

## THE SANGHA IN THE MODERN WORLD

By Ven. Professor Dr. Walpola Sri Rahula

*The following paper contains the main gist of a talk delivered by the Ven. Professor Dr. Walpola at the Third International Congress of the World Buddhist Sangha Council, held in Taipei in December 1981.*

*The Ven. Dr. Rahula touches in great detail on some of the Vinaya rules governing the discipline and conduct of the Sangha community. These rules were subject to amendment and modification, during the time of the Buddha as well as during later periods, because of changing economic and social conditions; they were adapted to suit the needs of the times.*

*“Some changes, modifications, adaptations are necessary today. Nothing can survive without change,” he adds. He concludes by submitting the problem as a subject for deliberation by the August Council.*

*The Venerable Professor is well-known to us, for his articles often appear in the “Voice of Buddhism”. He is the Chancellor of the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka as well as the President of the Paramadhamma Buddhist Institute, Sri Lanka.*

*-Ed.*

As the Order of the **Sangha** is constituted and conducted according to the **Vinaya**, it should be made clear, even very briefly, what the **Vinaya** is. First of all, it must be distinctly understood that the **Vinaya** is different from the **Dharma**. The **Dharma** is the teaching which deals with such doctrines as the Four Noble Truths (**catuvarīya sacca**) including the Eight-fold Noble Path (**ariya atthangika magga**); the Dependent Origination (**patticasamuppāda**); cause and effect (**hetu phala**); impermanence (**anicca**), suffering (**dukkha**) and egolessness (**anatta**) of our existence; four forms of the presence of mindfulness or awareness (**satipatthāna**); thirty seven qualities leading to Enlightenment (**bodhipakkiyadhamma**), etc., etc. This teaching, the **Dharma**, is meant for all – monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen – without distinction or discrimination. The **Dharma** is true and valid universally, everywhere and at all times. It does not change, and cannot be changed or modified anywhere, at any time.

But the **Vinaya** is a code, a set of rules, a convention, accepted and established for the good, orderly and smooth conduct of a particular community, namely,

the Community of the **Sangha** in a particular geographical area at a particular period of history. As such, it is subject to change, and bound to be changed and modified in different geographical areas at different times according to need. Thus, the Buddha himself amended and modified some **Vinaya** rules several times according to circumstances. For example, the rule on Communal food (**gana-bhojana**) was modified by the Buddha **seven** times to suit different circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

Some **Vinaya** rules were changed to suit certain geographical regions. According to the original rules, an assembly of ten **bhikkhus** was essential for granting Higher Ordination (**upasampadā**); foot-wear with more than one layer of leather could not be worn; bathing generally had to be once a fortnight; leather should not be used for mats to sit on. When these rules were in force, a **bhikkhu** named Sona from Avanti appealed to the Buddha on behalf of his teacher Maha-Kaccayana Thera and said:

“Lord, it is very difficult to find **bhikkhus** in Avanti. Therefore let the Lord approve that the number of **bhikkhus** required for granting Higher Ordination be reduced. The surface of the earth of the country of Avanti is rough. May the Blessed One, therefore, permit the use of foot-wear consisting of more than one layer of leather? The people of Avanti appreciate frequent bathing. May the Blessed One, therefore, permit frequent bathing over there in that country? Just as the people of Mid-Country use mats to sit on, the people of Avanti use hides to sit on. May the Lord, therefore, permit the use of hides as seats over there?”  
(Paraphrased)

Thereupon the Buddha summoned the **bhikkhus** to a congregation and changed the original rules, and declared that these new rules would be valid not only in Avanti, but also in all other countries except Mid-Country (of India). Thenceforth, the Higher Ordination Ceremony could be performed by a gathering of any five **bhikkhus** with at least one of them learned in the **Vinaya**; the use of foot-wear with more than one layer of leather, frequent bathing, and the use of hide for seats came into practice.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. *Pācittiya: ganabhōjanasikkhāpada.*

2. *Mahāvagga*, ed. Saddhātissa (Alutgama 1922), pp.242ff.

It is stated in the **Bhesajjakkhandhaka** of the **Mahāvagga** that during a famine certain rules pertaining to food and drink were relaxed and changed for the convenience of **bhikkhus**.<sup>3</sup> Earlier the Buddha had ruled that it was improper for a **bhikkhu** to keep food inside his residence, to cook food there, and to store food for himself. The Master changed these rules when a famine ravaged the city of Rajagaha.

A careful reading of the **Vinaya-pitaka** will clearly show that the Rules of Discipline were laid down and changed, amended or modified, in accordance with changing economic and social conditions, to suit times and places. The Buddha's system of directing the **Sangha** was democratic. It is because of this underlying broad principle that the Buddha, as mentioned in the **Mahāparinibbāna-sutta**, just before his passing away, told Ananda that if the members of the **Sangha** desired, they could abolish or modify minor rules after his death.

This question of 'minor rules' was raised at the First Council held at Rajagaha within a few months after the Buddha's **parinibbāna**. Different opinions were expressed as to what was meant by 'minor rules'. The Council reproved Ananda for not ascertaining from the Buddha what rules the Master meant by the term 'minor'. No unanimity of opinion was possible on the question. Therefore, on a motion brought forward by the Council's President, Mahā-Kassapa Thera, the **Sangha** unanimously decided neither to lay down new rules, nor to annul any of the existing ones, but to follow those that had already been laid down by the Master.

Mahā-Kassapa Thera's main argument in support of his resolution was that public opinion would go against them if they removed any rules, however minor they might be. It is of great significance that he did not advance any reason, apart from that of public censure, for not changing the rules.<sup>4</sup> Obviously there was no practical need to change any rules so soon.

From that day to this, as far as is known, not a single **Vinaya** rule was officially changed nor were new rules introduced into the body of the **Vinaya** by the **Sangha** of the Theravada. But as time went on **bhikkhus** had to face the realities of life under newly-developed circumstances, and to realize the

---

3. *Ibid.*, pp.260 ff.

4. *Cullavagga*, ed. Saddhātissa (Alutgama 1915), *Pancasatikakkhandhaka*, pp.450 ff.

impracticability and difficulty of following some rules in their original form. Therefore, without changing the letter of the law, monks discovered ways and means of overcoming the difficulty by interpreting the law without compromising themselves. These interpretations and decisions, concluded first at the Mahavihara at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka and later accepted by all Theravada countries, are known under the term **pālimuttakavinicchaya**, i.e. decisions not found in the original canonical texts.<sup>5</sup> These are tantamount to amendments or new rules, though they are not considered as such.

When the community of monks began to grow numerically, and their services to the country were regarded as essential, large and numerous endowments were made to monasteries for their maintenance. These temporalities brought many changes in the life of the **Sangha**. As the monks were obliged to make use of the landed property of the monastery, they had to religionize it. Thus, in order to regularize the new situation, which did not exist at the time of the Buddha, the **Sangha** had to agree upon a new **Vinaya** convention known as **lābhasīmā**, which means ‘income-boundary’. Therefore, the **Samantapāsādikā**, the Commentary on the **Vinaya** says:

“As for **lābba-sīmā** (income-boundary), it was neither allowed by the Buddha nor established by the **theras** who recited (collated) the **Dhamma** (in Council). But kings and ministers, after building a **vihāra**, define (boundaries within a distance of) a **gāvuta**, half a **yojana** or a **yojana** around (the **vihāra**), and set up pillars inscribed with the names saying, ‘This is the income-boundary/ (income-area) of our **vihāra**, and fix boundaries stating, ‘whatever is produced within this area, we give all that to our **vihāra**. This is called **lābba-sīmā**.”<sup>6</sup>

According to the **Vinaya**, a **bhikkhu** should not dig the ground or get another to do so. If he does, he commits an offence called **pācittiya**.<sup>7</sup> But this was impracticable when there was landed property attached to the monastery. Therefore, in the course of commenting on this rule, the **Samantapāsādikā** records an interesting decision as **pālimuttaka-vinicchaya**. It says:

---

5. *Samantapāsādikā* (SHB), p.551. There is a complete book called *Pālimuttaka-vinayavinicchaya* written by Sāriputta Thera of Sri Lanka in the 13th century. It contains discussions and decisions which are not found in the original Vinaya texts.

6. *Samantapāsādikā* III (Colombo 1900), p.260

7. *Pācittiya-pāli*, ed. Medha Siri Ariyavamsa Thera (Colombo, B.E.2472), p. 37.

“This is a decision not found in the (original) text: If one says, ‘Dig a pond’, it is proper, for only a place dug out is called a pond. Therefore it is proper usage. This is the method (rule) in other matters such as ‘Dig a tank, a lake, a pit.’ But it is not proper to say, ‘Dig this place, dig a pond in this place’. It is proper to say, ‘Dig yams, dig roots’ without specify- (where). It is not proper to say, ‘Dig this creeper, dig yams, or dig roots in this place.’”<sup>8</sup>

This is an ingenious way of getting over the difficulty by interpreting the letter of the law with legal acumen. After all, the **Vinaya** is a legal system and it should so be interpreted.

In ancient times, not only landed property, but also irrigation reservoirs or tanks yielding considerable income, were offered to the **Sangha**. But according to the Commentary,<sup>9</sup> a tank should be accepted by the **Sangha** only when the donor offers it with the proper formula. If one simply says: ‘I offer a tank or reservoir to the Sangha’, it should not be accepted. A reservoir should be accepted when it is offered to the **Sangha** for the purpose of enjoying the four requisites (**cattāro paccaye**).

Once the **Sangha** recognized ecclesiastical property as a necessity for the perpetuation of the religion, it obviously had the duty of protecting its property. Therefore the monks were advised and authorized to entertain even rebels, robbers and marauders with the property of the **Sangha**, if this had to be done in order to protect the wealth of the monastery. Thus, Abhaya Thera, chief incumbent of Mihintale, entertained a rebel and his gang who came to plunder the monastery, and thereby saved its assets. At the end of the story, the **Samantapāsādikā** says that an intelligent monk should act in this manner.<sup>10</sup>

If a **bhikkhu** knows medicine, the **Vinaya** allows him to attend medically on his fellow monks, his parents, and a few other close associates. But he should not treat medically anyone at all as a professional medical man would. Yet, quite naturally, people who knew him would go to such a monk for medical advice. However, if a layman requests a **bhikkhu** to treat a patient or prepare some medicine, the request should not be complied with. Lay people should know the ‘proper’ way of consulting a monk. If a layman inquires from a monk as to what is given for a certain ailment, then it is proper for the monk to tell him. If a man says, ‘My mother is ill; please prescribe some medicine’, no

---

8. *Samantapāsādikā* (SHB), p.551

9. *Ibid.*, p. 490

10. *Ibid.*, pp.338-339

reply should be made. But **bhikkhus** may start a conversation among themselves about what was given to a certain monk when he was suffering from a similar illness. If the inquirer listens to the conversation and treats his mother accordingly, the monk has not violated any **Vinaya** rule.<sup>11</sup>

Such examples, which can be multiplied, illustrate how the life of the **Sangha** was changed and developed as a result of social and economic changes, and how the **Vinaya** was interpreted, modified and adapted accordingly.

In the light of all this, what are the problems of the **Sangha** in the world today? The reality has to be faced. Buddhist monks living in different parts of the 20th century world cannot follow the way of life that was practised in India in the 5th century B.C. or in Sri Lanka in the 5th century A.C. Certain changes and modifications should be made to suit social and economic conditions in the modern world, and this is quite in keeping with the tradition of Buddhist history, as has been shown already.

Undoubtedly some changes, modifications, adaptations are necessary today. Nothing can survive without change. Adapt or perish is the inexorable law of nature. But these adaptations and changes must be done, not hurriedly, but with great care, caution, deliberation and wisdom.

May I, with deep respect, submit that this problem be taken up as a subject for deliberation by this August International Congress of the World Buddhist Sangha Council?

---

11. Ibid., pp.336-337.

