

Buddhist Councils: A Historical Study

SUMMARY of THESIS

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SUMMARY

Introduction

The present work entitled **“Buddhist Councils: A Historical Study”** is based on the historical approach to the Buddhist Councils especially held in Theravada School. From the time of the Final Passing away (*Parinibbana*) of the Buddha, the senior disciples of the Buddha tried to recite, classify and arrange all the teachings of the Master. At that time, the Chief Disciple of the Buddha was *Venerable Mahakassapa* and he proposed to recite, arrange and preserve the teachings of the Buddha. *Sangayana* which is known as the Great Council now a day was held at *Rajagaha* for the first time in the history of Buddhism there months after the passing away of the Buddha in India.

The Great Buddhist Councils (*Sangayana* in Pali) were assembled by Buddhist monks especially School of Theravada Buddhism. The Great Council means approving and compiling the teachings of the Buddha by senior and faithful great disciples. As recorded in the history of Theravada School we found that there were six times assembled by the Sangha from the time of the passing away of the Buddha until the present time. We have to trace the historical back ground of those respective councils and their impacts in the history of Buddhism.

The word *‘Sangayana’* mean reciting together or chanting together. There is also another Pali term *‘Sangiti’* which means the general convocation of the Buddhist *Sangha* in order to settle questions of doctrine and to fix the text of the Scriptures. Both convey the same meaning and many Western writers on Buddhism prefer to use the word *‘Sangiti’*. Whatever may be the case, it is clear that the word itself

suggests that the chanting of the Teachings of the Buddha cannot be performed by a single person or a single community. It requires the sincere co-operation of all interested parties.

The intention of Ven. *Mahakassapa Thera* was to establish unity and harmony among the Sangha and preserved all the words of the Buddha taught during those forty-five years. The main objective of this study is to prove that the teachings of the Buddha were systematically handed down from generation to generation until now. Those who have been preserving the teachings of the Buddha are none other than *Theravada bhikkhus*, the disciples of the Buddha with the support of respective Buddhist kings, governments and lay Buddhist followers.

The compilation of the Buddhist Canon was a gradual process, eventually assuming its present form, the preservation of the authentic teachings of the specific domains of the Buddhist tradition. This became all the more urgent after the Buddha's demise not only collective rehearsals of the teachings periodically, but also each time a collective sanction as regards authenticity.

Although there is evidence that the art of writing was definitely known and well established during the time of the Buddha, no scriptures as such were then put down in writing and recorded in any form of script. According to custom, the teaching of each spiritual teacher was regarded as sacred and imparted only to those who had shown genuine interest in the Teachings of religion, unlike other educationists of the day who used written treatises for vocational or literary education. The method of oral transmission played a vital part in religious Teachings at the monasteries where not only the resident monks got their education but also religious discourses were given to the laity.

The teachers taught their pupils not just to remember the words and lines of the discourses of the Buddha and the students had to be explained the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences in the discourse, together with the method of learning it by rote and the proper manner of its recital. It was only at the time of the convening of the First Council that formal compilation of the Teachings as a whole and arrangements into separate divisions took place.

Ven.Mahakassapa brought the proceedings of the congregation to an end with the resolution: "Friends, let the assembled *bhikkhus* hear me. If it is agreeable to the assembly, let not what is undeclared in the Teaching be declared, and let not what is declared be deleted. Let the community of *bhikkhus* remain devoted to the training rules according as they have been declared." The resolution was unanimously passed by the *Sangha* and the convocation terminated.¹

The word 'Pitaka' is a term used with reference to learning and a receptacle such as a vessel or a basket. All teachings that were compiled and rehearsed at the Council were sorted out and placed in three separated baskets, namely the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the Discipline basket in which Vinaya learning was kept); the *Sutta Pitaka*, (the Discourses basket, the *Sutta* learning was kept) and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, (the Higher teaching basket, in which the Abhidhamma learning was kept). The teachings kept handily in such separate baskets are then handed on from generation to generation till the present time.

1.The First Great Buddhist Council

It is three months after the final passing away of the Buddha that five hundred senior monks assembled in a cave on the hill in *Rajagaha*,

¹ . *Samantapasadika.p.9*

North India. They were all Arahants who had dispelled all craving. They have assembled to select and recite the teachings of the Buddha. Ven. *Mahakassapa* was presiding at the council. He is also the catechizer and brought the assembly to order as follow ‘*sunatu me avuso samgho*’ which means ‘let the assembly, friends, hear me.’ It seems agreeable to the assembly so it remains silent. Then, Ven. *Upali* puts a proposal to the assembly, saying ‘let the assembly, Sirs, hear me. If it pleases the assembly, when questioned by Ven. *Mahakassapa* regarding the *Vinaya*, I will reply.

In this manner, Ven. *Mahakassapa* questioned Ven. *Upali* regarding *Vinaya* and as questioned Ven. *Upali* replied. After recitation of *Vinaya* had been completed, Ven. *Mahakassapa* put a proposal to the assembly and asked Ven. *Ananda* about *Dhamma*. Ven. *Ananda*, cousin of the Buddha, has been mastered both *Vinaya* and *Dhamma*. The Buddha had declared that Ven. *Ananda* was the foremost among His disciples who were learned in the *Dhamma*, who was skilled in mindfulness, who was upright in conduct, who was established in enduring and who was well-versed in ministering.

That Great Council was named the First Great Council.² And such Great Councils were held for Six Times in Theravada Buddhist countries in the history within 2600 years.

The Buddha gave Ven. *Kassapa* three exhortations as his first formal introduction to the *Dhamma*. The triple exhortations constituted Ven. *Kassapa*’s going forth and higher ordination. Both the Master and Ven. *Mahakassapa* walked toward Rajagaha. On the way the Buddha wanted to rest so *Mahakassapa* then folded his double-robe in four and requested the Master to sit on it “as this will be for my benefit for a long time.” The Buddha sat down on *Kassapa*’s robe and said: “Soft is your

² . Ibid.7.

robe of patched cloth, *Kassapa*.” Hearing this, *Kassapa* replied: “May the Blessed One accept this robe of patched cloth out of compassion for me!” the Buddha said to him, “But, *Kassapa*, can you wear these hempen, worn-out rag robes of mine?”

This exchange of robes bestowed a great distinction on the Venerable *Mahakassapa*, an honor not shared by any other disciple. The commentary explains that the Buddha’s intention in exchanging robes with *Kassapa* was to motivate him to observe the dhutanga, the austere practices, from the time of his very admission into the *Bhikkhu Sangha*. Several austere practices: using only the triples set of robes; wearing only rag robes. On a later occasion the Buddha declared Ven.*Mahakassapa* foremost among the *bhikkhus* who observed the austere practices. It was only seven days after his ordination and the exchange of robes that *Kassapa* attained the goal he was striving for, Arahantship.

According to tradition, Ven.*Mahakassapa*’s relation to Ven.*Ananda* is closely connected with his leading role in the *Sangha* after the passing away of the Buddha. At the demise of the Buddha only the two of the five most prominent disciples were present, *Ananda* and *Anurudha*. Ven.*Sariputta* and Ven.*Mahamoggallana* had expired earlier that year, and Ven.*Mahakassapa*, with a large company of monks, was just then en route from Pava to Kusinara. During that walk he happened to step aside from the road and sat down under a tree to rest. Just then a naked ascetic passed that way holding a coral-tree flower (*mandarava*) which is said to grow only in the world of gods. When Ven.*Mahakassapa* saw this, he knew that something unusual must have happened for the flower to be found on earth. He asked the ascetic whether he had heard any news about his teacher, the Buddha, and the ascetic told him: “The

recluse *Gotama* passed into *Nibbana* a week ago. This coral-tree flower I picked up from the site of his demise.”

After cremation, he turned his thoughts to the preservation of the Master’s *Dhamma* and the *Vinaya*. The necessity for this was plainly demonstrated to him by *Subhadda*’s challenge of the monastic discipline and his advocacy of moral laxity.

Ven.*Mahakassapa* took this as a warning if *Subhadda*’s attitude were to spread-and there were groups of monks who shared this attitude even while the Buddha was alive-it would rapidly lead to the decline and ruin of both the *Sangha* and the Teaching. To prevent this at the very start, Ven.*Mahakassapa* proposed holding a council of elders to rehearse the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* and preserve them for posterity.

With that suggestion, he turned to the monks gathered at Rajagaha. The monks agreed, and at their request Ven.*Mahakassapa* selected five hundred elders all but one of whom were Arahants. The one exception was Ven.*Ananda*. As he had not yet succeeded in reaching the final goal, he could not be admitted to the council; but as he excelled in remembering all the Buddha’s discourses, his presence was essential. The only solution was to give him an ultimatum that he must reach arahatship before the council began, which he did on the very night before it opened. Thus Ven.*Ananda* was admitted to complete the five hundred members of the First Council. All other monks were to leave *Rajagaha* for the duration of the meeting.

As the first time of council’s proceedings, the *Vinaya*, the code of monastic discipline, was recited by Ven.*Upali*, the leading *Vinaya* expert. The second item was the codification of the teachings laid down in the *Suttas*. Here it was Ven.*Ananda* who, on being questioned by Ven.*Mahakassapa*, recited all those texts which were later collected into the five collections (*nikaya*) of the *Sutta Pitaka*.

After holding the First Council, the high regard in which Ven.*Mahakassapa* was held grew still greater, and he was seen as the de facto head of the *Sangha*. His seniority would have contributed to this, as he was then one of the oldest living disciples. Later on, Ven.*Mahakassapa* handed over the Buddha's alms bowl to Ven.*Ananda* as a symbol of the faithful preservation of the *Dhamma*. Thus, Ven.*Mahakassapa*, who had been generally recognized in the Order as the worthiest in succession, on his part chose Ven.*Ananda* as being the worthies after him.

When Venerable *Mahakassapa* heard these words, he said: "Come, let us, your reverences, chant *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* before what is not *Dhamma* shines out and *Dhamma* is withheld, before what is not *Vinaya* shines out and *Vinaya* is withheld, before those who speak what is not *Dhamma* become strong and those who speak *Dhamma* become feeble, before those who speak what is not *Vinaya* become strong and those who speak *Vinaya* become feeble." Hence, the necessity for holding the Great Council to recite, classify and arrange all the teachings of the Buddha. Ven. *Mahakassapa* presided over the Council; Ven. *Ananda*, the ever present attendant and cousin of the Buddha recited the *Suttas* and the *Abhidhamma* and Ven. *Upali* recited the *Vinaya*. With the support of King *Ajatasattu* who was the most devoted follower of the Buddha and a powerful king of North India. The Council was held three months after the passing away of the Buddha, in the eight years of King *Ajatasattu*'s reign and in the year one Buddhist Era. The Council lasted for seven months. The five-hundred monks who assembled together at *Sattapani* Cave in *Rajagaha* recited, classified and arranged all the teachings of the Buddha.

2.The Second Great Buddhist Council

A century after the Lord had attained Parinibbana, bhikkhus who were Vajjis of Vesali promulgated ten points at Vesali saying

- “the practice concerning a horn for salt is allowable;
- the practice as to five-finger breadths is allowable;
- the practice concerning ‘among the villages’ is allowable;
- the practice concerning what is customary is allowable;
- the practice concerning unchurned milk is allowable;
- it is allowable the drink unfermented toddy;
- a piece of cloth to sit upon that has no border is allowable;
- gold and silver are allowable.”

When Ven.Yasa, the son of Kakandaka heard about these points, he sent for the Senior Arahants of the Order and they all decided to hold a Council to decide this doctrinal question. Hence the holding of Second Great Buddhist Council, Ven.Yasa, Ven.REvata and 120 years old Ven.Sabbakami and 700 Arahants at Vesali (the present village of Basai in North Biha) supported by King Kalasoka. About 448 B.C. after the demise of the Buddha. This council lasted for eight months. The 700 Arahants recited, classified and arranged all the teachings of the Buddha.

Just before his death, the Buddha granted permission for the removal of minor rules from the Vinaya if the Sanghaso desired. (*akankhamano kho ananda sangho khuddanu khuddakani sikkhapadani samuhanatu*). But no one among the leading figures of the Sangha was willing to remove any rules however trivial they may have seemed

Mahakassapa Thera and the 500 Theras made a firm decision to preserve the Dhamma and Vinaya in its entirety and as they were handed down by the Buddha. However, contrary to this decision, the Vajji monks announced their ten points of controversy and used the Buddha's final remark on the minor rules as the basis for their argument.

In Vesali, monks from Vajji proposed an idea to deduct some minor and sub-minor rules from the Vinaya.³ Their proposal came out with ten points of controversy. Their ideas were unconventional. According to them, for example, following their teacher's practices, even if they were not in accordance with the Vinaya, was acceptable. They neglected that the Buddha taught in the Kesamutti Suttanta, "Do not be led by the idea: 'this is our respected teacher'. Whatever the teacher had said might not have been in accordance with that sutta. It is not surprising that they had distorted ideas for they also appreciated the attitude of Devadatta who had tried to murder the Buddha. Devadatta was the forerunner of all who distort the authentic teaching of the Buddha. He even created a split among the Sangha."⁴

It is common in every religion that conflicts occur following the death of the founder. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy or conservatism and liberalism are common features of religions. Followers of the Jainas split into splinter groups; some of the Buddha's disciples wanted a change. The Mahasanghika sect was a splinter from the Theravada convention a hundred years after the Buddha's demise. Hinduism had different interpretations on the Vedas and as a result there have been many religious beliefs within Hinduism. Christianity split into many churches such as Roman Catholics, Protestants, Methodists, Baptists, etc.

³ . Vinaya commentary.vol.3.p.134. Sarathadipanitika, vol,1.p.111.

⁴ . Vinaya, vol.3. p. 491.

Followers of Mohammad, Sunni and Shiite, at the present time, are killing each other. Sons and daughters of Brahma turn their backs on each other. Children of Jesus Christ disagree with each other on their Father's words. In the same way the Buddha's inheritors founded many religious schools. Fortunately, there have been no wars among the Buddhists, no matter how strongly they disagree on their Teacher's words.

The second Council with its 700 participants was an attempt to deal with ten questionable monastic practices. Yasa Thera was the president of the Council, Revata Thera the questioner and Sabbakami Thera gave answers to the questions. The council declared that the practices proposed by the Vajjian monks were unlawful. The Vajjian confederacy, with its ten thousand members, was charged with holding to unlawful Dhamma and subsequently exiled from Vesali. On their part, the Vajjians organized a separate council in Kosambi in protest the decisions of the Second Council. They declared that their council was the Mahasangiti since they had more participants at the convention. Their movement resulted in the forming of the Mahasanghika School. Some scholars trace the origin of Mahayana School to this school.

The leading figures of the Vesali Council were the disciples of Ananda Thera. Among them were some who were expert and memorized the entire teaching of the Buddha, tipitakadhammabhandagarikas. They had made the very admirable act of preserving the authentic teachings of their teacher. Unlike the Vesali Council, the Kosambi Council did not gain great reputation in the history of Buddhism. Nevertheless, the origins of the first major schism between the Mahasanghikas and the Theravada Schools can be traced back to this event. The generations of Ananda Thera and Upali Thera continued until the Third Sangha Council.

3.The Third Great Buddhist Council

The conflict between the orthodox traditionalists and the non-conformist sects in the Buddhist Sangha reached its climax at sometime in the reign of Asoka Maurya in the third century B.C. with the growth of numerous sects issuing from the Mahasanghika group as well as the Theravada group, new theories and interpretations on the Dhamma Vinaya became a regular feature.⁵ The Dipavamsa while recording the divisions in the Sangha which arose from the Mahasangitika faction refers to the sects which seceded from the Theravada and maintains that the original Theravada was the only pure undivided sect.⁶

In the 3rd century B.C, there existed many schismatic monk-groups or schools. The following is an account of these schismatic schools according to the Commentary. “One hundred years after the passing away of the Buddha, the so-called Vajjiputtaka monks declared for laxer rules of the Order and founded the Mahasangiti School from which, in the 2nd century after the Buddha. Five other schools sprang up making six in all. From the original school of Buddhism, there had already seceded 11 schools, the most important among them being Sabbatthivada school-making 12 in all. Thus, in the 3rd century B.C, the number of schools raised up to eighteen schools.

In the time of Asoka (262 B.C) the Theravadins gained ascendancy in the area around Pataliputra and they were able to win the sympathy of the monarch. To suppress the dissenting views of the opposing sect and claim superiority for the teachings of the Theravadins an assembly of Elders of the Theravada was convened at Pataliputta. The Theravadins during this period found an able exponent of their views in Moggaliputta Tissa, a

⁵ . Dipavamsa.Verse.36,43.

⁶ . Ibid.45,51.

monk of deep learning, well versed in the Vinaya and the orthodox tradition and an able dialectician.

In order to suppress a number of heresies whose exponents were causing dissensions, it was held expedient to convene the Third Great Buddhist Council. Under the chairmanship of the Elder Ven.Moggaliputta Tissa and 1000 Arahants including Arahant Majjhantika and Arahanta Mahadeva at Pataliputta, the present Patna sponsored by Emperor Asoka about 235 B.E. This Council lasted for nine months. The thousand Arahants recited, classified and arranged all the teaching of the Buddha. The Ven.Mahatheras Moggaliputta Tissa added 500 dialogues, *Puggalapannatti* on “Points of Controversy” to the original 500 dialogues, making 1000 points in all.

In the assembly at Pataliputta he presented the Kathavatthu, a work on the Abhidhamma, in which he denounced the views of the opposing sects after comparing them with the teachings of Theravada. Around the nucleus of this fact a large amount of fiction has grown up. When stripped of the legendary material it appears that some form of assembly was actually held during this period. As this assembly was strictly confined to the Theravada group, it is completely ignored in the account of Northern schools. It is only in the Chronicles of Sri Lanka, the commentaries of Ven.Buddha-ghosa and other literary works of a later date that there is reference to this Council. As it finds no mention in the Cullavagga, it implies that the Vinaya account was composed before the time of Asoka.

According to Theravāda commentaries⁷ and chronicles,⁸ the Third Buddhist Council was held primarily in order to rid the monks of

⁷ . Parajika kandha commentary.p.32,

⁸ . Mahavamsa, ch.V.p.26, ed Wilhelm Guiger,

corruption and bogus monks who held heretical views. Ven.Moggaliputta Tissa elected a thousand monks who were well versed in the Three doctrines of the Buddha to make a compilation of the true doctrine. The Council was convened in 236 B.C. at Asokarama in Pataliputta (the present Patna). It was presided over by the Elder Moggaliputta Tissa and one thousand monks under the patronage of the Emperor Asoka. The Council last for nine months and it was held in the same manner and with the same zeal as those of Ven.Mahakassapa in the First Council and Ven.Yasa in the Second Council respectively. In the midst of the Council Ven.Moggaliputta Tissa set forth the Kathavatthu pakarana wherein the heretical doctrines were thoroughly examined and refuted. Thus the end of the Third Buddhist Council in which a thousand monks took part.

This council achieved a number of other important things as well. The Elder Moggaliputta Tissa in order to refute a number of heresies and ensure the Dhamma was kept pure, compiled a book during the council called, the Kathavatthu. This book consists of twenty-three chapters, and is a collection of discussions (katha) and refutations of the heretical views held by various sects on matters philosophical. It is the fifth of the seven books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka. The members of this Council also gave a royal seal of approval to the doctrine of the Buddha, naming it the Vibhajjavada, the Doctrine of Analysis. It is identical with the approved Theravada doctrine.

4.The Fourth Great Buddhist Council

By the time of the Third Council the commentarial literature fully developed; and after the conclusion of the Council, Ven.Mahinda came to Ceylon and he brought over with him the expositions of the teaching which had been sanctioned by the Elders at the meeting. Very soon after

Ven.Mahinda's arrival he translated them into "the language of the land", and there they continued to be studied and pondered upon and further developed by the monks of Ceylon.⁹

The Chronicles speak of Mahinda's connections with Pataliputta and even before he arrived in Sri Lanka they made him a leader entrusted by Ven. Moggaliputta Tissa.¹⁰ The Chronicles further traced the lineage of the Vinaya teachers from Ven.Upali to Ven.Moggaliputta Tissa and to give more prestige to Ven.Mahinda, place him within this lineage as having studied directly under Ven.Moggaliputta Tissa, and is linked with Pataliputra. In the fifth chapter of Dipavamsa, twenty five verses are devoted to the emphasis of this fact and the Mahavamsa maintains the same tradition but with less emphasis. Ven.Buddhaghosa goes a step further and adds to the list of the Vinaya teachers the successors of Ven.Mahinda up to his own time.¹¹

It was Ven.Mahinda who had established the monastic Order in its traditional pattern; hence those who joined the Order after his time did so as men who followed the footsteps of the great Elder.¹² Ven.Mahinda not only established the Order of monks but also encouraged the teachings and traditional monastic practices. Thus he is extolled in the Mahavamsa.

The Mahavamsa (Ceylonese Chronicle) says: "the most wise bhikkhus who had passed down the Tipitakadhara and the Commentaries thereon orally in former times, since they saw that the people were less righteous, assembled and in order that the true doctrine may endure, they wrote Tipitaka treatises down in palms leaves." On account of the aforesaid reasons, it was expedient to convene the Fourth Great Council. Under the chairmanship of Ven.Mahathera Rakkhita 500 bhikkhus at

⁹ . The Pali Literature of Ceylon.p.91.

¹⁰ . Mahavamsa.232-233.

¹¹ . Samantapasadika.p.50.

¹² . Itivutaka Atthakatha,258 EHBC, 56.

Aloka Cave in the village of Malaya (modern Matale) patroned by King Vattagamani Abhaya about 29-13 B.C all the teachings of the Buddha were reduced to writing and the scripts checked over 100 times.

5.The Fifth Great Buddhist Council

Burma (now Myanmar) as the nation has been known throughout history and it is one of the major countries following Buddhist doctrines especially Theravada Buddhism. Buddhism and the people of Burma cannot be separated from each other because Buddhism is the life blood of Burmese in literature, cult, arts, architecture, ways of life and culture.

King Mindon was described as the king who most supported Buddhism during his reign.¹³ Unusual in the Myanmar conception, though not new in the Asokan tradition, King Mindon had the Tipitaka text inscribed on 729 stone tablets, and convened the Fifth Buddhist Council.

When Mindon came to power in 1853, the kingdom he inherited from his brother was in bad shape both economically and politically. The morale of the people was at a low ebb after the civil war and successive defeats at the hands of the British. territorial losses to the foreigners had created a disturbance in the politics, royal finances, and economic conditions of the country. At a time when political and economic instruments of policy could be only marginally effective in consolidating the kingdom, social instruments and especially religion, were the most convenient means to elicit the loyalty and support of the people. Because of their religious faith, the people increasingly turned their attention to the life hereafter, and with this solace they could bear the political and economic hardship of their time. For these reasons, it was no doubt that

¹³ . Myanmarmin Ok Chokpon Sadan. Part.III.p.90.

religion became a rallying point to unify the society and consolidate the kingdom under Mindon.

The purification of Buddhist Texts is as important as the purity of the Sangha for the survival of Buddhism. There was a precedent for the Burmese King at his accession to make new copies of the Pali texts, the teachings of the Buddha called Tipitaka in order to pay respect to the teachings of the Buddha and to purify the texts. There were three ways of copying Tiptaka, namely, copying on palm-leaf with an iron stylus, copying on palm-leaf in ink, and copying on gilded palm-leaf.

Four years after ascending the throne, King Mindon initiated the copying of the Tipitaka in all three forms. Inspired Asoka's noble work, King Mindon thought of copying the Pali texts and commentaries again in an unprecedented manner on stone tablets. Although it made no difference for the advancement of religion, it was a visible and dramatic way of showing his piety to the people. It was made clear that only under the King's patronage Buddhism could prosper.¹⁴

In order to have a uniform edition of the Tipitakas as well as to record them on marble slabs which cannot be easily worn out, it was held necessary to convene the Fifth Great Buddhist Council. Ven. Mahathera Jagarbhivamsa; Ven. Mahathera Narindabhindhaja; and Mahathera Sumangalasami led the council in the number of 2,400 bhikkhus at Mandalay (Burma) by King Mindon In 1871 (2414 B.E). the marble recording took a considerable length of time and the recitations of the Tipitakas lasted for five months.

¹⁴ . Ludu Daw Ama: Kaba Akyizon Saouk (The Tipitaka inscriptions in Mandalay) p.8, Ludu Press, 1972.

The bhikkhus recited the Tipitakas at the Royal Palace and the Texts were recorded on 729 marble slabs as follows:-Vinaya texts- 111 slabs, Suttas texts- 410 slabs and Abhidhamma texts- 208 slabs

6.The Sixth Great Buddhist Council

Before Burma regained her independence, the members of government had a future plane for the country the projects were national unity, independence, education, economy and perpetuation of Buddhism. Those projects are the infrastructure of the country. Among those projects, *Chatthasangayana* which is the Sixth Great Council project was one of them.

From the time Burma lost her independence in 1885, Buddha Sasana declined day after day for 68 years so the government tried to light the Dhamma. By looking at the historical back ground of the Great Councils in Theravada Buddhist world we learned that the kings and the Sangha joined hands together to preserve and promote Buddhism. With the intention of purifying *Buddhasasana* the government arranged to convene the Sixth Great Council.

In 1950, the parliament enacted Buddhist law and after enacting the law, **Buddha Sasana Council** was formed in 13th, November 1950 with the intention of performing necessary work at home and abroad. The Sixth Great Council was organized by Buddha Sasana Council. The government and the people of Burma had great desire to hold the Council with the intention of promoting Buddha Sasana last long, editing and purification the entire Pali texts and translating the Pitaka into Burmese for those did not understand Pali words so a meeting was held at the Prime Minister's house in September, 1951. The meeting formulated the proposal to start the Council from the full moon day of Kason in Buddhist

Era 2498 to the full moon day of Kason in 2500 (Burmese Era from 1316 to 1318) from 1953 to 1955.

In order to resolve the errors and omissions made by the scribes in repeatedly copying the Five Nikayas with the intention of purifying the texts, scrutinizing, editing, reciting and arranging all the teachings of the Buddha and finally in order to print these edited Tipitaka books and distribute these works all over the world by promoting the teachings of the Buddha. It was led by Ven. Mahathera Revata known as Nyaungnyan Sayadaw; Ven. Mahathera Nagavamsa known as Bagara Sayadaw; Ven. Mahathera Javana known as Pakkhuku Sayadaw; Ven. Mahathera Sobhana known as Mahasi Sayadaw and Ven. Mahathera Vicittasarabhivamsa known as Mingun Sayadaw total amount of 2,500 bhikkhus at Mahapasana Cave, Rangoon (Burma) The government of the Union of Burma led by U Nu, the Prime Minister and the people of Burma. The inaugural meeting of the Council was held in the full moon day of Visakha in 1953 (2498 B.E) and finished in 1965 the full moon day of Visakha in May, 2500B.E

The Great Council had been collaborated both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist countries including related Buddhist organizations. At the grand opening ceremony respective delegations and leaders of the countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Japan, China, Korea, Viet Nam, Sikkim, Indonesia, Malaysia and leaders of related delegation from Buddhist organizations participated. About 5,00 bhikkhus in Burma who are well versed in study and practice of the teachings of the Buddha took responsibility of re-examination of the texts and edited them with all available original versions around Theravada Buddhist countries including Pali Text Society (PTS) version.

By clarifying the texts and purified them and recited at the Great Council and printed all edited treatises as the version of Chattha Sangayana that has been referring around the world today when quoting Buddhist literature.

Perspective on the Council

We have stated the five versions on the assembly of the Five hundred bhikkhus, *pancasatika sangiti*, from their respective available Buddhist sources. In our work, we would like to focus on mainly the work of Theravada Buddhist School as recorded in the history.

The Dhamma was systemically compiled just after the demise of the Buddha with the intention of safeguarding it in its authentic form and making it available to the next generations. This was the main motivation of the First Sangiti. The Dhamma should remain in place of the teacher. Buddha himself had pointed his disciples out the Dhamma to be their teacher when he passed away.¹⁵

A Sangiti was essential for the purity of the Dhamma. The First Sangiti was organized in accordance with the Bhikkhu-aparivaniya Sutta which encourage disciples to meet regularly, to be united, to preserve the Dhamma-Vinaya unchanged, to respect the elders and to value those whose moral practices are pure and who are well versed in Tipitaka. It was remarkable that no one amongst seven hundred thousand monks who gathered at Kusinagara stood in opposition to Mahakassapa Thera. All of them elected Mahakassapa Thera to be the president of the Sangiti. Moreover, they all showed their respect for the Buddha's word, "*Sukha*

¹⁵ . D.ii.p.50.

Samghassa Samaggi”, by supporting Mahakassapa Thera for selecting 500 bhikkhus who represented all of them at the First Sangiti.

Some monks did complain about selecting Ananda Thera who was still a Sotapanna for this important event; they considered that it should necessarily be led by arahants whose undefiled minds would not make even a trivial mistake concerned with the teaching. But this complaint happened to be the best encouragement for Ananda Thera. Being driven by this encouragement, he could manage to attain arahatta-magga just before the Sangiti. Dhamma and Vinaya were systematically compiled at the Sangiti owing to the extraordinary memory of Ananda Thera and Upali Thera. After the Sangiti, Mahakassapa Thera laid down three Theravada strategies in accordance with the *Aparihaniya Sutta* and they were approved by the participants of the Sangiti.

The system applied in the election, compilation and convention of the First Council became the forerunner of the Parliament Democracy. That system is still alive in Buddha Sasana. The Sasana taught by the Buddha is perfect in every sense that will never get outdated. By the preservation of the teaching one can show his attentiveness to the teacher. The Buddha can be said to be alive as long as the Dhamma exists. We still have the Dhamma in our hands, which means that our teacher is still with us. The compilation of the Dhamma and Vinaya could be done in its pristine form because the First Sangiti was held while Mahakassapa Thera, Upali Thera and Ananda Thera were alive. Samgha was organized in unity due to the leadership quality of Mahakassapa Thera. The Dhamma would have been lost if the elders delayed the First Council. Since we have the authentic form of the Dhamma, we can still practice the Dhamma as if the teacher was giving the instruction personally. There is no doubt about that we owe our achievement to the First Council.

The Commentaries evaluate the claim of a monk called Subhadda, as the main reason for organizing the First Council. Contrary to this exaggerate statement; it must be just one of many reasons. Because what Subhadda said was a mere claim to live without discipline; it was not a dispute on the tenets of the teaching. Beside, Subhadda was just an ordinary monk who joined the Bhikkhu Samgha in his old age. He was not even a scholar of the Pitaka. Again, his background was weak. Undoubtedly, his claim must not be a serious threat to disharmony among Samgha.

He had no power to influence the Samgha, kings, and any other important personalities of that time. Therefore the claim of an ordinary old monk who did not have any influential power, who had no background, and who had no support could not be the main reason for organizing the First Council. The evil acts of Ven.Devadatta were taken into serious consideration since he was one of the influential personalities at the time of the Buddha.

As mentioned above to preserve and compile the Dhamma and Vinaya systematically was the main reason for organizing the First Council. Like the flowers of the tree that scatter on the ground, the discourses taught by the Buddha were spread since they were taught to different people in different places in different occasions. As the Buddha said his teaching must remain in his place guiding the disciples to the goal. So it was important that whatever was taught by the Buddha should be compiled and the compilation should be approved by the entire Samgha.

To gain the approval from the Samgha, Mahakassapa Thera made a systematic plan. He chose only 500 monks with the approval of the

Samgha. These selected monks were most eligible for this great task. Then he gave the specific task of compiling Sutta and Abhidhamma to Ananda Thera, and Vinaya to Upali Thera who were the most eligible persons for the task. The selection was obviously non-partial. Ananda Thera who just attained arahatta-magga and Upali Thera who used to be a barber were chosen instead. It was because Ananda Thera was the treasurer of the Dhamma (*Dhamma-bhandagarika*) and Upali was the best maintainer of the Vinaya (*Agga Vinaya-dhara*). As a consequence of this impartial selection and owing to the extremely precise memory of the two Theras, the compilation was approved without dispute. Thus Mahakassapa Thera could declare, “The Pitaka compiled at the First Sangiti is the authentic teaching of the Buddha and therefore it should be recognized as the teacher himself.”

If Mahakassapa Thera did not make the right selection, the Councils would have been futile. And if the First Council was not organized, the Dhamma would have been lost already or would have been distorted completely by now. The authenticity of the Dhamma that is still available to us should be contributed to the farsighted Theras at the time of the First Council and the generations of teachers who made the greatest effort to preserve the teaching. The generation of Ananda Thera and Upali Thera led the Samgha for about 250 years until the Third Council. This proved that Mahakassapa Thera made the right decision.¹⁶

Modern scholars’ perspective

Dealing with the Buddhist Councils many modern scholars have different perspective. We would like to focus on their opinions on it. **Hermann Oldenberg** was the first modern scholar to express doubt

¹⁶ . Sangiti, A perspective, Prospect and their impacts.p.38. Dr.Ashin Nyanissara, S.B.C.M.S. Malaysia,2008.

concerning the historicity of the First Council, what he said was that it was a pure fiction. His main ground was that there was no mention at all of the Council in the Mahaparinibbana-sutta which clearly gives its motive. He was supported by **R.O.Franke**.¹⁷

Oldenberg believed that the Second Council at Vaisali was historical, but that the First Council was invented for the sake of introducing the Second.¹⁸ **Wilhelm Geiger**, on the other hand, argued that the Pali account represents a genuine historical reminiscence, and its general framework contains a kernel of historical truth.¹⁹ Since Oldenberg, the authenticity of the Councils has been a topic of much controversy. Some Western scholars of his time had already reacted to Oldenberg. Thus, **Louis La Vallee Poussin** argued that such an important question as the historicity of the First Council could not be determined by such simple methods as those used by Oldenberg.²⁰ **Hermann Jacobi** also responded by remarking that there was no need for the Mahaparinibbana sutta to go out of its way to give the Council account. **T.W.Rhys Davids**, while initially agreeing with Oldenberg, seemed later on to concede some degree of historicity to the First Council.²¹

Moriz Winternitz remarked that Cullavagga XI-XII (in which the Councils are narrated) are later additions, forming a kind of appendix to the text.²² Oldenberg was the first to point out that these sections are closely connected with the Mahaparinibbana sutta. He and T.W.Rhys Davids showed that the first two parts of Cullavagga XI were derived from the Suttanta.²³ **Franke** went further to assert that both accounts of

¹⁷ . The Buddhist Councils at Rajagaha and Vesali, in Journal of the Pali Text Society, VI.1908.

¹⁸ . Herman Oldenberg, Vinaya Pitka, I, Indroduction, XXV.

¹⁹ . W.Geiger, The Mahvamsa, or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon,1912, Introduction.

²⁰ . Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, IV,p.182, James Hastings,ed.

²¹ . T.W.Rhys Davids, Buddhist Suttas, Sacred Books of the East,IX,1881, General Introduction.

²² . M.Winternitz, History of Indian Literature, II,26.

²³ . Sacred Books of the East, XX,370.

the two Councils as given in the Cullavagga are no more than concoctions based on the Suttanta. It was **Watanabe Baiyu** who pointed out that in three Chinese versions of the *Mahaparinirvana-sutra* (T1,175a-c;T1, 190c;T1,207c), the First Council is clearly mentioned.²⁴

Yin Shun remarked that much of the controversy resulted from these scholar's over reliance on the literary records, to the neglect of tradition itself. In his view, the Council accounts and the mahaparinirvana-sutra were separately transmitted by the Vinayadharas and the sutradharas respectively. In the process of transmission, the Vinayadharas had no need to go out of their way to depict the events of the Mahaparinirvana-sutra, nor did the sutradharas have any need to record the accounts of the Councils. From this perspective, we cannot doubt the authenticity of the First Council simply because it was not mentioned in the Mahaparinirvana-sutra. According to Yin Shun the sutra masters gradually compiled the Mahaparinirvana-sutra out of the tradition of scattered events connected with the Mahaparinirvana. On the other hand, somewhat earlier on, the Vinaya masters had put together traditions connected with the First Council and succinctly recorded them in the 'Vinaya-matrka'. Later on, the north-eastern Vinaya masters came to include the event of the Mahaparinirvana. On the other hand, somewhat earlier on, the Vinaya masters had put together traditions connected with the First Council and succinctly recorded them in the 'Vinaya-matrka'. Later on, the North-Eastern Vinaya masters came to include the event of the Mahaparinirvana in the Vinaya, and it is in this way that the event came to be connected with the Council, as attested in the ksudraka-vastu of the Mula-sarvastivada-vinaya. Likewise, the Rajarha Council was originally not transmitted by the Sutra masters. However its prevalence in the north

²⁴ .Watanabe Baiyu,101.

and the western regions resulted in its being incorporated into the above-mentioned three sutras on the Mahaparirvana translated in China.²⁵

²⁵ . Yin Shun,29.