

Lineage or community?

On a practical Dharma (“spiritual”) level of the question of Buddhist nuns today—indeed, on the question of the purpose of the monastic order itself—the answer is very clear whether we accept it or not. This answer is rooted in the issues of the meaning and purpose of renunciation. “**Renunciation**” (*nekkhamma*) basically means “letting go.”

The world, as the Buddha has discovered, is not only unsatisfactory but brings suffering when we are attached to it. Clearly, then, we must let go of this attachment to the world, if we do not want to suffer. This is the **meaning** of renunciation.

To renounce the world, whether as monks or as nuns, means to “walk the path,” that is, undergo Dharma training. This is ideally done by renouncing the world and joining the monastic order, or walking the path as a lay practitioner. To join the “conventional sangha” or avowedly celibate monastic order as monks or as nuns means to “take vows,” that is, to follow rules that expedite renouncing the world for the sake of awakening in this life itself.

Essentially, the conventional sangha or order is defined by renunciation in these 4 basic ways, that is, by the simplicity of dress, of food, of shelter and of health. Even monastics who are true renunciants are said to use these basic supports as debtors to the donors of these 4 supports. Even as noble individuals of the path, we enjoy these supports merely as heirs.

Only as arhats, monastics are we (as renunciants) worthy of them as owners of what we rightly receive as basic supports.¹

Being a monastic, then, is

NOT a cultural status (nothing to do with class, priesthood or priestcraft),
not a feudal class (not as nobility, elite or ancestry),
not a political status (nothing to do with power),
not an economic status (nothing to do with money or security),
not a professional status (nothing to do with career or wealth),
not a worldly state (nothing to do with comfort, pleasure, sex or species perpetuation).

The monastic life is one dedicated to renunciation and awakening, that is, attaining at least **streamwinning** in this life itself.

In very important ways, the conventional sangha (of celibate monastics) is a full preparation for attaining **the noble sangha**, that is, those who have actually attained the path of awakening, at least as streamwinners, in this life itself, or, to diligently aspire to it. If we understand and accept this historical explanation, then, we need not be troubled by the technicality of “lineage.”

The conventional sangha comprises only celibate monastics who keep to the Vinaya as laid down by the Buddha and the early noble sangha, both in the letter and in the spirit. The noble sangha, on the other hand, comprises all those who are walking the path (streamwinners, once-returns, and non-returns) and those who have reached the goal, nirvana (the arhats).

¹ MA 5:32; SA 2:199. See [SD 45.18 \(2.3.3.2\)](#).

The noble sangha is a Dharma-spirited community of monastic and lay practitioners of the path, and has nothing to do with lineage or tradition. While the conventional sangha is the means, the noble sangha is the end of the holy life.

If we consider the "**transmission**" of monkhood or nunhood not as the conventional legitimizing of enlightenment to perpetuate a lineage, but as the attaining of awakening (*bodhi*), then, there is no problem of religious hierarchy or status—there is no problem of lineage. As long as we practise the Buddha Dharma and attain (or aspire to) at least streamwinning, there is the true lineage (*varṃsa*). If we attain at least streamwinning, then there is the beginning of the noble community (*ariya saṅgha*).

The Buddha Dharma can be learned from any experienced teacher who walks the path, that is, one who has attained at least streamwinning, or even one who aspires to it. Otherwise, we should ourselves unequivocally declare our aspiration to attain streamwinning in this life itself. The Dharma-spirited community comes from our having personally tasted the Dharma, that is, enjoying the freedom of the path.

Today, a conventional “sangha” often degenerates, as a herd, crowd or tribe, into a multi-national corporation; monasticism into priesthood and priestcraft; and this into a money-based worldly careers or businesses. (There are, of course, some true Vinaya-spirited Dharma-inspired monastics, but they are very few.)

If we understand and accept that our purpose of living the Buddhist life as the attaining of awakening (*bodhi*) (that is, at least streamwinning) in this life, then, we only need to dedicate ourselves to Dharma practice, and *not* be concerned with lineage, looks, titles, status, support, career, pleasure or wealth.

As long as we accept the Buddha Dharma, we can aspire to walk the path of awakening. The true path begins with streamwinning. If we aspire to streamwinning, then, we will also be inspired to live the life of renunciation, whether we are monastic or lay. We can learn the Dharma from any noble individual (streamwinner, etc), whether monastic or lay. It is the Dharma that ennobles and awakens us.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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