's original teaching is the doctrine of interpenetration and intercontainment which finds full expression in the Hua-yen sutras. Co-dependent arising, an essential element in the Buddha's realization under the Bodhi tree, was the first enunciation of the Net of Indra in Buddhist terms—the multi-dimensional net in which every point is a jewel that perfectly reflects every other jewel—the metaphor which is central to the Hua-yen. This is the last great development of Buddhist metaphysics, and its implications are still working change in the *Mahāyāna* as it develops in Western society.

In surveying modern Western Buddhism, two groups of expatriates, the new and the old, can be distinguished, as can a group of indigenous Buddhists. The new expatriates, Tibetan, Vietnamese, and other culturally identifiable Buddhists are cut off from their home countries. Though colonies of Tibetans in Northern India work to retain and nurture their home culture, those who have come abroad have quickly adjusted to Western circumstances, and have established Dharma centers in many American European cities with members drawn almost entirely

from people of European antecedents.

Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian expatriates, on the other hand, are still suffering from the loss of their home ties. They seek to heal themselves in the course of maintaining the Dharma, and so far cannot reach out to the larger Western community. The single exception is Thich Nhat Hanh and his followers in Duras, France, who concern themselves with international issues of hunger and child welfare.

Meantime the older expatriate sects, originating in Japan, China, and Korea, continue to draw upon headquarters in Kyoto, Hong Kong, Taipei, and Seoul for leadership. The Honpa Hongwanji of Hawaii, for example, has been established for a hundred years, yet its first American born and educated bishop was appointed as recently as 1975. Such old-time expatriate Buddhist organizations are only slowly acculturating, and have lost to Western Christianity and humanism many of the brightest people who were born into their temples.

Certain Japanese priests, particularly in the Zen sect, have chosen to work in the broader Western society, rather than just among their compatriots, beginning with Senzaki Nyogen Sensei in 1928. Korean and Chinese priests also have followed such a path. Indigenous Western *Mahāyāna* Buddhism has developed around these teachers, now with native-born leaders emerging here and there. In the United States, most of the new indigenous Zen centers have monks, nuns, and lay members, with ordained people taking most of the leadership responsibility. One exception is the Diamond Sangha in Hawaii which is entirely lay with a lay teacher. Another is the Sino-American Buddhist Association of San Francisco, which is entirely clerical, with Theravāda standards for membership in the Sangha.

As a completely lay organization, the Diamond Sangha faces a number of special challenges. With staff limited to volunteers and two part-time paid employees at one of its six centers, the continuity of the teaching, the cultivation of

leadership, and the maintenance of schedule and facilities all are at risk, for the organization is almost entirely dependent on the time and energy its members can afford to take from their families, careers, and education. At the same time, I sense that ordinary members tend to assume responsibility for their religion, and are less passive than members elsewhere in matters of Sangha administration.

Established in 1959 as a center where Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi might lead annual retreats for American students, the Diamond Sangha has passed through several phases and now is affiliated with the Sanbōkyōdan sect of Zen Buddhism in Kamakura, and has centers in Honolulu, on the island of Maui, in Nevada City, California, Tucson, Arizona, and in Sydney and Perth, Australia. The Sanbōkyōdan is a small, independent sect of Japanese Zen Buddhism that developed in the Harada-Yasutani line of Soto Zen, and is led by Yamada Kōun Rōshi, administrator of a large medical clinic in Tokyo. Except for priests and nuns who were ordained elsewhere, its membership is entirely lay, and it has no residential community. Members gather twice monthly for day-long Sunday retreats, and for periodic sesshins (seclusions) of five to seven days. The foreign members have begun meeting regularly in the evenings, often without the teacher's presence and without Japanese members who face work and transportation schedules which do not permit them the luxury of frequent participation. My impression is that the Sanbōkyōdan is the largest and best organized of the few completely lay Zen Buddhist organizations in Japan.

The Diamond Sangha has a residential community in three of its six centers, and each center holds regular evening meetings as well as weekend retreats and longer sesshins. Members seem to strike a balance between personal responsibilities and responsibilities to the temple without too much difficulty, but they acknowledge problems in maintaining and carrying forward a compassionate spirit in our acquisitive society. Sometimes their

Bodhisattva ideals seem irrelevant, even in non-profit organizations. Consumerism, drugs, alcohol, and an exploitive spirit permeate the Western life style, and Zen practice can become just a sanctuary and a way to maintain personal equilibrium.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that perhaps the egalitarian tendencies of Western culture give a strictly lay center like the Diamond Sangha a better chance to apply the Buddha's teaching of non-discrimination and interpenetration than centers which still practice ordination. Though Western centers with monks and nuns do have an easier time maintaining a program, they must deal with the cultist tendencies that appear with a priestly class. Power corrupts, even in a religious organization, and such a problem can be avoided where there is no sub-grouping from the outset. In seeking guidance on the lay path, the social history of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the Far East is quite instructive. The older religions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto were entrenched when Buddhism appeared, so the new religion was accepted on sufferance, as a guest, so to speak. It survived in monastic enclaves, and then as the monastic system started to break down the elders found it necessary to cooperate closely with worldly authority, a practice that continues to the present day. The willingness of Rinzai Zen temples in modern Japan to hold retreats for new employees of large industries strictly as a way to drill them in conformity is an example of how extensively the Buddha Dharma can become a tool of secular interests.

It is in the Buddha's innermost teaching of non-discrimination and interpenetration that lay Western Buddhists can find inspiration. And just as Pai-chang and his colleagues devised ways for the monk to apply religious experience in daily monastery life back in the T'ang period, so lay Zen students must find skillful means to apply their insights in the modern world of repairing refrigerators and raising children.

The "Pure Conduct Chapter" of the *Hua-yen Sūtra* offers a gāthā for taking food, but not for

taking a drink, or refusing it. The Buddha set forth Right Livelihood as part of the Eightfold Path, but he did not discuss the role of the waitress who must serve whiskey as well as food, pork as well as tofu. Suppose a Zen student works in a store selling agricultural supplies. He sells deadly chemicals as well as things that nurture life. If he promotes natural fertilizer over chemical, but the store makes more profit with chemicals, then he will be out of a job very soon, and his family will suffer.

I like the idea suggested by Thich Nhat Hanh at a recent conference that Western Sangha members write their own *gāthā*. I also like the method worked out in Quaker organizations for mutual support through sharing meetings. And it seems to me that something as expressive of commitment as "leaving the house" must be worked out. The First Bodhisattva Vow, "Though the many beings are numberless, I vow to save them," has been recited in Mahāyāna monasteries for fourteen centuries. Monastery walls and government demands no longer limit the fulfillment of this vow. Reifying it becomes the practice.

Indigenous Mahāyāna centers in the United States have not yet begun this new path. Some are suffering severe problems, even scandals, that seem related to poor communication, hierarchical organization, and neglect of the Buddha Dharma. With these problems receiving wide public attention, the indigenous American Sangha is at a turning point, and many serious students are evaluating themselves and their religious purposes.

My own evaluation is that anarchism in organization, subsistence living as life style, and the Bodhisattva ideal form the true Buddhist path, now that we in the West are free of old cultural constraints. In our own culture, the Catholic Worker provides a model for this path. In that movement, participants work together to feed the poor, using food that is edible but not salable at supermarkets, and using their own income from part-time jobs to cover expenses. There are no federal grants to the Catholic Worker, and all decisions are made by consensus within the small collectives. Network-

ing between the collectives is informal, and there is no overall authority.

"Taking up the cross" is not that different from the Bodhisattva ideal, and the model of a community that is dedicated to helping others can be instructive generally to Zen students. However, my impression is that the Catholic Worker is beset by problems of burnout, and that Zen students can learn from its mistakes as well as from its virtues.

The virtues are: responsibility, participatory democracy, a way of life that avoids exploiting the environment, and a dedication to service. The lesson is that one needs lots of space for formal religious practice and recreation (re-creation) to sustain Bodhisattva work.

How does one become a teacher in an anarchist organization? I think that the teacher is one who earns that role, the way head men and women earned their roles in traditional societies, by the building of virtue and wisdom. In Far Eastern Zen practice, the prospective teacher may be nominated by the retiring teacher, but he (always he in those patriarchal societies) is confirmed as master by the group itself. The Dharma dialogue included as part of the ceremony of installing a new teacher involves the prospective teacher and the students. If the dialogue does not go well, then the nominee is not accepted by the Sangha. The hierarchical system tends to take over the Buddha Dharma, however. I attended a ceremony to install a new teacher several years ago at a famous Rinzai Zen monastery in Japan where the Dharma dialogue was printed in the program in advance. Still, the tradition for Sangha power cannot be erased, and it is that tradition, I believe, that now must be put into practice again.

Exaltation of the teacher is the way of the cult. Taking charge as the Sangha is the way to avoid cultist corruption. Putting heads and hearts together to generate synergistic responsibility for the Three Treasures will make the Bodhisattva ideal a force for change in streets and public houses, and bring fulfillment on the Buddha's path to participation.

#### REFERENCE

1. Most of this preliminary historical material is derived from secondary sources: Gokuldas De, Richard Gard, Hajime Nakamura, R.A.F. Thurman, and others. More primary sources include the *Mahāvagga* and the *Dīgha Nikāya II*.