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The Buddha and the Flavor of Freedom

By Nalin Swaris*

[Nalin Swaris, the eminent Sri Lankan Buddhist Scholar, recently passed away while in China. Apart from being a close friend and collaborator of Meeting Rivers, Nalin was perhaps the first Asian scholar who systematically revealed the liberative face of Buddhism. We will miss Nalin very much.

Below we carry excerpts from a book of his that Meeting Rivers published in 2008, titled "Buddhism, Human Responsibilities and Social Renewal", p 60-62.]

The Buddha's organisation came to be the Buddha Sangha. Membership in this Sangha was not determined by birth, but by free choice of an aspirant and by formal adoption into a new type of kinship group. The foundation of a new kind of *sangha* was a brilliant and imaginative project of practical and concrete transcendence. Members of the aristocracy, Brahmins, 'ritually unclean' performers of menial tasks like scavengers – all were admitted to full and equal membership in the Buddha Sangha. This act of "going forth from the household to the homeless life" was, in its historic context, more than the giving up of married life; it was the renunciation by men and women of the patriarchal household and its power relations.

The Buddha founded a new type of *sangha* by taking the positive values and practices of clan societies and by transcending in practice their narrow perspective, which confined egalitarianism to blood relations. The Buddha extended the egalitarianism and solidarity to include all human beings and founded a Universal Tribe, which he called a 'Sangha of the Four Quarters', comprising male and female renunciators and householders.

When a man or woman entered the Sangha of mendicants, he or she legally became a member of this universal society. But *de facto*, a candidate was initiated into a local commune, also called a *sangha*. The Universal Sangha was a federation of self-governing communes, a *ganasangha* in the best sense of the term, because the existing system's particularism had been transcended, not in thought but in practice.

Private property was abolished and the clan tradition of collective ownership adopted. Property was shared, as among members of an extended kinship group. The amalgam of this new society was filial devotion to the founding father, the Buddha, and *dana*: sharing the values of his Dhamma. In the spirit of *dana* the renunciators brought the gift of Dhamma instruction to the householders, and in exchange the householders provided them with the basic necessities of life. It is therefore not surprising that the first Buddhists referred to themselves as "Sons and Daughters of the Sakyan".

In accord with the tradition of lineage societies, the unity of early Buddhist *sanghas* was not merely legalistic. The members were welded together by bonds of familial affection. In their songs of freedom, the first Buddhist women expressed gratitude for the beautiful friendship, *kalyana mittata*, and the sisterhood they found in the *bhikkhuni sangha*. The Vinaya Pitaka refers to a community of *bhikkhus* led by the Elder Anuruddha where beautiful friendship reigned. When the Buddha inquired about the welfare of this community, Anuruddha replied: "Master, we are all living together on friendly terms and blending harmoniously, as milk and water, regarding each other with the eye of affection." (Vinaya Pitaka I. 351)

The Buddha's companion and aide Ananda once asked him if beautiful friendship and companionship in the Sangha constituted a partial realisation of his Noble Path, to which the Buddha replied:

Not so! Not so, Ananda! Truly, the whole of this life
of excellence consists in beautiful friendship, beautiful
support and beautiful comradeship (Samyutta Nikaya I. 88).

This seldom quoted description of the Noble Way's social efflorescence suggests that the Buddha believed that the goal of human liberation has to be realised not in another world, but through the creation of a

social humanity and a humane society. Real freedom is possible only in authentic communities where individuals obtain happiness in and through free and non-discriminating association. In a morally transformed society, individuals will see each other not as means or obstacles to their freedom, but as the conditions of their freedom. Freedom from every form of subjection is what his Sangha was meant to provide and exemplify. The Buddha felt that just as rivers with various names flow to the ocean lost their names and have but one taste, so too men and women from various social ranks and castes enter the Sangha, lose their former identities and become undifferentiated, "In my Sangha, there is only one flavour, the flavour of freedom – *vumutti rasa*". (Vinaya Pitaka V. 335)

**Nalin Swaris was an activist scholar who closely allied himself with the social movements of the poor all over Asia. His most comprehensive book on Buddhism was: 'The Buddha's Way to Liberation', Dehiwala, Sri Devi Press, 1999. He lived by himself on the outskirts of Colombo.*