

Going Forth: From Home to Homelessness

By Mu Soeng

“Going Forth” (Pali: *pabbajana*; Skt: *pravraajana*) is a term of great antiquity in broader Indian philosophical thought, and seems to have been a core reference point for religious rebels at the time of the Buddha. It refers to a clarion call for “going forth from home life to homelessness” that was quite audible and visible at the time of Buddha’s birth. It was seen in the figure of the wandering ascetic whose sighting became one of the four “heavenly signs” the young and safely-ensconced Siddhartha Gautama saw: an old man, a sick person, a corpse, and the wandering ascetic. These four signs were disturbing enough for the young man to go forth from his comfortable life of luxury and security to live as an ascetic in the forest. Until very recently, the figure of an ochre-robed *sannyasin*, the wandering ascetic, was so common in the cities and towns of India as to be part of the scenery that everyone took for granted.

The protocols of Going Forth at the time of the birth of the Buddha effectively meant leaving the life of a civic society and becoming a wandering ascetic, often joining a group of ascetics. The central fact of the future Buddha going into the forest remained the physical act of leaving a domestic life. Within the Buddhist tradition this call got translated, centuries after the death of the Buddha, into settled monasticism. The physical act of joining a community of monks has remained the most visible dimension of Going Forth in the life of a Buddhist.

In recent years, Sangharakshita, the British-born former Buddhist monk and founder of Western Buddhist Fellowship has broadened the definition of “Going Forth” in interesting ways that go beyond the conventional monastic context:

He [Sangharakshita] understands Going Forth as the act of taking personal responsibility for oneself and one’s development independent of the views and conventions of the society in which one belongs. In his terminology Going Forth is the act whereby the individual separates himself from the ‘group’ – the group being the various overlapping collectivities to which human beings belong and which are organized for their survival, exacting subservience to norms and customs as the price of protection and aid. Going Forth from the group is therefore a key step in spiritual life, since it is only as an individual that one can develop on the path. Going Forth does not, however, mean hostility to the group – merely that one is not, or is less and less, bound by its norms and customs.” (“Going Forth and Citizenship” by Subuthi, Western Buddhist Fellowship website).

The Historical Background

In trying to understand the contexts in which the norms of Going Forth among the wandering ascetics were contesting the established order of things in ancient India, the following observation from Sukumar Dutt's classic study of the protocols of early Buddhist monks (*Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*) seems to be quite helpful:

To the makers of the Dharmasastras [the literature of the Vedic Aryan civilization] the Vedic Aryan tradition contemplates only the householder's life: it sanctions and supports only this ashrama. The Parivrajaka, the wandering almsman, is a recusant from it in his going 'from home into homelessness', a custom bereft of Vedic sanction . . . 'the way of Brahma-seeking', it is said, is not for householders, but only for the homeless. The standpoint of those who give the call to a higher-than-social life is necessarily different from those to whom the stability of society is the be-all and end-all. . . . Some of the latter-day authors of Dharmasastras assail the Upanisadic ashrama theory of 'life in stages' on the ground that it is not 'seen' in the Vedas in which only one stage, viz, that of the householder is contemplated.

The ashrama theory referred to in the above passage speaks of four stages of life for a noble (Aryan) person: 1) Brahmacharya – the life of a celibate student working in close contact with a teacher; 2) Grahasta – the life of a married householder; 3) Vanaprastha – the stage where both husband and wife leave home after their children have grown up and have children of their own, to join a community of "retired" folks in the forest; and 4) Sannyasin – the stage where husband and wife separately leave the community upon intimation of infirmity and/or approaching death, and wander around in the forest until the moment of death.

It should be noted that a) this system emerged as a result of various accommodations and arrangements between the older Vedic culture and the highly visible culture of wandering ascetics in pre-Buddhist India; and b) it was put into practice by a relatively small number of people who had internalized the classical teachings on life and death. It was not for the faint of the heart. Nonetheless, as a cultural norm, it remains the defining feature of an evolved religious life in all Indian traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and others.

The classical Vedic culture (circa 1500-800 BCE) was centered on sacrifice (animals and grain) as ritual action (karma), which sustained the human afterlife, the gods, and the cosmos. The Indus Valley culture preceding it (circa 2500-1500 BCE) seems to have been organized around Fertility Goddess cults and/or symbolism associated with yogic practices. In the ascendant Vedic society, the esoteric knowledge of the Vedic priest (the Brahmin) in conducting the sacred ritual and his correct intonation of sacred *mantras* was seen as key to controlling the external world. It was also seen as a method for generating inner heat that epitomized the magical efficacy of the rituals performed

externally. It was a system of “acquisition of power,” and we can see its historical evolution along these lines:

- 1) Yogic culture of Indus Valley civilization offering possibility of magical or political power through yogic practices;
- 2) Early Vedic culture of northwestern India creating a culture of ritual sacrifice around a circle of fire (*dhuni*) as a tool for calling upon gods and getting their protection in various enterprises on earth; a system of acquiring magical and political power;
- 3) Later Vedic culture internalizing sacrificial symbolism and moving from priestly ritual to yogic practices largely under the influence of wandering ascetics who might have been remnants of older Indus Valley culture, and who had re-grouped themselves as followers of Jain tradition in pre-Buddhist India;
- 4) Post-Vedic culture of the Upanishads creating a new definition of karma through intentional action rather than its being generated in ritual action/sacrifice. This definition created a new relationship between the human being and the cosmos in which knowledge of the Absolute (Brahman) and the ontological status of the Self (atman) becomes pivotal.

The eastward expansion of the geographical frontier of Aryan civilization and its role in facilitating the emergence of *paribajjika* (wandering ascetics) is a little known but instructive chapter in that story. This expansion may have started some two to three hundred years before the birth of the Buddha, and it is not unlike the Westward push of the American frontier before and after the Civil War, which allowed for a new vision of the individual and society to emerge in contrast to how the Puritans of New England had defined them up to that time.

Thus, it would seem that the institution of the *sannyasin*, the ubiquitous figure of a wandering renunciate in Hindu India, is a much later development, and seemingly greatly impacted by the wandering ascetics of the shramana tradition that was developed and honed in the new geographical areas of Magadha, the kingdom in eastern India that became home to a large population of ascetics. Rajagaha (Skt: Rajagraha), the ancient capital of this kingdom, was home to three highly-prominent religious personalities of sixth century BCE: the Buddha; Mahavira, the last great figure of Jain religion; and Makkali Gosala, the putative founder of Ajivika sect. There were doubtless many other ascetic sects that are now lost to history.

What follows from this is that the four-fold stages of life (ashrama) theory in the literature of later Hindu generations really emerged out of the powerful *leitmotif* of renunciation in shramana culture. Thus it is the ascetics of Buddhist, Jain, and other traditions who basically transformed Indian religious culture in lasting ways, making renunciation such an important part of Hindu religious thought that it came to be integrally identified with it. The fact that the *sannyasin*, the renunciate, is now such a defining feature of Hindu religious thought is a remarkable turnaround from the original model in the Vedas of a householder’s life.

A New Interpretation

In my own reflections on how the term Going Forth can conceivably speak to us within the contexts of our own twenty-first century sensibilities and realities, I have come to see it as “going forth into psychological homelessness” rather than the conventional physical homelessness. It seems to me that an emphasis on psychological homelessness and a consequent de-emphasis on physical homelessness offers a much more nuanced correlate to the exhortation of the Buddha to his followers: live a life of non-clinging. What is important to note about Buddha’s teachings is that a life of non-clinging is not *ultimately* dependent on physical homelessness; it can be achieved as well, perhaps more so, through psychological homelessness.

What can possibly explain the roots of psychological homelessness or non-clinging? The broadest understanding we have from our discussion about the culture of wandering ascetics in India is that it is rooted in recognizing the futility of worldly pleasures as a source of true happiness. The ubiquitous word *samsara* in Indian philosophical and religious traditions really speaks to this sense of futility. In a simple translation, *samsara* means the phenomenal world: the world of senses and sense-pleasures. For the Buddha, the phenomenal world was a place of craving and clinging (for the ignorant person) and therefore a source of suffering. A wise person can train himself or herself to negotiate the pitfalls of the phenomenal world without craving and clinging. That would be the end of suffering for the wise person.

A proper understanding of Buddha’s emphasis on craving and clinging does not make it “pessimistic” or “world-denying” as has often been claimed by its opponents. For the Buddhists, it is simply a quantifiable and a demonstrative equation: if you cling to the phenomenal world, you will suffer; if you do not cling, you will be free from suffering.

What then is *samsara*? The Buddha spoke often of the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. But in the broader Indian tradition, there is a step further back that speaks of the so-called five poisons of food, sleep, sex, fame, and wealth as the loci of greed, hatred, and delusion. No doubt the powerful drives of greed, hatred, and delusion work separately and collectively in tandem with each of the five poisons.

The presence of these five poisons and our craving and clinging for them is not a metaphysical issue; these are hard, existential presences in the life of each one of us. As our conditioned existence becomes more negatively complex, each of these poisons coalesce around metaphysical and conceptual constructs such as self, afterlife, past, future, good, bad, and so on.

In the Indian and Buddhist traditions, *samsara* and *dukkha* are almost synonymous terms. It was not only the Buddha who emphasized the centrality of *dukkha* in human condition but the broader Indian philosophical tradition, which has been in agreement in recognizing the transience and dissatisfactory nature of human existence. It is only in

formulating an escape or transcendence from *dukkha* that the Buddha and other Indian thinkers differ from each other. It is not surprising then that they all found a common ground in Going Forth: a householder's life is dusty and not conducive to a higher calling. One does one's duty (dharma) by one's family, but one is always aware of Plan B (husband and wife leaving home to enter a forest community) and Plan C (husband and wife separately leaving that community upon intimation of infirmity and death and wandering around as *sannyasin*). In other words, an overarching intention or sensibility has been put into each individual's psyche from very early on that determines how and in what ways he or she will engage with the phenomenal world.

The logic of this orientation of being in the world suggests that one cultivates a dispassionate approach to engagement with worldly affairs. One does what needs to be done but also recognizes that these worldly engagements are a hindrance to the ultimate goal of liberation (Skt: *moksha*; in Hindu tradition). In this orientation, leaving home to join a forest community in one's middle age is not an afterthought arising out of some existential crisis or trauma, but an organic unfolding of how one has always been in the world.

This dispassion toward worldly affairs is a core ingredient for psychological homelessness. Understood properly, it is not simply an individual issue but a collective one as well. If the value system of an entire society is not geared for striving for worldly success, what does it say about the notions of "progress," "improvement," or "success"? These differences in the so-called Eastern and Western ways of thinking are now front and center in public discourse around issues of what it means to be in the world, what it means to live a "meaningful life."

Psychological Homelessness

Our challenge then is to understand what this dispassion, this psychological homelessness, means for living a Buddhist life. Traditionally it means an end to suffering through attaining *nirvāna*. But here we run into doctrinal difficulties of trying to explicate what *nirvāna* means. For many people *nirvāna* is a mystical experience that transcends human experience. Even among Buddhist teachers, there is no consensus in interpreting *nirvāna*.

But it may be possible to suggest that the *nirvāna* experience or a mystical experience does induce a sense of dispassion in the experiencing subject. We can perhaps go one more step and suggest that a common theme that can be identified, though not always talked about, in all these mystical experiences is a sense of a phenomenal world that is *stifling* in its multiplicity. In other words, the more complex the multiplicity, the more stress is felt in the awareness matrices of the experiencing subject. This stress is quantifiable as the inability of awareness to process all the data coming into the perceptual-cognitive field. In "Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious" the cognitive scientist Timothy Wilson writes that in each second we have nearly two million bits of data coming in, but our conscious mind can process only

forty of them. Our mind's inability to process all that it is coming into contact with becomes a source of stress and anxiety in an untrained mind.

The subjective experience of a meditative state, on the other hand, shows that it is possible to let go of multiplicity while focusing instead on a chosen object of awareness, such as the breath coming in and going out. In this meditative state, there is a quantifiable lessening of stress. In other words, with training one lets go of the "filters" that have been put into place in our normal conditioning to obscure the child-like innocence and curiosity that is still there in the background as our evolutionary inheritance. Letting go of these filters is a recovery of that child-like state, at least for a short period of time, leaving one feeling refreshed and recharged. We need not enter into obscure philosophical arguments about whether to call such an experience "unitary consciousness" or some other positivistic designation. It can be said with some degree of confidence, however, that the experience of letting go of the accumulated filters in our awareness is accessible to anyone with some training in discipline.

This discussion is relevant only to the extent that in our normal human conditioning, we find a "home" in the filters: the "poisons" of food, sex, sleep, fame, wealth, and a vast array of subsets of them. Our craving and clinging in varying degrees to each becomes a kind of virus that infects the total environment and entrenches itself through normative drives of greed, hatred, and delusion.

There seems to have been a spoken and unspoken recognition among Buddhist and Hindu householders in Asian history that finding a "home" in *samsara* and its consequent "poisons" is a recipe for putting oneself in bondage in all the birth cycles. There is a corresponding recognition of the limitations and futility of these poisons in providing lasting happiness, as well as a sense of "shame" in aligning one's efforts in pursuing one or many of them. It is this sense of shame that gives urgency to embracing the stage of life where one is able to leave home and hearth and be in an environment where one does not have to be in bondage to these poisons.

So we come to the proposition that "leaving home" and "going forth into homelessness" is not so much about a physical structure of a home but the "home" we have created for the pursuit of the five poisons as the operating principles of our life. Correspondingly, "homelessness" is not so much about being in the forest (although that does help) but disenchantment with, dispassion for, and non-pursuit of the temptations and seductions of the poisons.

Whether one leaves the physicality of a home is largely a matter of detail, at least in my understanding. I like to think that it is possible for a trained person to live the life of an urban hermit in New York City with just as much discipline as a monk lives in the forest. The urban hermit can create a daily structure in much the same way that a forest hermit does; he or she can step outside the apartment with as much dispassion, detachment, and equanimity as does a forest hermit.

Human experience shows that connecting with psychological homelessness in a positive way is a powerful incentive, especially in middle-age years, to uncover the

layers of disenchantment, alienation, stress, and unsatisfactoriness that have been there all along as part of our life experience, which we have continued to either suppress or deny. Buddha's teachings see going forth into psychological homelessness as a creative act of re-evaluation of our human life. It is the beginning of a new chapter in our human journey where we relearn to view the world with fresh new eyes.