

# Buddhist Monks and their Monastic Life: A Sociological Study around Dharamshala City of Kangra District of Himachal Pradesh



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## Abstract

Monks are an integral part of our society so it's equally important to study their life style and monastic life. The present study is an attempt to draw attention towards the monastic life of the monks living in the monasteries around Dharamshala. The study will create awareness among the people about the lives of monks. Monks have a quite different life as compared to the life of the layman. This study of organization of the monastic life explains the daily life of the monks and how they spend their lives in the monasteries. This study explains that the main aim of a monk is reaching the ultimate goal that is Nirvana.

**Keywords:** Monks, Monasteries, Monastic Life, Nirvana, Layman.

## Introduction

Gautama was the son of an Indian king on the border of modern day Nepal 632 years before Christ. The wise men of the kingdom foresaw that he would become either an emperor or a Buddha and his father wanted him to be an emperor, kept him utterly secluded from all unpleasant things, so that he might not become wise by seeing life. But on three successive days while he was on his way to the royal park, Gautama saw an old man, a sick man and a corpse and thus he learned that all men must suffer and die. On the third day he saw a monk; from this he understood that to learn the way of overcoming man's universal sorrow he must give up worldly pleasures. Accordingly, in his twenty-ninth year, he renounced his kingdom and became an ascetic. (Chaterjee, 2009). He after days of meditation, at the age of 35, he is said to have attained Enlightenment. From that time, Gautama was known to his followers as the Buddha or "The Enlightened One". After his awakening, the Buddha met two merchants, named Tapussa and Bhallika, who became his first disciples. (BhaskarAnand, 2012)

## Monastery

A monastery is a community of men or women (monks or nuns), who have chosen to withdraw from society, forming a new community devoted to religious practice. The word monk comes from the Greek word monos, which means alone. ([www.khanacademy.org](http://www.khanacademy.org)). To support these endeavours, monasteries are generally set apart from the usual commotion of ordinary life. Some monasteries are located in relatively secluded natural settings like forests and mountains; others are situated near or even in villages, towns, and large cities where they manage to thrive by serving the needs of their inhabitants for quiet contemplation and the needs of lay supporters for spiritual enrichment. Likewise, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are often situated near towns or villages. ([www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com))

## Monks

A member of a religious community (men) typically living under vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. ([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)). The community of monks is probably the oldest of any of the institutions that have remained faithful to their origins and spread world-wide. While scholars like to track its historical development from country to country, we could also start with a particular monk and trace the thread back through preceptor after preceptor to the Buddha Himself. Its many remarkable features enable men from different classes, backgrounds and cultures to live together in harmony and fellowship. Most important, it offers ideal conditions for the individual to train and meditate, to awaken to Dhamma, which is the whole point of the Buddha's Teaching. (BhikkhuAriyesako,

1998). A monk restrained in all things, is freed from all pain. He who controls his hand, he who controls his speech, he who is well controlled, he who delights inwardly, who is solitary and content, him they call a monk. The monk control his mouth, who speaks wisely and calmly, who teaches the meaning and the law, his word is sweet, he who dwells in the law, delights in the law, recollects the law: that monk will never fall away from true Law. A monk who behaves with kindness, who is happy in the doctrine of Buddha, will reach the quite place (that is Nirvana) and will find happiness arising from cessation of bodily existence. (Burt, 1988)

#### **Buddhist Monasticism**

The monastic tradition of Buddhism is probably the oldest in the world, and has certainly been the most widespread, both geographically and culturally. The order he founded has existed for two and a half thousand years. Although by the medieval period the Buddhist monastic order had all but disappeared from India, by that time it had been established in almost every other part of Asia. During the centuries following the Buddha's death various different "schools" of Buddhism arose. (Wijayaratna Mohan, 1990).

#### **Becoming a Novice**

The first part of the ordination procedure for monks is known as the Going Forth into Homelessness. The candidate is known as a *sāmaṇera* or novice. A very young boy is not allowed to become a novice either, but the minimum age will vary according to place. A *sāmaṇera* wears the robe just like a monk except he does not have the *saṅghāṇī* (double-thickness robe) —and leads a very similar life. In some places a period as a novice forms part of the preliminary training to become a monk, while some men decide to remain *sāmaṇera* for various reasons. The *sāmaṇera* keeps the Ten Precepts and the 75 Training Rules (*sekhiya*) and some other rules of the monks. Later, when he is ready and if he is old enough, he can ask the monk community for full ordination. (Bhikkhu Ariyesako, 1998).

#### **Becoming a Monk**

Anyone wishing to become a monk must fulfil certain conditions about which he will be questioned during the actual ordination procedure. The candidate must be male and at least twenty years old. He must never have committed any grievous crimes and, if previously ordained, he must not have been guilty of any offences or have entered some other religion without disrobing first. He should also be of good reputation; fit and healthy enough to carry out the duties of a monk; not in debt; not subject to government service; and have permission from parents or guardian. The Ordination ceremony requires a prescribed boundary, a preceptor, and a quorum of monks to validate the formal Sangha Act. In the formal procedure the candidate is examined as to the necessary qualities and, if all the monks are satisfied, they receive him into the Sangha, the Community of Monks. The new monk can participate (and make up the necessary quorum) in future assemblies and help receive other new monks—as monks have continued to do for two and a half

thousand years. When a candidate requests full admission to the Community he does not make any 'lifetime vows' but offers himself for training and instruction under his Preceptors guidance. At the end of the ordination ceremony, the Preceptor will immediately instruct the new monk (or arrange that he is properly taught) about the rules and the other principles that all monks should follow and observe. For the first five years a monk is called *navaka* ('new one') and he must dependent on a senior monk (*nissaya*) who is either his preceptor or teacher. These teachers help monks to learn ways of the monks. The preceptor and the new monk should be kind and helpful to each other; they should share father-and-son relationship. A new monk who no longer lives under his preceptor must take another senior monk as his teacher and depend on him instead. For the next five years after his *navaka* period, the monk is called *majjhima*, ('one in the middle') and he is allowed to live by himself. When a monk has completed ten Rains he is called *Thera*, which can be translated as 'an elder who is worthy of respect'. If he is also accomplished in certain extra qualities, he is allowed to give ordination as preceptor, to be a teacher, and have young monks live in dependence on him. (Bhikkhu Ariyesako, 1998).

#### **The Rules of the Community**

Monastic life requires rules regarding clothes and lodging, money and food, solitude and inner progress and these rules should be observed. This requires training and initiation and a set of regulations. There are total 227 rules which monks are expected to follow and live their life according to these rules.

#### **Precepts**

The awakened mind has gone beyond greed, hatred and delusion. Yet for those who are still striving towards this end such unskillful tendencies have to be addressed. Monks need guidelines to help us become more aware of our actions and speech, so that we do not go off the Buddha's Middle Way. For a start there are the Five Precepts, then the Eight and the Ten Precepts, and then the 227 *Pāṇimokkha* or Rules of the monks. (Bhikkhu Ariyesako, 1998).

#### **The Five Precepts**

1. To abstain from taking life.
2. To abstain from taking what is not given.
3. To abstain from sexual misconduct.
4. To abstain from false speech.
5. To abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness. (Bhikkhu Ariyesako, 1998).

#### **The Eight Precepts**

The five precepts can then be refined into the Eight Precepts:

1. To abstain from taking life.
2. To abstain from taking what is not given.
3. To abstain from unchastely.
4. To abstain from false speech.
5. To abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness.
6. To abstain from untimely eating.
7. To abstain from dancing, singing, music and unseemly shows, from wearing garlands, smartening with scents, and beautifying with perfumes.

8. To abstain from the use of high and large luxurious couches (BhikkhuAriyesako, 1998).

**The Ten Precepts**

These stop monks from

1. Killing
2. Stealing ("taking what is not given")
3. Sexual relations
4. Telling lies
5. Drinking liquor that causes intoxication and heedlessness
6. Eating after noon
7. Dancing, singing, music and unseemly shows
8. Using garlands, perfumes and unguents; and things which tend to beautify and adorn the person
9. Using high and luxurious seats and beds
10. Handling money. (Wijayaratna, Mohan, 1990).

**Review of Literature**

Perry (1946) in his book "Heritage of the Bhikkhu", in chapter two wrote that at the beginning monks used robes made of only pieces of cloth discarded by people at cemeteries and elsewhere. Later, on the request of the Jivaka, the Buddha approved the acceptance of other robes offered to them by devoted laymen. Earlier when devotees who went to the monasteries with offerings of robes, they returned without giving the robes because monks did not accept the robes. But later on after the change in the rule, they started accepting the robe according to their needs. In chapter eight he said during the time of Buddha monasteries did not possess land or other wealth. But at the end of 10th century AD kings and other rich laymen use to send money and other valuables to the monasteries. Monks knew what would be taught to them in monastery. From royal prince to a son of farmer everyone was taught at a monastery. Learned monks were respected by the lay people.

In the book "The Bhikkhu's Rule- A Guide for Laypeople", Ariyesako (1998) answers beginner's questions which are frequently asked. All the precepts are properly explained. Information about becoming a novice and then becoming a monk is provided. Major Rule Groups of the Patimokkha are also given. How monk should behave in public is also a major part of the book. Disrobing a concept where a monk disrobes himself seven times in his life is explained. This book has provided detailed information of how a monk is expected to live his life according to Buddha.

Daswani (2006) in her book "Buddhist Monasteries and Monastic Life in Ancient India" have written on the monastic aspects of Buddhism in ancient India. Book provides an authoritative and critical account of Buddhist monasteries and Monastic life in India from 3rd century BC to 7th century AD. It provides a detailed account of life in monasteries. In chapter three of the book she have explained the life the monasteries. About admission of monks in the monasteries she has written that Pabajjā and Upasampadā ordinations were essential for every individual who desired for every for membership of Buddhist Sanhga. The minimum age required for the novitiate ordination was reduced to seven years. A monk who attained the Pabajjā was called a

Samanera. About grading of monks in the Sangha she has written that the most intrinsic feature of the early Buddhist Sangha was the absence of a hierarchy of positions. But with the growth of corporate life, one notices that the organizational structure of the Sangha which was anti-hierarchical in the beginning now specified status positions with seniority and associated competencies. Mahāvastu refers to three grades, the Sthavira (thêras), the Madhyama (those of middle status) and Navakas (newly ordinate monks). Book also have information about the important monastic observations, type of dress monks are suppose to wear , material possessions of the monks, monastic routine etc. In the book monasteries are explained as centres of learning.

In "Humble before the Void"(2014), Impey, a noted astronomer, educator and a author gives us an account of his journey to Northern India to teach in the first ever Science for Monks a leadership program. The program was initiated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to introduce science in to the Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition. In a vivid and compelling narrative, Impey introduces to group of exiled Tibetan monk whose charm, tendency and unbridled enthusiasm for learning is very impressive.

Thero (2015) has written a book "The early Buddhist Monastic Duties" where he has discussed about the critical study of the early Buddhist monastic duties. The book explains about all the early duties that monks are supposed to fulfil. They don't just think about their own welfare but also think about the welfare of everyone also.

**Objectives of the study**

The present study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the daily routine of the monks.
2. To study the reasons why an individual become a monk.
3. To examine their monastic life.

**Research Methodology**

The present study was undertaken to examine the monastic life of the Buddhist monks. The adopted methodology for the study is described below:

**Locale of The Study**

The present study was conducted in the monasteries around Dharamshala. Dharamshala is the home to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile so this area has quite a number of monasteries, so this area was selected.

**Findings of the Study****Annual Ceremonies and Events of the Monasteries**

There are various ceremonies and events that hold significance in the monasteries. Some of the main events and ceremonies are listed below.

1. Tibetan New Year is celebrated on 9th February.
2. The ritual practice ceremony of the Iron-Mansion is on February 12th. It is a prayer for the benefit of Tibet's welfare.
3. His Holiness the 10th Pachen Lama's Pririvana anniversary is celebrated on 12th February.

4. The Ritual Prayer of Sitatapatra also known as Dhugkar Torchen is done on 26th February.
5. The Tibetan Uprising Day is on 10th March.
6. Birth anniversary of 11th Pamchen Lama is celebrated on 3rd April.
7. On May 21st Buddha's birth, enlightenment and par nirvana are celebrated.
8. On 26th June birthday of 17th Gyalwa Karmapa is celebrated.
9. In every monastery birthday of the His Holiness Dalai Lama on 6th July is celebrated with lot of enthusiasm.
10. There is a Universal Prayer Day held on 19th July in most of the monasteries.
11. Mandals are painted on the cloth on the occasion of the Consecration Ceremony on 5th August.
12. On 6th August an event is held to pay respect to Buddha's first teachings.
13. Like in the entire country Independence Day is celebrated in all the monasteries on 15th August.
14. On 2nd September Democracy Day of Tibet is celebrated.
15. Commencement of the Summer Retreat also known as Varsika is on 16th September.
16. Ceremony of Mahakala and Kalarupa is conducted on 27th October.
17. The Torma casting ceremony is held from 26th November to 28th November.
18. There is an annual celebration on 10th December for awarding/winning of Nobel Peace Prize to His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.
19. On 28th December the Par nirvana anniversary of 13th Dalai Lama is celebrated. ([www.namgyal.org](http://www.namgyal.org))

#### **Normal Daily Routine of the Monasteries**

Normal day at the monastery starts at 5.00 am. In the morning monks get ready and meditate, pray or exercise. After their morning tea they gather for the morning puja. People from outside the monastery also join the puja. Puja normally takes about one to two hours. After the puja breakfast is served to the monks. Breakfast consists of either prantha with curd or bread toast or puri with potato curry.

The classes for the monks normally start at 9 in the morning. Main subjects taught in the monastery are English, drawing, Buddhist philosophy, Tibetan literature, Tibetan history, Indian history, geography, Buddhist sutras and texts, mathematics etc. At 11 am there is a 15 minutes break for the monks to relax and after that they continue with their classes. Lunch time is from 1 pm. to 2 pm. Lunch is mostly rice served with any types of curry or noodles or momos. After the lunch monks are allowed to rest for a while. From 3.00 pm to 4.30 pm they again attend their remaining classes. From 4.30 pm to 6 pm monks practice chanting mantras. It is very important for monks to memorize all the mantras in their syllabus. At 6 pm. monks gather for their daily debate session. Debate session is important part of the monastic life. Monks debate about various topics about Buddhism. It is considered that debates helps to build understanding and clear doubts about Buddhism. Debate session normally ends around 8 pm after which dinner is

served. Dinner normally consists of any type of cooked vegetables (subji), dal served with rice or chapattis. After dinner monks are free for one hour before their bed time. During that time they like to go for a small walk inside the monastery or they like to study or watch television if they are allowed. Mostly 9.30 to 10 pm is the bed time in the monasteries. Older monks go to sleep just after the dinner.

#### **Other Facts about the Monastic Life**

Earlier monks use to go for alms round where lay people use to offer them food but now this does not happen. Monks get food which is prepared inside the monasteries. Lay people can offer their offering to monasteries directly. Every monk gets certain amount of allowance (in form of money) from their respective monasteries, they utilize in buying the things (socks, towel, medicines etc) they need. Monks don't have to pay any fee to the monasteries as it is free of cost. Even books and other stationary things are provided by the monasteries. Every monastery has certain days on which monks are allowed to go outside the monasteries and during that time they mostly buy things they need or they just like to go out with their fellow monks. Age for the ordination ceremony of monks is usually 18 years. But few monks who are considered blessed (His Holiness Dalai Lama is considered to know who is the blessed one) are ordinate before the age of 18. Before their ordination ceremony monastic's are called novice or training monks. Every teacher is assigned few students for training purposes. Teacher considers his students as his own children and students consider their teacher as their father. Monks who reach an age where they are unable to take care of themselves they are assigned one or two younger monks to take care of them and help them in their day to day life. Most of the monasteries have their own rest houses for the lay people. Rent of these rest houses is very low that is 300 to 600 per day. Many people come to the monasteries for learning about Buddhism or just for meditation.

#### **Summary**

In this study, the researcher arrives at different conclusions that is monastic life comprises of both educational and religious life of the Buddhist Monks. The monastic life of the monks consists of rules regarding clothes and lodging, money and food, solitude and inner progress. There are total 227 rules which monks are expected to follow and live their life according to these rules.

Monks are more interested and involved in monastic life as compared to social life. It was found that there is a tradition in the Buddhist families that second or third son needs to be a monk. Majority of the monasteries offer the Degree of Geshe to the monks. Monks come to the monasteries mainly for the educational purposes. Various subjects like English, Tibetan literature, Tibetan history, mathematics, Tibetan poetry, Arithmetic, painting, General Studies are taught in the monasteries. Monasteries have a set routine which every monk has to follow. It was found that chanting mantras is an important part of the monastic life. Monks have various choices of how they want to spend their leisure time. It was found that

football was the favourite leisure time activity of the monks.

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