

Life in a Buddhist Monastery

Rahul Majumdar

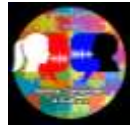
During its long and continuous history life of monks in Buddhist monasteries underwent many transformations. In this article we have tried to offer a glimpse of life of monks and other inmates in a Buddhist monastery.

Admission:

Whenever someone wanted to get admission to a monastery as a monk he had to take two types of ordinations namely the Pabbajja and the Upasampada. The Pabbajja was the initial conversion for which the minimum age requirement was reduced to seven years.² A monk who attained Pabbajja was called Samanera (Sk Sramanera).³ According to I Tsing if someone was willing to enter the sangha by way of pabbajja he had to first find out a teacher and tell him about his wish of doing so. The teacher initiated him after the elapse of ten day to one month and in the initiation ceremony he was imparted the five Sikshapadas. Then the teacher informed the sangha about the candidate's desire and after obtaining the necessary permission from the sangha he asked the acharya for the conduct of the ceremony. The head and beard of the candidate were shaved and after having taken a bath he was given a robe and a bowl, and thereby making him a pravajita or homeless ascetic. Thereafter in the presence of the Upadhaya he was imparted the ten sikshapada by the teacher and from then on he came to be known as the Sramanera.⁴ The Sramanera graduated to the status of a regular monk of a monastery through a ceremony named Upasampada. For this a candidate had to be at least twenty years old.

During the Upasampada the teacher arranged the six requisites⁵ for him and during the ceremony the teacher himself had to be present with nine other monks. The candidate showed his respect to the monks attending the ceremony by salutation (thrice) or by touching the feet of everyone present. He was advised to learn the mahasilas and then he was given the garments and bowls in front of everyone present there and he had to carry the bowl in front of every priest in succession and it was the duty of them to announce that it was a good bowl. After the completion of the necessary formalities the monk received the status of upasampanna⁶ that meant that he had received the upasampada or the higher ordination. The time of the ordination was recorded in the register because seniority of the monks on the time of upasampada ordination.

Bars to Admission:



In order to protect the purity of the sangha the admission of the right type of persons as monks was required. Though theoretically the entry into the sangha was open to persons belonging to all walks of life, practical necessity compelled the authority to impose some restrictions for the entrance into the Order. This question was discussed in the Mahavagga and in the writings of Nagasena, the monk. Nagasena said that some particular types of person would be denied entry into the sangha as monks. Those types were- a matricide, a patricide, an arhat killer, a schism creator, one who sheds the Buddha's blood, a eunuch, a hermaphrodite, and a child less than seven years of age and other people with doubtful motivations. Among those with 'doubtful motivations' he lists those people who leave the world in terror, at the tyranny of kings, to be safe from being robbed, to avoid the payments of debts, and to gain a livelihood.

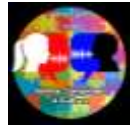
Gradation of Monks in the Monastery:

According to the Mahavastu the monks belonging to a monastery were divided into three grades namely The Sthavira or the theras, the madhyamika, monks belonging to the middle status, and navaka or the newly ordained monks. The sthavira in reality was not merely a senior member of the monastery but he was in charge of the affairs of the monastery. He had to shoulder the responsibility of supervising the Uposatha ceremony, of entrusting to the qualified members of the sangha various duties related to the day to day affairs of the sangha i.e. taking votes, recitation of the pratimoksha, and delivering lectures to the laity and the new entrants of the sangha. Again there was the Dvitiyasthavira whose job was to perform the duties of the sanghasthavira during his absence or inability for any reason.

The new monks of the monastery gained seniority in a particular way. After gaining admission he was treated as a pavrajita, the after gaining Upasampada admission he got the status of a 'small teacher'. And after spending ten years as a monk he became the sthavira.

Privileges:

The privileges enjoyed by monks in a monastery depended upon his gradation or seniority. The monks entrusted with some responsibility in the monastery were given comfortable place to live in, particularly the Chief Monk of a monastery who were allotted elegant and separate residential areas. The famous vihara no 19 at Bhaja, and Bahusrutiya monastery at Nagarjunikonda bear testimony to this fact. Fa- hien says that the monks of Khotan sat in regular orders while taking their meals. Hiuen-tsang informs us that distinctions depended on spiritual attainments. To quote his own words, "The brother who



expounds orally one treatise (or class of scripture) in the Buddhist canon, whether Vinaya, Abhidharma or Sutra, is exempted from serving under the prior; he who expounds two is invested with the outfit of a superior; he who expounds three has brethren deputed to assist him; he who expounds four has lay servants assigned to him; he who expounds five rides an elephant; he who expounds six rides an elephant and has a surrounding retinue.” I-tsing says that a very learned monk was given the best room of the monastery as well as a servant to look after his comfort. Such learned monks during lecture sessions enjoyed freedom from the regular activities of the monastery. A learned monk enjoyed the liberty of riding a sedan chair in the road., Such monks were often assisted by lay servants who helped the in carrying such a chair and other utensils.

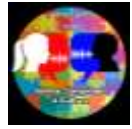
Monastic Observances:

Vassavasa:

Generations of Indian mendicants like the brahmanical sanyasis, the yatis of the Jaiia ect, as well as Buddhist monks continued to observe Vassavasa (rain retreat) down the ages. The main reason behind it was the fact that during that period wandering was rendered impossible due to monsoon rains. Among the Buddhists monks this tradition continued and is still continuing even after their beginning to live in a fixed residence. During vassavasa the monks completely depended on the laity for their sustenance. We find reference to vassavasa in the writings of Fa-hien and Hiuen- tsang while I –tsing writes about it in detail. He says that vassavasa was to be observed by all the five assemblies. Anyone was allowed to remain absent only after receiving the necessary permission from the assembly.

Uposatha ceremony was one of the important ceremonies Uposatha Ceremony. Buddhist monks observed the Uposatha ceremony in the monastery by reciting the sikshapadas or rules of discipline

suggested by the Buddha. At a later stage of its growth the sangha adopted the system of reciting the Patimoksha with the confession of the breaches committed 16 Later the observance of the uposatha ceremony assumed a colourful picture and image worship became its most important scene. Hiuen-tsang says that in the uposatha days the monks paid tribute to their respective saints.17 “ The Abhidharma Brethren often worship to Sariputta, the Samadhists to Mudgalputra, the Sutraists to Purnaimaitraniputra, the Vinayists to Upali, the bhikhunis to Ananda and Sramaneras to Rahula, and the Mahayanists to the various P’susas.”



During the uposatha day the laity also took part in the celebration along with the monks.

Paravena:

The next important ceremony of a Buddhist monastery was paravena which took place at the end of the rainy season.

The Paravena ceremony took place at the end of the rainy season. In this communal ceremony the monks requested the assembly to point out any mistake they might have committed unknowingly. On the paravena day a priest came to chant a Buddhist sutra in front of a gathering of monks and lay devotees. On the next morning the monks went out and walked around the town or the village to worship caityas. The procession came back to the monastery in the forenoon. Everyone was in a mood of festivity and incense and flowers were offered. Music was played and images in sedan chairs were brought with the accompaniment of banners and canopies.

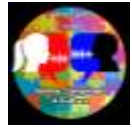
The pavarena can be divided into three parts. In the first part the guilt was brought to the notice of the monk and then it was followed by a confession and atonement on his part. The purpose of the ceremony was to make an evaluation of a monk's conduct.

Kathina:

The Kathina ceremony took place just after the Pavarana ceremony. Originally in this festival the laity stitched and distributed robes to the monks. By unanimous consensus a monk was selected to receive the kathina robes for all the monks of the monastery. We are informed by the Pali and Sarvastivadin tradition that the stitching of the cloth was to be completed within 24 hours and thereafter washing, dyeing and drying of it took place. About the post vassava ceremonies Fa-hien writes "One month after the annual retreat, the families eager for merit, advise each other to present offerings and refreshments to the monks. A meeting is held by the monks in which dharma is preached to the people. After the sermons they offer to Sariputra's stupa all kinds of flowers, incenses and burn the lamps throughout the night. They hire actors to play one episode in the life of Sariputra in which he was a great brahmana and begged Lord Buddha to ordain him as a monk.

Food and Drink:

The monks used to collect food by begging but at the same time they were allowed to accept invitation from the laity and food was also prepared for them in the refectory. According to nature and quality food taken by the monks could



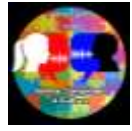
be divided into two classes namely bhojaniya (soft food) and khadaniya (hard food) Bhojaniyas were of two types odana (rice)¹⁹, sattu (baked green flower whether barley, wheat or grain}, Kummasa (pulse and rice mixed), maccha (fish), and mamsa (meat). But I-tsing provides us with a different list in which we find rice, a boiled mixture of barley and peas, baked cornflour, meat and cakes. However, the monks were allowed to take fish or meat only when they had no knowledge of its preparation to satisfy their hunger. Among the panchakhadaniyam we have roots, stalks, leaves, flowers and fruits. Monks had the permission to take eight types of drinks and among them we may mention grape syrup and sugar cane drink.

Dress:

According to Buddhist custom monks could accept robes as gifts from lay donors and this practice gave rise to the kathina ceremony which signified the annual distribution of materials for clothes at the end of rain retreat (vassavasa). A monk generally wore three types of cloth namely (a) antarvasaka (b) sanghati (c) uttarasangha. The antarvasaka meant an undergarment wrapping round the loins and reaching below the knee, being fastened round by a girdle. The sanghati was the waist cloth wrapped round the waist and back and secured with a girdle. The uttarasanga was the upper robe. Cotton, wool, silk, coarse cloth, hempen cloth²⁰ were used to make clothes and the material was decided upon its seasonal suitability. During I –tsing’s time silk and linen were the most frequently used materials for preparing robes for the monks. A monk was forbidden to wear a single piece of cloth because it was believed that it would make a monk appear similar to lay people. Material Possessions:

The Buddha expected the monks to live a life of austerity and to satisfy themselves with the bare minimum. The homeless state of the monk was regarded as a blessing because he has nothing to fear from thieves or robbers. He could lead a life of safety and security. He did not have to store food because he lived on begging. But with the passage of time the concept of a monk as akinchana (possessing nothing at all) changed.

The material possessions of a monk can be divided roughly into two classes namely (a) personal or individual (b) communal or sanghika. The first consisted of the six requisites and thirteen necessities. The six requisites were (a) sanghati (b) uttarasangha (c) antaravasa (d) patra (e) nishidana (f) parisravana) . The thirteen necessities were (a) sanghati (b) uttarasangha (c) antaravasa (d) nishidana (e) nivasana (f) pratinivasana (g) sankakshika (h) prati-sanknakika (i) kaya- pronchana (j) kandupratikkhandana (k) kandupratikkhandana (l) kesapratigraha (m) bhesajaparishkaracivara



So in order to satisfy the needs of the community the sangha had to acquire property and so the communal property increased. The monks were allowed to receive gifts on behalf of the sangha but

they in reality became the users of them.

Management of the monasteries: In order to look after the day to day affairs of the sangha office bearers had to be employed. For the appointment in such posts three criteria namely seniority, character and learning were necessary.

A. Officers Connected with Food:

- (1) Bhattudesaka or the apportioner of cooked food, (2) yagubhajaka or distributor of yagu, a kind of rice pulp (3) phalabhajaka or distributor of fruits (4) khajjaka bhajaka or distributors of eatables other than meal) (5) bhandagarika or overseer of stores

B. Officers connected with lodgings robes and other requisites

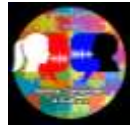
- (1) Sayanasana prajnapaka: Distributors of lodgings: He was assigned the duty of arranging seats for the monks. (2) Senasanagahapaka :His duty was to accept viharas, parivenas on behalf of the sangha.(3) Civarapatiggahapaka or the receiver of clothes donated to the monks by lay people.

C. The Technical Terms: (1) Sanghastavira : He was the most important official of the sangha because he acted as the director, chief priest or head abbot of the entire unit.

- (2) Karmadana: He looked after the secular affairs of the monastery.
- (3) Officer- in – charge of Screening Examination: He was a person of vast learning and was able to evaluate the performance of candidates in the admission tests.
- (4) Viharapala : He was the officer whose duty was to announce time and informing it to the inmates.

Monastic Etiquette:

The members of every religious faith have to maintain some rules and regulations and this is true in the life of a Buddhist monk also. In the sekhiya dharma section of the Pratimoksha we find a discussion about those rules which when violated by a monk does not invite punishment but definitely is harmful to his reputation among his fellow monks and to the society at large. The Visuddhimagga describes a monk as a person “who is respectful , deferential, possessed of conscience and shame, wears his inner robe properly ...



knows the right measures in eating, is devoted to wakefulness, possesses mindfulness and awareness, wants little, is contented, is strenuous, is a careful observer of good behaviour, and treats the teachers with great respect. This is called (proper conduct). “A junior monk used to address his seniors as “thera, ayusman, arya and bhadanta (bhante). These express the respect and regards on the part of the junior monk towards his seniors.

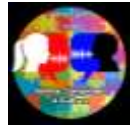
Monastic Routine:

Within the monastery monks lived a life of discipline and most of their daily activities were guided by the clock. In those days a special instrument were used to keep time. Its name was velachakra which worked by means of sun dials. Apart from that larger monasteries used clepsydrae. In the morning the monks rose early and the performed their duties according to their schedule. Apart from their maintaining personal hygiene their daily chores included looking after the daily needs of their teachers, worshipping the stupa, learning the scriptures, cleaning the vihara and accompanying senior monks when they went out to beg in the nearby locality. Before taking their midday meals the monks also bathed, took a walk and participated in ritual worship. To avoid falling asleep after lunch due to drowsiness the monks engaged themselves in meditation. In the afternoons and evenings the monks remained engaged in paying their tributes to the images, chaityas and stupas with incense and flower.

The monks spent the nights in learning, mediation and rest.

References:

1. It meant a journey from home to a state of homelessness.
2. The Questions of King Milinda (Milindapanha) pt1 pg20
3. We can see the word Samanera in the Buddhist stupa1 of Sanchi
4. I- tsing interprets Sramanera as ‘one who seeks for rest’ meaning ‘one who wishes to enter nirvana (the complete rest)
5. The sanghati (double cloak) the uttarasangha (Upper garment), the antarvasa (inner garment, patra (bowl), nishidana (water strainer),



6. I- tsing says the term upasampanna means upa or near and sampanna or complete. This means that after receiving the Upasampada a monk goes nearer to Nirvana.
7. In Jainism we find a similar list that renders certain classes of people disqualified from entering the sangha.
8. Mahavastu, 3, p47. This is somewhat similar to I –tsing’s classification of monks as superiors, mediocre and inferiors.
9. Abhisamacharika, pp. 5f
10. T. Watters, op, cit p 162
11. J. Takakusu, op. cit p64 According to I- tsing there was a distinction between very learned priests and merely elder priests (sthavira)
12. J. Takakusu op. cit. p 64
13. J. Takakusu op.cit p86
14. J. Legge , op, cit pp22, 29, 53
15. From the pre Buddhist age the custom of the purification of bodies for both monks and householders was in vogue.
16. A.C. Sen ‘Asoka’s Edicts’ p131
17. Abhisamcarika pp 1-4
18. J. Takakusu
19. Odana meant seven kinds of cooked grains viz Sali(rice), vihi (a kind of rice), yava (barley), godhuma (wheat), Kangu(milletwhite red and black), varaka (a kind of millet probably bajra), kudrusaka (a kind of rice), See Samantapasadika (nal edited) vol2 p 842-843
20. Mahavagga, pp 298f
21. The regulation of the clepsydrae was different in monasteries of Kushinara and at Nalanda.