

THE RAMANNA NIKAYA (SECT) OF CEYLON

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The very existence of a religion depends on discipline. This is clarified by the commentator's statement "**Vinaya Nama Sasanassa Ayu**". Religion is preserved by those Bhikkhus who observe carefully the higher precepts laid down by Lord Buddha in the code of discipline (Vinaya Rules). This should be understood to mean that the religion cannot be preserved by those who do not follow the code of discipline.

The Bhikkhus state is preserved by observing the disciplinary precepts. Therefore the scarcity of such Bhikkhus spells danger to the religion. It is well known therefore that the Ramanna Nikaya was inaugurated in Ceylon to secure the progress of Bhikkhus who observe the disciplinary precepts. That this Nikaya was not established on account of caste or creed differences is seen clearly from the love displayed for the religion by its founder.

In 2406 B.E. the Right Reverend Ambagahawatte Sasanawansa Kavindhaja Siri Saddhammachariya Yati Sanghathani Indasabhawaragnanasami, the Chief Maha Thero, founded in Ceylon, for the purpose of purification of the religion the Ramanna Nikaya and it has spread into all three provinces in Ceylon viz. Ruhunu, Maya and Pihiti.

This great Nikaya set up for the purpose of infusing new life into the disciplinary code of rules which were gradually falling into neglect and decay had its first higher ordination ceremony within the aquatic limits at the great confluence of the Ginganga river at the famous city of Galle on Monday the thirteenth in the Sinhala month of Esala in the Buddhist Era (year 2407). The master of ceremonies was the great ascetic Ven. Varapitiye Siri Sumitta Maha Thero.

This Ven. Varapitiye Siri Sumitta Maha Thero was given higher ordination by the Bhikkhus of the Dhammayukthika Nikaya headed by the Right Reverend Vajiragnana Sangharaja, the chief incumbent of Pavaranivesa temple of the city of Ayodya in Siam. He was observing ascetic rules for seven years under the Sangharaja, studied the Tripitaka well and cultivated the higher virtues. On his return to Ceylon this Maha Thero whose conduct was a shining example to others was residing at Matale Kumbiyangoda temple which was a secluded place. He was observing the precepts rigidly.

The Right Reverend Indasabhawaragnanasami the chief high priest who went to the kingdom of Ratanapurna in Burma was given higher ordination at a ceremony held under the patronage of King Mendun. This ceremony was conducted by the Bhikkhus headed by Neyyadhammabhi Munivara Nanakittissiri Pavara Dhammasenapathi Mahadhamma Rajadhirajaguru Sangharaja of Burma. He became an erudite scholar of the Tripitakas. He then came to the city of Hansawathi in Ramanna. There within the Kalyani sacred limiting enclosure he obtained from the forest dwelling Bhikkhus headed by the Right Reverend Saddhamvara Maha Thero the extreme service vows. He was an exemplary Maha Thero who rendered a great service, at the risk of his own life, for the upliftment of Buddhism.

I wish to mention here briefly that these three co-associates namely Ven. Ambagahawatte chief high priest, Ven. Varapitiye Siri Summitta Maha Thero, and Ven. Puwakdandawe Pannananda who received higher ordination at the hand of Bhikkhus headed by the forest dwelling Maha Thero Saddhammavara within the limiting sacred Kalyani enclosure and observed rigid vows remaining there as a great recluse at the risk of his own life, inaugurated in Ceylon the Ramanna Nikaya by holding the first higher ordination ceremony.

The efforts of the Ramanna Nikaya thus established to secure the advancement of the religious life of the Bhikkhus for over a period of a century are immeasurable.

It is only one who has a knowledge of the Dhamma who can understand its importance. By the word Buddhism some do not regard its intrinsic supramundane religious aspect but places emphasis on worldly benefits. Though reference is made in the Dhammadayada Sutta to the material aspect and mention is made to profits, name and fame as the lot of a Bhikkhu, it is not the observance of a real Bhikkhu life. I do not wish to dwell here on this aspect but prefer to mention briefly a few facts relating to the Ramanna Nikaya.

For the disciplinary control of the Nikaya, Ven. Ambagahawatte Indasabhawaragnanasami, who was appointed the first high priest of the said Nikaya and who whilst observing Buddhist precepts at the risk of his very life and creating a following of precept observing Bhikkhus, ruled this Nikaya from Payagala, the original great Vihara, till the twenty ninth of January, 1886. As the demise of this chief priest occurred on this very day, for disciplinary control of this Nikaya the Bhikkhus appointed a tenfold committee from amongst themselves and also made the Rt. Rev. Dipegoda Saddammavara Jotipala Silakkhandhaswami Maha Thero, the chief High Priest.

During this period the controlling committee was increased to thirteen and a post of registrar was created to register and hand over certificates of higher ordination. As this chief high priest died on the third of June 1916 his regime extended up to thirty years.

On the twenty-first July 1917 the Rt. Rev. Obadakande Sasana Sobhana Vimalananda Tissa Maha Thero was appointed to the post of chief high priest. During his regime for the purpose of adjudicating on matters of the Nikaya judicial office was created and an addition made to the committee of thirteen. At this same period a Deputy High Priests office was created. As this chief high priest died on the 28th of September 1924 his control was limited to seven years. In that very year itself the Rt. Rev. Matara Siri Saddhammachariya Nanidasabha Maha Thero was appointed to the post of chief high priest.

During this period the controlling committee of the Nikaya was reduced to thirteen again and a post of Chief Secretary created. As this chief high priest who was ruling the destinies of the Nikaya amidst a great deal of trouble died on the 30th of June 1937, the Rt. Rev. Kodagoda Sasanawansa Kavidhaja Tripitaka Vachissarachariya Upasena Maha Thero was appointed chief high priest. During his period renovations were made in the method of controlling the Nikaya.

An effort was made at that time to introduce an orderly method of controlling the Nikaya by setting up a Ramanna Nikaya protection society with the then Minister of Agriculture and Land, the late Mr. D. S. Senanayake as its president. As a result of this arrangement the Nikaya controlling organisation consisting of representatives from twenty district organisations had membership of sixty and its working committee comprised twenty members.

In addition to the original constitution even a draft enactment was prepared. After the new method of control was introduced into the Nikaya, the Rt. Rev. Kodagoda Upasena chief high priest expired on July 24th 1939 and in his place Rt. Rev. Matale Pandithachariya Siri Dhammasiddhi Maha Thero was appointed chief high priest on May 8th 1940, but he died on December 7th 1940.

Thereafter Rt. Rev. Karatota Siri Indasara Maha Thero was appointed to act as chief high priest but he was not confirmed in this post till July 20th 1945. The reason for this was that the control had got disintegrated. To bring this state of affairs into some order ten Bhikkhus made strenuous efforts and this resulted in the appointment of a controlling society of 100 Bhikkhus from which a working committee of twenty was appointed.

When this controlling method was introduced the defunct posts of Deputy Chief High Priest, Judicial Officer, and Registering Officer were resuscitated and powerful Bhikkhus were appointed thereto. The former chief secretary's post was made into a joint secretaries post and two powerful Bhikkhus were appointed thereto. A supreme council of ten was set up. The rules were printed with corrections incorporated therein.

On July 20th 1945 the Rt. Rev. Karatota Indasaratissa Maha Thero was confirmed as chief high priest and his regime lasted for nine years. During this period, in order to improve the system of education in force in the Nikaya, an observance administrative council was set up; and a Tripitaka Dhamma examination was commenced under the title religious degree examination.

On the advice of the then Prime Minister of Ceylon Rt. Hon. Don Steven Senanayaka, an enactment was drafted to set up the Nikaya as a legal body by legislation. This proposal gave rise to a good deal of differences of opinion. On account of the great efforts of the protective society, its president Hon. Dudley Senanayake, the Prime Minister and the Nikaya working committee of twenty, the administrative body of the Nikaya adopted the draft legislative enactment of March 27th 1954. Nevertheless up to this time no effort has been made to pass this draft as a legal enactment.

When the Rt. Rev. Karatota chief high priest died on November 14th 1954, the Rt. Rev. Panditachariya Hissalle Siri Nanodaya Maha Thero was selected to act and the working committee with him as its head guided the Nikaya. On May 15th 1956 he was confirmed in the post and he guided the destinies of the Nikaya till October 12th 1966.

During his regime the centenary celebrations of the Nikaya were held on a grand scale and the ordaining of five hundred Bhikkhus on this occasion was a unique event in the history of Ceylon. On his demise on October 13th 1966 the Nikaya is now being controlled by the working committee and the administrative committee headed by the acting chief high priest the Rt. Rev. Depegoda Siri Chandawimala Maha Theo.

The Ramanna Nikaya, which has twenty five provincial branches and over thousand temples spread over the whole of Ceylon and also several forest dwelling centres and Pirivena's, is engaged in protecting Buddhism.

All those laymen and priests who value Buddhism will accept the fact that this Nikaya has made a great contribution for preserving Buddhism.

