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### Buddhist Monasteries

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*Buddhist Monasteries: Their Design,  
Inhabitants, and Role in Buddhist  
Tradition*

Bella Rushing



# Background

- Buddhism is one of the largest religions in the world, originating in India nearly 2,500 years ago
- Adhere to the teachings of the Buddha
  - Everything is suffering
  - The cause of suffering is clinging
  - Quit clinging
  - The eightfold path
- Three denominations
  - Theravada
  - Mahayana
  - Tibetan



# *Monks Versus Laypeople*

- Monks have renounced the ways of the world and are ordained scholars and teachers of Buddhism
- Laypeople actively participate in society and practice Buddhism in the context of everyday life
- The relationship between the two is mutually dependent
  - Laypeople provide for the needs of the monks through alms
  - Monks provide teaching to the laypeople

# *History of Monasteries*

- At its conception, Buddhism did not use monasteries to house the disciples of Buddha or Buddhist monks
  - Buddha taught asceticism- giving up all ties to the world
  - Monks relied on laypeople to provide them for any needs
- Buddha commanded his followers to take his teaching all over before his death
- Eventually, monks and nuns would begin to congregate in groups during the rainy season
- These communities became permanent, setting the ground work for monasteries
- Monasteries were built close to laypeople to continue the interdependent relationship

# *Monastery Inhabitants*

→ Monasteries are inhabited by monks and nuns

→ Path to monkhood

1. Layperson becomes novice monk (vows aren't binding)
2. Novice monks live in monastery and has a "spiritual guide" that helps them study and learn
3. Novice monks (at least 20 years old) decide to become an ordained monk
4. "Go forth," Acceptance, Proclamations

\* Each monastery has monastery-specific steps that a novice monk must take

# *Monastery Design*

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→ Found all around the world in many different places, each containing unique architecture

→ Key similarities

→ Three important architectural components

1. Stupas (Remains of Buddha)
2. Vihara ("shared space")
3. Chaitya (assembly hall)



# *Social Organization*

- Each monasteric community has a hierarchy within
- Equality is viewed as dichotomous with hierarchy
- Typically assigned by seniority and reflected in seating arrangement of monks when participating in formal activities
- Typical hierarchy
  - Oblates, Candidate/Postulant, Novice Monk, Lay Brother, Choir Monk, Monk, Herodeacon, Hieromonk, Sub-prior, Prior, Abbot, Hegumen, Archimandrite or Mother Superior
  - Hegumen, archimandrites, bishop (these are positions outside the monasteries and are often region/denomination specific)



# *Novice Versus Ordained Monks*

- Novice monks have little authority in a monastery and may not be full-time residents
  - Required to abide by 10 rules
  - Participate in some aspects of monastery life, but cannot hold position in monastic hierarchy
- Ordained monks participate fully in monastic life and are permanent residents
  - Required to abide by about 250 rules
  - Typically assigned a specific job along with their hierarchical position
- Organization and rules come from the Vinaya and Pratimoksa (and chayiks for Mahayana)

# *Monasteries in Society*

- Monasteries have adopted an important role in Buddhist society as a place for pilgrimage, education, spiritual growth, and refuge
- Buddhist pilgrimage tours are popular among both monks and laypeople and involve travelling to different monasteries and sacred sites of Buddhism
- Popular tourist destinations, as they each contain unique art, architecture, spiritual experiences, and even stunning natural views
- Monasteries play (and have played) an important role in education
- Students could be taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and even things like law, medicine, and astronomy by the monks in monasteries

# *Conclusions*

- Monasteries are a foundational piece of the Buddhist tradition
- "Hub" of cultural significance in Buddhism
- Serve as homes, place of worship, educational centers, and religious centers



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