

The Wandering Monk and the Mindful Monk - A Reading of Sangha in Praxis with Special Reference to Ajahn Mun and Thich Nhat Hanh

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Abstract:

Gautama Buddha, a Guru, an early psychologist who contemplated on the nature, workings and traps of human mind presented three gems-Buddha (refers to Buddha as well as potential for enlightenment of all), Dhamma (Truth) and Sangha (Community) to the humanity. The Navayana, the Ambedkarite Buddhism interrogated the model of socially detached spiritual quest in solitude and re-conceptualised social action-oriented notion of Sangha. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contemporary, Ajahn Mun (1870-1949), known as a wandering monk, evolved the Sri Lankan Forest and Thai Forest Traditions. In the recent past, Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022), established Plum Village Tradition in France. He has inspired the West with his model of engaged Buddhism whereas Ajahn Mun, earned several disciples who volunteered to experience Sangha in the deep forests.

The paper intends to examine the notion of Sangha and its Praxis in the West and the East with reference to Ajahn Mun and Thich Nhat Hanh. These two models of Sangha, the paper seeks to find out if they correspond with the Navayana, Ambedkarite notion of Sangha. The paper explicates the notion of Sangha with a discussion of Ambedkar's re-conceptualisation and attempts to interpret the modern manifestations of the same.

Keywords: Ambedkarite Buddhism, Buddha, Dhamma, Engaged Buddhism, Navayana, Sangha.

Introduction:

Gautama Buddha, a counsellor to people in despair, an early psychologist, a philosopher and a spiritual leader, as several narratives suggest, was deeply moved by the hopeless condition of humans. Human beings are ensnared within the cyclical process of birth and death, conditioned by ignorance and attachment. They have been suffering immensely in the short span in which they lived due to desire, greed, anger, bodily ailments and aging. This problem of human existence can be resolved to some extent with welfare measures like creating free shelters for the elderly and the diseased. A social solution. However, the suffering of the humans has no end for they are led by an untrained mind that eternally causes suffering to oneself. This could be one of the reasons as to why the Blessed Lord Buddha sought to find answers in the spiritual domain.

It is important to note that his spiritual journey was prompted not by his personal crisis but a deep compassion he felt for the larger humanity. Driven by a deep compassion, Buddha began his spiritual journey. He renounced all the material possessions and dissolved his identity. After attaining enlightenment, he returned to the human world as a Mahaguru and popularised the idea of Sangha. The

paper traces the origins of the notion of Sangha and its Modern manifestations in Asia and West using Ajanhn Mun and Thich Nhat Hanh as comparative grounds and access points. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's re-definition of Sangha has been recognized as a key moment in the re-formations of Buddhist Sangha.

Is it possible to equate Buddhist Sangha to Mutt, a Hindu Monastery or Anubhava Mantapa, an academia for the spiritual seekers established by Basavanna of 12th century? Let this question guide us to further investigate the many manifestations of Sangha. What are the origins of the notion of Sangha and its early moments? Let us look at its etymology. Oxford Bibliographies makes an entry of the concept of Sangha as the 'Buddhist community'. Thomas Borchert elucidates that the term Sangha, draws its origin from Pali and Sanskrit. It further denotes a sense of collective association or an assembly that broadly refers to any community which is formed out of a shared sense of purpose. Within the Pali canonical literature, the idea about the Sangha is presented as a fourfold community. This community comprises the bhikkus (monks), bhikkunis (nuns), upasakas (laymen) and upasikas (laywomen). This also helps extend the ideas and practices associated with spirituality beyond the monastic order, so that lay participation can also be included.

In the preface to The Dhammapada, Bikku Bodhi suggests that the Buddha which instituted the Sangha as a monastic community that is organised. It primarily consists of monks and nuns, conceived as a distinct spiritual domain for individuals who are willing to commit themselves to the disciplined practices of the path articulated by him (XIII Bodhi).

2500 years ago, at the foot of Ajapala Tree, Ven. Acharya Buddharakkhita's narration of Buddhism captures the initial moments of the establishment of Sangha by Buddha. (Buddharakkita 140). Buddharakkita notes that, "after forty-nine days of ecstatic absorption, the Buddha went back to the foot of the ajapala tree and began to contemplate on the future course of action". He was hesitant and sceptical about disseminating the truth of Dhamma that he has experienced as it is 'boundless and profound like the vast expanse of water that upholds and sustains from below, subtle like tiny and invisible mustard seed that lies under the Mt. Meru' and the sentient beings are caught in the net of craving and attachment' (Buddharakkita 140).

The great Bramha Sahampati, worried about Buddha's reluctance to teach, appears before him. He further suggests that certain individuals possess a clarity of insight that is relatively unclouded by defilements, suggesting that they are receptive to the transformative demands and their readiness to apprehend and follow Buddha's teachings. In other words, they are ready to receive the Dhamma. Responding to Bramha Yacana, Buddha chooses the five ascetics at Istipana and establishes a Sangha of the spiritual seekers.

Sangha is the third refuge of a monk. To quote from Tisarana or Three-fold Refuge Buddhham Sharanam Gacchhammi/ Dhammam Sharanam Gacchhammi / Sangham Saranam Gacchhami (Buddharakkita 180). Referring to Sangha, Ven. Ananda, a well-known disciple of Buddha, he affirms that spiritual friendship begins in the company of virtuous and admirable companions. This further helps in constituting vital aspects in leading a holy life. "... Having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life... expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path (Samyutta Nikaya XLV.2, Upaddha Sutta, Half of the Holy Life).

Thus, it can be documented that Buddha with his diagnosis of human problem and unique pedagogy, laid emphasis on Monk's contribution to society. In the preface to The World of Buddhism, Heinz Bechert offers a crucial insight by suggesting that the teachings of Buddha were never primarily associated with controlling and channelising worldly life. In fact, it was more about articulating a path towards the liberation and release from worldly desires and attachments. Within the given theoretical framework,

Bechert identifies the Sangha as one of the oldest and most enduring institutional foundations of Buddhism. He further iterates that Buddhism does not become firmly established within a certain region until a native monastic community emerges. This highlights that the key role of the Sanghas was to preserve Buddha's teachings and help sustain the meditative traditions that are central to the continued practice of Buddhism (Berchert 7).

In an essay titled "The Buddha, His Teachings and His Sangha", renowned scholar Lamotte points out that the Sangha serves as a nurturing agent which gradually administers the remedy for spiritual affliction. As a result, Tathagata Buddha becomes the chief physician curing the worldliness of the people. According to renowned scholars like Etienne Lamotte, Richard Gombrich, and Lal Mani Joshi, the influential text titled Buddhism in Ancient India attempts to examine the expansion and historical evolution of Buddhism. It further attempts to offer a detailed and comprehensive account of the formative development of Buddhism. They note that Buddha himself advised the monks to travel and help people.

Buddha exhorts monks to take up their respective journeys with the primary and crucial aim of promoting the welfare and happiness of all creatures. They ought to be motivated by affection for the world, and also for the mutual benefit of the human and divine. Buddha instructs monks to indulge in travelling alone and independently, rather than in a collective manner. This idea helps in disseminating the doctrine in its complete and coherent form; enabling a pure inception, development and conclusion. It also helps in proclaiming and upholding the spirit of a holy life. This exhortation also facilitates the acknowledgement of the presence of individuals with very less defilement who have fallen prey to their lack of access to the teachings and are therefore receptive to the doctrine (Gambrich, Lamotte and Joshi 77).

The authors note that Buddha dispatched the first sixty monks for social action. The monks were expected to preserve and disseminate Buddha's teachings. Vinaya Pitika is one of the important texts that marks 'changes in monastic life. As various authors have notably observed, the Sangha gradually evolved from a densely peripatetic mode of existence to one in which monks have remained settled for most of the year in permanent residences. This transition in lifestyle was also accompanied by the increasing material support from new devotees. Lamotte, Gambrich, and Joshi note that greater monastic austerity has often elicited a heightened reverence and generosity, including patronage; which tends to temper the very austerities that inspired it (Gambrich, Lamotte and Joshi 81).

Based on Hiuen Tsang, the 7th century Buddhist monk and Chinese traveller's notes, the authors conjecture that the Sanghas would invest wealth and would own whole villages and inhabitants and their riches attracted the invaders. Thus, one can argue that Sangha from the five monks of Istipana ordained by Tathagata Buddha to the twentieth century has been quite dynamic and diversified. While the Western engagement with Buddhism focuses on the spiritual aspects of this Indian philosophical tradition and applying the knowledge to find an antidote for the stress and other mental ailments created by modernisation, the Ambedkarite Buddhism urges the monks to initiate social action. Further, as Ven. Dhammapala notes in his What is the role of the Sangha in the 21st century?, the Sangha has also taken an academic turn with Eastern and western universities like the university of Hong Kong, Harvard University, Stanford University are sponsoring research on Buddhism. From Istipana to academic corridors, the Sangha has travelled very far.

However, it is important to take stock of Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his preface to Buddha and his Dhamma, problematises the four-fold truths the Buddhist commentaries proclaim. The world depicted as a place of suffering due to desire, to Ambedkar is a pessimistic view of the world which is 'Aryan and Brahminical' in nature. The concept of Anatta or Non-self, according to

him contradicts the notion of karma and rebirth. Most importantly, he deems spiritual and religious practices of Bhikkus without social engagement as 'selfish'. To quote Ambedkar in his preface to Buddha and his Dharma: "What was the object of the Buddha in creating the Bhikkhu? ... This question must be decided... in the interest of the future of Buddhism (Ambedkar 10).

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar re-interpreted Buddhism and re-defined its role in the social milieu. As established in the earlier sections of this paper, his definition of social function of Sangha does not contradict Buddha's concept of Sangha. However, with the lapse of time, one can notice a domination of Euro-American readings of Buddhism which are more on the lines of anthropology and finding exotic religious traditions that are not easily fathomable. This orientalist zeal can be found in works of Richard Gambrich, Etienne Lamotte and Edwin Arnold, to name a few. Hence, it can be argued that Ambedkar, despite philosophical disagreements with the concepts of Anatta (Non-Self), Karma, Rebirth and his dismissal of these as a detraction of Buddha's teachings, he was in alignment with Buddha's concept of Sangha. His interpretation deconstructs not only the modified Buddhist narratives but also the Euro-American scholarship that separates a religious and philosophical tradition from the social world. The emphasis on the function of Sangha is a clear departure from socially cut off exoticizing of Indian philosophical traditions.

The central quest of this paper is to trace the history and contemporary developments of Sangha and it is interesting to note that it coincides with the history of revival of Buddhism in India. Dharmachari Lokamitra, in his seminal work titled, Revival of Buddhism in India, reflects on how monks lost touch with people, while living in monasteries in large numbers. He further documents the efforts of Angarika Dharmapala, a monk from Sri Lanka, who tried to liberate Buddhism from the clutches of Buddhism. Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) from Tamil Nadu and Dhammanand Kosambi, among others, represent such voices. The Navayana of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar stands in continuity with these liberating traditions.

The paper intends to study two models of Sanghas established by Ajahn Mun, a forest-dwelling monk who founded the Thailand Forest Tradition, and Thich Nath Hanh, a Vietnam Buddhist monk who established the Plum Village Tradition, in the light of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's concept of Sangha.

Mountains of Chiang Mai

Ajahn Mun's spiritual journey, Bhikku Dik Silaratano notes that, the journey is grounded in the ideal of renunciation embodied by the homeless nomads, who abandon their household lives, wear robes made out of discarded cloth, live amidst the forests, and heavily rely on alms for sustenance. He spent nearly forty years teaching the monks and people of the hill tribes. The Wandering monk was met with suspicion by the local tribes of Chiang Mai. The village headman termed him and his disciple as 'tigers in disguise' and were vigilant about their movements. However, after a few days, they found out that these monks are well accomplished.

He adapted the core principles of Buddha's doctrines in order to align with the intellectual and cultural contexts of the village and tribal populations. This in turn facilitated a wider engagement and comprehension. To highlight Ajahn Mun's pedagogical method within the forest tradition, which relies a lot on metaphor, paradox, and dialogic engagement to communicate meditative truths to lay communities, the following excerpt recounts his interactions with the villagers through the symbolic idiom of buddho: ...a village representative arrived ... to question him:

'What are you searching for when you sit still ...

Ācariya Mun replied, “I’ve lost my buddho ...the most precious gem in the three worlds of existence – a jewel of all-pervading knowledge. Whoever finds buddho will become a superior person... ‘It’s much brighter than hundreds, even thousands, of suns... buddho can penetrate everywhere, illuminating everything.” (Ñāḍasampanno Tr. Sīlaratano 205).

The quote demonstrates Ajahn Mun’s attempt to use symbolic dialogue in order to translate meditative insight into experiential terms that are accessible to new practitioners. The above quote also exemplifies and reiterates Ajahn Mun’s distinctive mode of instruction where the profound meditative principles are transmitted indirectly through symbolic language and quotidian dialogue. The use of buddho as a metaphorical “lost jewel” permits abstract notions of awareness and insight to be presented as intelligible within the experiential horizon of rural lay practitioners, without reliance on doctrinal exposition.

In the second decade of the 20th century, Ajahn Mun had become a recognised spiritual leader. However, several accounts like Phra Gabriel Dhammadharo’s ‘Testimonies of Awakening’ pertaining to Ajahn Mun document his refusal to support the Bangkok Monastic authorities who attempt to impose permanent settlement of wandering monks to make them ‘productive’ members of society. Furthermore, accounts state that some of his disciples were arrested. He then escaped into wilderness and spent time in solitude and among tribal communities, disseminating his knowledge.

A thorough analysis of Ajahn Mun’s spiritual journey reveals that his idea of society included the innocent and honest people of the hills tribe and his was an ecological citizenship. Living amidst nature, he mastered fearlessness and shared a sense of commonality with it. He regarded tribal people as more prepared for spiritual emancipation, with fewer defilements. The expectation to make monk’s stay ‘productive’ is based on a limited understanding of social action. However, Ajahn Mun finally settles down ‘at his pond hermitage’ near Sakhon Nakhon, Thailand, in the deep forest practising eco-spirituality. To quote from Ajahn Mun’s *The Ballad of Liberation from the Khandhas*,

I’ll take you to a massive mountain
with a cave of wonders
free from suffering & stress:
mindfulness immersed in the body.
You can view it at your leisure to cool your heart
and end your troubles.

This is the path of the Noble lineage.

It’s up to you to go or not. (*The Ballad of Liberation from the Khandhas*, Ajahn Mun)

The body is the cave of wonders. In a simple ballad, Ajahn Mun explicates the core principles of Buddhism and helps the laymen find ‘the lost Buddho in the caves.

Ajahn Mun’s model of ‘noble lineage’ launches a new dimension of society and it can be asserted that he was not ‘selfish’ despite perfecting himself in seclusion. But expanded the borders of society to include tribals who lived amidst wilderness. The paper will now look into the second model of Sangha in Thich Naht Hanh. A Vietnam monk, a peace activist, a poet and a writer who remodelled Sangha on democratic and egalitarian principles. Thich Naht Hanh coined the term ‘engaged Buddhism’ and ‘most of the engaged Buddhist narratives begin with him’ (Ann Gleb et al 3).

Dr. B. R Ambedkar’s clarion call for Buddhist monks to initiate social action finds its praxis in Thich Naht Hanh’s engaged Buddhism. His Buddhist Theravadi (conservative Buddhist Practitioner) Ajahn Mun’s model of Sangha aimed at individual spiritual emancipation of people, who do not enjoy or suffer from state citizenship but with their honesty and sincerity, they practice Ethics of care. Ajahn Mun with his

unique pedagogy instructs the people in the mountains and often finds it easier to train them as they are honest and innocent. He was a wilderness warrior who relentlessly wandered in the deep forests and attained enlightenment. Being in Sangha, he successfully facilitated collective awakening.

Whereas, Thich Naht Hanh, with his state citizenship as opposed to eco citizen ship of Mun, was a peace warrior who organised an underground for draft registers, printed leaflets, ran social service projects and called demonstrations and cared for many war victims' (Gates) While some monks immolated themselves, some of them were killed by States. Ajahn Mun's disciples were at the mercy of nature, whereas Thich Naht Hanh's disciples, were penalised by the governments of both sides. He continued to spread joy by organising retreats at Plum Village, his farm in France and collecting funds for causes like child nutrition and refugees. Ajahn Mun believed in realising truth through self-mortification in the wilderness, Nath Hanh walked amidst the sufferers of war and deprivation. In an interview with Barbara Gates and Wes Nisker for Inquiring Minds, Thich Naht Hanh reflects on his experiences of widespread sufferings and loss owing to the Vietnam War. He further addresses the apparent paradox in his emphasis on joy and mindfulness. Additionally, he also asserts that an exclusive focus on suffering is very insufficient to present a holistic understanding of Buddhist practices. He notes that while Theravada traditions often foreground dukkha, Mahayana Buddhism places greater emphasis on the life-enhancing, and affirmative dimensions of existence. Reflecting on his engagement with both traditions, Thich Naht Hanh cautions against interpretive extremes, suggesting that Buddha spoke of both sukha and dukkha. He also attempts to clarify that concepts like liberation and extinction must not be seen as a rejection of life, but as a cessation of ignorance, attachment, suffering; and a process that simultaneously paves way for positive qualities of compassion, clarity, and joy to emerge. As a result, this interpretive balance between affirmation and renunciation becomes central to the understanding of Thich Naht Hanh's reconfiguration of the Sangha as a mindful, engaged community, distinct from yet dialogically related to the austere monastic praxis exemplified by Ajahn Mun.

Thich Naht Hanh's interpretation of Buddhism resonates with Dr. B R Ambedkar's scepticism about the Buddhist later interpretations as being pessimistic and influenced by the contemporary philosophical traditions. He emphasises joy and actively engages with society thereby re-defining the role of Sangha. In a letter dated August 21 2009, from Boston, the unwell Thich Naht Hah writes to his 'friends and co-practitioners at the retreat. In this reflection, Thich Naht Hanh stresses on the collective vitality of the Sangha, suggestive of how spiritual presence is sustained and carried forward through the community. He invited scholars and practitioners to embody a sense of shared continuity by indulging in quotidian acts of walking, smiling together, and breathing. This affirms that the Sanghas are a living extension of individual practice and collective mindfulness.

The mindful monk popularised the 'Art of Mindfulness' and connected the idea with the notion of Sangha. To quote, Mindfulness... grows when we have a spiritual home and a spiritual family... it means the Dharma is there... the true Sangha carries within herself the true Dharma... (Naht Hanh 393).

The concept of Sangha and Dharma have existed in a relationship of mutual interconnection, especially the idea that Dharma cannot be isolated from the Sangha. They constitute the very animating core of the community. In contrast to more ascetic and solitary modes of monastic discipline, Thich Nhat Hanh attempts to foreground the Sanghas as a nurturing and interdependent space which facilitates mindfulness and spiritual growth, enabled through collective practices. This re-definition of Sangha allows laypersons and children to access spiritual experience. This global movement-the plum village tradition includes people from all walks of life and countries.

To conclude, the paper has attempted to trace the origins of the notion of Sangha from the Teravadin Ven. Buddha Rakkitha's narrative to Ambedkar's re-definition of Sangha. From the Ajaphala tree to Istipana, from the mountains of Chiang Mai to the Plum Village, the Sangha has mindfully wandered and has been dynamically re-modelling itself to the contemporary requirements. A comparison of Ajahn Mun and Thich Nath Hanh's Sangha in Praxis has been quite a productive exercise, as the paper discovered the contrasting worldviews and teaching methodologies. While Ajahn Mun trained his disciples in a strict ascetic method by eliminating their fear, Nath Hanh emphasised on mindful and joyful existence. Mun was reluctant to settle down and fled to the wilderness to work with the tribal men and women, Nath Hanh actively participated in peace process. Finally, Ronald E. Purser in his text titled *McMindfulness* problematises the unmindful marketing of self-help books and courses and suspects its capitalist orientation (However, this article too went viral). The new virtual Sangha do require a systematic study and reflection.

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