

## Why the sangha needs no leader

Excerpt from *SD 61.5a: Devadatta, a study from early Buddhist sources* © Piya Tan 2024.

### 3.1.1 The Buddha chides Devadatta

**3.1.1.1** Later, Devadatta went to the Buddha and suggested that the leadership of the sangha should be handed over to him in view of the Buddha's advanced age. The Buddha scoffed at the suggestion, saying,

"I wouldn't even hand the sangha over to Sāriputta and Moggallāna,<sup>1</sup> so why then to you, a corpse that eats rejects [who eats what the noble ones spit out]?"<sup>2</sup>

Devadatta predictably reacted with great resentment and vowed vengeance.

The Buddha's strong remark may shock some of us; clearly, the remark is to highlight the preposterousness of the very notion of a "sangha leader": **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) records the Buddha as telling Ānanda that of the idea of "leading the sangha" never occurred to him.<sup>3</sup> Devadatta saw **the sangha** as a successful, wealthy and powerful organization with numerous monastics in many monasteries, enjoying strong public and royal support. The reality is that **the sangha** is a spiritual fellowship of those going the "same path" (*samaggī*) of awakening and are thus "harmoniously unified" (*sāmaggī*) like milk and water in love, truth and vision.<sup>4</sup>

**3.1.1.2** Even after the Buddha's passing—as reported in **the Gopaka Moggallāna S** (M 108), the sangha remains a truly democratic community without a lord or leader, but well guided by the Dharma and the respect for morally virtuous and wise elders. Clearly the sangha is no personality cult: even the Buddha puts the Dharma above himself,<sup>5</sup> and in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), the Buddha tells Ānanda that he has no thought of "leading the sangha," thus:

"Ānanda, it does not occur to the Tathāgata to think, 'I shall take care of [lead] the order,' that 'The order should refer to me.' ...<sup>6</sup> (D 16,2.25.2/2:100)

What the Buddha bequeaths to us and posterity is the Dharma-Vinaya, thus:

Ānanda, it may be that you would think:

'Gone is the Teacher's word! We have no teacher.'

It should not be seen thus, Ānanda, for the Dharma and the Vinaya [the Teaching and the Discipline] that I have taught and explained to you, will, at my passing, be your teacher.

(D 16,6.1/2:154), SD 9

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<sup>1</sup> Cf **Cātumā S** (M 67), where the Buddha states that "either I ... would look after (*parihareyyam*) the sangha of monks, or Sāriputta and Moggallāna would." (M 67,13/1:459), SD 34.7. *Parihareyya* here refers to the training and discipline of sangha members, not in an administrative or power-centred way.

<sup>2</sup> *Sāriputta,moggallānānam pi kho ahaṃ devadatta bhikkhu,saṅghaṃ na nissajjeyyāṃ, kiṃ pana tuyhaṃ chavassa kheḷ'āsakassā* [Ee -*āpakassā*] *ti*. (Cv 7.3.1 @ V 2:188 f; see Brahmali, [Theravāda Collection on Monastic Law](#) 5, Sutta Central, 2021, 2023:398). The matter of the Buddha making unpleasant remarks is mentioned in **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** (M 58,3/1:393), SD 7.12. The "rejects"—*gain and loss, fame and obscurity, honour and lack of honour, evil desires and bad friendship*—are listed in **Devadatta Vipatti S** (A 8.7), SD 61.5(3).

<sup>3</sup> D 16,2.25.2/2:100 (SD 9).

<sup>4</sup> A 2.43/1:70 = 3.95/1:243; Sn 281, 283; Dh 194; Thī 161.

<sup>5</sup> **Gārava S** (S 6.2/1:138-140), SD 12.3.

<sup>6</sup> *Tathāgatassa kho ānanda na evaṃ hoti "ahaṃ bhikkhu,saṅghaṃ pariharissāmi ti vā "mam' uddesiko bhikkhu,sanṅho ti vā*. The vb *pariharissāmi* is fut of *pariharati*, "looks after, cares for; attends to; takes charge of" (for other senses, see DP *pariharati*). While here (D 16,6.1) it has the sense of "to lead," at **Cātumā S** (M 67), it clearly has the sense of "take care of" (by way of advice, instruct, befriend, etc" (M 67,13/1:459, SD 34.7).

Hence, in **the Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta** (M 108), the elder Ānanda declares:

“The worthy ones [The elders] do not deal with us; the Dharma deals with us.”<sup>7</sup>

(M 108,11/3:10), SD 33.5

**3.1.1.3** A couple of important points before we go on to examine the key word in the Buddha’s chiding of Devadatta. **Why did the Buddha chide Devadatta?** As we have noted, it has to do with Devadatta’s total lack of understanding of the nature of the sangha [3.1.1.1]. It is vital that the Buddha highlights this point since this is what he has been teaching from the start.

As individuals, a renunciant is guided by the Dharma protected by the Vinaya; as a community, too, it is guided by the Dharma and protected by the Vinaya—in this sense, **the sangha** is truly a democratic community: it is guided and governed by the voice and vote of its Dharma-spirited and Vinaya-keeping members. There is only *one* Dharma; hence, it is a **consensus** when it comes to decision-making.

The sangha is neither a building nor a Church; it is a path, the path to awakening. We must walk this path—by keeping ourselves morally fit in body and speech, and mentally ready with calm and clarity. This is the noble path, an inward journey of first, overcoming our defilements rooted in views (leading to streamwinning); then, weakening the grosser defilements (lust and aversion, leading to once-returning); thirdly, to breaking the residual defilements (leading to nonreturning), and finally destroying all the defilements, we attain arhathood.<sup>8</sup>

**3.1.1.4** The Buddha, as **the first arhat** of our times, is the first amongst equals (*primus inter pares*), and the idea is to *keep up the count*. He is the “first” because there are followers; they all follow the same path of awakening. This is the reason and purpose that the Buddha teaches: to inspire us to walk the path. Indeed, *the path is the walking*, the progress in spiritual nobility; there is no path if we do not walk in nobility (*ariyattā*).<sup>9</sup>

The path is open to all: we do not become “members” of the path; we *become* the path. In this way we keep the path going—by not becoming the last traveller. In **the Makhadeva Sutta** (M 83), the Buddha relates the story of king Makhadeva, who, noticing that he has reached old age, appoints his son as king, telling him,

“Continue this good tradition I have laid down, and **do not be my last man.**”<sup>10</sup>

The Buddha bequeathed us the Dharma; he did not bequeath us the sangha. The good that we do, bodily and mentally, becomes the sangha. *Only so long as we follow the Dharma, there is the sangha*. **The noble sangha** exists neither by lineage nor empowerment, but on account of its members reaching the path and attaining arhathood. It is not a question of who leads the sangha; rather, it is who follows the Dharma to gain the path of awakening. So long as there are arhats and those on the path, the noble sangha exists. In this way, The Dharma-Vinaya has *no* “last person” (*antima purisa*, lit, “the last man”), meaning that the sangha lives and grows. We keep the sangha going by following the Dharma; the Dharma is kept going when there is no “last person.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Na kira no bhavanto kārenti; dhammo no kāreti*. See SD 33.5 (2).

<sup>8</sup> See SD 61.4 (2.5.1.3) n.

<sup>9</sup> VvA 130.

<sup>10</sup> M 83,4.5/2:75 (SD 60.8).

<sup>11</sup> M 83,24/2:83 f (SD 60.8).