

The Saṅgha of the Triple Refuge: A Canonical Review and its Critical Interpretations¹

Karmananda Tanchangya

If the *nikāya* story of a young man named Yasa appearing in the *Vinaya Mahāvagga* is considered to be of very early records, then the first person to use the word *saṅgha* vis-à-vis the first group of five monks would be his father, a householder, who took refuge in the Blessed One, his *Dhamma* and his group of five monk disciples (*bhagavantam saraṇam gacchāmi, dhammañca, bhikkhusaṅghañca*).² This *trifecta* formula was later to become the paradigm in declaring oneself a follower of the Buddha, a Buddhist. Since the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* (the community of nuns) was not formed till some years after the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* came into being, the third of the triple refuge (*ti-saraṇa*) was exclusively meant the *bhikkhusaṅgha* (community of monks). The usage of the early *bhikkhusaṅgha* as an exclusive reference to the third refuge continued to dominate the scene³ until, perhaps even after the appearance of the *bhikkhuni*s and the appearance of multiple corrupted and unscrupulous members within the original *bhikkhusaṅgha*. To retain and maintain the spiritual strength and the moral credibility of the third refuge, it became necessary for the Buddha to clearly define his position on it.

Subsequently, when asked by the Sākya prince Mahānāma to clarify on how one becomes a lay follower (*upāsaka; upāsikā*), the Buddha replied that one should take the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Saṅgha* as his/her triple refuge.⁴ Elsewhere to the same questioner, Buddha had defined the *saṅgha* as “the community of disciples (*sāvaka-saṅgho*) who are well-faring (*supaṭipanno*), straightforward-faring (*ujupaṭipanno*), methodically faring (*ñāyapaṭipanno*), and dutifully faring (*sāmicipaṭipanno*) along the path, namely, the four pairs of persons, and the eight types of individuals.”⁵ To distinguish this group of disciples from the earlier *bhikkhusaṅgha* which, by this time, included corrupted and unscrupulous members, Buddha has used the term *sāvaka-saṅgho*. By omitting ‘*bhikkhu*’ from ‘*saṅgha*’ and replacing it with ‘*sāvaka*’, Buddha seemed to have broadly intended to

accommodate a place for other deserving members particularly the *bhikkhunīs* in the third refuge. However, one has to be very cautious about arriving at this conclusion, because nowhere have the *bhikkhūs* and *bhikkhunīs* been referred together by a single term *saṅgha*. 'Ubhato-*saṅgha*' (both communities) was the term used by the Buddha to distinctly refer to the both *saṅghas* of monks and nuns.⁵ Buddha consistently made it clear that it is this *sāvaka-saṅgha*, shortened to *saṅgha* that one should go for refuge, not the *ubhato-saṅgha* in specific sense. The four pairs or the eight individuals constituting this *sāvaka-saṅgha* are the following eight *ariyasāvakās*, noble disciples:

1. One in the process of realizing the fruition of stream-entry (*sotāpatti-phala-sacchikiriyāya paṭipanno*)
2. The stream enterer (*sotāpanna*)
3. One in the process of realizing the fruition of once-returning (*sakadāgāmi-phala-sacchikiriyāya paṭipanno*)
4. The Once-returner (*sakadāgāmi*)
5. One in the process of realizing the fruition of non-returning (*anāgāmi-phala-sacchikiriyāya paṭipanno*)
6. The Non-returner (*anāgāmi*)
7. One in the process of realizing the fruition of *arahat* (*arahatta-phala-sacchikiriyāya paṭipanno*) and
8. The Worthy One (*arahā*).⁶

Buddha continues to tell the Sākyan prince Mahānāma that the members of this *sāvaka-saṅgha* are "worthy of gifts (*āhuneyyo*), hospitality (*pāhuneyyo*), offerings (*dakkhiṇeyyo*) and reverential salutations (*añjalikaraṇīyo*), and are the unsurpassed field of merit (*anuttaraṃ puñṇakkhettaṃ*)."⁷ However, the *nikāya* passages are ambiguous and fail to identify exactly the members of this group i.e. whether this *sāvaka-saṅgha*, as the third refuge, includes monks, nuns, and layman and laywoman followers or not. The only specific definition given is that this group contains only the disciples of advanced spiritual standings i.e. *sāvakās* belonging either to the *sekha* or/and the *asekha* category.⁸ Nevertheless, if the term *sāvaka* was used to mean the same thing as 'ariya-[*sāvaka*]', which actually was, and not specifically as a *bhikkhu* or a *bhikkhunī*, then a safe consensus would be that the *sāvaka-saṅgha* as

the third refuge includes all four assemblies of advanced Buddhist followers of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen claiming to be or acknowledged as *Āriyas*. Substantial *nikāya* evidence to this understanding can be found in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* where Buddha used the terms *sāvaka* to refer to the monks and layman followers and *sāvika* to refer to the nuns and laywoman followers, stating that he would not pass away until they are “accomplished, trained, skilled and learned, holders of the *Dhamma*, living according to the *Dhamma*, abiding by the appropriate conduct, faring along the path of the *Dhamma*.”¹⁰ Elsewhere these same four individuals, spelt out as a *bhikkhu*, a *bhikkhunī*, an *upāsaka* and an *upāsikā*, are said to illuminate the *saṅgha* (*saṅgham sobhenti*) and are credited by the Buddha himself to be ‘the lights of the *saṅgha*’ (*saṅghasobhanā*).¹¹ The qualities and characteristics of these four individuals described in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* are identical with the wordings of the definition of the *saṅgha* as the third refuge described to Mahānāma. In the first instance, these four are simply referred to as *sāvaka/sāvika*. In the second instance, they are specifically spelt out as a monk, a nun, a layman follower and a laywoman follower and are designated as the lights of the *saṅgha*. Hence, taking out the terms *sāvaka* and *saṅgha* appearing in these two instances, we get to construct the term *sāvaka-saṅgha*, the third of the triple refuge, whose members are unequivocally drawn from the monastic and the lay communities alike. The *nikāya* definition of the *sāvaka-saṅgha*, though unarguably and invariably reveals the *Āriyan* nature of the *saṅgha*, it has not been, however, interchangeably used with the term *ariya-saṅgha* (noble *saṅgha*) in the *nikāya* passages. Instead the term *ariya-sāvaka*, or more correctly *sutavā ariya-sāvako* (the well-instructed noble disciple), was used to imply a member of the *sāvaka-saṅgha*.¹²

The occurrence of the term *ariya-saṅgha* as a synonym of *sāvaka-saṅgha* appears only in exegetical texts, a term which seems to have been introduced by Venerable Buddhaghosa, the greatest Pāli commentator.¹³ The term *sāvaka*, on the other hand, when used independently without epithets attached, is to be understood from its specific contexts appearing in *nikāya* passages, for it carries an ambiguous meaning. However, the *nikāya* readings indicate that Buddha personally used the term *sāvaka* to refer to his monastic disciples (*bhikkhu buddhassa sāvako*)¹⁴ while he used the terms *upāsaka*¹⁵ and *upāsikā*¹⁶ to refer to his male and female lay followers respectively. The same term *sāvaka* was also used by contemporary heretics to refer

to a monastic or/and a lay follower of the Buddha in general. In the more specific soteriological scheme, *sāvaka* was used affixed with *ariya*, described stereotypically in the *nikāya* texts as '*sutavā ariyasāvako ariyānaṃ dassāvī ariyadhammassa kovido ariyadhamme suvinīto...*'¹⁸ who was to be contrasted with a run-of-the-mill person, *puṭhujjana* whose stereotype description runs as '*assutavā puṭhujjano ariyānaṃ adassāvī ariyadhammassa akovido ariyadhamme avinīto...*'¹⁹ Because the term *sāvakaśaṅgha* was always used followed by its stereotype description '*supaṭipanno, dakkhiṇeyyo*', etc. whose members are accomplished, trained, skilled and learned *bhikkhūs*, *bhikkhūṇīs*, *upāsakas* and *upāsikās* who have been rightly acknowledged to be the lights of the *śaṅgha* as *sutavā ariyas*, it is in this soteriological context that we understand *śaṅgha* of the third refuge as comprising these four individuals, irrespective of whether they are monastics or lay. Yet, however much this conclusion seems convincing; it is still refutable and largely remains vague in the light of other *nikāya* passages. The *Dakkhiṇavibhaṅga-sutta* where we get the mention of both communities of monks and nuns as *ubhatośaṅgha* names a list of seven kinds of offerings, [the results of] which are said to be "incalculable (*asaṅkheyyam*), immeasurable (*appameyyam*)."²⁰

Interestingly, these seven kinds of offerings are to be made only to the *ubhatośaṅgha*, effectively leaving out the *upāsaka ariyasāvakas* and *upāsikā ariyasāvikās*. Does it mean that offerings made to the lay *ariyasāvakas/sāvikās* do not bear the same results? The answer, at least from this *Sutta* point of view, seems to be in the affirmative. The other drastic viewpoint of this *Sutta* is that it defines the *śaṅgha* of the third refuge as only comprising the *ubhatośaṅgha*. According to the *Sutta*, giving gifts even to the immoral *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhūṇīs* of evil characters for the sake of [in the name of the *sāvaka/ariya?*] *śaṅgha* still counts as incalculable, immeasurable! The only comforting part of the *Sutta* is that it also mentions a list of fourteen kinds of offerings, namely, offerings extended to the Buddha, a *paccekabuddha*, to the eight *ariyan* disciples, to one outside [the Dispensation] who is free from lust for sensual pleasures, to a virtuous ordinary person (*puṭhujjanasilavante*), to an immoral ordinary person (*puṭhujjanadussīle*) and to an animal. Could it be that offerings made to the two lay *ariyan* communities were included in the category of the eight *ariyan* disciples? It could be and indeed reasonably they were, but that still does not rectify the *Sutta's* position that the third

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refuge only comprises the *ubhatośaṅgha*. Hence when the Buddha asked his stepmother Gotami to offer the set of new robes meant for him to the *saṅgha* as “*saṅghe, gotami, dehi*” (mother, offer it to the *saṅghas*), we are made to understand that the third of the triple refuge is essentially that of the monastic *saṅgha*, because this statement was followed by the analysis of seven kinds of offerings extendable only to the *ubhatośaṅgha*. The *Dakkhīṇavibhaṅga-sutta*'s position is strongly supported by the *Araṇavibhaṅga-sutta* where Buddha talks of his Middle Way to be a celibate way “beyond the pursuit of the pleasures of the five senses.”²¹ Unlike the laity,²² the *ubhatośaṅgha* which is exclusively celibate in nature represents that Middle Way beyond the pursuit of the five sensual pleasures. The reason why the lay *ariyan* disciples were denied the fortune of offerings, gifts and reverential salutations can also be understood from a conversation between King Kosala and the Buddha. Asked by the former as to where gifts should be given, the latter replied “wherever the mind feels confidence” (*yattha cittaṃ pasīdati*).²³ The answer given is very significant in that gifts are not to be confined only to monastic members but to be extended to the *sekhas* and *asekhas* proper.²⁴

However, to the second question as to a gift given where it bears great fruit (*kattha dinnam mahapphalam*), the reply was “to a virtuous person (*sīlavato*)”; and this virtuous person to whom a gift given bears great fruit has been described as “someone gone forth from the home life into homelessness, has abandoned five factors and is endowed with five.”²⁵ This odd definition significantly changes everything, because a lay *ariyan* disciple by virtue of being a lay, albeit a *sekha* or *asekha*, can only meet the second condition, not the first, which is why he/she is not the ideal person to be given gifts for that matter.²⁶ Elsewhere Buddha is also quoted in the *Ratana-sutta* as saying that gifts given to the *sāvakaśaṅgha* of the Well Gone One (*Sugata*) consisting of the eight *ariyas* yield great results.²⁷ According to the *Dakkhīṇavibhaṅga-sutta* and the explanation given to King Kosala, the statements worthy of gifts, hospitality, offerings and reverential salutations, unsurpassed field of merits, incalculable, immeasurable, bears great fruits, all these would apply, strictly speaking, only to the *ubhatośaṅgha* of the *sāvakaśaṅgha* proper, because its members meet the two conditions: they are monastics and have eradicated some or all of the latent fetters. But if one were to critically evaluate the statement occurring in the *Ratana-sutta* and elsewhere, one would get a different picture, because the lay

ariyan disciples were not singled out as not being a party to the *dakkhiṇeyyasāṅgha* (gift-worthy-*saṅgha*). Thus, the *nikāya* readings indicate in the overall sense that the third refuge was understood quite earlier on as essentially referring to the monastic *saṅgha*.

Thus we see the householders Ugga of Vesālī²⁸ and Ugga of Hatthigāma²⁹, who were both *anāgāmi*s and being such, should be considered as belonging to the *sāvaka*saṅgha representing the third refuge, paying reverential salutations to a certain monk of with no spiritual standings! Indeed nowhere in the Tipiṭaka do we find an incident where lay *ariyan* disciples were being showered with gifts or reverential salutations because of their spiritual attainments, which amounts to saying that they were not considered a party to the third refuge. However, Buddha's consolidation of his monastic *saṅgha* as the ideal and indubitable third refuge worthy of gifts and reverential salutations was not essentially meant to downplay the spiritual status of the lay *ariyan* disciples. As a matter of fact, the importance of the monastic *saṅgha* always seemed to have been greatly emphasized to the sakyans of Kapilavatthu whose haughtiness was legendary.³⁰ Gotamī, prince Mahānāma, Venerable Ānanda and Venerable Channa³¹ were all Sakyans who had particular affection and personal love and pride towards the Buddha, the greatest son of their kingdom sometimes at the expense of the greater *saṅgha* of which Buddha was the head. It is to them that Buddha stressed the greatest importance of the monastic *saṅgha* in the hope that they would start appreciating and respecting its members equally and perhaps even more.

Hence, we see the significantly different definition of the *sāvaka*saṅgha as described to the *sākyans* and in other *nikāya* passages. Indeed essentially Buddha couldn't have excluded the lay *ariyan* disciples from the *sāvaka*saṅgha or the *dakkhiṇeyyasāṅgha* just because they were not monastics. That the *ariyas* of *asekha* grade are not soteriologically different from the Buddha himself in respect to their cognitive understanding of reality needed for the cessation of *dukkha*³² implies that such *ariyas* cannot be fundamentally different or singled out on the basis of whether or not they are monastics; and it is in this context that the lay *asekhas* demand a more inclusive representative role in the *saṅgha* of the triple refuge. But of course whether there could be lay *asekhas* at all is another subject matter. However, though the Pāli

tradition holds the view that a laity must ordain as a monastic within seven days of his/her attainment of *arahathood* or face imminent death, *nikāya* passages show that there were indeed lay *arahats*, no matter how short they lived as in the case of Bahiya, a merchant,³³ Tapassu, a householder³⁴ and King Suddhodana³⁵ who were lay *arahats*.

Nevertheless, if the third refuge i.e. the *sāvaka-saṅgha* is to be understood as constituting the *ubhatosaṅgha* of both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* per se, then it leads to another *nikāya* created problem. The *aṭṭhagarudhammā* (eight important rules) of the *bhikkhunīs* technically prevent them from claiming a place in the *sāvaka-saṅgha* as the third refuge, because the first rule of the *garudhammas* states that a *bhikkhunī* with even 100 *vassas* must respect, in every way, a *bhikkhu* ordained but that day and the eighth rule states that *bhikkhunīs* cannot admonish *bhikkhus* but *bhikkhus* can admonish *bhikkhunīs*.³⁶ If the sole purpose of going for refuge to the *saṅgha* is to derive inspiration, get admonished and to be guided by its accomplished, trained, skilled and learned *ariyan* members, then it makes no sense at all why *bhikkhunīs* should be included in the *saṅgha* of the triple refuge if they were not to admonish and guide spiritually junior monks but required to pay respects to a monk ordained but that day. These two rules of the eight *Garudhammas* imply that the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* of the *sāvaka-saṅgha* as representing the third refuge is only to be sought by lay followers. Hence, when a *bhikkhu* of any grade recites “*saṅgham saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*,” the underlying meaning of it leads us to understand as “I go to the *bhikkhusaṅgha* of the *sāvaka-saṅgha* for refuge” whereas when a *bhikkhunī* or a lay follower of any grade recites likewise, it ought to be understood as “I go to the *ubhatosaṅgha* for refuge!” That the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* cannot virtually claim an all-encompassing authority as part of the third refuge makes the *bhikkhusaṅgha* the only candidate for the third triple refuge.

This hypothesis implies that though the term *bhikkhu* was omitted from *saṅgha*, as we have noted at the beginning in the definition of the third refuge described to Mahānāma, it is almost obvious, at least from our critical review so far, that the word ‘*saṅgham*’ in the third formula *saṅgham saraṇaṃ gato hoti*³⁷ and in the statement ‘*saṅgham saraṇaṃ gatā*’³⁸ essentially refers to the original word ‘*bhikkhusaṅghaṇca*’ in the formulae occurring at footnote#3. The credence of this

logical conclusion is that the occurrence of '*bhikkhu-saṅghañca*' as the third formula of going for refuge is found all over *nikāya* passages whereas '*bhikkhunīsaṅghañca*' or '*ubhatoṣaṅghañca*' or even *sāvakaṣaṅghañca* for that matter does not occur at all as a formula for going for refuge. Every time the going-for-refuge (*saraṇā-gaṃana*) formula appears only the *bhikkhusaṅgha* found its consistent position as the third of the triple refuge. The only thing we don't exactly understand is why *bhikkhusaṅgha* was used in stead of the more appropriate term *sāvakaṣaṅgha*, especially because the term *bhikkhu* is vaguer than the term *sāvaka*. From among the sixteen descriptions of a *bhikkhu* given in the *Pārājikākaṇḍapāli*, only six can strictly be considered as *ariyan* attributes³⁹ while the rest eight descriptions are ordinary.⁴⁰ Thus, when the term *bhikkhusaṅghañca* is cited as the third of the triple refuge, we are not certain if it was used inclusively or otherwise. Nevertheless, even the preference of the masculine prefix in the term *sāvakaṣaṅgho* is further indicative of our conclusion that it is only the *ariyan* members of the *bhikkhusaṅgha* who comprise the third refuge, because all other possible prefixes like *sāvikā-*, *bhikkhunī-*, *upāsikā-* and *upāsaka-* are neither implied nor explicit in the third canonical *saraṇa-gaṃana* formula *bhikkhu-saṅghaṃ saraṇam gaṃchāmi*.

Thus, our consensus so far that the *saṅgha* as the third refuge refers only to the monastic *saṅgha* and that only the *bhikkhusaṅgha* can technically claim as representing the third of the triple refuge not only justifies the traditional understanding and practice of going for the refuges and the unquestioned faith thrown upon the authority of the *bhikkhusaṅgha* as the flag of the *Sāsana* but also canonically very sound. In the absence of any reliable sources, we are not exactly certain as to what and how the atmosphere was in the understanding and practice of going for refuge with regard to the *saṅgha* particularly in the post-canonical period when the Buddhist history was still blessed with the active presence of both the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī saṅghas*. But now that the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* has died out around the 11th century in all the orthodox Theravādin cultures, the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* remains the unchallenged champion for the post of the third refuge for well over two and a half millenniums. The only question remains now to ask is whether this unchallenged *bhikkhusaṅgha*, in its long legacy, has been able to retain its authority and credibility as members of the *sāvakaṣaṅgha*, the only authorized *saṅgha* that can legally claim the post of the third refuge. The answer is of course anyone's guess.

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However, if the current prevailing hypothesis that the present *bhikkhusaṅgha* is but a conventional representation of the original *bhikkhusaṅgha* of the triple refuge proves to be right then with all legality we have to accept the painful truth that Buddhism has lost its third refuge, for a regent is not the king, so to speak. That the historic *bhikkhusaṅgha* became extremely academic oriented rather than practice oriented particularly during and after the period starting from the 1st century B.C. the 5th century A.D. when the compilation and composition of the Tipitaka and its exegetical texts were at their peak, monastic members aiming for ariyanhood in this very life began to dwindle drastically. Perhaps sensing the spiritual vacuum of the *bhikkhusaṅgha* which has by then effectively begun to lose its moral authority and spiritual authenticity as constituting the third refuge, a supplementary stanza to the locus classicus *nikāya* definition of the *sāvakaṣaṅgha* has later been introduced as follows:

*Saṅghaṃ jīvitam pariyaṃtam saraṇam gacchāmi. Ye ca saṅghā aññā
ca ye ca saṅghā anāgatā paccuppannā ca ye saṅghā ahaṃ vandāmi
sabbadā. Natthi me saraṇam aññam saṅgho me saraṇam varaṃ.
Etena saccavajjena hotu me jayamaṃmagalam. Uttamaṅgena
vandeham saṅghaṅca duvidhuttamaṃ, saṅgho yo khalito doso
saṅgho khamatu taṃ mamaṃ.*

Though this non-canonical verse is popularly chanted by theravādins and is found in all major *paritta* (chanting) books, the source as to by whom, where and when it was introduced or composed remains untraced. That the major composition of later Pāli texts and various other devotional chanting and verses was undertaken during the Anurādhapura period (ca. 3rd B.C. 8th A.D.) of ancient Sri Lanka, we propose that this devotional stanza must have been composed most probably by the ancient Sinhalese *theras* of that period. The coinage that is of utmost interest to us here, however, is '*saṅghaṅca duvidhuttamaṃ*' which means 'the *saṅgha* of two kinds or twofold *saṅgha* which is the highest (*du-vidhā-uttama*).'¹ That this stanza remains untraced with no commentarial reference, we are at a disadvantage in deciding these two kinds (*duvidhā*) of *saṅgha*. This *duvidhasaṅgha* etymologically cannot refer to the *ubhatosaṅgha* of the *Dakkhiṇāvibhaṅga-sutta* because the words '*duvidhā*' (two kinds) and '*ubhato*' (both) are obviously not the same. Moreover, this *duvidha-*

saṅgha cannot mean the *ubhatosaṅgha*, because monks technically cannot worship nuns as we have already noted whereas the stanza's ending in quotation goes as 'vandehaṃ saṅghañca duvidhuttamaṃ' (I worship the twofold *saṅgha*, the highest).

To solve this, we have to turn our attention to Venerable Buddhaghosa's explanation of the term *saṅgha* in the statement "*suṇātu me bhante saṅgho*" (Venerable Sirs, may the *saṅgha* listen to me!) appearing in the *Vinaya Pātimokkha*.⁴¹ He explains '*saṅgha*' as consisting of two divisions: *dakkhiṇeyya-saṅgha* (gifts-worthy-*saṅgha*) and *sammuti-saṅgha* (conventional *saṅgha*).⁴² The former consists of the eight *ariyan* disciples and the latter consists of the ordinary monks (*avisesena bhikkhusamāho*).⁴³ The fact that Venerable Buddhaghosa cared to acknowledge the members of the *saṅgha* as of *ariyan* and *sammuti* implies that by his time (ca. 5th century A.D.), the [*bhikkhu*]-*saṅgha* as the third refuge was already in dire need of a clearly demarcated charter. Following Venerable Buddhaghosa's explanation, we would instead, for our interpretation of the term *duvidhasaṅgha* in question, propose the two oft-occurring *nikāya* phrases: *sutavā ariya-sāvako bhikkhu* (a well-instructed noble monk disciple) and *assutavā puthujjano bhikkhu* (an uninstructed monk worldling).⁴⁴ By introducing this *duvidhasaṅgha* as a supplementary definition of the *sāvaka-saṅgha* of the third refuge, the *bhikkhusaṅgha* whose *assutavā puthujjana* members by now made up the majority has attempted throughout its long historical legacy in tactfully validating its authority as the third refuge. One conspicuous outcome of this attempt was that the [*ariya*]-*sāvaka-saṅgha* was made to become a thing of the past which is why the supplementary verse includes a *saṅgha* of the past (*ye ca saṅghā atītā ca*); and the present *saṅgha* (*paccuppannā ca ye saṅghā*) was always to be venerated in relation to the past and a future (*anāgata*) *saṅgha*, something which is of course alien to the *nikāya* texts. Thus, presenting itself to be the *saṅgha* of the third refuge, gifts given where produces great fruits, this so-called *sammuti-saṅgha* or more correctly the *assutavā puthujjana bhikkhusaṅgha*, made it a practice today to invoke the presence of the Buddha and his immediate *dakkhiṇeyya-saṅgha* (i.e. the *sāvaka-saṅgha*)

in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. Hence, in the Sinhalese Buddhist culture of today, as was in the past, we see the Sinhalese *theras* exhorting their lay devotees to extend gifts to the *mahāsaṅgha*, the great *saṅgha* consisting of “*Ānanda Nanda Rāhula Sāriyut Moggallāna ādi Mahākashyapa maharāṭṭha wahanse-laṭṭa*.” These were some of the great *arahat* monks who constituted the Buddha’s immediate great *sāvaka-saṅgha*. This exhortation is then followed by a standard formula, “*imaṃ bhikkhaṃ saparikkhāraṃ buddhapamukhassa bhikkhusaṅghassa dema*” (we offer this alms food together with gifts to the *bhikkhusaṅgha* headed by Buddha).⁴⁶

According to the analysis of seven kinds of offerings mentioned in the *Dakkhiṇavibhaṅgasutta*, offering to the *bhikkhusaṅgha* headed by Buddha can only be made during the lifetime of the Buddha himself and this is the first kind. Now that the Buddha has passed away long before, the present *bhikkhusaṅgha*’s insistence that offerings be made to them headed by the Buddha himself is a gross textual manipulation. The practice of invoking the past *saṅgha* or the future *saṅgha* for that matter to validate and upgrade the present *bhikkhusaṅgha*’s moral authority and spiritual credentials as the third refuge cannot be augmented by any *nikāya* reference either. The closest *nikāya* reference could be the *Dakkhiṇavibhaṅgasutta*’s mentioning of “giving gifts even to an immoral (*dussīla*) monk for the sake of the greater [*sāvaka*]-*saṅgha* still counts incalculable, immeasurable.” The invocation of the past (*atītā*) and future (*anāgata*) *saṅghas* to authenticate the present *saṅgha* as the *anuttaraṃ puññakkhettaṃ* or *dakkhiṇeyya-saṅgho* must have been a misinterpretation or rather a twisting of a statement occurring in a *Cūlavagga* passage of the *Vinaya-Piṭaka*, “*tena hi tvaṃ gahapati te saṭṭhiṃ vihāre āgatānā-gatassa cātuddisassa saṅghassa patiṭṭhāpehī ’ti*.”⁴⁷ (In that case, householder, do you offer those sixty monasteries to the [members of the] *saṅgha* of the four quarters present or not come). Obviously this injunction of the Buddha to the householder is not referring to offering something to a combined *saṅgha* of the past, present and future as suggested by Chakravarti.⁴⁸ It is clearly meant that the present *saṅgha* at any given point of time is the central concern of the injunction. And it was merely an injunction allowing monks to accept fixed lodgings as a common property and that gifts are to be given to the members of the *saṅgha* as such.

In view of the fact that the academic oriented *bhikkhusaṅgha* of the recent historical past and today cannot also really claim an all-encompassing authority as the third of the triple refuge based on the review provided herein, we are left with the conclusion that the *ariyan* legacy of the original *bhikkhusaṅgha* of the triple refuge has technically ceased to exist in the present day. This conclusion, of course, can be refuted and repudiated with strong facts particularly drawn from the forest (*arañña*) traditions of Sri Lanka⁴⁹ and Thailand⁵⁰ where the members of the *bhikkhusaṅgha* vigorously practice the thirteen *dhutaṅgas* in pursuance of *Nibbāna* in this very life itself.⁵¹ The internationally well known *vipassanā* movement of today started by Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, a movement that emphasizes on the realization of the *ariyan* fruits in this very life, is certainly a noticeable trend in reviving or perhaps reinforcing the traditional *sāvakaṅgha*, the *saṅgha* of the third refuge as a living spiritual force. Considering such spiritually dedicated forest monks and practitioners as having attained some or even all of the *ariyan* fruits even at present, it can thus effectively challenge and demerit our conclusion.

However, to whatever conclusion our review thus far leads, as far as the *Theravāda* tradition is concerned, the *saṅgha* of the triple refuge has always been defined as the community of disciples (*sāvakaṅgha*) who are unequivocally *ariyas* of varying degrees of spiritual attainments. The consolidation of the *ubhatoṅgha*, particularly the *bhikkhusaṅgha* over the lay *ariyasāvakas* was only a question of to whom gifts and highest veneration should be given. The introduction of a *duvidhasaṅgha* was a desperate attempt to justify the spiritual credibility of the largely, if not exclusively, academic oriented *bhikkhusaṅgha* and certainly it was also the beginning of a period during which the exclusive role of the *bhikkhusaṅgha* was later to be justified as the sole and ultimate authority of being the *saṅgha* of the triple refuge.