

SD 63.5 Was the Buddha a Monk?

Cult, homosexuality and renunciation

*Dedicated to Tan Lim Chai Leng, our daughter,
and her partner Yanne Vranckx of Belgium, with joy and love
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1 The essence of Buddha,dharma¹

1.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE QUESTION

Before we can properly understand the question, “Was the Buddha a monk?”, and the person who asked this question, we need to know who, or rather, **what** is the Buddha? Since the Buddha himself respects the Dharma,² we need to *first* understand what the Dharma is. For it is the Dharma that makes the Buddha. Then, we will have a better idea why such a question was asked, and the significance of the different answers that we get.

1.1 THE BUDDHA’S DISPENSATION

1.1.1 Primacy of the Buddha,dharma

1.1.1.1 When an unawakened person starts his or her own religion or sect, it must necessarily be without any foundation of awakening. If the teacher or founder is really awakened, he would have the nature of buddhahood and see no need for introducing a new religious school or sect, or have any peculiar ideas for promoting himself as teacher or his sect as “the new society” and so on. Our task, as Buddhists, is to walk the path of training, and the teacher is meant to be an example of the guide and traveller. This is what the dispensation (*sāsana*) of the Buddha is about. We are to be heirs of Dharma, *not of bodies and worldliness*. This last remark will become clearer as we follow the discussion here.

The Buddha is our one and only true teacher, and the Buddha Dharma is our one and only true teaching. **The Buddha is our one and only true teacher** means that we should understand and accept (or seek to understand and accept) the account of how Siddhattha renounced the world to seek awakening, and that he himself became **the Buddha**, the awakened one.

Hence, we often speak of the Buddha’s teaching (uncountable noun) as Buddha Dharma in English or *buddha,dhamma* in Pali. The word *dhamma*³ here also has the sense of “true reality”; it also has the sense of “teaching.” Hence, Buddha,dharma means “the Buddha’s teaching of true reality.” We often use the convenient short term Dharma for this.

1.1.1.2 Dharma is the joyful and radiant heart of wholesome truth, despite the cold bare winds of true reality. This joyful radiance attracts the intelligent and wise who, appreciating it, see *meaning and purpose* in their lives. This is called **Buddhism**, which then becomes a convenient and expedient means of teaching, practising and spreading itself according to how one understands Dharma and one’s purpose for doing so.

The best form of Buddhism is one that does not forget this warm and radiant heart of the Buddha’s teaching, which reminds us of two interrelated universal truths: we tend to *see, hear, smell,*

¹ “Buddha,dharma” “Dharma” and “dharma” are anglicized forms of Pali *dhamma*, whose sense depends on the context. On the polysemy of dhamma, see SD 51.25 (2.2.2.5).

² See **Gāraṇa S** (S 6.2), SD 12.3.

³ On the polysemy of *dhamma*, see SD 51.25 (2.2.2.5).

taste, touch or think of something, and we see ourselves as **desiring** this something that we see as giving *comfort or pleasure*.

This, then, simply put, is **the meaning of life** in accordance with true reality on a broad ordinary level. This meaning is defined as the first 2 noble truths formulated and taught by the Buddha thus:

1. There is **suffering**: we see *something* which we want. We are thus always *wanting*.
2. There is **craving** for this something, of which we want *more* or something *better*.

Let us look a bit more into this teaching on the meaning of life that is the 1st and the 2nd noble truths.

1.1.2 Dharma as meaning

1.1.2.1 The Buddha discovered **the true nature of life and the world**: why we are this way; how we should see and face it; and so fully understand everything; and thus free of suffering? The Buddha formulated his self-awakening into *words* to help us see the nature of life and the world, which is that we are habitually in **want** of something; this is because we are instinctively drawn to the idea there is **something** (*kiñcana*) out there, and we want *that* something. If there were no such idea, we then need to *project* it and seek it!

When we are *habitually in want of something* it means that we think we do not have it and that it is *worth* having. We are conditioned to think and act this way because our body needs food and comfort, and our mind needs something to hold on to. We feel pleasure when we find *food*, anything that *feeds* us, and we readily consume it; we feel *pleasure* when the body feels no pain, or a just a bit of it, and feels mostly comfort.

Often, we do not know when to stop taking food, feeding our senses—*seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, acting and resting*—even when we should have had enough, especially when we give comfort and pleasure to our body. We simply do not know how to *stop* thinking about such things. We keep taking food for thought to extremes.

The mind is always moving, racing, stumbling, leaping into *something*. The mind wants to know; but it only knows pleasure for something it felt it *was*, some past hazy love or sense of *security*; it knows only displeasure for what it recalled as *painful* or dark. It feels bored and listless when it fails to see a familiar past in the present or a familiar promise as the future.

1.1.2.2 Our **mind** keeps thinking that we must have something more of what we feel as pleasing, and that what we have been pleased with can be even more pleasurable. In itself, this is neither good nor bad. However, it is bad when we simply do not know when to stop; but it is good when we notice how feeling pleasure and not getting pleasure affect us, and to accept this by understanding the nature of all such things is to change. This is **good** because we are learning how we often do things as a *habit* rather than as a learning process.

We need to learn and understand **the true meaning of life**, that is: *life always lacks something because we are always wanting*. [1.1.1.2]

1.1.3 Dharma as purpose

1.1.3.1 Where there is meaning in our life, there is also purpose; meaning is *seeing* rightly, purpose is *acting* rightly on that clear vision. In Pali, the same word *attha* means “meaning,” “purpose” and “goal,” showing the close connection between **seeing** what is *right and real*, **doing** what is *good and true*, and **benefitting** from all this.

Hence, we don’t just see suffering; we also know that we *are* suffering. When we see and know suffering, we also learn that suffering arises from craving. This is the way things are; the meaning of life.

1.1.3.2 When we clearly see the true meaning of life [1.1.2], we are likely to also see **the true purpose of life**. Knowing the *meaning* of life, we are likely to know what suffering is and how it arises—through **craving**, that is, through *wanting* something, and when, having it, not being satisfied with it and wanting *more* of it; when we have more, we begin to want something *different*, something other than what we think we have now. Hence, there is no end to craving and suffering—except to **end** craving.

We must first understand how craving works. We crave for something because we think of that something as being desirable; when we get what is desirable, the desire remains, but the object changes, becomes other, and ends. Then we want some more of this, or of some other thing. Thus, to understand craving is to understand the nature of all things, *real* (things out there) or *imagined* (our ideas and views).

Change means that *whatever arises must also pass away*—all things are impermanent. When we understand and accept **impermanence**, we learn to live in the present, understanding the nature of change. In this way we actually enjoy the moment; when we thus enjoy something, it becomes us, as it were; we crave no more for it. We have lived that experience.

1.1.3.3 Hence, our purpose here is to **let go** of craving. We understand that without craving we can better and truly enjoy something or someone. We no more see others as *something* or as merely a “thing,” an object of desire, the creation of our craving. This **letting go** or renunciation of craving does not happen by chance or unknowingly; we have to mindfully remind ourselves of the impermanence of things, and train ourselves to accept this impermanence.

Since craving arises in the mind by way of the body, the most effective way to begin to deal with craving is at the bodily level. We need to understand **the body**—*seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching*—in 2 ways. **Firstly**, all these experiences arise as pleasant or unpleasant because we are conditioned to like or dislike them from our past experiences (our memory), meaning what we went through as a child and being conditioned by others. This is the past haunting us.

Secondly, we need to understand and accept that whatever we experience by way of body and mind arises in the present. We experience them because they are *impermanent*. We should *not* live in the past through our present experiences; then, our present experiences just slip by without our understanding what is really happening.

To live in **the present**, then, is to *see, hear, smell, taste and touch*, just as they arise and pass away. We happily see this arising and passing away of the body; we change. We can and must learn from this change (uncountable noun). *To learn is to change; to change is to learn*. To that extent we are mastering our body (that is, craving does not arise at that moment).

1.1.3.4 This “body”-training is known as “**moral conduct**” (*sīla*), that is, *respect for the body*, taking the body for what it really is: changing all the time. Just as we accept our body, others have each their own body. This is a living, conscious body; we are alive and enjoy living. Our life is inter-connected with other lives: those of our family, neighbours, relatives, friends, the people and beings around us.

We should thus respect **life**, our own and that of others. This is the 1st precept.

Our life is expressed through our honest and good work by which we support life, ours and others. Hence, we should respect the wholesome work and **property** of others. This is the 2nd precept.

Just as we treasure our body, so do others, and we enjoy **health** and **freedom**. We should thus respect the person (the body) of others. We should also keep our own body free from negative habits and not be dependent on habit-forming substances. This is the 3rd precept.

All these teachings and practices are not religious commandments but truth-based experiences that are the bases for real happiness. This is the 4th precept.

Ours is a conscious body—we are *body and mind*—through a calm and clear **mind** we are able to master *mindfulness and awareness* so that our body and mind are the bases for the arising of *wisdom* for a healthy mind in a healthy body. This is the 5th precept.

1.1.3.5 To keep our body healthy means giving our body what it really needs for good health, growth and regeneration, and understanding what it desires and resolving its needs and wants with mindfulness and wisdom. The body is maintained by a **balanced diet** of proper food for the body's need of protein (to prevent muscle loss), carbohydrates (for energy), water (for bodily organic functions), and minerals and vitamins (for bodily growth, sense-functions and health).

The body also needs proper and regular exercise, leisure and rest, even and especially *as we age*. This means our needing sufficient sleep, avoiding any kind of habit-forming substance, managing stress, maintaining good hygiene, and going for regular health checks.

This is **bodily health**, that is, joyfully supporting our body with its *needs* (food, clothing, shelter and health), and wisely embracing its *wants* (things and pleasures). We should examine the nature of bodily desires—the desires *to see, to hear, to smell, to taste and to touch*, and their inherent (but false) notion that they are or should be “forever”—where these impulses and views are coming from or rooted in.

We should then work to remove or avoid those negative conditions, such as by seeking healthy alternatives and wholesome solutions.⁴

1.1.3.6 A healthy body is a vital support for building a healthy mind. Our higher purpose, then, is to keep a healthy mind in a healthy body. By “**healthy mind**” is meant a mind that is *not* driven or burdened:⁵

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1. by <u>sensual pleasures</u> | cultivating a mind joyful in itself, <i>not</i> enslaved by the senses; |
| 2. by <u>ill will</u> | by <i>not</i> thinking, speaking and acting in a negative way; |
| 3. by <u>slloth and torpor</u> | through healthy mental stimulation and physical exercise; |
| 4. by <u>restlessness and worry</u> | by <i>not</i> being stuck in the past or dreaming about the future; or |
| 5. by <u>doubt</u> | by proper learning, self-acceptance and self-reliance. |

In practice, then, this is *clearing our mind of all hindrances to wholesome thoughts and full concentration*, which is the basis for mental health. A healthy mind is one that *is calm and clear*, a mind that *reflects* true reality with mindfulness and awareness. This healthy mind is the basis for concentration training on the path of awakening.

The is the 4th noble truth: the path to the ending of suffering.⁶

1.1.3.7 The rationale for keeping a healthy mind in a healthy body is not only because we function best as *a family, group or society* of joyful individuals with healthy bodies and minds, but that our healthy body-mind is itself a process of **self-individuation**, that is, training and realizing our natural potential for *self-dignity, self-reliance and self-awakening*. The best example of such an awakened individual is, of course, the Buddha himself.

When we go for **the 3 refuges** (*ti, saraṇa*), we take **the Buddha** as our human ideal, to emulate him with a *healthy body* dedicated to compassion and a *wholesome mind* directed by wisdom. Inspired by the Buddha, we dedicate ourselves for the practice of **Dharma**, the true teaching, so that we will walk the path **of the noble sangha** in moral virtue, mental concentration and liberating wisdom.

Even with the first step on the path of awakening, as a streamwinner, taking the boat upstream against the currents of defilements, we already have a vision of nirvana, just as a thirsty traveller

⁴ Some methods of dealing with negative desires are given in **Vitakka Saṅṭhāna S** (M 20), SD 1.6.

⁵ On the 5 hindrances, see **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1.

⁶ Here, the path to the ending of suffering (*dukkha, nirodha, gāminī, paṭipadā*) is listed 3rd, and the ending of suffering (*dukkha, nirodha*), nirvana, is listed 4th, by way of **the practice sequence** (1-2-4-3): see **Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika S** (M 149,11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4); SD 53.26 (2). On the teaching sequence, see **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11), SD 1.1.

reaches a well and sees cool clean water deep in the well. Even now as we read this, whether we have reached the path or not, we know that avoiding evil and doing good is possible.

We thus avoid evil by respecting self and others, that is, by cultivating and keeping the **moral precepts**. With that moral virtue, we cultivate **mental concentration**, not only to calm and clear the mind, but to reach out to others with *love, compassion, gladness and peace*. In this way, we emanate heaven wherever we are, to everyman⁷ and all beings. In this way, we practise and realize **the Buddha Dharma** and awaken to nirvana.

The ending of suffering is **the 3rd noble truth**, that is, nirvana. This is the goal (*attha*) of our Dharma-spirited life.

In this way, the 4th noble truth forms **the true purpose of our lives**, and the 3rd noble truth is the goal of our lives. [1.1.3.6]

2 Buddha,dharma and religion

2.1 IS BUDDHISM A RELIGION?

2.1.1 What is religion?

2.1.1.1 “Religion” is defined in various ways by people who follow it, use it or study it.⁸ The premodern religions are, as a rule, based on doctrines, beliefs, rituals and notions of some external agency, usually God or spirits, that control everything, life itself, or important aspects of life. The founders of premodern religions tended to be individual **prophets**, who, on account of some kind of “altered state of mind”—which was likely to be rapturous or hallucinatory—was interpreted as some kind of “other” intelligence which communicated with that prophet. These prophecies or revelations were then disseminated to others and spread through the community, or a privileged group in such a community.

The lack of public education and proper information—along with little understanding of the natural elements and how the mind works—leave the public easily and hopelessly driven by the personality of prophets and preachers. Most of their believers have little understanding of the contents of the “prophecies,” but as the crowd grows thicker and is drawn deeper into fear and wonder for the prophet, the crowd tends to suck in more believers through fear of retribution or hope for promised rewards. The crowd does not think but merely follows the prophet and those who, after him, are convincing or cunning enough to speak for him.

2.1.1.2 When such a prophetic religion grew bigger and stronger, there were those, usually tribal or elite leaders, who used their power to convince and control the crowd as successors or representatives of that prophet. These were **priests** (like the brahmins of India), who were closely allied with the tribe’s or elite group’s most powerful person, the king, emperor or pharaoh.

Often these powerful individuals were themselves priests, or they were priests who climbed the ladder of power to claim kingship or lordship, or even as living “God” (Egypt), or “the Son of Heaven” (China), or “born of the God’s mouth” (the brahmins of ancient India). Such priestly religions, as a rule, empowered imperial systems of the Middle East, of India, of China and of Rome in ancient times.

2.1.1.3 Up to the Buddha’s time, the brahmins compiled scriptures, such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Brahmanas, and mythical and ritual texts to support their sole priesthood, and claimed their “purity and privilege” by way of birth into the priestly caste. Others were said to have arisen from

⁷ “Everyman” was the name of the protagonist in a 15th-cent English morality play. OED: “the ordinary or typical human being.” Here it is used as a common uncountable n referring to “untutored worldly persons,” ie, the unawakened.

⁸ On scholars’ Buddhism, see SD 60.1 (1).

God's arms (the kshatriyas), the hips (the vaishyas) and the feet (the shudras) of Primal Man (Skt *puruṣa*).⁹ This served as an effective myth and method of crowd control, whereby the hierarchy benefitted those at the peak of this social pyramid.

In 6th-century India, **the Buddha** unequivocally rejected and spoke against the priestcraft of the brahmins and class ideology of Brahmanism.¹⁰ The brahmins preached **karma** as right rituals performed *for* others by the brahmins themselves so that others are "promised" or "guaranteed" a space in heaven.

The Buddha totally rejects this ideology. We are neither pure nor impure (high caste or low caste) by birth but our actions, which make us morally high or low; a good act makes us noble (*ariya*), an evil act makes us *ignoble* (*anariya*). Nor do rituals purify us; only our intentions make us good (pure) or evil (impure). As we think, so we are.

2.1.2 Indian religions in the Buddha's time

2.1.2.1 The world religions, other than Buddhism, that exist today—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—may be said to be "Word"-based faiths. In other words, they each have their own sacred scripture by which they define their beliefs, shape and control the lives of their congregations, and accumulate funds.

The Buddha's teachings—as recorded in the suttas—often point out arguments against the various false teachings and worldly conduct of the brahmins. Besides the Buddha, there were others—known as "recluses" (*samaṇa*), such as the Jains (*nigaṇṭha*) and wanderers (*paribbājaka*)—who also rejected Brahmanism; hence, the brahmins labelled them as "nonbelievers" (Skt *nāstika*). In other words, they were the "reform movements" rejecting brahmins and debunking Brahmanism.

In Brahmanism, the term *Dharma* or "the Word" refers basically to the Vedas whose origin was regarded as "divine revelation," one "that is heard" (*śruti*; P *suti*), rather than being texts authored by humans; although they were taught and transmitted by humans. This ideology implies that **the Vedas** ("Knowledge") contain authoritative "self-evident"¹¹ knowledge and are considered the very word or voice of God (that is, of the brahmins), revealed to ancient sages (*ṛṣi*; P *isi*). However, none of these brahmins or teachers, even going back seven generations, have ever met such a being.¹²

The Vedas are the sacred scriptures of Hinduism and the ultimate source of the eternal order (Skt *sanātana dharma*), defining righteousness, moral conduct, and the universal laws that sustain the world. The believers' task is to believe this Word, whether they understand it or not. There is no way man is able to understand God's Mind, what more the words that issue from that Mind. However, the brahmins or priests will guide the believer, by way of interpreting the Word, and provide the rituals by which one gains the path to Heaven.

Last, but not least, all these religions have rules and obligations stipulating that believers unstintingly support the faith (through its priesthood). A key dogma or idea used here to attract and accumulate **funds** is that *nothing in this world belongs to us* (not even our lives); it is God's; what we have

⁹ Ṛg, veda 10.90 (Puruṣa Śūkta) depicts Puruṣa as "a cosmogonic figure, a creative source, the primeval male who envelops the whole earth and who represents totality" (M & J Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, 1977, Routledge 2019: Puruṣa). See also DAṬ 3:46; also Gombrich 1992a:163 f, cf 167. The phrase *orasā mukhato jatā*, lit, "the breast-born 'sons' born from the mouth," is ironic as it suggests two different and incompatible places of origins. They suggest that they are born from the "upper parts," ie, noble offspring. *Orasā* tr as "offspring, son."

¹⁰ On the Buddha's rejection of Brahmanism, see **Vāseṭṭha S** (M 98) + SD 37.1 (1.3).

¹¹ If Vedic truths were revealed by God, they cannot really be described as "self-evident." Conversely, if they were "self-evident," why would it take God to reveal them? Theistic believers are likely to dismiss this point as a "human" problem as "everything" is possible with God! "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities." (Voltaire): SD 60.3 (3.1.6.2).

¹² The brahmins called their God, amongst other names, Brahmā: **Te, vijja S** (D 13,14), SD 1.8; **Caṅkī S** (M 95,-13.2), SD 21.15.

is always part of “God’s Plan” or gifts to us. Hence, we should show our gratefulness by returning to the faith what is not ours anyway!¹³

2.1.2.2 Hinduism, as a religion, some scholars argue, was formulated during the colonial period (1858-1947), when the British ruled India and Western scholars began in-depth study of Indian religions.¹⁴ What we call Hinduism today is a popularized form of Brahmanism, often characterized by beliefs in various local deities, and is predominant in South India, while Brahmanism continues to dominate North India. Otherwise, the term Hinduism, at least as used here, is a broad term that includes Brahmanism. Modern politicians and radicals use the term “Hinduness” (*hindutva*) to justify Hindu power and dominance over Indian politics, culture and society, under the leadership or dominance of these politicians and radicals.

During the Puranic period (4th-12th century), we see the rise of **the Indian Trinity** (*trimūrti*)—comprising Brahmā (the Creator), Viṣṇu (the Sustainer) and Śiva (the Destroyer)¹⁵—symbolizing the natural cycle of the universe. Due to Brahma’s “conversion” by the Buddha, Brahma consequently became the least popular of Hindu deities.¹⁶

In significant ways, the brahminical reaction against the Buddha’s rejection of Brahminism was highly effective. Brahmanism successfully assimilated and neutralized early Buddhism by introducing or reviving such practices as the “stages of life” (**āśrama**)—the celibate student (*brahmacarya*, “bachelor,” 1st 25 years), the householder (*gṛhastha*, 2nd 25 years), the forest dweller (*vāṇa, prastha*, 3rd 25 years), and renunciant (*sannyasa*, last 25 years).¹⁷ By producing anti-Buddhist polemical works such as **the Bhagavad, gītā** (2nd-1st century BCE; which teaches, for example, that killing as a duty is acceptable)—this tries to debunk the central Buddhist teaching of respect for life.¹⁸ Another attractive religious icon for Indian folks is the deity **Krishna**¹⁹ (the 8th of the 10 Avatars, incarnations of Viṣṇu), a Hindu deification of Māra (*kaṇhā*).²⁰

2.1.2.3 Hindus today, as a rule, regard the Buddha as one of their “gods,” or technically as one of the later **avatars** or incarnation (ts *avatāra*, “descent”)²¹ of their Godhead. In that sense, the Hindus have “domesticated” the notion of the Buddha. The Hindu genius—as in many successful religions—is “if you cannot beat them, adopt them as your own.”

¹³ What is stated here is an observation of traditional religion in general. With the rise of better education, political freedom, modern psychology and Buddhist influence (such as through meditation), various groups in these world faiths (which are not monolithic anyway) may be said to be more “human-centred” than their mainstream or dominant “churched” forms. Interestingly, we can see such developments as signs of the growing globalization or secularization as the power and relevance of organized religion weakens over time.

¹⁴ See D Cush et al (edd), *Ency of Hinduism*, 2008:317. B K Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?* 2005.

¹⁵ G Flood (ed), *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, 2003:139.

¹⁶ Temples dedicated to Brahmā in India are rare: the best known is the Brahmā Temple (Jagatpita Brahma Mandir) in Pushkar, Rajasthan, with only half a dozen others scattered all over India. SD 49.8b (9.2.2.3).

¹⁷ Jābāla Upanishad 4. R K Sharma, *Indian Society, Institutions and Change*, 1999:28. P Olivelle, *The Āśrama System*, 1993:30-34.

¹⁸ The darkest episode is the dialogue between Krishna (God’s incarnation) and the warrior Arjuna of the Paṇḍavas who despairs to battle against his own kinsmen, the Kauravas. Krishna instructs Arjuna that the path to “spiritual liberation” is doing one’s duties (*dharma*); that the soul is not destroyed by death; one is reborn; one should be dedicated to God (*bhakti*). SD 36.1 (1.7.1).

¹⁹ Greek historian, Megasthenes (4th cent BCE), on his visit to India, noted similarities between the Heracles cult and Krishna. Key parallels incl both figures performing superhuman feats, such as killing monstrous beasts like the Hydra and a multi-headed snake (Kalia), and wrestling with demons. Both are also depicted with great strength and often shown with a staff or holding mountains. Cf SD 61.a (4).

²⁰ Like many Indian beliefs, gods, etc, their origins can be traced to ancient history. Such ideas evolved and were often adapted or revised to counter ideological onslaughts from outside. See SD 61a (4.1.1; 4.3).

²¹ See SD 49.8b (2.3.7.3); SD 57.1 (3.3.1.5).

However, **Buddhism's disappearance from India** was not due to the brahminical or Hindu assimilation of Buddhism—there were always significant numbers of those who would reject Hinduism, and those who were attracted to Buddhist teachings. Buddhism—monastic Buddhism to be exact—was building up its *own bad group karma* by accumulating immense wealth, living in opulent sprawling “great monasteries” (*mahā, vihāra*),²² and by Buddhism tending towards the worldly, magical and scholastic.

With the fall of Persia in the 7th century, the Arab conquerors, allied with Turkish nomads, in due course reached India. The Muslim marauders pillaged villages and towns, killed the monks, razed their monasteries to the ground, and enslaved thousands of women and children. They stole mountains of gold and precious stones, and destroyed Buddhist idols. Nālandā University and its great library burned for 3 months in 1193, and Vikramaśilā was razed to the ground in 1203 by Muḥammad Ghūrī²³—this marked the effective extermination of Buddhism in India.²⁴ Māra was smiling.

2.1.2.4 In the Buddha's time, the brahmins used the Sanskrit term ***dharma*** to refer to their concept of “eternal truth” [2.1.2.1] as well as their ideologies of social order (such as the caste system) and the world order (as God-created). Early Buddhism uses the term ***dhamma***—anglicized as dharma or Dharma—to mean, among other key ideas in Buddhism, true reality and the true teaching leading to the realization of freedom and awakening.

Early Buddhism, as such, is not a Word-based religion. Words may define the Vinaya, which is a legal text and procedure, but they do not define **Dharma** or true reality. Vinaya, as a legal system, depends on both the letter of the training-rule as well as the spirit of the law, that is, the Dharma (as teaching and true reality). However, the Dharma as true reality *can neither be embodied nor transmitted in words* (including mantras, koans and so on). The words of the Dharma are only helpful in guiding us to keep the mind calm and clear, so that we are able and ready to move towards the path of awakening. Dharma itself has to be directly experienced for oneself. True reality can and must be self-experienced and self-realized.

2.1.3 Buddhism and key global developments

2.1.3.1 India of the Buddha's time—6th-5th centuries BCE—was an era of dramatic political and economic changes. The old republics or republican tribes—the nations or states (*mahā, janapada*), namely, the Sakyas, the Mallas, and the Vajjī confederacy of Licchavīs and Videhā—were being conquered by powerful kingdoms or ceded to them, namely, Kosala (under Pasenadi) and Magadha (under Bimbisāra, and later Ajāta, sattu). Kosala and Magadha, linked by marriage, became Greater **Magadha**, which marks the beginning of the Indian empire that reached its climax with the Maurya empire under Asoka (r c268-232 BCE).

Buddhism was already the most influential religion of the time, especially with the patronage of king Pasenadi. During **Asoka's** time, Buddhism reached its apex, again with royal patronage. Like other religions that flourished with royal patronage, Buddhism also started declining with the downfall of the royal house. The new rulers were unlikely to favour the old religion. This was clearly the pattern in imperial India and imperial China. Whenever Buddhism associated with **power** and the powerful, it is Buddhism that was eventually crushed by power.²⁵

²² On the wealth of the Buddhist monasteries around this time, see Schopen, “Doing business for the Lord: Lending on interest and written loan contracts in the Mulasarvastivada-Vinaya,” JAOS 114,4 1994 & *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 1997a:3-5.

²³ See SD 39.1 (7.3.3.1).

²⁴ On the Turko-Muslim extermination of Buddhism from India: SD 39.1 (7.3.3); Thapar, *The Penguin History of India*, 2002:425-436.

²⁵ SD 60.1e (13.13.2 (iii)).

2.1.3.2 Christianity, too, grew into a powerful world religion with the patronage of emperor Constantine (r 306-337). It continued to expand into the colonial period (19th-20th centuries) all over the world. We still see the sunset glory of Christianity today as it gained momentum through its colonial powers, but it is being significantly challenged by the rise of modern education, political freedom, secularization (including widespread religious scandals) and the rise of other religions, especially Islam and Buddhism. Islam's rising influence is mainly from its sheer population and economic growth; and Buddhism from its liberating teachings regarding **moral psychology and secular spirituality**.

2.1.3.3 We are at the cusp of a new global change, dominated by the rise of **psychology of the human mind** and the objectification of the mind (especially by way of artificial intelligence). The new struggle will not be amongst religions, but between the human mind and humanoid intelligence.

We will now examine what made Buddhism rise as an Indian faith and blossom into a global religion with characteristics of a galactic spirituality of the future. For one, the early Buddhist texts often mention "divine beings" inhabiting space and distant quadrants of the heavens. These are aliens by other names.

2.1.3.4 Historically, we can say that when Siddhattha renounced the world when he was 29 years and 10 months old, he was not impelled out of the luxuries of youth and royalty by some God-driven calling nor did he have a powerful vision of starting a new religion. Even as a child and youth, he was already spiritually precocious. He was able to attain dhyana at the tender age of 7.²⁶ Even as a young boy, he had great compassion. There is a story about how he saved the life of a goose or swan (*hamsa*) shot down by his nasty cousin Devadatta, who would try to murder him and usurp his position as the Buddha in later years.²⁷

A significant factor in Siddhattha's extraordinary reaction to the worldly vicissitudes (old age, disease and death) is clearly his father's over-protectiveness from them, and providing the adolescent Siddhattha with all the worldly luxuries and sensualities. In other words, Siddhattha was free from any distraction caused by adolescent difficulties or from seeking sensual pleasures. His father, Suddhodana, flooded him with worldly pleasures so that his youth was filled with luxury and beauty.

Just as a youth with delicate skin is burnt excruciatingly by the direct rays of the noon sun, when young Siddhattha saw the 4 sights, it was as if the rug had been pulled from under him. The false world around him collapsed away, leaving only visions of the stark reality of *decay, disease and death*.

2.1.4 The Buddha's renunciation and its results

2.1.4.1 Siddhattha's visions of **the 4 sights** (*nimitta*)—an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a renunciant²⁸—are metaphorical images of young Siddhattha's *samvega* (spiritual shock); this is a pin-prick in the great balloon of pleasures and worldliness. His *samvega* was expressed in these words recorded in **the Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 3.38), thus:

Bhikshus, amidst such splendour and wealth,²⁹ and because of such an exceedingly delicate life, this thought arose in me:

²⁶ J 1:57; BA 277 f. On the ploughing festival incident, see SD 52.1 (5.1.2).

²⁷ See SD 52.1 (18.3.2.5).

²⁸ (**Pañca**) **Deva,dūta S** (M 130,4-8), SD 2.23.

²⁹ "Splendour and wealth," *iddhi*, or in a word "majesty."

“An untutored [ignorant] ordinary person, though by nature would himself age [decay] and being unable to escape ageing [decay], feels distressed, ashamed, disgusted³⁰ when seeing an old or aged person, being forgetful of himself [of his own situation].

1. Now I, too, by nature, will age and cannot escape ageing. If, bhikshus, when seeing an old or aged person, I were to feel distressed, ashamed, disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself.”

When I reflected thus, bhikshus, all my **intoxication with youth** (*yobbana,mada*) vanished.

2. Now I, too, by nature, will suffer disease and cannot escape disease. If, bhikshus, when seeing an ill person, I were to feel distressed, ashamed, disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself.”

When I reflected thus, bhikshus, all my **intoxication with health** (*ārogya,mada*) vanished.

3. Now I, too, by nature will die and cannot escape dying. If, bhikshus, when seeing a dead person, I were to feel distressed, ashamed, disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself.”

When I reflected thus, bhikshus, all my **intoxication with life** (*jīvita,mada*) vanished.

(A 3.38, abridged)³¹

In other words, the insightful Siddhattha looked deep into true reality and saw not only **decay, disease, death** (the 3 D's of life); but he also saw a hint of the way out of them in the 4th sight, that of renunciation (*nekkhamma*).³² Renunciation means being free from the world and worldliness; **creation** and creature mean *suffering*, being totally dependent on false images of the senses, the mind, and their bondage.

On the other hand, we can safely, mindfully, use these razor-like senses and mind by turning their cutting edges away from us, towards *seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking*, cutting away the unwholesome. Our experiences will then be wholesome, leading us to freedom.

2.1.4.2 The brahmins saw their religion as their God-given birthright and privilege; no one might go to heaven except through them, that is, by their mantras and rituals. They were the truth and the path to Brahman, their highest good itself. In other words, no one had religion—only the brahmins had—and others (even then, only other brahmins, and the kshatriyas and vaishyas) could go to them with faith and funds for the rites to heaven.

The wanderers (*paribbājaka*) were, on the other hand, those who wandered in quest of the truth, but the truth for most of them was that they were into it just for the living. They were all wanderers, and they were lost, or had yet to find the right way. There were others, like **the naked ascetics** (*acela*) and **the Jains** (*nigaṇṭha*), who had their own doctrines; but they all differed significantly from the Buddha's awakening.

2.1.4.3 What the Buddha did after his **awakening** (*bodhi*) was never before done by any religion: he opened up his teachings to anyone who was willing and able to work to attain the very same awakening he had himself attained. By “anyone” is meant literally any adult willing and able to follow his Dharma training, no matter to which caste they belonged—the priestly, the noble, the mercantile, or the artisans—or those who did not fit into any of these castes, that is, the outcasts. [2.1.1.3]

³⁰ “Would feel troubled, ashamed, disgusted,” *aṭṭhiyeyyaṃ harāyeyyaṃ jeguccheyyaṃ*. For fuller analyses of these terms, see **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,5/1:213), SD 1.7 n sv.

³¹ For full text, see A 3.38/1:145 f (SD 63.7). For further discussion, see SD 1.11 (3.2.1); SD 5.16 (19.4.2).

³² SD 50.9 (1.1.3, 2.2.1); see also **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14,2.1-2.14) + SD 49.8b (1.0.4.4 + 1.0.4.5).

In this way, the Buddha's teaching—what we today know as “Buddhism”—became the world's **first missionary religion**. The Jains may be said to be a missionary religion, too, in allowing anyone to join their monastic ranks, but they were much less organized than the Buddha. The wanderers and the naked ascetics were even less organized; they were either freelance religious or lived in parks (*ārāma*) of their own, without any systematic teachings or practices. They were famously known to frivolously discuss worldly matters. [2.1.4.5]

2.1.4.4 The Buddha teaches **dharma** as his own experience; such teachings are then recorded. Or, the sutta compilers record some direct teachings of the Buddha, **the Dharma**. So long as we are not awakened, we study, teach and practice the Dharma, a set of compiled teachings or even an aspect of such teachings that we practise and understand for ourselves. This understanding is technically still *the Dharma*, that is, it agrees with the canonical teachings, or gives a clearly better understanding of the **dharma**, just as the Buddha experienced it.

I have here used **spiritual language** to differentiate between the experience of awakening itself, such as that of the Buddha and the arhats, that is, **dharma** (the lower case to reflect universality); and the authentic teaching, especially those of the suttas (which broadly is said to be “canonical”), that is, **the Dharma** (with initial capital to reflect conventional or authorized teachings). The Dharma with the big D, prefixed by “the,” is the authentic (original) or canonical teaching that we hear or read, perhaps understand, and practise.

However, unlike in a rigid Word-based religion, dharma as true reality can only be personally observed as being *impermanent, suffering or nonself*. Even then, our **perception** of such experiences may be influenced, even projected, by our past or present conditioning, or simply come from sectarian text-based or teacher-based beliefs and dogmas.

For this reason, we can only accept whatever knowledge or understanding we have right now, even of dharma (as an unawakened person) as being **provisional**. This means that our understanding or wisdom is still evolving; over time, we will change our views of dharma. When we see this evolving knowledge or wisdom as bettering us *morally, mentally and spiritually*, then we can say that we have spiritually progressed.

On a broad level, this reality of our understanding—whether of Dharma (as text) or of dharma (as experience)—is always evolving and provisional. This applies to other religions and other kinds of knowledge, too. For this reason, **mutual respect and tolerance** of differences in opinions and views are justified.

2.1.4.5 The Buddha, as is well known, **first taught dharma** to the group of 5 monks (*pañca, vaggiya*). This was a direct oral teaching, with nothing recorded until very much later. We know this today as **the Dhammacakka Pavattana Sutta**, the discourse on the turning of the Dharma-wheel, which is preserved in a far-flung corner of the Saṃyutta, in its very last chapter, as **S 56.11**. It may be the 1st discourse, but it was put together as a sutta—as Dharma [2.1.4.3]—probably late in the Buddha's life but certainly within the canonical period.³³

We do have an early record of the 1st discourse embedded in an ancient Majjhima text, called **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26),³⁴ but these passages widely differ from, but not contradict, what is given in the Dhammacakka Pavattana Sutta (S 56.11). This merely means that while **S 56.11** records only the very first “official” teachings to the 5 monks, **M 26** gives a more elaborate account of the Buddha's “noble quest” and the attaining of the 9 abodes (the 4 dhyanas, the 4 attainments and cessation).³⁵

³³ The “canonical period” in early Buddhism refers to the era when the core scriptures, particularly the Pali canon or Tipiṭaka were compiled. This period is generally considered to span from the Buddha's time, around the 6th or 5th BCE, until just before the 2nd cent BCE, ie, just before or incl Asoka's time.

³⁴ M 26,29-43 (SD 1.11).

³⁵ SD 1.1 (2.3.2).

The Vinaya records a more continuous narrative of the Buddha giving teachings daily to the 5 monks, and their becoming streamwinners on successive days, beginning with **Koṇḍañña** on the Āsaḷha full moon day. Koṇḍañña then went forth as a monk [Mv 1.6.32]. **Vappa and Bhaddiya** then became streamwinners, and they, too, requested to go forth [MV 1.6.33]. Then, **Mahānāma and Assaji** became streamwinners, and requested to go forth [Mv 1.6.34]. Each pair of them were admitted by the Buddha similarly with the words, “Come, bhikshus!”³⁶

On the 5th day of the waning fortnight of Āsaḷha (June-July) the 1st year of the ministry—after all the 5 monks had become streamwinners—they were given **the Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59), hearing which they all became **arhats**, the first awakened individuals other than the Buddha, but just like him. All the 5 monks realized dharma, and thus formed the first sangha of noble disciples, that is, **the ariya,sangha**.

2.1.4.6 Within the 1st year of the Buddha’s ministry, he had a total of **60 disciples**, all of whom became arhats; in other words, they awakened just as he did. Since the Buddha was the first arhat, and the rest followed, those who awakened after him were known as true “Buddha followers (or successors)” (*anubuddha*). These first 60 arhats comprised the 5 monks³⁷ and Yasa,³⁸ and his 4 friends³⁹ and their 50 friends.⁴⁰

The Buddha then sent them out in various directions throughout the central Gangetic plain. This highly significant event is known as **the great commission** (*mahā cārika*), that is, the sending of **the 60 missionaries**. Within that 1st year, the missionaries brought back numerous converts. During the same period, the Buddha himself had converted the 3 fire-worshipping Kassapa brothers of Uruvelā and their 1,000 followers; they all became arhats, too, and were admitted into the sangha.⁴¹ This made early Buddhism the world’s first missionary religion.⁴² [2.1.4.2]

2.1.4.7 As for the new converts brought in by the first 60 missionaries, we seem to have no mention of their number (probably in the hundreds) but we are told that they wished to renounce the world and join the sangha by being accepted by the Buddha. This important occasion is documented in **the Vinaya**, thus:

At that time, the monks brought (to the Blessed One) from various quarters, various districts, those wishing for the going forth and the ordination, thinking:

“The Blessed One will let them go forth, he will ordain them.”

But then both the monks and those wishing for the going forth and the ordination were tired [exhausted].

[Then the Buddha reflected on the difficulty of *bringing candidates from afar to be admitted by him*. He allowed the monks to admit and ordain the candidates themselves wherever they are.]

“I allow, bhikshus, that you yourselves may now let go forth and ordain in any quarter, in any country.

And thus, bhikshus, should you let go forth and ordain:

³⁶ Mv 1.6.33+35+36 (V 1:12 f).

³⁷ On Yasa, see Mv 1.7.11 SD 11.2 (1-7), SD 60.1c (16.3.2.2).

³⁸ On Yasa’s 4 friends (Vimala, Subāhu, Puṇṇaji and Gavampati), see **Catu Gihi,sahāyaka Pabbajjā** (Mv 1.9.1-4) SD 11.2 (9).

³⁹ On the 50 friends, see **Paññāsa Gihi,sahāyaka Pabbajjā** (Mv 1.10.1-4) SD 11.2(10).

⁴⁰ On Yasa and his 54 friends, see Mv 1.7.11 SD 11.2 (1-7), SD 60.1c (1.12.7.23 (4)).

⁴¹ V 1:33, VA 2:506, AA 1:199, SA 2:215, ThaA 3:203, ApA 86 f, 517, 548 (Nadī Kassapa), 559 (Gayā Kassapa); ThaA 2:143, 145 (Gayā Kassapa), 160 (Uruvelā Kassapa); BA 20; J 1:82.

⁴² Mv 1.11.1 (V 1:20-23) = **(Māra) Pāsa S 2**, S 4.5/1:105 f; Mvst 3:415 f; see SD 11.2 (6). On the great commission, see SD 11.2 (6). On the 60 monks, see SD 49.20 (1.2.3.1).

First, the candidate should have the hair and beard shaven off, and then put on ochre robes. He should then arrange his upper robe over one shoulder, bow at the feet of the monks, squat on his heels, and raise his joined palms.

He should then be told to say thus:

<i>Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi</i>	To the Buddha for refuge I go.
<i>Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi</i>	To the Dharma for refuge I go.
<i>Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi</i>	To the Saṅgha for refuge I go.
<i>Dutiyam pi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi</i>	For the second time, to the Buddha for refuge I go.
<i>Dutiyam pi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi</i>	For the second time, to the Dharma for refuge I go.
<i>Dutiyam pi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi</i>	For the second time, to the Sangha for refuge I go.
<i>Tatiyam pi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi</i>	For the third time, to the Buddha for refuge I go.
<i>Tatiyam pi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi</i>	For the third time, to the Dharma for refuge I go.
<i>Tatiyam pi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi</i>	For the third time, to the Sangha for refuge I go.

I allow, bhikshus, **the going forth and ordination with these 3 going for refuge.**⁴³

(Mv 1.12.3 f @ V 1:22)

By this gesture, the Buddha, as it were, transfers his authority to the sangha to admit candidates into the sangha, whether they are arhats or not, so long as they qualify for such an admission.⁴⁴ In doing so, the sangha is now, in modern terms, a **legal person**,⁴⁵ one that is able to perform valid acts with authority regarding monastic discipline and administration.

One may now be admitted into the sangha without being arhats, but to take up the training of the noble eightfold path that would in due course bring one to the path of awakening.⁴⁶ These monastics thus admitted form the conventional sangha [2.1.4.7]. This skillful arrangement has allowed the sangha to grow and continue right down into our time and into the future.

2.1.4.8 The conventional sangha⁴⁷ (*sammuti saṅgha*) is a general name of all monastics who have gone forth in the name of the historical Buddha, whether they are awakened or not. Historically, the conventional sangha is a continuity, an unbroken line, of preceptors and their preceptees who have been ordained by the act with the “resolution as the 4th” (*ñatti, catuttha kamma*), that is, by way of 3 “readings” of the act, which is then carried (as the resolution, *ñatti*). Briefly, this is the “full ordination” (*upasampada*).⁴⁸

While the defining characteristic of the conventional sangha is the full ordination of its sangha members, **the noble sangha**, on the other hand, is not defined by this full ordination, but by each

⁴³ *Anujānāmi bhikkhave imehi tīhi saraṇa, gamanehi pabbajjaṃ upasampadan ti.*

⁴⁴ The qualifications of being a monk (and conversely, a nun) is encoded in this series of questions in the sangha act of ordination which the candidate has to properly answer witnessed by the monastic conclave, declaring that he is free from these “stumbling blocks” (*antarāyika dhammā*): “Do you have any of these diseases: Leprosy? Abscesses? Mild leprosy? Tuberculosis? Epilepsy? Are you human? Are you a man? Are you free from slavery? Are you employed by the king [the government]? Do you have your parents’ permission? Are you fully 20 years old? Do you have a full set of robes and bowl? What is your name? What is your preceptor’s name?” (*Santi te evarūpā ābādhā—kuṭṭha, gaṇḍo, kilāso, soso, apamāro? Manusso’si? Puriso’si? Bhujisso’si? Aṇaṇo’si? N’asi rāja, bhaṭo? Anuññāto’si mātā, pitūhi? Paripuṇṇa, viṣati, vasso’si? Paripuṇṇaṃ te patta, cīvaraṃ? Kiṃ nāmo’si? Ko nāmo te upajjhāyo ti?*) (Mv 1.76.1.4 @ V 1:93).

⁴⁵ On the sangha as a “legal person,” see SD 45.16 (2.2.2.1); SD 51.17 (3.1.2); SD 51.18 (2.4.1.2); SD 55.8 (1.2.2.3).

⁴⁶ SD 54.18 (2.2.2.4).

⁴⁷ See SD 54.18 (2.2.2.3 f).

⁴⁸ SD 45.16 (3.2).

individual member's attaining the path of awakening, that is, as streamwinner, or once-returner, nonreturner or arhat. Hence, the noble sangha comprises the fourfold assemblies of monks (including novices), nuns (including novices and probationers), laymen and laywomen.

The noble sangha preserves **the dharma** that all buddhas and other noble ones realize whether in the past or in the future, and also in our present time. **The most significant role** of the conventional sangha is its preservation and propagation of the Dharma-Vinaya (the teaching and the discipline) which has come down to us to this day.

2.2 SECTS, CULTS AND THE MIDDLE WAY

2.2.1 Buddhism today

2.2.1.1 Today, we mostly know "Buddhism" as a **religion** [2.1.1], with each Buddhist school, group and teacher having their own system of beliefs, rituals, rules, membership, even lineages, each claiming to go back to the Buddha himself. Underlying this rich array of religious factions is Theravāda, modified to fit local cultural settings: Sinhalese, Burmese, Thai, Khmer and Laotian. Further, there are Chinese Buddhism (a Sinicization of Buddhism coloured with Daoist superstition, Confucianist ethics and Communist ideology), Tibetan Buddhism (with deities and magic assimilated from autochthonous Bon), Japanese Buddhism (with its diverse range of modernized, intellectualized and personality cults, where monasticism is legally "banned"), Korean Buddhism (struggling with its meditation tradition in a nation that is mostly Christianized).

2.2.1.2 Western Buddhism started about a century ago, mainly from various sects of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Today Western Buddhism is just as ethnically inflected, incorporating language, ideas and interpretations from the various Christian schools; teleological ideas about progress; economic ideas of individuality and self-improvement; increasingly ideas about psychological and technological monitoring as a means to self-awareness; and so on.

Even modern Theravāda forms of Buddhism in the West are more westernized and modernized than their oriental predecessors. Both forms of Western Buddhism, whether Mahāyāna-based or Theravāda-based are going through their own modernized transformations. Out of this rich maelstrom of modern sects and teachings, we have clear signs that the Westerners themselves are realizing that none of the modernized forms of Western Buddhism represent a pure and unbiased presentation or interpretation of Buddhism.

With the beginning of the second millennium, we see more Westerners, even professional scholars coming out openly as "Buddhists." Growing numbers of local Westerners themselves are mastering early Buddhism, even Pali, including the translation of the Pali texts into modern European languages. There are now a growing number of Western groups that specialize in or promote early Buddhist meditation such as vipassana and samatha. In this sense, there is a clear movement towards returning to early Buddhism of the historical Buddha.

2.2.2 Buddhism as sect

2.2.2.1 Western developments in Buddhism are significantly influencing the rise of modern global Buddhism. Here we can see modern organized Buddhism as comprising **the 2 extremes** of dogmatic Buddhist sects and secular Buddhist cults, and transcending these extremes, the middle way that is **the forest tradition**. This is not a perfect taxonomy since parts of the forest tradition, for example, are being "deforested" as they engage more with the world.

Still, it is useful to examine trends that seem to emerge from modern Buddhism when we carefully study the patterns of teachings, practices and beliefs that pervade these 3 groups. We should of course see that each group is itself not monolithic, but gradients of Dharma commitment.

I have here used the terms sect and cult to refer to 2 kinds of exclusively **teacher-centric groups**. We will here briefly look at the term "sect," and in the next section at "cult." We are not here going

into any academic theory or critical analysis of sect and cult. These comments are merely a background study for a better understanding of some challenging developments in modern Buddhism.

2.2.2.2 A sect is a teacher-centric group whose teachings are generally quite close to or at least parallel to those of early Buddhism. One of the most innovative and well known of modern Theravāda sectarian teachers is **Pa-Auk Sayadaw**, who fits very well into the definition of “sect” [2.2.2.1]. Although Pa-Auk has a large network of monasteries in Myanmar, he is not as well accepted in Myanmar itself as overseas, where his teachings and meditations are very popular, that is, in Sri Lanka, SE Asia, Nepal, China, Taiwan, and USA.⁴⁹

Pa-Auk is especially famous for his unique claim of what is known as **kalāpa observation**. *Kalāpa* refers to the tiniest observable cluster of mental objects when his meditation is properly done.⁵⁰ In keeping with the Pali canon, this should be seen as the manifestation of *impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself*.⁵¹

As well known in sutta-based teachings, meditation experiences are all mind-based experiences, and are thus *subjective*; that is, conditioned by our own personality and practice. With enough training, we—or some of the amenable students—will be able to see whatever should be seen in meditations; it is a mind-made reality.

Even when, for example, the experience is misperceived, but the descriptions of the experience is approved or certified by the teacher or one authorized by him, such feedback may be accepted as being those of *kalāpas*. If such objects are said to be atomic or sub-atomic particles of reality, perhaps scientists may one day be able to observe them, too. This of course remains to be seen. But then science is only science when it is falsifiable. Hence, it is better not to use science to support such claims.⁵²

2.2.2.3 Can Pa-Auk’s Buddhist group be considered a “cult”? The term cult refers both to a set of beliefs and dogmas taught or authorized by the cult leader—in this case, Pa-Auk Sayadaw himself—who is the sole authority, ultimate leader and centre of faith of the community, which may be local or global. Clearly, Pa-Auk is the one and only Buddhist authority in his group, one who defines and disseminates selected teachings which are accepted and practised with faith by his followers. Pa Auk’s numerous writings act as the defining canon for the faith and understanding his cult.

Pa Auk, for example, rejects the central tenets of the Vipassana schools (rooted in the teachings of another Burmese monk, Mahasi Sayadaw), and Pa Auk bases his teachings on a systematic development of dhyana as taught in the Visuddhimagga. Despite being clearly rooted in the Pali Abhidhamma tradition, Pa Auk’s teachings have been very controversial, so that his books have been banned by the State-sponsored Sangha Council in Myanmar.

One controversy lies in the claim that a meditator should be able to actually see the details of the “series of thought moments” (*citta, vithi*). This is an Abhidhamma construct which, according to orthodox Burmese Buddhism, can be directly seen by Buddhas and chief disciples only.

“Once again, while Pa Auk’s approach can be seen as deeply conservative on the one hand, he poses a radical challenge to the spiritual authority of the Vipassana schools. If jhana really is necessary, then he implicitly claims to have a deeper level of realization than Mahasi and his followers. The major international success of Pa Auk can only have deepened this challenge.”⁵³

Of course, Pa Auk is not the only modern Buddhist teacher who has, in a way, challenged the early or canonical teachings and the teachings of other modern Buddhist masters, and promoted his own unique ideas and practices. In our own times, as our view of the Buddha and his teachings grow more distant and dimmer, we see teachers and seekers peering and squinting at the fleeting vision

⁴⁹ <https://www.paaukforestmonastery.org/>. 8 Aug 2025.

⁵⁰ Although this teaching is not found in the suttas, they are mentioned in the Abhidhamma: SD 26.2 (esp 3).

⁵¹ SD 60.1c (9.2.3).

⁵² On scientific falsifiability, see SD 59.7 (3).

⁵³ Sujato, “Reform,” Sujato’s Blog, 2009. <https://sujato.wordpress.com/2009/11/25/reform/>. 21 Dec 2025.

and memorable flashes of glory and colours of what they thought Buddhism was like. Driven by their wishes, hopes and overestimation (*adhimāna*),⁵⁴ they re-create Buddhism in their own image.

2.2.3 Buddhism as cult

2.2.3.1 Cult teachings may sound Buddhist or even be sutta-based, but the “official” dogmas of a cult are really a “revision” or innovation, mostly Buddhist, but may include external and eclectic influences depending on the fancy and fiat of the teacher. In other words, the final and only authority of truth in a cult is the Guru, the teacher himself.

Whether in a sect or a cult, the teacher or leader is, as a rule, attributed **charisma**⁵⁵—*seen* as endowed, even “gifted,” with certain powers, special knowledge, and position—but charisma alone is insufficient to attract or hold followers together for long. Pa-Auk, for example, dresses as a traditional Myanmar monk with an air of calm, and is an old senior monk.

2.2.3.2 To be a religious leader, one needs more than just **charisma**; the leader should not merely be seen as holy or gifted; one should also be **heard** as authoritative and empowering. The 3 naked ascetics of **the Pāthika Sutta** (D 24), for example—Kora, khattiya the dog ascetic, Kālara, maṭṭaka the votary ascetic and Pāthika, putta the chair-bound ascetic—were only *seen* as charismatic ritualists. They had admirers, even supporters, but no followers like a cult teacher.⁵⁶

Teachers like Mahāvīra (Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta), the Jain teacher, and the Buddha himself, were not only *seen* as being charismatic but also heard as teachers. Technically, both Mahāvīra and the Buddha may be regarded as “cult teachers,” that is, while they lived they are the cult’s living authority.

On the other hand, although the Buddha is still our one and only true teacher, this is merely a gesture of historical respect for the founder. Even in his own life-time, the Buddha held the Dharma above himself; this ensures that with his passing the same true Dharma continues to pervade his teaching and our lives. This is clear from **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2).⁵⁷

2.2.3.3 Besides the Buddha, the arhats, too, hold the Dharma above themselves. We see this warning against being blinded by a teacher’s charisma. The verses of the elder **Lakuṇṭhaka Bhaddiya** (“the dwarf”)—a monk who was a dwarf but had a captivatingly beautiful voice—essentially summarizes the nature of a cult, and his warning against it:

- 469** Those who have judged [measured]⁵⁸ me by **looks** and who follow me by **voice**,⁵⁹
overcome by desire and passion, they know me not.
- 470** The foolish one, surrounded by mental hindrances, neither understands the inside
nor sees the outside—he is indeed misled by voice.
- 471** Who understands not the inside, but sees *the outside*:
seeing only external fruits, he, too, is misled by voice.
- 472** Who understands the inside, and sees the outside:
seeing without obstructions, he is not misled by voice. (Tha 469-472 ≈ A 4.65/2:71)

⁵⁴ “Overestimation or arrogance (*adhimāna*) is a reason for monks to falsely or erroneously declare themselves to have attained final knowledge (arhathood or awakening), or some religious status: **Sunakkhatta S** (M 105,5), SD 63.3.

⁵⁵ SD 3.14 (4-8).

⁵⁶ See **Pāthika S** (D 24,1.8-2.12), SD 63.4.

⁵⁷ S 6.2/1:138-140 (SD 12.3).

⁵⁸ “Have judged,” *pāmiṃsu*, lit, “(they) measured.”

⁵⁹ “Who follow me by voice,” *ye ca ghosena anvagū*, alt tr “who follow me by my voice.”

Thus, when a religion or religious group takes its own scriptures as the unquestionable and final authority—rejecting all other scriptures, teachings, and sources—it can also be considered as **a cult**, especially after the founding teacher is dead. This is especially true when such scriptures are **pre-scriptive**. Significantly, in the early Buddhist texts, only the Vinaya may be said to be prescriptive (since they are legal texts dealing with moral discipline and legal procedures).

The Dharma is, as a rule, **descriptive**, defining the nature of true reality and how we can now understand and be free from suffering, no matter what religion we belong to or none. In other words, one does not become *a Buddhist* by following Buddhist teachings, but one *is Buddhist* by understanding and accepting true reality and living by that realization.

2.2.4 The characteristics of a teacher-centric cult

2.2.4.1 Firstly, **a cult** centres around a living teacher who is regarded as the absolute and final authority in all matters. Even when a cult has some ancient scriptures, its authority comes from the teacher's interpretation and dispensation, without any need for understanding the process on the follower's part. Since a cult is **teacher-centric**, the followers must show total loyalty to the teacher and be close to him, even inappropriately.

2.2.4.2 Secondly, **the teacher** is “the cult”; he has **absolute authority** without any need for accountability for his actions, words or thoughts. Even in the absence of the teacher, what he has said, or recorded, or his interpretation of cult scripture serves as absolute authority. Followers need only *to believe so that they will understand!* There is no tolerance for doubts, questions or critical inquiry regarding the cult.

2.2.4.3 Thirdly, **the followers** are said “to be” the cult (whatever its name). This is a shrewd way of claiming that the followers *belong totally* to the cult, to the Guru. Followers are subjected to intense cult rules, group activities, rituals, and peer pressure, which create a sense of unity and belonging. These experiences often induce an arrogant, euphoric or trance-like state, making members more susceptible to suggestion and less likely to question the cult's beliefs and practices. Questioning or doubt is regarded as a “sin” or disloyalty to the cult.

2.2.4.4 Fourthly, the cult is the followers' “**true family**,” and there is no other family. Usually cult followers are already isolated from their families, and even feel a euphoric sense of “family” with the cult. The reality is that the cult rejects or downplays any role of family relationships, especially unwholesome ones, but also wholesome ones. This means that the cult is its members' **real** family, which its followers are not allowed to leave; neither are the members allowed to relate with those outside the cult, except by way of infiltrating them or enticing them to join the cult.

2.2.5 As we leave the discussion on sect and cult, we will now return to familiar ground—the nature and purpose of early Buddhism—before we approach the significance of the title topic, “Was the Buddha a monk?” and why Sangharakshita raised this question and how he answered it. Before proceeding, we should remind ourselves of how early Buddhism arose, its human significance, its social developments, and religious changes:

- **Human significance of Buddhism**—that a human is in the best position for spiritual awakening because humans know suffering due to their being driven by craving. Understanding craving and overcoming it, humans awaken to true reality, to be free from suffering.
- **Social development of Buddhism**—while the Buddha lived, the monks and nuns had the Buddha as their living model and guide for their Dharma-spirited lives of training in the cultivation of their body and mind, to gain the path of awakening in this life itself.

- **Religious changes**—After the Buddha, we see human genius, cunning or frailty compensating for the death of the Buddha, or exploiting it, to sublimate⁶⁰ it by their own *greed, hatred, delusion and fear* into systems whereby they usurp the Buddha's position in an attempt to enjoy lordship over the crowd. By revising Buddhism in their name and for their own benefit, these false teachers bring untold suffering to others who follow them or believe in them.

We will now examine one of the most remarkable cases of how the Buddha is debunked, the Dharma revised and sangha exploited to compensate for the failures and drives—the lust, hatred and delusion—of the Guru-figure. These events are real and thus significant for those who really care for both Buddhism and humanity, to be aware of our own failures and weaknesses, so that

- we do not repeat such self-overestimation and deviousness, and
- we know how to wisely deal with it whenever it arises.

A Guru cannot exist alone (unlike the Buddha); the Guru rises because we gravitate to him or her and feed him or her with our own *lust, hatred, delusion and fear*; these evil roots are sublimated as the Guru.

3 Revising the Buddha

3.1 HOW ONE BECOMES A GURU

3.1.1 “Bad monk, good Buddhist”?

3.1.1.1 Modern religious writings often reveal more about their authors than the truths they propose. Such a document is Sangharakshita's article, “Was the Buddha a Bhikkhu?” published as a book.⁶¹ **Sangharakshita** (Dennis Lingwood, 1925-2018) wrote this article as a rejoinder to criticisms of his earlier essay, *Forty-Three Years Ago*,⁶² which questioned the validity of the monk (*bhikkhu*) ordination in modern Buddhist tradition, and explored themes like the spiritual health of monks, the role of the laity, and the need for a nun (*bhikkhuni*) order. The book challenges established views on ordination, suggesting that a “bad monk” could be a better Buddhist than a good one, and examines the “true meaning” of the monastic robe in Sangharakshita's view.

A key excerpt from Sangharakshita's *Forty-three Years Ago*, speaks volumes on his attitude and grasp of Buddhist monasticism; perhaps I should be more judicious by limiting this insight to only those unblinded by Sangharakshita's arrogance and views:

I am glad there was a flaw in my ordination ceremony, glad that really I was not ordained, glad that technically I was never a bhikkhu, for in the long run this contributed more to my spiritual development, and more to my understanding of the Dharma, than any amount of correctness and technicality could have done.

The bhikkhu who had a wife and son living with him at his temple may have been a bad monk, but he was a good Buddhist. He was kind to me, and took the trouble to help me, and

⁶⁰ “**Sublimate**” here is used in a psychological sense to mean “to make subtle and refined” one's gross weaknesses and failures that is *greed, hatred and delusion*. If this initiative is *unconscious* (the perpetrator denies it) then he or she is deluded; if consciously done, even defensive about it, then he or she is evil. The delusion or evil is not a label for the perpetrator as an individual, but in his or her thoughts, actions and speech.

⁶¹ *Was the Buddha a Bhikkhu? A Rejoinder to a Reply to “Forty-Three Years Ago.”* London, Windhorse, 1995 29 pp.

⁶² *Forty-Three Years Ago: Reflections on my Bhikkhu Ordination*, London, 1993 59pp. The book was written to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Western Buddhist Order (1968). For an internal review of the book, see Tejananda, “Forty-three Years Ago ...,” *Golden Drum* 31, Nov 1993-Jan 1994: 16.

I knew he had for many years striven, under difficult circumstances, to disseminate a knowledge of the Dharma.

Later on, in the course of the eight years between my “discovery” and my return to England in 1964, I came to know that most of the bhikkhus who had taken part in my supposed ordination were in much the same position as he was. They were either guilty, like him, of a breach of the training-rule prohibiting sexual intercourse, or guilty of a breach of one or more of the training-rules prohibiting actions of a sensual nature other than intercourse, and thus were permanently or temporarily self-excluded from the Order.

(Sangharakshita, *Forty-three Years Ago*, 1993)

3.1.1.2 Despite confessing the knowledge that the monks who formed the conclave for his ordination—including the preceptor—were guilty of *parājika* (the offence of “defeat,” entailing automatic expulsion from the sangha), Sangharakshita continued to wear the saffron robes, and, during his cult years, donned it as religious regalia before his followers.

The point is simple enough: if and when Sangharakshita knew his ordination was invalid, and if he was really serious about Buddhist renunciation, he could have turned to some other proper sangha community for re-ordination; but then, his hostility to Theravāda sangha members was profound. Moreover, one of Sangharakshita’s fundamental failures was that he never really had proper monastic training or any Dharma training for that matter, under any proper teacher.

A critic, for example, noted that “When one scrutinizes Sangharakshita’s so called ‘Buddhism,’ it becomes clear that it is based largely on knowledge acquired in an autodidactic fashion, principally from the Western literature on Buddhism current in the 1940’s and 50’s along with English language translations available at the time.”

Sangharakshita claimed to have studied under numerous teachers, even that this studentship was initiated by them, but the reality is stranger than fiction:

Nowhere is their [sic] proof of any deep involvement with teachers of any of the spiritual traditions. Sangharakshita appears, at best, to have “rubbed shoulders” with them. None of his claims to deep involvement are supported by any substantial evidence apart from his own accounts. Indeed, Sonam Kazi, the senior translator for more than one of the Tibetans whom Sangharakshita claims to have known during their time in Kalimpong was unable to confirm any “deep relationships” (in light of Sangharakshita’s complete lack of understanding of the Tibetan language, a translator would have to have been present at any interaction). Furthermore, the manner in which Sangharakshita related towards his supposed Tibetan gurus in the UK and his interpretations of Tibetan Buddhist practices very clearly indicate a distinct lack of any deep involvement with the tradition.

(E Mazard, “[Critique of Sangharakshita](#),” 1999, 2014)

3.1.1.3 An early English proverb says: “Give a man rope enough and he will hang himself.” Rope is here used literally and figuratively in the sense of “licence, freedom.” Sangharakshita had all the freedom and choice: if he wanted to renounce, he could get someone valid to ordain or even re-ordain him. If he did not want to be ordained, he should not have behaved as if he was. He was having it both ways—presenting himself as a monk while not being one, using his appearance as a monk for his own purposes.

The suttas give a graphic and scatic description of **a false monk** as one who is:

immoral, of bad character, impure, of suspect conduct, secretive in his actions, not a recluse though claiming to be one, not a celibate though claiming to be one, inwardly rotten [rotten to the core], leaking [wet with lust], full of filth.

*dussīlaṃ papa,dhammaṃ asuci,saṅkassara,samācaraṃ paṭicchanna,kammantaṃ assamaṇaṃ samaṇampaṭiññaṃ abrahma,cāriṃ brahma,cāri,patiññaṃ anto,pūtiṃ avassutaṃ kasambu,jātaṃ).*⁶³

3.1.2 The religion of sex

3.1.2.1 We will here take a brief excursus on a topic that often underlies cults, especially the tendency of cult leaders; that is **sexuality**. On the other hand, one of the very basic rules of the Buddhist monastic life is that of **celibacy**, the abstention from any kind of sex. I can think of at least 2 important reasons for this.

The first is that early Buddhism teaches **mastery of one's physical senses** so that they do not hinder mental development. We are, as a rule, distracted by *seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching*. These **5 mental hindrances** (*pañca nīvaraṇa*) may be paraphrased in this way:

- (1) We are likely to **desire** what we perceive as pleasure-giving sense-experiences (or simply “sensations”).
- (2) We often feel **hatred** or anger when we are unable to get or are deprived of what we perceive as pleasurable.
- (3) Whenever we are experiencing sensations, we are likely to be **restless** about missing some anticipated pleasure, or we **worry or fret** over memories of past pleasures that we now miss.
- (4) Any result of the recurrence of any of the preceding will induce **slothfulness**, mental heaviness, and we are overcome by **torpor**, physical lethargy; thus we lose interest in the present, in being mindful.
- (5) With these hindrances troubling us, we simply **doubt** whether we can focus our mind, much less meditate.

3.1.2.2 Sexuality is the most potent root of the hindrances to mental development because sexuality demands our full sensual participation and time. Sense-restraint is thus necessary to calm the body so that we can focus on the mind. Ideally, celibacy should be observed for meditation retreats or when we want to direct our whole body-mind to attain concentration.

Sensual pleasure is Nature's way of enticing humans to procreate. Yet, sensual pleasure need not be sex-specific since it is our whole body that gravitates to pleasure, not just the sexual organs. Furthermore, sex is *not* gender-specific. It is *body-specific*. Since the body is physical (an assembly of the 4 basic elements, *earth, water, fire and wind*), it tires or one gets bored, and the body quickly forgets the pleasurable experience; it keeps wanting more of it.

3.1.2.3 Mental pleasure, especially of the dhyanic kind, pervades body and mind *totally*. This is a “pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome states.”⁶⁴ The bodhisattva Siddhattha, avoiding the extremes of sensual pleasures and of self-mortification, turned to the middle way of dhyana meditation and attained awakening, becoming the Buddha.

Sadly, Sangharakshita—unable to keep the monastic precepts and unable to attain dhyana—resorted to sensual pleasures and worldly ways, and turned all this into cult teachings exploiting the lust, hatred and delusion of others—like the worldly wanderers of the Buddha's time.

⁶³ SD 59.2a (2.2.1.1). This is stock: **Dāru-k,khandha S 1** (S 35.200/4:179-181), SD 28.5; **Āsaṃsa S** (A 3.13/-1:108), **Saṅgha,bhedaka S** (A 4.241/2:239 f); **Aggi-k,khandhōpama S** (A 7.68,4/4:128), SD 52.12; **Pahārāda S** (A 8.19/4:201), SD 45.18; (**Aṭṭhaka**) **Uposatha S** (A 8.20/4:205), SD 59.2a; (**Samudda**) **Uposatha S 2** (A 8.20/-4:239 f = U 5.5/52, 55), SD 59.2b; Pug 27, 36; DA 1:122; SA 3:42; AA 2:177, 4:64; UA 297 (UA:M 761); DhkA 207; Nm 483 :: NmA 455, 338; cf Vism 1.158*/57 (verse 10a).

⁶⁴ **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,32.2), SD 49.4. On the 2 kinds of pleasures—sensual pleasure and the joy of renunciation—see **Laṭukikōpama S** (M 66,21/1:455), SD 28.11; **Araṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 139,9.3/3:233), SD 7.8. On pleasure felt by the awakened mind, see **Uṇṇābha S** (S 51.15), SD 10.10.

Selected young members of the WBO [below] were routinely billeted to “Bhante’s room” during retreats so that Sangharakshita could have sex with them. Other Order Members also exploited young men,⁶⁵ and a devastating scandal eventually broke out in the Aryatara Community, in Croydon, housing teenage male members under an Order Member, Padmaraja, who routinely exploited them.⁶⁶ The scandal then broke, leading to a downturn in the fortunes of the FWBO and the WBO [3.2.2.1], whose name was then changed to **Triratna Buddhist Community** (TBC) in the spring of 2010.

3.1.2.4 An ex-FWBO Member, “Alan J W,” a Polish,⁶⁷ made this significant and insightful analysis of Sangharakshita’s sexuality:

What I had failed to realise, in my naivety, was that Sr [Sangharakshita] PREFERRED very young heterosexual companions. I cannot possibly prove it, but I believe that he was sexually excited by the prospect of a gay relationship with a young straight consort; whom he could “convert” to his own sexual orientation, and then cast aside when he wanted a change. I am convinced that this was the case. Instead of examining this harmful aspect of his sexual nature, within the context of insight meditation practice, and the Buddhist precepts (ie, moral guidelines), Sr simply tried to incorporate this behaviour pattern into his teaching: with damaging consequences for some of his young companions, and eventually the small group of OM’s who naively followed his example.

(Alan J W, *Dialogue Ireland*, 2017)⁶⁸

Alan makes a personal observation based on his own experience:

OM [3.1.2.3] told me in 1997: the Order regarded Mitras⁶⁹ as “some sort of **subhuman** species” during the 1980’s! He wasn’t joking, and this attitude fuelled the impetus for the abuse that I, and other Mitras, suffered—especially during this decade.

(id, 2017, highlight added)

3.1.2.5 For Sangharakshita, his choice initiate was always a young, good-looking, impressionable male, who deeply respected the teacher. The teacher, however, used sexual contact as a means to gain control, manipulate, and assert dominance; here the situation is one-sided and negative. Even if the victim is willing, because the teacher uses sex in a manner where the victim is treated like a prey to be hunted and tamed, this sexual tendency is a symptom of a psychological need for power and significance. It is very likely that the predator has a sense of inadequacy or some past unhealed emotional wound; hence, the asura-like exploitation and collecting of sexual trophies. This seems to be the case with Sangharakshita.

In Dharma terms, the predator’s “will to power,” or simply **lust and hatred**—lust for impressionable young males and hatred for “authority” that seem to advocate renunciation, are gratified by the delusion that the predator has achieved his or her goal. These intentions—unconscious and instinctive—are driven deeper and darker into the predator’s unconscious as latent tendencies (*anusaya*).

⁶⁵ <https://triratna-perspectives.com/testimony/yashomitras-letter>,

⁶⁶ TBC’s [3.1.2.3] response to the Aryatara (Croydon) scandal:
<https://www.buddhistcentrecroydon.org/statement-on-the-history-of-cbc>, 9 Aug 2025.

⁶⁷ “I have decided to use my own name (as I did in my second article for Dialogue Ireland) minus the highly unusual Polish surname. This is to save surviving members of my family from embarrassment.” (2017) [\[Dialogueireland\]](http://dialogueireland.com) 10 Aug 2025.

⁶⁸ <https://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2017/06/16/triratna-fwbo-inside-the-sect-of-sangharakshita-by-alan-j-w/>.

⁶⁹ Those who join FWBO activities or support them in some way are called “Friends.” A Mitra (Skt for “friend”) is one who goes for refuge taking Sangharakshita as “Teacher” and commits himself or herself to the F/WBO.

3.2 WAS THE BUDDHA A *BHIKKHU*?

3.2.1 When sexuality is toxic

3.2.1.1 In 1993, Sangharakshita, wrote *Forty-Three Years Ago: Reflections on my Bhikkhu Ordination on the Occasion of the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Western Buddhist Order* (1993), in which he basically (consciously or unconsciously) tried to resolve or justify his non-celibate lifestyle with his monkhood by attempting to make **a distinction between a “Vinaya-style” monasticism and a so-called “Sūtra-style” monasticism.**⁷⁰ By the latter, he meant “a full time spiritual life defined by commitment and practice rather than technical status, and to recognize, even, that a ‘bad’ monk might be the better Buddhist than a good one”! (1995:10).

Are we to understand that Sangharakshita was admitting that he *was* a “bad monk,” and on that account, there were “good monks” who were really bad. Or, considering real-life situations where we know or read about Buddhist monastic scandals and say that those bad monk-perpetrators were really “good monks”? Or perhaps, if bad monks were “committed” to Sangharakshita’s teachings, practices, to him personally, they should be considered “good.” My understanding—I suspect it may be a deluded one —is that Sangharakshita was saying: “I am a bad monk; accept me as I am.”

3.2.1.2 Only **Ajahn Brahmavamso**, a pupil of Ajahn Chah of the Thai forest tradition, seems to have openly responded to this challenge by proving, on the basis of his knowledge of and training in the Vinaya, that Sangharakshita actually had received a valid ordination, albeit for a short period of time. In 1995, Sangharakshita replied to Brahmavamso in a small book entitled ***Was the Buddha a Bhikkhu?***, an aggressive attack on the Theravada establishment, in particular on Brahmavamso himself.

In this second book, Sangharakshita attempts to establish that **the Buddha himself did not receive an ordination** and was therefore of the same non-ordained status as himself! The Buddha, however, led *a celibate life* but Sangharakshita did not; after all, the Buddha was the first and only fully awakened being in this part of our history.⁷¹

3.2.1.3 Sangharakshita’s strong **hatred** can be seen in his aggressive attack on the Theravada Buddhist order, in particular, on Brahmavamso [3.2.1.2], and who, on the basis of his practical knowledge and understanding of the Vinaya, proved that Sangharakshita actually had received a valid ordination, albeit for a short period of time.⁷²

Sangharakshita attempted to prove that the Buddha himself did not receive an ordination and was therefore *of the same non-ordained status as himself*! However, while the Buddha had lived a celibate life throughout, Sangharakshita clearly did not, despite his claims to the contrary.⁷³ Sangharakshita tried to circumvent this massive discrepancy by referring to the bhikkhu ordination as “in the technical Vinaya sense,” which is effectively a catchphrase in his writings.⁷⁴

An anonymous critic, “Arthur Rimbaud,”⁷⁵ clearly a pseudonym, wrote this incisively insightful response to Sangharakshita’s casuistry:

⁷⁰ Sangharakshita, *Was the Buddha a Bhikkhu?* 1995:12.

⁷¹ *Golden Drum* Oct 1987 No. 6: 12; *Shabda* October 1988:91; Harvey 2000: 429.

⁷² On Brahmavamso’s stand on sexuality and monkhood, see “Buddhist sexual ethics—a rejoinder” by Ajahn Brahmavamso & Ajahn Ñāṇadhammo, nd: [Buddhist Sexual Ethics - a rejoinder](http://www.buddhistethics.com/buddhist-sexual-ethics-a-rejoinder/).

⁷³ See eg <http://www.ex-cult.org/fwbo/fwbofiles.htm>.

⁷⁴ See also eg *Forty-Three Years Ago: Reflections on my Bhikkhu Ordination*, London, 1993.

⁷⁵ The real “Arthur Rimbaud” (1854-1891) was a French boy prodigy and poet known for his transgressive and surreal themes and for his influence on modern literature and arts, esp symbolism, and prefiguring surrealism. His *A Season in Hell* (1873) was a precursor to modernist literature. He stopped writing when he was 20, with his last major work, *Illuminations* (1886). He died of cancer at 37. (G Robb, *Rimbaud: A biography*, NY, 2000)

The use of this terminology implies that it is possible to be a bhikkhu in some other way than the “technical Vinaya sense.” This is akin to claiming that it is possible to be a nun, for instance, without wearing nun’s robes, keeping nun’s vows or living in a nunnery. As is obvious, any woman who does not keep such vows, wear such robes, or live in such an establishment is what the overwhelming majority of sane human beings would recognize as a layperson.

Similarly, any form of bhikkhu who does not uphold the Vinaya, is simply not a bhikkhu, since living within the confines of the Vinaya and the title “bhikkhu” are actually synonymous. Perhaps now Sangharakshita will begin to speak of young women becoming pregnant other than “in the technical sense” or elephants other than those in the “large grey quadrupeds with tusks, trunks and large floppy ears sense.”

(“Arthur Rimbaud,” A Season in Hell Press, 1998)⁷⁶

3.2.2 Cults, wealth and worldliness

3.2.2.1 Sangharakshita started **the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO)** in 1967. In the fall year, 1968, those trainees whom Sangharakshita deemed as being committed to him and his teachings were “ordained” as Dharmacharis (m) and Dharmacarinis (f), forming **the Western Buddhist Order (WBO)**, as the authoritative and organizational core of their movement. Their core practice came from the Tibetan tradition, with selected texts from the Pali canon and the Mahāyāna. Between 1970-1990, they established branches all over the world with at least 55 city centres.⁷⁷ [3.1.2.3]

3.2.2.2 Since Sangharakshita was a prominent cult guru or New Religious Movement teacher, his life, teachings and activities have been well documented by himself,⁷⁸ by sympathisers,⁷⁹ by critics⁸⁰ and by the mass media.⁸¹ Of special interest to his critics is his licentious behaviour, especially his sexuality and sublimating it as a “skill” for religious growth.

It would be a serious mistake to disregard Sangharakshita and the institutionalization of his personalized ideologies in the name of Buddhism. This is even truer today, even after his death, when his movement—which now calls itself **the Triratna Buddhist Community (TBC)** [2.1.1.2]—is perhaps the largest, richest and well-organized global Buddhist cult.

Psychologically, both Sangharakshita and his movement are a case of how the unwholesome roots—*greed, hatred and delusion*—have grandly manipulated him and his followers, overwhelming them with a sense of self-overestimation (*adhimāna*). To say the least, the TBC is today perhaps the most successful business using and selling Buddhism to attract “**subhuman**” bodies and minds for their consumption and in turn consume them. [3.1.2.2]

3.2.2.3 An anonymous member of the blog, “FWBO/Triratna—Sangharakshita—cases of sexual abuse” (2016), wrote openly:

⁷⁶ <http://www.ex-cult.org/fwbo/fwbofiles.htm>.

⁷⁷ Ency of New Religious Movements (ed P B Clarke, Routledge) 2005:219 f.

⁷⁸ Sangharakshita’s [Complete Works](#) have been published by Windhorse Publications, Cambridge (the biggest independent Buddhist publisher in the UK); details about his life and work on websites like [Urgyen Sangharakshita Trust](#) and [The Buddhist Centre](#).

⁷⁹ R Ellis, *The Thought of Sangharakshita—A Critical Assessment*. Equinox, UK, 2020 (written just before Sangharakshita’s death).

⁸⁰ J Crook, *Dangers in Devotion: Buddhist cults and the tasks of a guru*, Western Chan Fellowship, 1998 [for working links: [Vajratool](#)]. E Mazard, *A Fragment of the Sangharakshita Scandal from India*, 2014. Tenpel, 2016, *FWBO/Triratna—Sangharakshita—Cases of sexual abuse*, 2016. All 10 Aug 2025.

⁸¹ *The Sunday Times*, “[The dark side of enlightenment](#),” (reprint from Guardian), Sri Lanka, 1998; [BBC 2016](#); [The Guardian 2017](#); [The Guardian 2019](#). All 9 Aug 2025. [3.1.1.2 n]. An attempt at an unbiased view of the Sangharakshita controversies: R Ellis, *The Thought of Sangharakshita—A Critical Assessment*. Equinox, UK, 2020:167-221.

One of the principal problems in this situation is that many of the senior, long term [order] members involved in running the group are either themselves implicated in the abuse (be it by copycat behaviour or by helping with the continuing cover up) or are intent on preserving the status quo because the continued existence and stability of the group relates directly to their own continued high status and/or their own future financial wellbeing. In other words, they don't want change because change would require that they come clean about the past and would mean they lost money and status.

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The measure of the success of a cult or any religious group is, as a rule, the great wealth that it commands. In the case of the WBO (now the TBC), there is so much wealth and assets involved, they can continue to exist against all the slings and arrows of critics and public opinion. There will always be those who are unconcerned with the negative publicity and those who see the dark shadows of the TBC as simply cast by the bright lights of the TBC Centres.

3.3 SELF-APOTHEOSIS

3.3.1 Self overestimation

3.3.1.1 Self overestimation (*adhimāna*) is the most common delusion that drives cult leaders. Japan's famous cult leader, **Nichiren** (1222-1282), for example, towards the latter part of his life, in 1271, when exiled to Sado island, saw his trials and tribulations as signs of his superhuman status, one above worldly laws and petty human conditions. He felt apotheosized.

Nichiren came to regard himself as **the embodiment of Jogyo Bosatsu** (Viṣiṣṭa, cāritra Bodhisattva), who is mentioned in chapter 15 [ch 14 of Sanskrit edition] of the Lotus Sutra as the leader of a vast army of Bodhisattvas who emerge from below the earth. This self-apotheosis signified for Nichiren, the release of his loyal lowly followers from injustice of worldly authorities. Power delusion happily infect followers. By this incarnation, Nichirenists believe that Nichiren contains the “life-force of the true Buddha ... proving himself to be the original Buddha of Supreme Wisdom.”⁸²

3.3.1.2 As head of the WBO, Sangharakshita went on to use the monastic title “**Mahā Sthavira**” (great elder) before his name. As his movement grew bigger, Sangharakshita felt justified to have his followers literally worship him in their daily puja. He introduced his own sādhana⁸³ based on a Refuge Tree with Sakyamuni Buddha at the centre and Sangharakshita himself sitting prominently right up front, surrounded by Bodhisattvas, lineage gurus and divine beings.⁸⁴

Sangharakshita also prefixed his ordination name with the toponym, *Urgyen*, the birthplace of Padmasambhava, with whom he apparently identified himself, perhaps even of whom he regarded himself as an incarnation. Thus, Sangharakshita, in his sunset years, was **Urgyen Sangharakshita**. [Traditionally, such a toponym identifies the bearer's birthplace place (commonly prefixed before a Sinhalese monk's name) so as to distinguish between persons bearing the same given name.]

⁸² Piyasilo, *Nichiren, The new Buddhism of modern Japan*, 1988d: 93 f.

⁸³ Basically, a visualization exercise for **guru pūjā**. “A *sādhana* is a key form of tantric meditation through which a practitioner aims to achieve union or identity with a particular divine being through a process of visualization and subsequent dissolution of subject and object into emptiness.” (*A Dictionary of Buddhism*)

⁸⁴ Vessantara (Tony McMahon), *Meeting the Buddha*, Windhorse, 1998:320 f.

4 The Buddha misrepresented

4.1 SANGHARAKSHITA WAS NOT A BHIKKHU

4.1.1 Sangharakshita, through his ignorance and arrogance grossly misrepresented the Buddha to justify his own failure to keep to the Vinaya and committing a “defeat” offence of sexuality. He claimed that “the Buddha was not a *bhikkhu*” (1995) [3.2.1.2]. Supposedly, Sangharakshita’s argument was that since he was not a *bhikkhu*, or not a valid one, he could freely indulge in sex with his choice of impressionable young men and boys. But if the Buddha was not a *bhikkhu*, the Buddha certainly did not indulge in sex of any kind. The point is clear: the Buddha was awakened, Sangharakshita was not.

4.1.2 No denial of the Buddha’s bhikkhuhood in the texts

Although the Pali canon does not explicitly speak of the Buddha as a *bhikkhu*, there is clearly no denial that he is one, that he was the first *bhikkhu* of them all. The Buddha was clearly a *bhikkhu* in more ways than one, that is, by recognition from others (Bimbisāra, Sn 405-424; Sela Sn 551 = Tha 821) and by his own awakening (Sn 87 f, 513 f).

4.1.3 When the Greek king Milinda asked the question “**Was the Buddha ordained?**” Nāgasena answered that the Buddha was inherently a *bhikkhu*:

Great king, when the Buddha attained omniscience at the foot of the Bodhi tree, that was for him his ordination. There was no conferring of ordination upon him by others by the way that he has laid down for his disciples. (Miln 76)

A simple illustration helps: The crew of a ship is called “sailors.” Although we may not think of the captain as a “sailor,” he is technically one, the most high-ranking of sailors, the ship’s master. So too in the Buddha’s case: even if we may not think of him as a *bhikkhu*, he was clearly the master or lord (*bhagavā*) of all *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunis* and renunciants, and our one and only true teacher.

Yet, the point remains that the Buddha was a *bhikkhu*, after all.

4.2 THE BUDDHA WAS A BHIKKHU

4.2.1 Types of bhikkhus

4.2.1.1 The Paṭisambhidā, magga speaks of 3 kinds of *bhikkhu*:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| 1. the good worldling, | <i>kalyāṇa, puthujjana</i> | a good unawakened renunciant; |
| 2. the learner, and | <i>sekha</i> | the streamwinner, once-returner, nonreturner; |
| 3. the arhat. ⁸⁵ | <i>arahata</i> | the awakened one. (Pm 1:176) |

Normally, a “good worldling” may be one ordained or lay; but here it refers to a “**renunciant** who still has all the 10 fetters (*samyojana*)⁸⁶ binding [him] to the round of rebirths, and therefore has not yet reached any of the 4 stages of holiness” but who has “knowledge conforming to the truths” (*saccānulomika ñāṇa*)⁸⁷ “and who earnestly strives to understand and practise the Teaching.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Bhikkhū ti puthujjana, kalyāṇako vā hoti bhikkhu sekho vā arahā vā akuppa, dhammo* (Pm 1:176, 12 f).

⁸⁶ **The 10 fetters:** self-view, doubt, adherence to rites and rituals, sensual lust, repulsion, attachment to form-existence, attachment to formless-existence, conceit, restlessness, ignorance (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377).

⁸⁷ *Saccānulomika ñāṇa* is “adaptation-knowledge” or “conformity knowledge,” the last of the 9 insight-knowledges (*vipassanā, ñāṇa*), that constitute the “purification of knowledge and wisdom of the path-progress.” Cf Vism ch 21. see *Buddhist Dictionary*: Visuddhi (9).

⁸⁸ BDict: “*puthujjana*”; see DhsA:PR 451 & comys to D 1, M 1. PED 504, “*bhikkhu*” errs in saying that the “good worldling” is “a layman of good character” and mentioning only 2 types of *bhikkhu*, omitting the arhat.

4.2.1.2 The Niddesa, in its canonical commentary on **Sn 957** (the 4th verse of the Sāriputta Sutta, Sn 4.16), explains *bhikkhu* as being either a good worldlyling or a learner (that is, omitting the arhat). The context here is restricted to a “monk who is repulsed” that Sn 957 refers to; that is, one who is “repulsed by birth and so on [various forms of suffering]” but is not yet an arhat.⁸⁹

4.2.1.3 As a rule, the term “arhat” includes the Buddha, too, since he is the first arhat. This is clear from **the Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58), where the Buddha states in the *uppādetā pericope*, thus:⁹⁰

The Tathagata gives rise to the unarisen path (of awakening) ...
He is the knower of the path ...
And his disciples now dwell as followers of that path later (after the Buddha).
(S 22.58,11), SD 49.10

Similarly, **the Pavāraṇā Sutta** (S 8.7) records Sāriputta as stating thus:

The Blessed One, bhante, is the one who opens a path where there is none, ...
His disciples, even now dwell as accomplished followers after him.
(S 8.7,5), SD 49.11

Then, in **the recollection on the Buddha** (*buddhānussati*), where *arahaṃ* is the first of the Buddha’s 9 virtues, thus: “So, too, is he the Blessed One:⁹¹ he is **arhat**” (*Iti pi so bhagavā arahaṃ*).⁹² An arhat, by his very nature, has “bhikkhuness,” that is, the bhikkhu-state. Since the Buddha is an arhat, the bhikkhu-state is inherent in him; that is being one who lives by alms (*bhikkhā*). But he is much more than that since he is fully self-awakened and is the first arhat who discovers and teaches the path of awakening.

4.2.2 A bhikkhu is one in terms of both Vinaya and sutta

4.2.2.1 Sangharakshita might have a case for claiming to be a “Sutra-type bhikkhu” or a “lay monk” or “one neither lay nor ordained”—the first to do so, it seems—on the strength of the Paṭi-sambhidā and Niddesa passages (both of which he failed to mention). On the other hand, to oversimplify this long-winded rationalization regarding his taste for young males as a religion, Sangharakshita’s ordination would have probably been less problematic if he had (upon realizing its technical invalidity) *officially renounced it* and had continued his Buddhist work by keeping lay Buddhist precepts.

It might be argued here why there is a need for undoing something that was already undone in the first place: the Buddha had not only renounced the world, he had also transcended it. On the other hand, indulging in sex keeps one in the world. But to undress Buddhism with homosexuality to

⁸⁹ In the phrase “a bhikkhu who is repulsed” (*bhikkhuno vijigucchato ti*), *bhikkhuno ti kalyāṇa,putthujjanassa vā bhikkhuno sekkhassa vā ti bhikkhuno* (Nm 465,7 f = Nc 477b), *bhikkhu* refers to a good worldlyling or a learner. See also **Nm 95** on Sn 810. For a comprehensive def of *bhikkhu*, see Vbh 245 f + comy (VbhA 327 f).

⁹⁰ On the *uppādetā pericope*, see esp **Sammā,sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10; also **Gopaka Moggallāna S** (M 108,5.3), SD 33.5; esp **Pavāraṇā S** (S 8.7,5 n), SD 49.11.

⁹¹ Alt tr: “For the following reasons, too, he is the Blessed One [the Lord] ...” On the meaning of *iti pi so*, see CPD 2:278: *‘iti: ... kitti-saddo abbhuggato: “~ pi so bhagavā: arahaṃ sammā-sambuddho ...”* (“for the following reasons, too, he is a *bhagavā*: because he is *arahaṃ*...”), V 3:1,13 = D 1:49,27 = M 2:133,22 = S 1:219,31 = A 3:312,8, qu Vism 198,4 and Mahvṛ 26,11 (VA 112,4 = DA 146,5 ≠ Vism 198,8: *so bhagavā ~ pi arahaṃ ~ pi sammā,sambuddho ... iminā ca iminā ca kāraṇenā ti vuttaṃ hoti*). Translating *iti pi so* this way explains the double occurrence of *Bhagavā*. See **L S Cousins**, “Review of *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*,” in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4, 1997: 165. The Skt parallel to this opening reads: *Iti hi sa bhagavāṃ tathāgato*, but *tathāgato* here is missing from the Pali version. See **Dhajagga S** (S 11.3), SD 15.5 (2).

⁹² *Buddhānussati*, SD 15.7 (2.2.1).

“convert” young males as sexual trophies is unjust to both Buddhism and gay people. We can see today, for example, the gay community working for loving responsibly and for marriage equality. The karmic destiny for exploiting or disrespecting either the Buddhist community or the LGBT community surely is subhuman, even inhuman, karma! [3.2.2.1]

4.2.2.2 Let me close this difficult study in human sexuality and Buddhism, and the challenge to the traditional idea of monkhood (*bhikkhu, bhava*) with 2 observations, one from the suttas and the other from Buddhaghosa’s commentaries.

Firstly, whenever the Buddha teaches a large crowd of listeners, he would address them as “**monks**” (*bhikkhave*), even when nuns and the laity are present. This does not mean that non-monks are excluded, but that when we hear the Dharma and practise it, we have the opportunity for attaining the bhikkhu-state. Being a monk or nun is not a status, but *a spiritual transformation* that frees one from samsaric suffering and spiritual ignorance.

Secondly, Buddhaghosa highlights the spirituality of the monk-state, such as in his commentary on **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), where he explains that the term “**monk**” (*bhikkhu*) refers to anyone, even a lay person, when one properly meditates.⁹³ Furthermore, when we attain any state of path sainthood, that state is no different from the one attained by a true monastic, as stated in the closing of **the (Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta** (S 55.54).⁹⁴

Isn’t it easier and better, then, to close our eyes celibately in joyful meditation, and attaining the monk-state rather than denying that the Buddha was a monk, or denying oneself this readily available bhikkhu-state by thirsting for the love of young male bodies?

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⁹³ **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10,3A) + “monk” n (SD 13.3); SD 13.1 (3.1.1.5); SD 16.7 (1.1.1.2).

⁹⁴ S 55.54,19 (SD 4.10). The Sutta actually says that one has directed one’s mind to “the cessation of identity,” *sakkāya, nirodha*, a syn of the 3rd noble truth (nirvana): D 3:216 (*antā*), 3:240; M 1:299; S 3:159, 5:410; A 2:33, 2:165, 3:246, 3:401; see also DA 3:992, AA 3:153; *sakkāya* = *te, bhūmaka, vaṭṭa* (“cycles of the 3 worlds,” ie, sense, form, and formless worlds) (AA 3:404). On a simple level, the overcoming of *sakkāya, diṭṭhi* (“self-identity view”) leads to streamwinning; hence, to progress on the path of awakening. See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3 (5.1).