

The Buddhist Monk

An historical beginning

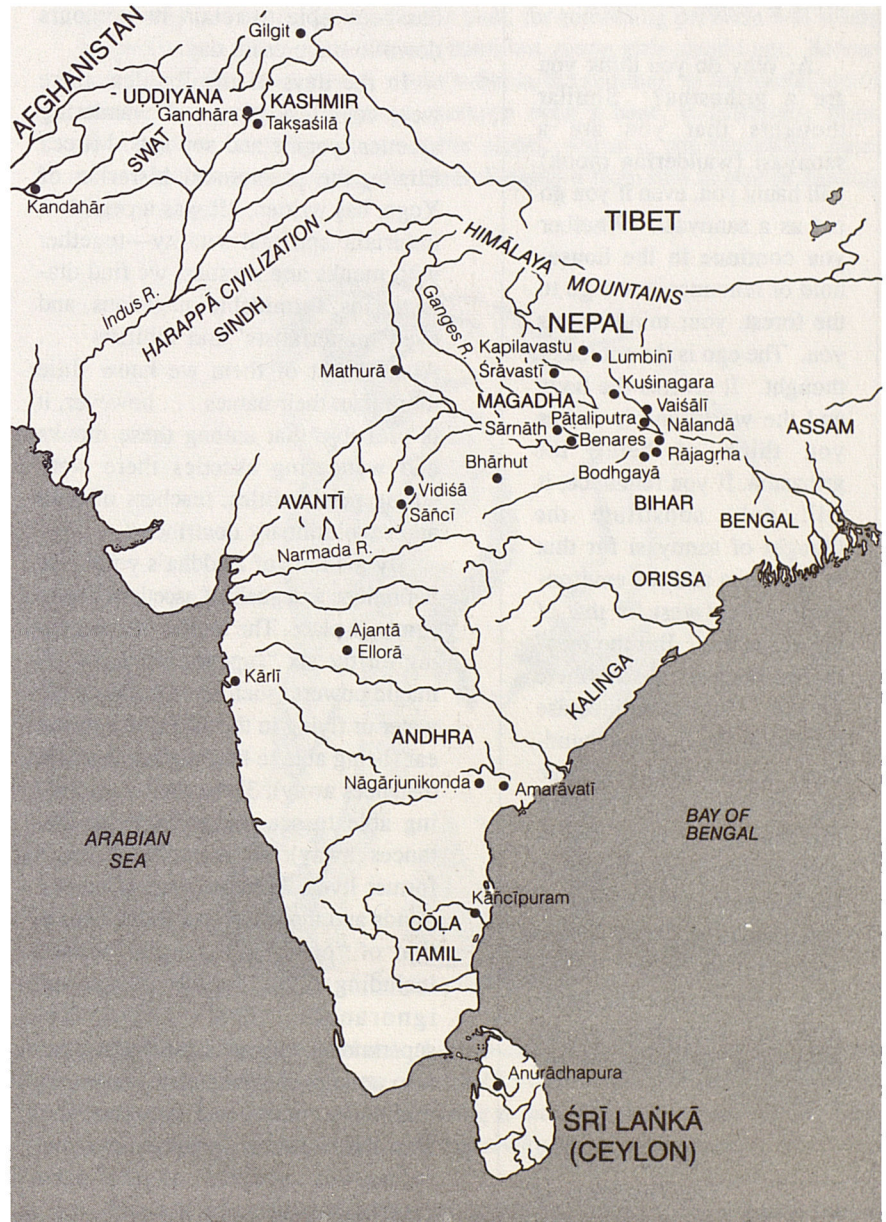
Mu Soeng Sunim

No one can say when the experiments began. But gradually ancient India produced its prototype of a holy man: he owned nothing except his loin-cloth and his begging bowl. As he traveled the length and breadth of India, from the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas in the north to the sun-lapped ocean shores in the south, the earth was his pillow, the sky his blanket. He was called the *sanyasin*, the home-leaver, the Renunciate.

The archetype of the *sanyasin* arches back into the farthest reaches of Indian antiquity. Through hundreds of years of development as a movement, these wandering ascetics (*shramanas*), leading an essentially anarchic and uninstitutionalized life, were what passed for a rebellion not only against the stranglehold of the Brahmin sacrificial priests on the spiritual life of individuals in ancient India, but also against the social and economic structures of their time.

They were probably the first alienated men of history; their rebellion could have been as much a response to the unsettled conditions of the time as a search for new spiritual horizons. It has been pointed out that the wandering ascetics were the first intrepid explorers, seeing themselves perhaps as the first truly free men in the world known to them, roaming into unmapped territory without a sense of borders and boundaries. In a sense they were the first cosmopolitans of the subcontinent, and it was through them rather than the Brahmins that new teachings developed and spread.

Some of the ascetics were solitary psychopaths, given to dwelling in forests and inflicting self-torture; new developments in thought, however, came from ascetics of less rig-



The India of Buddha's time (from The Buddhist Religion by Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, ©1982 Wadsworth Publishing Company)

Householder and monk

Sri Ramana Maharshi

Q: How does a grihastha (householder) fare in the scheme of moksha (liberation)? Should he not necessarily become a mendicant in order to attain liberation?

A: Why do you think you are a grihastha? Similar thoughts that you are a sannyasi (wandering monk) will haunt you, even if you go out as a sannyasi. Whether you continue in the household or renounce it and go to the forest, your mind haunts you. The ego is the source of thought. It creates the body and the world and it makes you think of being the grihastha. If you renounce, it will only substitute the thought of sannyasi for that of grihastha and the environment of the forest for that of the household. But the mental obstacles are always there for you. They even increase greatly in the new surroundings. It is no help to change the environment. The one obstacle is the mind and it must be overcome whether in the home or in the forest. If you can do it in the forest, why not in the home? Therefore, why change the environment? Your efforts can be made now, whatever the environment.

*Be As You Are:
The Teachings of
Sri Ramana Maharshi
(Arkana, 1985)*

orous regimen whose chief practices were the mental and spiritual exercises of meditation. Some of these ascetics dwelt alone on the outskirts of towns and villages, while others lived in groups of huts, under the leadership of an elder. Others wandered, often in large groups, begging alms, proclaiming their doctrines to all who wished to listen, and disputing with their rivals. Some went around completely naked, while others wore simple garments. Remarkably, this way of spiritual life has been able to retain its contours down to the present day.

In the days of the Buddha, there were countless groups of wandering ascetics, yogins and sophists. Mircea Eliade, the preeminent historian of Yoga, has written, "It was a period of luxuriant spiritual vitality—together with monks and mystics, we find dialecticians, formidable magicians, and even 'materialists' and nihilists . . . About most of them we know little more than their names . . . however, it is probable that among these monks and wandering ascetics there were strong personalities, teachers of bold and revolutionary doctrines."

By the time of Buddha's youth, the definitions and goals of asceticism were firmly in place. The ascetic was searching for the six "superknowledges": 1) magic powers (such as walking on the water or flying in the air); 2) the divine ear (being able to hear sounds from far distances away); 3) the divine eye (being able to see things from far distances away); 4) memory of one's former lives; 5) knowledge of others' minds and thoughts; and 6) the extinction of "outflows" (sensual desires, including desire for becoming) and ignorance. The first five superknowledges are shamanistic powers, attempted by shamans in every traditional culture, and are considered "low-class"—not desirable in themselves—by seekers of the sixth superknowledge.

Such a tribe of wandering ascetics was the community which Siddhartha

Gautama, prince of the Sakya clan, joined when he set forth from his palace and family to pursue his own spiritual quest.

The enlightenment of the Buddha was a radical departure within the milieu of wandering ascetics and the spiritual culture they espoused. The Buddha presented his teaching to the world not as a doctrine but as a message to be preached and attained. It was as the propagation of a certain message that Buddhism thrived and made headway in India. The yellow-robed Bhikku, wandering the length and breadth of India, was a natural heir to the shramana, the wandering ascetic, but with a significant difference: he carried the message of the Buddha. The message was of liberation through the Eightfold Path, and the Bhikku himself was a personification of that message. For the first time in the history of Indian thought, a wandering ascetic sought not spiritual debate with other ascetics but translation of the insight of a Buddha into his own life and the lives of those he came in contact with.

A Bhikku means an almsman. He is differentiated from an ordinary beggar by the sacramental character of his begging. His begging is not merely a means of subsistence; it is a statement that he has renounced the world and all its goods and has chosen to take his chances for a bare living through public charity. The term Bhikku also means a "sharer." His begging, even though sacramental, was not one-sided. The Buddha had charged his monks with a mission: "Go forth, O monks, and wander about for the good of the Many, the happiness of the Many—in compassion for the world—for the good, the welfare and happiness of gods and men." Thus from the very beginning there is a symbiotic relationship—one of sharing—between the monk and lay society.

This group of wandering monks was called sangha, literally "union."

When the Buddha charged his monk-disciples to spread out and carry his message of liberation, they were not even a hundred strong. To the outsiders this group was known as "Ordained Followers of Sakkyaputta," but the group called itself by the simple name, the Union of Bhikkus (Bhikku-sangha). But Bhikku-sangha, while a diligent custodian of Buddha's teaching, has never been the totality of the sangha. The monks and lay people have always been sharers in the message and practice of liberation.

The Buddha compared the life of the Bhikku to the refining of gold: stage by stage, impurities are purged away; first the coarse dust and sand, gravel and grit; then the finer grit, then the trifling impurities like the very fine sand and dust. At last, "the gold-dust alone remains," until it can be run out of the crucible. Then the gold is melted, molten, flawless, done with; its impurities strained off. It is pliable, workable, glistening, no longer brittle; it is capable of perfect workmanship. Similarly, in the monk who is given to developing the higher consciousness, there are gross impurities of deed, word and thought. Through wisdom and mindfulness, these are gradually purged out, first the coarser impurities, and then the finer, subtle impurities, until there comes a time when all this dross has been removed and the basic pure state of consciousness is reached.

The Bhikku of Buddha's time thus stands as a new figure in India's religious thought—a figure radicalized by Buddha's message of liberation and radicalizing the spiritual climate of his time by carrying that message through the length and breadth of the sub-continent.

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The Woman Who Marries a Bear

A new nun's journey parallels a fable

Kwang Myong Sunim

When I read *The Woman Who Marries a Bear* and the commentary on the story by Gary Snyder, it resonated in me for several weeks. There are many versions of this story. The following is another rendition as it relates to my life as a novice nun.

The parable is about a young woman who marries a bear. We first meet her while she is out berry picking with her family. As a child, she is warned not to step on bear droppings on the path, for something perverse will surely happen to her. Men can walk over them but young girls should not. Berries make up a substantial part of a bear's diet in the summer, so the likelihood of coming across bear droppings, perhaps even a bear, is extremely high. Although she is clearly aware of her elders' warning, she repeatedly takes advantage of every dropping she finds, kicking it from side to side or dancing right through it.



Defiantly, she picks and eats the forbidden fruit, flirting with and embracing the unknown. "Come on, come on! I want to take you on!" she seems to be saying: leaving her husband; doing a hundred day retreat, teasing fate, then returning to Manhattan as a housewife for several years.

One afternoon, the girl, now a young woman, thinks she sees a man behind the bushes where she is picking blackberries. Interestingly enough, she is neither startled nor surprised. She just keeps on picking berries, occasionally