THE PATH OF THE HOUSEHOLDER: 
BUDDHIST LAY DISCIPLES IN THE PĀLI CANON

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It is often argued that Buddhism is an essentially monastic religion, where the lay people support the monks and practise morality, rather than aim for substantial spiritual progress themselves. This is tacitly assumed to be the case both historically and in many modern Buddhist communities. I will examine the extent to which this view is supported by the ancient Pāli texts. Was the original difference between monastics and lay Buddhists a qualitative one (where monastic status itself gave access to spiritual progress) or a quantitative one (where lay people simply had fewer daily opportunities for spiritual practice)? Or was it perhaps a mixture of the two?

A combination of modern commentators and Pāli texts in translation will be used to investigate the role of lay disciples in the Buddha’s time. I will look in turn at: the relative status of lay people and monastics; the teachings offered to lay people by the Buddha himself and by his senior monks; the categories of spiritual progress which could be made; and examples of both ordinary and exceptional lay people in the texts. This should allow a conclusion to be drawn as to whether the earliest lay disciples were ‘second-class Buddhists’ or not.

Conze argues strongly for the primacy of the monastic life throughout Buddhism:

In its essence and inner core, Buddhism was and is a movement of monastic ascetics ... The monks are the Buddhist elite. They are the only Buddhists in the proper sense of the word. The life of a householder is almost incompatible with the higher levels of the spiritual life'.


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The lay person's role is seen here as supporting the monks, their spiritual aspiration being faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, together with the belief in karma and the wish to acquire merit to escape from 'the burden of his past misdeeds...Nirvana was too remote to aim at in this life'.

Although there are large numbers of lay disciples in the Pāli texts, even the term upāsaka for the 'devout layman (or laywoman – upāsiṅkha) means one who follows, serves, attends or accords honour.' Bowker defines upāsaka as 'one who sits close by', a layperson who has taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha, and has 'undertaken the five precepts... Although far from the goal of arhat, they can acquire merit, especially through support of the Saṅgha, and can hope to reappear as a monk'. It seems from this that the limit of the layperson's spiritual activity is dāna (giving, generosity) and sīla (morality).

Richard Gombrich confirms that most of the Buddha's sermons to lay people concentrated on morality as 'the foundation of spiritual progress'. They did not provide such fertile soil for the Dhamma as the monks and nuns (although of course many sermons were given to lay people who then ordained). Despite very rare cases in the Canon of lay disciples gaining enlightenment, and examples of them making advanced spiritual progress,

These few lay religious virtuosi... do not invalidate the generalization that the Buddha expected those seriously interested in attaining salvation to become monks or nuns, that meditation was considered to be normally impossible for the laity, and that much of the Buddha's teaching was given only to the Sangha. This expectation has been made in much of Buddhist history. As Harvey states, 'most Buddhist schools see monasticism as a superior way of life, one that all should respect and aspire to join in this

or some future life'.

Turning to the Pāli texts themselves, there seems to be support for this view. The Buddha recalls his decision to leave home as a vital step in his search for enlightenment:

Household life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life as utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell. Suppose I shave off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe and go forth from the home life into homelessness. This passage is repeated by the Buddha at the beginning of several discourses about the bhikkhu training in the holy life, as representing the initial feeling of a householder who wishes to make spiritual progress. He also describes one of the obstacles to Nibbāna as 'being caught by human beings', which he explains as the entanglements of the home life:

Here, someone lives in association with laypeople; he rejoices with them and sorrows with them... and he involves himself in their affairs and duties. Elsewhere he tells the bhikkhus plainly that there are the 'two pleasures' of home life and homelessness, and 'that of homelessness has the pre-eminence'. He declares to the wanderer Vacchagotta that 'there is no householder who, without abandoning the fetter of householdership, on the dissolution of the body has made an end of suffering'. The Commentary explains here

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2 Conze, op. cit., p.79.

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11 MN I, 483; tr. Nāṇamoli, pp.588.
that even those very rare individuals who became Arahants while still laymen, immediately either were ordained or passed away. This may be based on the post-canonical Milindapañña, where it is explained that the householder’s situation is too weak to sustain arahatship.

Before considering these ‘very rare individuals’, let us look briefly at the first lay disciples, and then examine the standard moral teaching of the Buddha to lay people.

Schumann cites the post-canonical Mahāvagga of the Vinaya to show that the Buddha’s very first followers were not the five ascetics to whom the first sermon was preached at Isipatana, but two merchants named Tapussa and Bhallika, who offered him food in the fourth week after his enlightenment, taking refuge in the Buddha and the (as yet unpreached) Dhamma.

Soon after the first sermon, the Buddha preached the first ‘step-by-step discourse’ to a young man named Yasa, beginning with easily understood ideas such as alms-giving, moral rules and the futility of sense-pleasures, and moving on to teach the Four Noble Truths when he could see that Yasa would be able to understand. Yasa’s father came looking for him, listened to the first part of such a discourse, took refuge for the first time in ‘Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha’ and so became the third lay follower (upāsaka). Yasa became ordained, and his mother and ‘former wife … took the threefold refuge, thus becoming Gotama’s first female followers (upāsikās). The fact that Yasa became the seventh Arahant (again according to the Mahāvagga) shows that the establishment of lay-followers came at the very beginning of the development of Buddhism.

Schumann points out the important role of the merchant class (vessas) in disseminating the Dhamma to other lay people, carried ‘by means of the clumsy ox-carts of the trade caravans…’. But the Buddha’s teaching drew lay disciples from all classes, partly because ‘it did not stamp lay-followers as second-rate Buddhists’.

The teaching given to such lay people appears at first to be the conventional Buddhist morality. In a chapter on the lay disciple, the Buddha repeatedly emphasises the importance of the five precepts (avoiding killing, stealing, wrong sensuality, lying and intoxicants). Breaking them causes fear and rebirth in hell, but keeping them leads to confidence and rebirth in heaven. He further proscribes the five trades which break the precepts and so ‘ought not to be plied by a lay-disciple’ (trading in arms, human beings, animal flesh, intoxicants and poison).

When a lay-disciple asks how a monk and a layman should both act well, the Buddha replies that a monk should practise detachment, but a layman should keep the five precepts (or eight precepts on observance days), provide food for the monks, support his parents and ‘pursue a blameless career’. This moral life will ensure a favourable rebirth.

Ling uses the Pāli scriptures to build up a detailed picture of the ‘ordinary man’ (puthujjana) who has no glimpse of Nibbāna. He is seen as addicted to pleasure, with senses uncontrolled, greedy, and easily provoked to violence. He is distressed by pain, disease, old age and death, and may be tormented by sorrow, because he ignores the truth and fails to see things as they really are. However, this condition is not seen as final, and between:

‘the common people … and the Sangha there exists an important relationship, not of reciprocity exactly, but of complementariness’.

This relationship is set out in the well-known Sīghālaka Sutta, which may be seen as a ‘vinaya for the householder’.

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12 Naṇamoli, pp.1273-4.
15 Schumann, op. cit., pp70-2.
17 AN III, 203-13; tr. Woodward and Hare, III, pp.150-7.
success in morality (gaining wealth, reputation and confidence; a mindful death and a favourable rebirth). Ling refers to this episode, commenting that for the Buddha, lay-followers:

had an important place in the scheme of things, and it was for this reason that he undertook to instruct them in detail in the matters of social morality, pointing out to them the various advantages of moral uprightness and integrity. But after this conventional teaching ‘the Lord instructed, inspired, fired and delighted the lay-followers of Pāṭaligāma with talk on Dhamma until far into the night’. The text of this talk is not given, but it may well have been a version of the ‘step-by-step discourse’ where the Buddha goes beyond discussing morality and teaches the Four Noble Truths to those who are ready to hear the Dhamma in more detail.

There is further evidence of at least some kind of ‘complementariness’ between monastics and lay disciples. The Buddha praises ‘right conduct’ in both the householder and the monk, saying that they can both win through to the Path, the Dhamma, in this way. When asked directly whether the monastic path or the way of the lay disciple is the right way, the Buddha replies that he praises ‘the right way of practice’: either the householder or the monk who is engaged in this right practice ‘is accomplishing the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome’. Elsewhere he defines this right practice as the Noble Eightfold Path and confirms that in this way the householder or the layman ‘attains the method, the Dhamma that is wholesome’.

Nyanaponika and Hecker provide a wealth of detail about the lives of eminent lay disciples, drawn from the Pāli texts. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s Introduction makes clear that the path of the monastic and that of the lay-follower are both leading in the same direction.

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21 DN III, 191; tr. Walshe, p.468.
23 Ling, op. cit., p.103.
25 AN I, 69; tr. Woodward and Hare, 1, pp.64-5.
26 MN II, 197-9; tr. Nanamoli, pp.808-10.
Different guidelines are appropriate for lay followers and monastics, and the individual must choose between them:

But all such guidelines, originating from different starting points, eventually converge upon a single path, universal and unique, leading infallibly to the final goal. This is the Noble Eightfold Path, the way to the cessation of suffering.\(^{28}\)

The most important distinction within the overall category of *sāvaka*, the disciple of the Buddha, is not between monastics and lay people, but the spiritual distinction between ‘the ordinary disciples and the noble disciples’. Ordinary disciples (the large majority) are ‘still technically classed as worldlings or commoners (*puthu jīṇa*).’ Despite going for refuge and practising *dāna* and *sīla*, ‘they have not yet reached the plane where liberation is irrevocably assured’. The noble disciples (*ariyā sāvaka*), by contrast, have achieved ‘a radical transformation ... of the mind’, and have understood the Dhamma in a deeper sense.\(^{29}\)

It may be helpful to pause here to explain briefly the four important stages on the path to Nibbāna. Walshe describes these as follows:

1) The Stream-Winner (‘stream-enterer’ in *Nāṇamoli*) has ‘glimpsed Nibbāna’, discarded three of the ‘five lower fetters’ (i.e. belief in a self ... doubt ... attachment to rites and rituals) and is thus assured of attaining Nibbāna within the next seven rebirths. 2) The Once-Returner has weakened the remaining lower fetters of sensuality and ill-will, and will attain Nibbāna ‘after at most one further human rebirth’. 3) The Non-Returner has abandoned sensuality and ill-will and all worldly attachments, and after death will attain Nibbāna after a heavenly rebirth. 4) The Arahat has destroyed the ‘five higher fetters’ (i.e. ‘craving for existence in the Form World ... in the Formless World ... conceit ... restlessness ... ignorance), has attained Nibbāna, and ‘will attain final Nibbāna “without remainder” at death’.\(^{30}\)

The *Dīghanāka Sutta* gives a fascinating glimpse of what might be described as the parallel spiritual development of a monk and a lay person. The Buddha skillfully encourages the wanderer Dīghanāka to abandon his fixed views, explaining that all feelings are impermanent and that the ‘well-taught noble disciple’ regards them dispassionately and so obtains liberation. At this moment Dīghanāka saw the Dhamma, reached the Dhamma, fathomed the Dhamma, overcame all doubt and perplexity, and became self-sufficient in the Master’s Teaching.\(^{31}\)

This is the standard description of one who becomes a Stream-Winner. Dīghanāka must have been a remarkable young man to progress so swiftly from a non-Buddhist to one assured of Nibbāna.

Meanwhile the monk Sāriputta, who is fanning the Buddha, attains arahantship as he considers these words on liberation. This is highly significant, not only as Sāriputta was to become one of the Buddha’s chief disciples, but also since he ‘had been a bhikkhu for only two weeks and was still a stream-enterer.’\(^{32}\) But the sutta concludes with Dīghanāka (incidentally Sāriputta’s nephew) formally taking refuge as a lay-follower, in a passage repeated frequently at the end of suttas:

> Magnificent, Master Gotama! Master Gotama has made the Dhamma clear in many ways, as though he were turning upright what had been overturned, revealing what was hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, or holding up a lamp in the dark ... I go to Master Gotama for refuge and to the Dhamma and to the Sangha of bhikkhus. From this day forth let Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge for life.\(^{33}\)

This leads us on to the spiritual attainment of lay people in the


\(^{29}\) Nyanaponika, *op. cit.*, pp.xvi-xix.


\(^{31}\) MN I, 501; see Nyanaponika, *op. cit.*, p.xix.

\(^{32}\) *Nāṇamoli, op. cit.*, p.1276, n.730.

\(^{33}\) MN I, 501; tr. *Nāṇamoli*, p.606.
Pali texts. In the *Nalakapāna Sutta*, the Buddha explains that when he declares a particular bhikkhu to be an Arahant, Non-Returner, Once-Returner or Stream-Winner, it is not for flattery but to inspire others. These four categories are repeated for bhikkhus, but only the last three are given for laymen and laywomen, implying firmly that arahantship was extremely rare for a lay person. In reply to Ananda’s questions in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* about those who have died at Nāḍikā, the Buddha says that ‘more than fifty lay-followers’ there have destroyed the five lower fetters and become Non-Returners, over ninety have become Once-Returners, and ‘well over five hundred’ are Stream-Winners. This says something about both the size of the lay Buddhist community there and their remarkable spiritual progress.

Walshe states that there is ‘no scriptural authority’ for the widely-held view that ‘while lay persons can attain to the first three paths, only monks can become Arahants’. Schumann says that although the *upāsaka* might find it harder than the monk ‘to gain inner detachment and release from suffering’, the Canon lists ‘twenty-one householders who became Arahants without ever being monks’. Harvey gives further details of the attainments of lay people in the Pāli Canon and draws a similar conclusion:

The early texts do refer to many lay Stream-enterers, more than 1,000 eight-precept lay Non-returners (M I, 490-1), and a few lay *Arahats* (A III, 450-1). Indeed, while the conditions of lay life pose more obstacles, those who make the effort in spite of them can attain good spiritual progress.

Both of these textual references are worth examining. In the *Mahāvacchagottasutta* the Buddha explains that more than five hundred bhikkhus and a similar numbers of bhikkhuṇīs ‘abide in the deliverance of mind’ (i.e. have become Arahants). There are more than five hundred celibate laymen Non-Returners, and more than five hundred non-celibate laymen who are either Once-Returners or at least Stream-Winners. The same numbers and categories are given for laywomen. So in all three cases the number of monastic Arahants, lay Non-Returners and lay Once-Returners or Stream-Winners is over a thousand (perhaps well over, as the Buddha actually says ‘far more’ each time). Despite the lack of Arahants here – and assuming that the figures are genuine, rather than a later pious inflation – this is compelling evidence for the spiritual progress of lay people.

The ‘twenty-one householders’ listed as notable disciples in the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* include Tapussa and Bhallika, Anāthapiṇḍika, Citta, Hatthaka, Mahānāma, Uggā of Vesāli, Uggata, Sūra Amatā, Jivaka and Nakulpitā. Each of them is said to have ‘gone to the end, seen the deathless and had his being in the realization of the deathless’, because of their faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, and also their ‘virtue, knowledge and release’. These are indeed ‘very rare individuals’, and it is worth looking at some of them in a little more detail, together with important laywomen.

In listing his chief disciples, the Buddha begins with forty monks and thirteen nuns, each with their special category of preeminence. The names of eleven laymen (given above) and ten laywomen follow. Of the laymen, Tapussa and Bhallika are included as the first disciples; Anāthapiṇḍika is chief of almsgivers; Uggā is chief of those who give rice ‘liberality, kind speech, a useful life and equal treatment of all alike’. Of the laywomen, Sujātā (who offered rice to the ascetic Gotama before his enlightenment) is included as the first laywoman disciple; Samātā is chief of those ‘who live in kindness’; and Suppiyā is chief of those who nurse the sick. These and others all appear as the exemplars of dāna and sila which we would expect.

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35 DN II, 92-3; tr. Walshe, pp.240-1.
37 Schumann, *op. cit.*, pp.190-1.
38 Harvey, *op. cit.*, p.218.
40 AN III, 450-1; tr. Woodward and Hare, III, pp.313-14.
41 AN I, 23-6; tr. Woodward and Hare, I, pp.16-25.
However, the layman Citta is described as ‘chief among my disciples, lay-followers, of Dhamma teachers’; the laywoman Khujjuttarā is chief of those ‘of wide knowledge’; Uttarā, Nanda’s mother, is chief of those ‘of meditative power’ (these three categories have been applied first to monks or nuns); and the laywoman Kāli is said to have become a Stream-Winner after merely overhearing two yakkhas praise the ‘Triple Gem’.

There are two implications here. Clearly these individual lay-followers have achieved deep understanding and practice of the Dhamma, but they may only be chief among an unspecified number of other laymen and laywomen who are Dhamma teachers, ‘of wide knowledge’, or advanced meditators.

Some of the ‘pre-eminent ones’ are elsewhere given as exemplars by the Buddha. A laywoman should encourage her son to become like Citta or Hattakha, who are ‘the standard and criterion for my male disciples who are lay followers’. She should encourage her daughter to become like Khujjuttarā and Velukantiyā, Nanda’s mother (presumably another name for Uttarā), who are ‘the standard and criterion for my female disciples who are lay followers’. The implication is that lay-disciples should not only aspire to gain merit by dāna and sīla, but also to acquire knowledge of the Dhamma, meditative powers and even perhaps to become Dhamma teachers themselves.

In the same passage, it is stated that those who wish to become monks should emulate Sāriputta and Moggallāna, while potential nuns should emulate sister Khemā and Uppallavanā. Hecker comments pragmatically that the lay and ordained ways of life are substantially different ‘and an example taken from one’s own background is bound to prove more effective’.

There are other references to most of the lay Arahants listed above. The Buddha explains to Mahānāma that a lay-disciple develops his own welfare by faith, virtue, renunciation, seeing monks and hearing the Dhamma mindfully, reflecting on the meaning of the Dhamma. Similarly, he may help others to achieve this.

In three identical suttas, Ugga of Vesāli, Uggata and Nakulapitā each come to ask the Buddha why some beings ‘attain Nibbāna in this very life’ while others do not. The Buddha gives them the same reply as he had to Sakka, lord of the devas: there are sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible objects and thoughts which are ‘desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, tantalizing’. Only by not clinging to them can one attain Nibbāna.

Ugga of Vesāli is said by the Buddha to have ‘eight wonderful and marvellous qualities’, which not only include sharing his wealth and respecting the monks, but also understanding the Dhamma when the Buddha explained the Four Noble Truths to him. He listens attentively to a monk who preaches the Dhamma or ‘If he preach not Dhamma to me, I preach Dhamma to him’; devas come and praise the Dhamma to him, but he feels no elation.

An almost identical story is told about Uggata, though here the eighth quality is ‘that the Exalted One should declare to me: “There is no fetter, fettered by which, Ugga, the householder of Hatthigama shall come again to this world”’. This may imply that he is a Non-Returner rather than an Arahant.

The Buddha advises Nakulapitā, an old man in poor health, to train himself with the phrase: ‘Even though I am afflicted in body, my mind will be unaffected’. Sāriputta explains that the worldling sees the body, feeling, perception, (mental) activities and consciousness (i.e. the five khandhas) as the self, as ‘mine’, and so suffers greatly when these inevitably change. But the disciple who is trained in the Dhamma does not have this false view and so can face change with equanimity.

42 AN I, 25-6; tr. Woodward and Hare, I, pp.23-5.
44 Nyanaponika, op. cit., p.365.
45 AN IV, 220; tr. Woodward and Hare, IV, pp.149-50.
46 SN IV, 101; tr. Bodhi, op. cit., p.1192.
48 AN IV, 207-11; tr. Woodward and Hare, IV, pp.142-5.
49 AN IV, 211f; tr. Woodward and Hare, IV, pp.145-6.
Citta is even able to answer complex questions on the Dhamma put to him by bhikkhus, and to engage in detailed conversation about the liberation of the mind. On one occasion he explains to a group of senior bhikkhus the difference between the fetters and the sense objects, and they are so pleased by his answer that they declared that Citta must be in possession of the eye of wisdom which ranges over the profound teaching of the Buddha. When his friend the naked ascetic Kassapa asks him how long he has been a follower of the Buddha and whether he had attained any superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision, Citta replies that he has followed the Buddha for thirty years, and he can enter and dwell in the four jhānas ‘to whatever extent I wish’. Moreover, if he were to die before the Buddha, ‘it would not be surprising if the Blessed One were to declare of me: “There is no fetter bound by which Citta the householder could return to this world”’. Again this implies he is a Non-Returner rather than an Arahant.

In the context of lay meditation, it is worth adding the example of Pessa the elephant driver’s son. When the Buddha briefly describes the four foundations of mindfulness, Pessa praises his explanation but adds:

From time to time, venerable sir, we white-clothed lay people also abide with our minds well established in these four foundations of mindfulness ... ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

The story of Anāthapiṇḍika, the rich merchant who becomes the chief patron of the Saṅgha in Sāvatthī, will be considered in more detail. The Buddha frequently gave teachings to Anāthapiṇḍika, which Hecker describes as ‘a comprehensive code of lay Buddhist ethics ... from the simplest message to the most profound’. The Buddha explained that the householder’s duty (i.e. offering robes, almsfood, lodging and medicine to the monks) is a path which brings good repute and leads to the heavenly world. The householder may win ‘four kinds of bliss’: ownership (from honest work); wealth (which facilitates meritorious deeds), debtlessness; and blamelessness (in actions, speech and mind). Wealth honestly acquired may be used to support family and friends, or to make offerings to the Saṅgha: if wealth is gained for these reasons, the noble disciple will not be upset whether his wealth is lost or increases.

Desirable things such as long life, beauty, happiness, fame and a favourable rebirth cannot be obtained by prayers or vows, but only by following an appropriate path of life. The conditions for winning desirable things such as wealth, a good report, a long life or a favourable rebirth are: Perfection of virtue, perfection of generosity, and perfection of wisdom.

The Buddha also gave Anāthapiṇḍika a step-by-step discourse, beginning with dāna and sila and the futility of sensual pleasure; but seeing that he was ‘ready in heart and mind’, he also explained the Four Noble Truths to him, with the result that the merchant understood the Dhamma and became a Stream-Winner.

Elsewhere stages of practice are described, leading from dāna through sila towards the gaining of insight. One might offer a meal to the Saṅgha, or to the Buddha himself, or even build a monastery:

But better yet would be the going for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. And this deed would be perfected if one observed the Five Precepts. It would be better still if one could imbibe a slight fragrance ... of loving-kindness (metta). Best of all, however, would be to cultivate, even for the time of a finger-snap, the insight into impermanence.

52 SN IV, 301; tr. Bodhi, op. cit., p.1329.
53 MN I, 340; tr. Ñāṇamoli, p.444.
54 Nyanaponika, op. cit., p.351.
55 AN II, 66; tr. Woodward and Hare, II, p.73.
56 AN II, 68; tr. Woodward and Hare, II, pp.77-8.
57 AN III, 46; tr. Woodward and Hare, III, p.38; see Nyanaponika, op. cit., pp. 351-3.
58 AN III, 47; tr. Woodward and Hare, III, pp.39-40.
59 AN II, 66; tr. Woodward and Hare, II, p.74; see Nyanaponika, op. cit., p.354.
60 Nyanaponika, op. cit., p.339.
On another occasion the Buddha urged Anāthapiṇḍika and 'several hundred lay followers' not to be satisfied as householders with providing for the needs of the Saṅgha: 'May you also from time to time strive to enter and abide in the joy of (inner meditative) seclusion'.

With a similar audience, the Buddha declared to Sāriputta that a 'white-clad householder' (i.e. an upāsaka) who keeps the moral precepts, and who can 'obtain at will the four lofty mental abodings which bring happiness in the present', may if he wishes declare himself to be a Stream-Winner, 'assured of final enlightenment'. These 'lofty mental abodings' are not the four jhānas, as one might expect, but instead are an unshakeable faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha, and the possession of noble virtue.

When Anāthapiṇḍika is seriously ill, Sāriputta and Ānanda visit him, and Sāriputta urges him to train himself not to cling to 'what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, encountered, sought after, and examined by the mind'. Anāthapiṇḍika is profoundly affected by this teaching and begins to weep, explaining that 'I have served the master and the spiritually accomplished monks for a long time, yet I have never heard such a profound discourse'. Sāriputta says that this kind of teaching will not be clear to lay followers, only to monastics. But Anāthapiṇḍika replies:

Venerable Sāriputta, let such talks on the Dhamma be given to white-clad lay followers too. There are those with just a little dust on their eyes. If they do not hear such teachings they will be lost. Some may be able to understand.

Nāṇamoli comments that although Sāriputta's statement does not imply an exclusiveness in the Buddha’s teaching, ‘such talk leading to complete detachment’ would not be appropriate for lay people who ‘must look after their families, possessions, and occupations’. But worldly concerns no longer apply here to Anātha-

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In conclusion, the spiritual progress of the early Buddhists in the Pāli Canon depends on their understanding and practice of the Dhamma, rather than their status as lay people or monastics. If the latter are more likely to make substantial progress, this is because of their unique situation. The householder who is fully engaged in working and supporting his or her family may have to concentrate on dāna and sīla, and the teachings offered to lay people by the Buddha and by senior monks usually concentrate on various aspects of these two methods of acquiring puñña, 'merit' or 'karmic fruitfulness'. But teachings on the Four Noble Truths, or on various aspects of meditation, may also be included if the hearers are seen as ready to understand more of the Dhamma. While many became Stream-Winners, those lay disciples in particular who have a measure of independence from worldly ties, or those who are coming to the end of their lives, seem to have a genuine opportunity to become Once-Returners, or even Non-Returners, and (in very exceptional cases) Arahants.

So the difference between monastics and lay Buddhists in the Pāli Canon is more quantitative than qualitative. The monastic life provides ample opportunity for spiritual progress, but of course the individual monk or nun has to make the effort for themselves. The household life has many distractions, but for the determined lay disciple these need not be barriers to spiritual progress. In the Pāli Canon – and by implication in historical and contemporary Buddhism – the progressive path of morality, meditation and wisdom is open to monastics and lay-followers alike. The essential distinction, both then and now, is not between the monastic and the lay-follower, but between the ‘ordinary disciple’ (who may still be a devout Buddhist rather than a merely nominal one), and the ‘noble disciple’ who has glimpsed Nibbāna and who is genuinely committed to the understanding and practice of the Dhamma.

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2 In the Theravāda tradition there is another source relevant to this issue, a Śāṅkamatiya list of sixteen incidents transmitted by Daśabalaśrīmitra in his Sanskritasanskrtaviniscaya. It is probably a Dhammarucika list in a Sinhalese work of the fourteenth century or earlier called Deis Karmaya, which allegedly describes thirty-two such incidents. The manuscript of this work is preserved in the British Library; see K.D. Somadasa, Catalogue of the Hugh Nevill Collection of Sinhalese Manuscripts in the British Library 2 (Pali Text Society, 1989), pp.122-3. See also Paul Harrison, ‘Some Reflections on the Personality of the Buddha’, The Otani Gakuko LXXIV, 4 (1995), p.11. Since this is a very late work it does not fall into the scope of our discussion of the debate on the physical body of the Buddha in the period of the early Buddhist schools.

1. The Pāli Canon: (1) the Pañcasūtasthavāravādāna, T 199, 190a-202a, (2) the Xīngqīngjīng, T 197, 163c-174b, (3) the Bhaśajyavastu of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, T 1448, 94a-97a, (4) the Lokānuvartanasūtra, T 807, 751b-753c, (5) the Pushāsingwushiyuānsānti, T 812, 773a-774c, (6) the Upāyakausālsūtra, T 310:38, 594c-601c; T 345, 156a-165c, T 346, 166a-178b, (7) the Mahāyānadasādharmakāsūtra, T 310:9, 154c-157a, T 314, 767b-769a, (8) the Tathāgatakathāsūtra, T 692, 788a-c, T 693, 788c-790a, T 694, 790a-790b, (9) the Mahāyānāpāramitābodhikāsūtra, T 1509, 121c, (10) the Mahāyānāvātārakaśāsāstra, T 1634, 37b-c.

2. The Sanskrit Canon: (1) the Upāyakausālsūtra, translated by Gos Chos Grub (Ch. Wu Fencheng) based on Dharmarakṣa’s rendition (T 345), (2) the Upāyakausālsūtra, translated by Dānāśila, Karmavarma and Ye sse sde from Sanskrit, (3) the Bhaiśajyavastu of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, (4) the Lokānuvartanasūtra and (5)