
THE FOURFOLD BUDDHIST COMMUNITY IN EARLY BUDDHISM: TEXTUAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MAJJHIMA AND DĪGHA NIKĀYAS

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ABSTRACT

The Catuparisā, or fourfold Buddhist community, occupies an important place in the religious, social, and institutional development of early Buddhism. It comprises bhikkhus (monks), bhikkhunīs (nuns), upāsakas (male lay followers), and upāsikās (female lay followers). The concept represents a broad Buddhist community in which monastic and lay followers contribute to the preservation, practice, and transmission of the Buddha's teachings. This paper examines the representation and significance of the fourfold Buddhist community in the Majjhima Nikāya and the Dīgha Nikāya, two major collections of discourses preserved in the Pāli Canon. Through a textual and analytical approach, the study investigates how these Nikāyas portray the participation of different sections of the Buddhist community in religious practice, ethical discipline, teaching, and the continuation of the Dhamma. Particular attention is given to the relationship between monastic and lay followers, the responsibilities associated with different community roles, and the contribution of women and men to Buddhist religious life. The study also considers how the fourfold community provides a framework for understanding the social and institutional dimensions of early Buddhism. Rather than viewing Buddhism exclusively as a monastic tradition, the analysis highlights the complementary roles of ordained and lay followers in sustaining Buddhist teachings and practices. By examining relevant discourses from the Majjhima and Dīgha

Nikāyas, this paper seeks to clarify the textual foundations of the Catuparisā and its significance for understanding the development of the early Buddhist community.

KEYWORDS: Catuparisā; Fourfold Buddhist Community; Early Buddhism; Majjhima Nikāya; Dīgha Nikāya; Pāli Canon; Monastic Community; Lay Followers; Buddhist Social History; Transmission of the Dhamma.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early Buddhism developed not merely as a system of philosophical teachings but also as a religious tradition sustained by a community of practitioners. The Buddha's teachings addressed questions of human suffering, ethical conduct, mental cultivation, wisdom, and liberation. Their practical application required individuals who could learn, practise, teach, preserve, and transmit the Dhamma. In this context, the concept of the Catuparisā, or fourfold Buddhist community, provides an important framework for understanding the collective character of early Buddhist religious life.

The fourfold community consists of bhikkhus (monks), bhikkhunīs (nuns), upāsakas (male lay followers), and upāsikās (female lay followers). These four groups represent the principal constituencies of the Buddhist community. Although their religious responsibilities and institutional positions differ, they are connected through their commitment to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, as well as through their participation in Buddhist ethical and spiritual practices. The concept therefore enables an examination of Buddhism that extends beyond the activities of ordained monks and includes the contributions of women and men living both monastic and household lives.

The distinction between monastic and lay life is significant in the study of early Buddhism. Monks and nuns undertake an ordained life characterised by renunciation, discipline, meditation, and the pursuit of liberation. Lay followers generally continue their household and social responsibilities while practising generosity, moral conduct, devotion, and other forms of Dhamma-based living. These roles are different, but they are not necessarily independent of one another. Lay supporters contribute material assistance to the monastic community, while monastics preserve and communicate the teachings and provide religious guidance. The relationship between these groups consequently forms an important dimension of Buddhist communal life.

The Majjhima Nikāya and the Dīgha Nikāya, two collections within the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon, offer valuable textual material for investigating these relationships. The

Majjhima Nikāya contains medium-length discourses addressing a wide range of doctrinal, ethical, and practical questions. Its teachings illuminate the conduct of disciples, the development of spiritual qualities, the practice of meditation, and the application of the Dhamma to different circumstances. The Dīgha Nikāya, comprising long discourses, includes discussions of religious practice, social relationships, moral responsibilities, the organisation of the Buddhist community, and the Buddha's teaching mission. Read together, these collections provide a broad basis for examining the place of different groups within early Buddhist society.

The representation of the Catuparisā should not be understood only in terms of the numerical presence of four groups. It also raises questions about religious participation, access to instruction, responsibilities within the community, and the transmission of Buddhist teachings across generations. The presence of both monastic and lay followers suggests that the continuation of Buddhism depends on multiple forms of participation. Similarly, recognising both bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs invites closer examination of the representation of women in early Buddhist texts and their place within the wider religious community. A careful textual study must, however, distinguish between explicit references to the fourfold community and passages that discuss particular groups or individuals without directly presenting them as a unified structure.

The study of the Catuparisā also contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between Buddhist doctrine and social organisation. The Buddha's emphasis on ethical conduct, compassion, wisdom, and disciplined practice provides a normative foundation for communal life. At the same time, the textual representation of disciples, householders, rulers, teachers, and other social participants illustrates the interaction between religious ideals and the social settings in which Buddhism developed. The fourfold community can therefore be examined both as a religious concept and as a framework for analysing the organisation and continuity of early Buddhism.

The present study investigates the textual perspectives on the fourfold Buddhist community in the Majjhima Nikāya and the Dīgha Nikāya. It focuses on the representation of monks, nuns, male lay followers, and female lay followers; their respective religious roles; the relationship between ordained and household communities; and their contributions to the preservation and transmission of the Dhamma. The research adopts a qualitative textual and analytical approach, drawing on relevant Pāli discourses and their contextual interpretation. Rather than assuming that both Nikāyas present the Catuparisā in an identical manner, the

study seeks to identify their distinctive emphases and examine the broader significance of their representations.

By bringing these textual perspectives together, the paper aims to demonstrate how the fourfold Buddhist community provides a useful framework for understanding early Buddhism as a tradition sustained through diverse but interconnected forms of religious participation. It also seeks to contribute to the study of Buddhist social history by highlighting the importance of monastic and lay followers, including women, in the life and continuity of the early Buddhist tradition.

The Concept and Structure of the Catuparisā

The Catuparisā, or fourfold Buddhist community, is an important concept for understanding the collective organisation of early Buddhism. It comprises bhikkhus (monks), bhikkhunīs (nuns), upāsakas (male lay followers), and upāsikās (female lay followers). These four groups represent different forms of participation in the Buddhist tradition. While monks and nuns follow the monastic way of life, lay followers practise the Dhamma while maintaining their household, occupational, and social responsibilities. Together, they illustrate that Buddhist religious life is not confined to a single institutional or social category.

The fourfold community should be understood as a broad religious community rather than as a group in which all members have identical responsibilities. Ordained members undertake specific disciplinary commitments and devote themselves to religious practice, while lay followers support the Buddhist tradition through ethical conduct, generosity, learning, and participation in religious activities. Their responsibilities differ, but their commitment to the Buddha's teachings provides a common foundation.

The Majjhima Nikāya and the Dīgha Nikāya contain numerous discourses that illuminate the lives, practices, and relationships of Buddhist disciples. Their teachings address monastic discipline, spiritual development, household ethics, instruction, and the relationship between religious practice and society. These subjects provide a basis for understanding how the four groups participate in the wider Buddhist tradition.

The significance of the Catuparisā therefore extends beyond the classification of followers. It offers a framework for examining the relationship between individual spiritual development and collective religious life. Buddhism emphasises personal effort in overcoming suffering, yet the development and transmission of Buddhist teachings also depend on a community in which knowledge, guidance, material support, and ethical example are shared.

Representation of the Fourfold Community in the Majjhima Nikāya

The Majjhima Nikāya, comprising 152 medium-length discourses, provides important perspectives on Buddhist practice and the conduct of disciples. Its discussions cover meditation, moral discipline, wisdom, the overcoming of mental defilements, and the responsibilities of individuals following the Buddha's teaching. The collection also presents encounters between the Buddha and different social and religious groups, demonstrating the varied settings in which the Dhamma was communicated.

The Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN 44), for example, presents a discussion between the lay follower Visākha and the bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā. Dhammadinnā explains important doctrinal questions concerning personality, the five aggregates, and the path of practice. This discourse is significant for examining the intellectual and religious role of women in early Buddhism. The bhikkhunī is represented not merely as a participant in religious life but as a knowledgeable teacher capable of providing detailed explanations of Buddhist doctrine. This example also demonstrates that religious instruction in the early Buddhist texts is not represented exclusively as a male activity. The authority of Dhammadinnā in the discourse rests on her understanding of the Dhamma and her ability to explain complex ideas. Her role offers an important textual perspective on the participation of women in Buddhist learning and teaching.

The Upāli Sutta (MN 56) provides another relevant example of the Buddha's interaction with a prominent householder. Upāli, a follower of the Nigaṇṭhas, approaches the Buddha and engages in a discussion concerning moral and religious questions. His subsequent acceptance of the Buddha's teaching illustrates the importance of dialogue, examination, and personal conviction in the formation of religious commitment. The discourse also shows that the Buddhist community could attract individuals from outside its established circle of followers. The Sigālaka Sutta (MN 31) is not the relevant discourse; rather, the well-known discourse on household ethics is found in the Dīgha Nikāya as the Sigālovāda Sutta (DN 31). This distinction is important when comparing the two collections. The Majjhima Nikāya offers numerous examples of ethical instruction and encounters with householders, while the Dīgha Nikāya contains an especially systematic presentation of social responsibilities in the Sigālovāda Sutta. Taken together, the discourses of the Majjhima Nikāya demonstrate that the Buddhist community is sustained through teaching, questioning, ethical development, and the cultivation of wisdom. They also reveal that spiritual progress is not presented solely as a matter of institutional status. Understanding, disciplined practice, and the capacity to apply the Dhamma are central to the religious significance of the individual.

The Representation of the Fourfold Community in the Dīgha Nikāya

The Dīgha Nikāya, consisting of 34 long discourses, offers a complementary perspective on early Buddhist religious life. Its teachings include discussions of morality, contemplative practice, social relationships, religious institutions, and the preservation of the Buddha's message. Several discourses are particularly relevant to the relationship between Buddhist ideals and the wider community.

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16) is especially significant because it describes the Buddha's final journey, his instructions to disciples, and events surrounding his passing away. The discourse emphasises the importance of the Dhamma and Vinaya as the basis for the continuation of the Buddhist tradition after the Buddha's death. It also depicts a religious community whose continuity depends on understanding and practising the teaching rather than relying solely on the physical presence of its founder.

The text is relevant to the Catuparisā because the future of Buddhism depends on the participation of a community capable of sustaining its teachings and practices. The preservation of the Dhamma involves learning, recollection, instruction, and the maintenance of ethical and disciplinary standards. Although the responsibilities of the four groups are not identical, their collective presence provides a wider social setting in which Buddhist teachings can be transmitted.

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta also presents the Buddha as a teacher concerned with the organisation, conduct, and future stability of the community. His instructions concerning the Dhamma, discipline, and communal harmony indicate that the continuity of Buddhism requires more than the acceptance of particular doctrines. It requires a commitment to practices and principles that can guide the community across generations.

Another important discourse is the Sigālovāda Sutta (DN 31), which presents the Buddha's guidance to the young householder Sigāla. The discourse explains reciprocal duties within social relationships, including those between parents and children, teachers and students, spouses, friends, employers and workers, and religious practitioners and householders. Its ethical framework demonstrates that lay life can become a meaningful field of Buddhist practice.

The Sigālovāda Sutta is particularly valuable for understanding the relationship between the monastic and lay dimensions of Buddhism. It does not require householders to abandon their social responsibilities before practising ethical conduct. Instead, it explains how relationships can be guided by respect, responsibility, fairness, generosity, and mutual care. These principles contribute to the moral environment in which Buddhist religious life develops.

The Dīgha Nikāya thus provides a broad perspective on the relationship between religious practice and society. Its discourses indicate that Buddhist community life includes both renunciation and responsible participation in household and social relationships. This dual perspective is essential to understanding the fourfold community as a comprehensive framework of Buddhist religious participation.

The Role of Bhikkhus in Preserving the Dhamma

Bhikkhus occupy a central position in the institutional history of Buddhism. Their responsibilities include studying the teachings, observing monastic discipline, cultivating meditation and wisdom, and instructing others in the Dhamma. The monastic way of life provides conditions for sustained religious practice through renunciation, restraint, simplicity, and freedom from many ordinary household obligations.

In the discourses of the Majjhima Nikāya, the path of the monk is frequently associated with the cultivation of ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom. The training of the mind requires consistent effort, mindfulness, and an understanding of the causes of suffering. Monastic life therefore serves as a setting for systematic spiritual development. The Dīgha Nikāya similarly highlights the importance of moral discipline and the contemplative life. The Sāmaññaphala Sutta (DN 2), for example, describes the benefits associated with the life of renunciation and presents stages of spiritual development. Its account illustrates the relationship between moral restraint, mental cultivation, and deeper knowledge.

The responsibilities of bhikkhus also extend to teaching and supporting other members of the Buddhist community. Through explanation, discussion, and personal example, monks can help lay followers understand Buddhist principles and apply them in everyday life. Their role in preserving the teachings, however, should not be interpreted as implying that other members of the Catuparisā have no responsibility for the continuation of Buddhism. The monastic community depends on the faithful practice of its members and on constructive relationships with the wider community. Its authority is strengthened by ethical conduct, knowledge, compassion, and the consistent application of the Dhamma. The representation of bhikkhus in early Buddhist literature therefore combines institutional responsibilities with the personal qualities required for spiritual development.

The Role of Bhikkhunīs and Women's Religious Participation

The inclusion of bhikkhunīs within the Catuparisā is important for understanding women's participation in early Buddhism. The fourfold model recognises women who have entered the

monastic life alongside male monastics and lay followers. This recognition provides a framework for investigating women's access to religious instruction, their spiritual development, and their contribution to Buddhist teaching. The Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN 44), particularly through the figure of Dhammadinnā, demonstrates that women could be represented as knowledgeable exponents of the Dhamma. Her explanations in response to Visākha's questions provide evidence of the intellectual and doctrinal contribution attributed to a bhikkhunī in the Pāli discourses.

Such representations are significant because they allow the study of women not merely as recipients of instruction but also as interpreters and communicators of Buddhist teachings. Their participation in the religious community could include learning, meditation, ethical discipline, and the communication of doctrinal understanding. At the same time, the representation of women must be examined with attention to the historical and institutional context of the texts. Recognition within the fourfold community does not establish that men and women held identical institutional positions or experienced equal opportunities in every setting. A careful textual analysis should distinguish between the acknowledgment of women's religious participation and the specific conditions under which that participation occurred.

The study of bhikkhunīs is therefore essential to a balanced understanding of the Catuparisā. It brings attention to the diversity of religious experience within early Buddhism and demonstrates why the contribution of women should be considered when analysing the development and transmission of Buddhist teachings.

Upāsakas and Upāsikās: The Contribution of Lay Followers

Lay followers form an essential component of the fourfold Buddhist community. Upāsakas and upāsikās generally live within household and social environments while following Buddhist ethical and religious principles. Their responsibilities differ from those of ordained monastics, but their participation contributes to the continuity and social presence of Buddhism. The Sigālovāda Sutta (DN 31) provides a particularly important account of ethical responsibilities in lay life. Its discussion of reciprocal relationships demonstrates that Buddhist practice can be expressed through the ways people treat their families, teachers, friends, employees, and religious guides. Ethical conduct is not confined to meditation or monastic discipline; it also concerns everyday decisions and social obligations.

Lay followers can contribute to the Buddhist tradition through generosity, support for monastic communities, participation in religious gatherings, learning, and the observance of

moral precepts. Such activities create practical connections between religious institutions and the wider society. They also help establish an environment in which Buddhist teachings can be communicated and practised beyond monastic settings. The role of laywomen deserves particular attention. The inclusion of upāsikās indicates that women's participation in Buddhism is not limited to ordination. Women living household lives can engage with Buddhist teachings, cultivate moral conduct, support religious activities, and contribute to the continuation of the tradition. Their place in the fourfold community broadens the social basis of Buddhism.

It is nevertheless important not to reduce lay followers to the role of material supporters. The Buddhist path places importance on intention, ethical conduct, understanding, and mental cultivation. Lay followers are also participants in religious learning and practice, even though their circumstances and responsibilities may differ from those of monks and nuns. The fourfold model therefore helps explain how Buddhism developed as a tradition with both monastic and household dimensions. It recognises that religious commitment can take different forms while remaining connected to the shared goal of understanding and practising the Dhamma.

Ethical Conduct, Spiritual Practice, and Community Harmony

Ethical conduct provides a common foundation for the four groups of the Buddhist community. Although monastic discipline and lay precepts differ in their specific requirements, both are concerned with restraint, responsibility, and the reduction of harmful actions. The moral life supports individual spiritual development while also contributing to trust and harmony within the community. The Majjhima Nikāya explores the relationship between ethical conduct and mental development through discourses on mindfulness, meditation, and the removal of mental defilements. These teachings suggest that spiritual progress requires attention to one's actions, intentions, and mental habits. The development of wisdom is closely associated with the ability to understand experience and respond without being dominated by greed, hatred, and delusion.

The Dīgha Nikāya also connects morality with social stability and religious practice. The Sigālovāda Sutta illustrates how respectful and responsible relationships can support a harmonious social environment. Its emphasis on reciprocal duties provides a practical ethical framework for householders and other members of society. For the Catuparisā, community harmony is not merely an administrative concern. It is connected with the wider Buddhist emphasis on disciplined conduct, mutual respect, and the reduction of suffering.

Disagreements, irresponsible behaviour, or the misuse of religious authority can weaken relationships, whereas ethical consistency and mutual support can strengthen confidence in the teaching.

The fourfold community can consequently be understood as a social setting in which Buddhist ethical principles are practised and communicated. Monastics may provide instruction and an example of renunciation, while lay followers demonstrate how ethical principles can be applied within family, occupational, and civic relationships. Both forms of participation contribute to the wider social significance of Buddhist practice.

Education, Dialogue, and the Transmission of the Dhamma

The continuation of Buddhism depends on the communication of its teachings across generations. In early Buddhist literature, teaching frequently occurs through dialogue, questions, explanations, and discussions between the Buddha and his interlocutors. These exchanges demonstrate the importance of listening, reflection, and understanding in religious learning. The *Majjhima Nikāya* contains numerous dialogues that examine doctrinal and practical questions. The exchange between Dhammadinnā and Visākha in MN 44 illustrates how Buddhist concepts can be explained through systematic questioning. Such passages are important for understanding religious education as an active process in which learners seek clarification and teachers explain the implications of the Dhamma.

The *Dīgha Nikāya* also contributes to the transmission of Buddhist teachings through its extended discourses. The *Saṅgīti Sutta* (DN 33), for instance, presents teachings organised into numerical categories. This arrangement illustrates a method of structuring material that can assist collective recitation, recollection, and learning. The preservation of teachings in organised forms is especially relevant to understanding the development of early Buddhist textual traditions. The transmission of the Dhamma should not be understood as the responsibility of one group alone. Monks and nuns may undertake specialised roles in study, teaching, and disciplined practice, while lay followers can support learning through participation, discussion, and the application of Buddhist principles in daily life. The broader community provides the social conditions in which religious knowledge can be maintained and communicated.

The two *Nikāyas* thus reveal different but complementary aspects of Buddhist education. The *Majjhima Nikāya* often highlights individual instruction and doctrinal dialogue, while the *Dīgha Nikāya* includes extended treatments of teaching, communal practice, and social

responsibilities. These textual perspectives help explain the importance of learning and communication within the fourfold Buddhist community.

Comparative Perspectives on the Majjhima and Dīgha Nikāyas

A comparison of the Majjhima Nikāya and the Dīgha Nikāya demonstrates that the fourfold Buddhist community can be studied through several interconnected themes. Both collections provide material concerning ethical conduct, religious instruction, spiritual development, and relationships between the Buddhist tradition and wider society. Their differences in structure and emphasis make it possible to approach the Catuparisā from complementary perspectives. The Majjhima Nikāya is particularly useful for examining the practice of the Dhamma through dialogues, individual encounters, and discussions of mental and ethical development. The presence of figures such as Dhammadinnā and Upāli provides examples of different forms of participation in religious learning. These narratives show how Buddhist teachings are explained, questioned, and understood in particular circumstances.

The Dīgha Nikāya offers an extended view of religious and social relationships. The Sigālovāda Sutta presents household ethics, while the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta raises questions concerning the continuity of the teaching and the organisation of the community after the Buddha's death. The Sāmaññaphala Sutta illustrates the value of the renunciant life and the stages of spiritual development. These differences should not be treated as a rigid division in which one collection concerns individual practice and the other exclusively concerns institutions. Both Nikāyas address multiple dimensions of Buddhist life. Their comparative value lies in the opportunity they provide to examine different textual presentations of shared concerns.

A further distinction is necessary between explicit statements about the fourfold community and the wider evidence supplied by individual discourses. Not every reference to a monk, nun, householder, or female lay follower directly describes the Catuparisā as a unified structure. The concept is best investigated by combining explicit references to the four groups with careful analysis of passages illustrating their activities and relationships. This approach avoids assuming that all textual representations are identical.

The Significance of the Catuparisā for the Continuity of Early Buddhism

The fourfold Buddhist community provides an important framework for understanding the continuity of Buddhism as both a spiritual path and a religious tradition. Its four constituent groups represent different ways of participating in Buddhist life, from monastic renunciation

and disciplined study to household ethics and lay support. Their relationship demonstrates the connection between individual practice and collective religious continuity. The preservation of the Dhamma requires more than the existence of texts. It also requires people who study, understand, practise, teach, and communicate the teachings. Monks and nuns contribute through disciplined practice, learning, and instruction. Lay followers contribute through ethical conduct, religious participation, generosity, and the application of Buddhist principles within society. Women and men participate in different capacities, and their contributions should be considered within the historical and textual contexts in which they are represented. The Majjhima Nikāya and the Dīgha Nikāya provide a valuable basis for investigating these relationships. Their discussions of ethical conduct, spiritual cultivation, religious dialogue, social responsibility, and the continuation of the Dhamma demonstrate that Buddhist community life has multiple dimensions. The texts do not present a single, uniform account of every group, but they offer material through which the relationships among the groups can be analysed. The Catuparisā is therefore significant not simply as a traditional classification of Buddhist followers but as a framework for understanding the breadth of religious participation in early Buddhism. It draws attention to the complementary responsibilities of ordained and lay members and to the importance of collective commitment in sustaining the Buddhist tradition.

Concluding Observation

The textual perspectives of the Majjhima Nikāya and the Dīgha Nikāya demonstrate that early Buddhist community life encompasses spiritual discipline, ethical relationships, education, social responsibility, and the transmission of the Dhamma. The Catuparisā brings these dimensions together by recognising monks, nuns, male lay followers, and female lay followers as constituent groups of the wider Buddhist community. A comparative study of the two Nikāyas consequently offers a useful approach to understanding how individual practice and collective participation contributed to the development and continuity of early Buddhism.

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