

THE BUDDHIST THERAVĀDA COUNCILS, AND THE PRESERVA- TION OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS¹

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Abstract

The traditional way of preserving the teaching of the Buddha in the old days was by commitment of every word into memory. It had to be refreshed by subsequent Saṅgāyanā (or Saṅgīti) Councils from time to time. This worked effectively for the Theravāda School, which employed Pali as the textual language, regardless of the geographical site of each individual Council.

Records of the Councils are found scattered in the Tipitaka and other late Pali writings. In general, it may be that three Theravāda Councils were held in India, two in Ceylon, two in Burma, and two or three in Thailand. Of all these, the Chaṭṭha Saṅgīti Council held in Burma from 1954 to 1956 A.D. appears to be the most scholarly, except for the fact that a reliable printed edition of the resolution of the Council is hard to find.

¹In this article, the present writer takes "Pali" as the name of the language employed in the Theravāda Tipitaka, and used by the Buddha during his forty-five years of teaching in Magadha and Kosala in the Eastern part of India after his Enlightenment. The author also accepts the customary use of the term "Pali" in Buddhist commentaries signifying the canonical text, or the *canonical passage*.

With the passage of time, the definition of the term Council has also changed. Now a Council is often identified by the judicious application of the rules of textual criticism in the edition of the Tipitaka text as appearing in manuscript and printed books. In connection with this, the Dhamma Society Fund of Lady Maniratana Bunnag is now undertaking

In Theravāda countries, Pali is often called "Māgadhi", or "Māgadhika" language. This Māgadhi has no connection with the dramatic Prakrit dialect of the Indian literature, being so far apart in time as well as in linguistic makeup. This Buddhist Māgadhika dialect or Māgadhika-vohāra, has had a long history within orthodox Buddhist communities, and is a sort of *educated dialect*, retaining much of the Sanskrit phonetic characteristics, yet common enough to be comprehended by the general public in Magadha and Kosala at the time.

This dialect, which was carefully and ceremonially transmitted by faithful believers, had remained practically unchanged, the writer believes, even at the time the Tipitaka was reduced to writing some four centuries later.

The writer declines to accept the views proposed by some scholars that the Buddha employed a geographically remote Indian dialect in his teaching, or the idea that Buddhism was introduced into Ceylon in a language different from that used by the Buddha, or the suggestion that the "original dialect" was replaced by another language at the time the Tipitaka was written down. In short, the author accepts the general view proposed by Childers, Geiger and Windisch concerning the Pali language. See Robert Caesar Childers', *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. vii; Wilhelm Geiger's, *Pali Literature and Language*, p. 1-7; and Maurice Winternitz's, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. II, p. 601 ff.

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another scholarly edition of the Tipitaka in Thai and Roman characters based on the various printed copies of the text of the Chaṭṭha Saṅgīti Council.

It is recognized by both the Theravāda School and the Northern Schools of Buddhism that the preservation of the Buddha's teachings in the early centuries of Buddhist history was by means of oral recitation, or rehearsal in Councils held by the original Buddhist Saṅgha or Congregation. The language adopted for the recitation was the one used by the Buddha during the forty-five years of his teaching. It was the recitation procedure, plus the trained memory of individual monks, that caused the original wording of the Master, intended for future preservation, to remain unaltered against the passage of time. After the split of the original Congregation into factions, the Theravāda Saṅgha continued to use the same language and the same procedure of recitation, regardless of the mother tongue of individual monks, whereas the Northern Schools gradually sought to facilitate the popular understanding of the doctrine by introducing regional languages. It is claimed by the Theravādins that at the time the teachings were systematically arranged into the form now called the Tipiṭaka, the language of the original teachings of the Buddha had remained the same. The collections of the Northern Schools, on the other hand, consist of several individual texts in various languages, although frequent claims are made that those texts are derived from the Sanskrit originals.

Among the Theravāda Buddhists, the usual Pali term for the *council*, or *rehearsal* or *recitation* of the Buddha's teachings, as found in Pali-English dic-

tionaries, is Saṅgīti. In Thailand, the use of the term *Saṅgīti* is limited to a small number of Pali scholars, whereas another term *Saṅgāyanā* is more commonly used, by specialists and non-specialists alike. Strange as it seems, the term *Saṅgāyanā* is not included in any of the Pali-English dictionaries. Nor is it found in Abhidhānappadīpikā, a dictionary of Pali synonyms compiled by Moggallāna Thera of Ceylon in the twelfth century A.D., nor in the Hybrid Buddhist Sanskrit Dictionary by Franklin Edgerton.

Morphologically, *Saṅgāyanā* appears to be a legitimate Pali word. Theoretically the term might be regarded as a "*desīya*" or "local" Pali word coined in either Myanmar (i.e., Burma) or Thailand, where it has been in regular use. Both terms, *Saṅgāyanā* and *Saṅgīti* are from the same root √*gā* (*gāyati* - to sing) with the prefix *saṃ* (together), and should bear an identical meaning. Originally the words should mean "*the group chanting in unison of the words of the Buddha*," but the meaning as understood by Buddhist students in Thailand nowadays has been extended to "*The textual criticism or edition, by an authoritative assembly of monks and scholars, of the Pali teachings or Tipiṭaka, from available printed versions and reliable manuscripts, so that the finished edition will conform to, or most closely conform to, the true teachings of the Buddha.*"

From the definition given above, *Saṅgāyanā* or *Saṅgīti* necessarily implies (1) *an assembly authorized by the Saṅgha or Congregation*, and (2) *a recitation in concord, or a joint examination of the available printed editions and manuscripts of the Tipiṭaka to fix and preserve the original teachings of the Buddha.*

Although the term *Sanḡīti* (or *Sanḡāyanā*) is often translated as "a general Council", it is by no means open to all monks. Historically, the number of monks attending early Councils varied from a few hundred to many thousands. The Cullavagga XI records that the monks asked Mahā-Kassapa Thera to select five hundred monks to take part in the first Council, and after four hundred ninety-nine Theras had been nominated, the monks proposed that the next one should be Ānanda Thera, a suggestion readily accepted by Mahā-Kassapa Thera. From this number of five hundred, this Council is also called the Council of The Five Hundred. As a Council always required a patron to bear the expenses, it may be assumed that the attending monks were in those days selected by the organizer or the president of the Council, with the implied approval of the patronizing king.

Childers, one of the early English scholars of Pali, in his Pali-English Dictionary, defines the word *Sanḡīti* by "*chanting together, rehearsal*." He explains further that the Council was held for the purpose of *fixing the text of the Buddhist Scriptures*, and it was called *Sanḡīti* or *Rehearsal* because the text was first recited, sentence by sentence, by an eminent thera, *to be chanted after him in chorus (gaṇa-sajjhāya)* by the whole assembly.

In the preliminary details of two rehearsals that are recorded in Culla Vagga of the Vinaya Piṭaka, we can see how the actual procedure was conducted. The first Council is found in Culla Vagga XI.7 of the Vinaya Piṭaka in connection with the Pārājikā offences.

Then the venerable Mahā-Kassapa Thera informed the Saṅgha, saying:

"Your reverences, let the assembly listen to me. If it seems right to the assembly I could question Upāli Thera on the Vinaya." Then the venerable Upāli Thera informed the assembly, saying: "Honoured sirs, let the Assembly listen to me. If it seems right to the Assembly, I, questioned on the Vinaya by the venerable Mahā-Kassapa Thera, could answer."

Then the venerable Mahā-Kassapa Thera spoke thus to the venerable Upāli Thera:

"Where, reverend Upāli Thera, was the first offence involving Pārājika laid down?"

"At Vesālī, honoured sir."

"Regarding whom?"

"Regarding Sudinna the Kalandaka."

"On what subject?"

"On sexual intercourse."

Then the venerable Mahā-Kassapa Thera questioned the venerable Upāli Thera as to the subject of the first Pārājika offence, and he questioned him as to its provenance, and he questioned him as to the individual, and he questioned him as to what was laid down, and he questioned him as to what was an offence, and he questioned him as to what was no offence.²

After questioning Upāli Thera on the Vinaya offences, Mahā-Kassapa Thera then questioned Ānanda Thera on the Dhamma, (Culla Vagga XI.8).

Then the venerable Mahā-Kassapa Thera informed the Order, saying: "Honoured sirs, let the assembly listen to me. If it seems right to the assembly,

²Adapted from the translation by I. B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, Volume V (Culla Vagga), in *Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, Vol. XX, London, Luzac, 1952. p. 396

I could question Ānanda Thera about the Dhamma."

Then the venerable Ānanda Thera informed the assembly, saying : "Honoured sirs, let the assembly listen to me . If it seems right to the assembly, I, questioned on the Dhamma by the venerable Mahā-Kassapa Thera, could answer."

Then the venerable Mahā-Kassapa Thera spoke thus to the venerable Ānanda Thera:

"Where, reverend Ānanda Thera, was the Brahmajāla Sutta spoken?"

"Honoured sir, between Rājagaha and Nālandā in the royal rest-house at Ambalaṭṭhikā."

"With whom?"

"Suppiya the wanderer and Brahmadatta the brahman youth."

Then the venerable Mahā-Kassapa Thera questioned the venerable Ānanda Thera as to the provenance of the Brahmajāla Sutta, and he questioned him as to the individual.³

It can be seen from the above that the examination with regards to the Pārājika offences in the Book of Vinaya (or Discipline) was more detailed than that on the Dhamma. This first Council is generally accepted by both the Theravāda and the Northern Schools. Although the *gaṇa-sajjhāya* (chanting in chorus) stipulated by Childers in his definition of the term *Sanḅhīti* is not mentioned in the Culla Vagga passage above, it is very likely that such chanting was the general procedure, a sort of approval and confirmation by the entire assembly, otherwise the term *Sanḅhīti* should not have been coined to refer to this kind of rehearsal. From the practical viewpoint, the group chanting is an effective means to teach the neophytes of the endorsed

text of the Tipiṭaka, when they are allowed to attend the assembly.

In recent times, it is often held that if no objection is raised by the audience during or after the recitation by the authorized Thera or group of Theras, the assembly is assumed to have given full approval to the recitation.

Granting that group recitation was one of the most effective means to preserve the Buddha's teachings in the old days, it had by its nature a limitation. As long as the mother tongue of the attending members of the Council was the same, the group recitation was possible, but in a large assembly with several thousands of attendants speaking probably several dialects, *gaṇa-sajjhāya* or chanting in chorus, could become impossible, or at least difficult to achieve. This is due to a salient passage in the Vinaya Piṭaka where the Buddha is reported to have said :

"anuḅjānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanam pariyāpuṇitum."(I ordain, o monks, that the word of the Buddha be learnt in *sakāya niruttiyā*).

This particular phrase "*sakāya niruttiyā*", literally "*in one's own language*", could be interpreted differently. "*Sakāya*" could be either "my own", "your own", "his own", "their own", etc. In this particular case, it was interpreted by Buddhaghosa, the celebrated and greatest Theravāda commentator of the Tipiṭaka, as "in the language of the Buddha". He further explained that this particular "language of the Buddha" was no other than "that kind or style of Māgadhī or the language of Magadha as spoken by the Buddha: (*ettha sakā nirutti nāma sammmāsambuddhena vuttappakāro*

³ ibid. p. 397f

māgadhiko vohāro)". This interpretation is often quoted in Theravāda circles, to reaffirm the view that the Theravāda Tipitaka has never been in any other language than Pali, and that a Theravāda monk consequently has to study Pali. It also follows that the official language employed in conducting the meeting in a general Council in the Theravāda ecclesiastical history is Pali.

The Northern Schools, however, disagree. Instead, they take "*sakāya niruttiyā*" as the *language or dialect of each and every monk in the assembly*. In a Council, when the presiding monk made an announcement, he most likely employed either his own mother tongue, or the language of the region where the Council was held, or the language of the majority of monks in the assembly. If the audience consisted of monks speaking the same language, the recitation in that language was natural. But in a large assembly of monks speaking different dialects, and with no requirement to have studied "one particular central dialect" beforehand, the recitation *in concord* or *in unison* was then an impossibility. The preservation of the word of the Buddha by chanting in concord could not therefore be effective in the Northern Schools a few centuries after the time of the Buddha's Parinibbāna.

Because of this, no more Saṅgīti or Saṅgāyanā of the Northern Buddhist Schools was convened after the reign of King Kaniṣka of north India. The Theravāda School, on the other hand, has maintained this practice up to modern times, with the latest Council being held in Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma), from May 1954 to May 1956 A.D.

At the present time, Theravāda or Orthodox Buddhist countries are limited to Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Laos, and Kampuchea (Cambodia). In most books on ecclesiastical history written by Western scholars, Buddhist Councils are discussed mostly chronologically, and almost exclusively limited to India and Ceylon. This article will try to present all the known Councils that have been held in India, and in all Theravāda countries in Asia.

1. The Indian Councils

The first Council was held in the city of Rājagaha in the east of India about three months after the decease of the Buddha. Up to that time, the Buddha's teachings were usually called *Dhamma-Vinaya* — "the Doctrine and the Discipline". The Elder Mahā-Kassapa, who presided over the assembly, gave as the reason for summoning the first Council the unbefitting and disturbing remark made by Subhadda Bhikkhu indicative of a glaring lack of respect towards the Buddha, and Subhadda's conceivable tendency to drift away from the disciplined life required of a conscientious monk. The details of this Council have been given above.

The second Council was held at Vesālī (Sk. Vaiṣālī), also in the eastern part of India, a little more than one hundred years after the passing away of the Buddha. The reason for the convention, as reported by the Theravāda School, was because the Vajjiputtaka monks of Vesālī were alleged to be in the habit of practising the *dasa vatthūni* or *ten items (of indulgence)* which were regarded by strict orthodox monks as contravention of Vinaya rules. These Ten Issues as described in the Cullavagga were as

follows:

1. That salt might be preserved in horn by monks for seasoning their food as desired,
2. That meals might be eaten even after midday as long as the sun's shadow was less than two inches long,.
3. That a monk, after eating in the morning at one place, could go to another village for a second meal on the same day,
4. That monks in one monastery might observe separate Uposatha ceremonies,
5. That a monk might obtain sanction for a deed after it has been done,
- 6 That a monk might use customary practices as precedents for other acts,
7. That a monk might drink buttermilk after meals,
8. That a monk might drink toddy,
9. That a monk might use a rug which has no fringe.
10. That gold and silver might be accepted as alms by monks.

Seven hundred monks attended the Council, which condemned such pleasure seeking tendencies. The decision led ten thousand dissatisfied monks to form another faction called the Mahāsaṅghika (The Great Congregation). The new faction immediately convened another Council in which the metaphysical nature of the Buddha and the Arhats (accomplished monks) was announced as the topic for discussion. As the new faction included several previously non-Buddhistic "*ācariyas*" (teachers), they called their doctrine *Acariyavāda- the Doctrine of teachers*,

⁴ E. J. Thomas, *History of the Buddhist Thought*, p.31.

or the Teacher-School", possibly a name deliberately coined to emulate the name "*Theravāda*-the Doctrine of the Elders".⁴ Thus arose the schism of the original congregation, leading to the formation of eighteen Buddhist sects in less than two centuries after the decease of the Master.

While the Theravāda School recorded that the second Council took place in which the Ten Issues of the Vajjiputtaka monks were declared improper and unacceptable, the Northern Schools, while recording that the second General Council took place, mentioned neither the Vajjiputtaka monks nor the Ten Items of indulgence. They on the other hand put the emphasis on discussion of the special characteristics of the Buddha and the Arhats instead.

The third Council was held in the city of Pāṭaliputta (the modern Patna) under the aegis of Emperor Asoka in 253 B.C. (B.E.230), the seventeenth year of his reign. It is well known that the Buddhist Emperor was so overwhelmed with a strong sense of remorse after learning the grim facts of the pitiful suffering and miseries resulting from his victorious war (at around 257 B.C.) over the Kingdom of Kalinga that it turned him evermore into a staunch Buddhist.⁵

In a short time, with Asoka's strong support of the congregation, the Buddhist communities in the capital city became prosperous. Then came an infiltration into the Buddhist monasteries of a large

⁵It is rather interesting to note that Asoka Rock Edict XIII, the only edict which described his sense of remorse due to the Kalinga conquest, was erected only in Shahbazgarhi, the most remote place away from Kalinga. See R. K. Mookerji, *Asoka*, p. 162 ff.

number of non-Buddhistic monks seeking a place to live in ease and comfort. Buddhist teachings and practice were contaminated and confusion arose to the point that it was almost impossible to find out if a man in a Buddhist monk's garb was a Buddhist or not.

The condition continued to deteriorate and King Asoka, at about 253 B.C., sought the advice of Moggalliputta Tissa Thera, his preceptor, to find a way to correct or at least alleviate the worsening situation. His objective was twofold: first, to disrobe and expel the heretical monks out of the Buddhist congregation in order to stop the propagation of the false beliefs; and secondly, to purify the Buddhist teachings which had been polluted. In order to identify who were the heretical monks, the wise Thera composed the *Kathāvatthu*⁶, a manual for the refutation of false doctrines and at the same time a test to help verify if a monk in question was true to the teachings of the Buddha or not.

After the elimination of the false monks from the Order, a Council was convened in 253 B.C. (B.E. 230) under the presidency of Moggalliputta Tissa Thera. The Council was attended by one thousand monks and lasted nine months. One new attempt undertaken by the Council was the dispatch of nine missions of monks to neighboring countries for the promulgation of the Buddhist faith. The most notable mission was undoubtedly the one sent to Ceylon under the leadership of Mahinda Thera, Asoka's own son,

born of his queen at the time he was a young viceroy at Ujjenī (modern Ujjain). The Northern Schools did not recognize this Council. The fourth Council was summoned about A.D. 100 (B.E. 643) in the north of India under the auspices of the powerful King Kaniṣka. By that time the split between the Theravāda and the Northern Schools had been fully recognized by both sides. King Kaniṣka was a powerful king who sympathized with the Sarvāstivādins. Among the celebrities of his court the most eminent was perhaps Aśvaghoṣa, a philosopher, poet and dramatist, who wrote the literary beautiful *Buddhacarita*. King Kaniṣka convened a Council, either in Kāśmīra in the north or in Jālandhara, a city a few hundred kilometers southward from there. According to a Tibetan record, the Council claimed that it was able to settle the dissensions in the Buddhist Brotherhood, and that the eighteen sects were all acknowledged as being the repositories of the genuine doctrine. The Theravāda Buddhists do not recognize this Council, and it is not even mentioned in *Mahāvamsa*.

2. The Ceylonese Councils

As mentioned above, Emperor Asoka dispatched chapters of monks to several countries as Buddhist missionaries. Mahinda Thera, a son of Emperor Asoka born of an Ujjenī mother, came with other monks to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Theravāda Buddhism was promptly established. Two years later, a rehearsal of the *Vinaya Tipiṭaka* was performed by the newly formed Sinhalese congregation, probably to demonstrate the readiness of the native Sangha to carry on the promulgation of the new religion. As the objective of the rehearsal was nowhere indicative of the attempt to fix

⁶The *Kathāvatthu*, a discussion on the points of controversy between the eighteen early Buddhist sects, and the defence of the Theravāda viewpoint, is now included as one of the seven works in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*.

the Tipiṭaka, the recitation was not recognized by the Theravāda countries as a Saṅgāyanā.

The Sinhalese monks were very active in Buddhist studies from the beginning. They composed several Sinhalese commentaries to the Tipiṭaka, which they studied and orally transmitted to younger generations by word of mouth for over a century.

Two centuries later, King Vattagāmaṇī Abhaya convened a Council on the island, with the purpose of refreshing the memory of the monks who were the retainers of the Tipiṭaka. The entire Tipiṭaka was recited, and at the end of the rehearsal, the assembled monks wrote the Tipiṭaka down on manuscripts.⁷ The Sinhalese commentaries to the Tipiṭaka were also written down on palm leaf manuscripts at the same time. The international Theravāda tradition regards this first Ceylon Council as the Fourth Council (i.e., the next one in line of the three previous Indian Councils).

In A.D. 413 (B.E.956), an Indian monk by the name of Buddhaghosa came to Ceylon with the purpose of examining and translating into Pali the Sinhalese commentaries which had been written by Sinhalese monks and preserved in Ceylon. His first work on the island, however, was the Visuddhi-Magga (The Path of Purity), which was a test-subject imposed upon him by the Sinhalese monks, before he should be allowed access to the native commentaries. This Visuddhi-Magga is now regarded as a

Buddhist encyclopedic masterpiece containing the whole of the Buddha's teachings in a single volume. After finishing this work, he started translating the Sinhalese commentaries to the Tipiṭaka into Pali almost single-handedly. These very scholarly and valuable commentaries, or Atthakathās, by Buddhaghosa have since been indispensable to any serious traditional student of Buddhism in Theravāda countries.

Buddhaghosa's commentaries to the Tipiṭaka, however, are oftentimes difficult. In the year 1044 A.D. (B.E.1587) Sinhalese monks started writing sub-commentaries to these commentaries. These sub-commentaries (technically called Tīkās) clarified knotty passages found in Buddhaghosa's works.

It should be mentioned that these religious activities undertaken in Ceylon so far, viz., the Pali translation of the Sinhalese commentaries into Pali by the great Buddhaghosa, the writing of sub-commentaries (Tīkās), by later Sinhalese monks, are not regarded by the international Theravāda tradition as a rehearsal or a Council in the strict definition of the term.

Ceylon held an actual general Council in 1865 A.D. (B.E.2408), but it was not much publicized. Theravāda countries, in general, do not recognize it.

3. Two Burmese Councils

In 1871 A.D. (B.E.2414), soon after Mandalay had been established as the new capital of Myanmar (Burma), the devout King Mindon convened a Buddhist general Council there to revise and purify the Pali scriptures on a grand scale. A large concourse of 2400 learned

⁷ Mahāvamsa XXXIII.101. says "seeing the downfall of the people from righteousness, the monks who were assembled there wrote down the Tipiṭaka in books, so that the Dhamma might long endure".

monks solemnly assembled to recite the Tipiṭaka from the beginning to the end, after which the entire sacred text was inscribed onto 729 white marble tablets. Each tablet was installed carefully in a small pagoda-like structure surrounding a centrally located large pagoda in a large square at the foot of the Mandalay Hill. The Myanmar congregation has regarded the text of this Council with very high esteem up to the present day. The Burmese Sangha refers to this Council as the fifth, and international Theravāda authorities recognizes it.

From May 1954 to May 1956, U Nu summoned a Buddhist Council to commemorate the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's MahāParinibbāna. Two thousand five hundred monks from Burma, Cambodia, India, Laos, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Thailand took part in this great international Council. They examined, compared and discussed the readings of all the printed editions of the Pali Tipiṭaka, namely, the Burmese Mindon Edition, the Ceylonese edition, the Thai edition, and the Pali Text Society edition. Recitation of the approved text was also conducted at the late stage of the Council. This Council, usually referred to as the sixth, the *Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti*, is universally regarded as the most elaborate rehearsal undertaken by the orthodox Buddhists school in modern times.

4. The Thai Councils

In 1870 A.D. (B.E.2413), Vimaladhamma Thera of Bangkok, Thailand, composed a Pali work entitled *Saṅgītiyavaṃsa*, in which he listed nine Theravāda Buddhist Councils in chronological order, regardless of the countries where the Council took place.

Some of the activities of the Ceylonese monks on the Tipiṭaka and commentaries were given the status of a Council in this work, although they did not meet the definition for a proper Council.

The nine Councils listed in the *Saṅgītiyavaṃsa* follows:

- 1.The first Indian Council after the Parinibbāna of the Buddha.
2. The second Indian Council, in connection with the ten points of indulgence of the Vajjiputtaka monks at Vesālī.
- 3.The third Indian Council at Pāṭaliputta under the aegis of King Asoka after the heretical monks had been disrobed and at the end of which the project of sending nine chapters of Buddhist monks to neighboring countries was confirmed.
- 4.The recitation of the Ceylonese congregation two years after the establishment of Buddhism on the island.
5. The council convened by King Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya, at the end of which the Tipitaka was for the first time written down on plam leaf manuscripts.
- 6.The Pali translation of the *Sinhalese commentaries by Buddhaghosa in 413 A.D.*
7. The writing in A.D. 553 of the sub-commentaries (Tīkā) to explain the Pali translation by Buddhaghosa of the original Sinhalese commentaries.
- 8.The Council of 1577A.D.(B.E. 2020) convened in Chiangmai under the patronage of King Tilokarāja after the successful casting of a large bronze Buddhist image.
9. The Bangkok Council of 2331 B.E. (1788 A.D.) under the aegis of King Rama I of Bangkok. Two hundred eighteen Theras and Thirty two lay scholars were at work for five months.

Vimaladhamma Thera, who wrote the text, noted that all of the Councils re-

ferred to in the above list had as the objective to promote the religion so that Buddhism would endure far into the future (traditionally five thousand years). Although some of these did not meet the strict definition of the term Saṅgāyanā or Saṅgīti, their importance should be explicitly indicated. He called those activities “saṅgīti-sadisa—A Council-Equivalent”.

It is to be noted that as the work of Vimaladhamma Thera was written in 1870 A.D., later Councils in Burma, Thailand and Ceylon are therefore not included. There was one more Council held in Thailand, under the aegis of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej in B.E. 2527 (A.D. 1984). More than three hundred monks attended the recitation, lasting three years. The result was an edition, so-called Thai-Rattha Edition of B.E.2530.

As mentioned above, the Tipiṭaka was once retained in the memory of the body of monks in several lands, a procedure which naturally required occasional restoration to prevent oblivion as time passed. With the recording of the Tipiṭaka onto palm leaf manuscript and in books, the preservation of the Tipiṭaka began to change gradually. Instead of holding an assembly of monks for recitation, an assembly of fewer, but carefully selected, monks to scrutinize the Tipiṭaka page by page, folio by folio, and even word by word, aided by modern facilities to reduce monotony and exhaustion, is becoming a more and more accepted practice. Modern textual criticism has been the practice since. The work is still called Saṅgīti or Saṅgāyanā, however, and chanting in chorus (gaṇa-sajjhāya) of the finished text is occasionally performed as the

final stage of "rehearsal".

This new method of preserving the original Buddhist Tipiṭaka, by collation and edition of the written manuscripts, or books, started about a hundred years ago⁸, and the information source was limited at first to palm leaf manuscripts primarily from Ceylon, Burma and Thailand, and occasionally from Kampuchea (Cambodia).

At present, the M. L. Maniratana Bunnag Dhamma Society Fund (MDS Fund), under the Patronage of His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, is now undertaking an edition of the Buddhavaṣṣe 2500 Mahāsaṅgīti Tipiṭaka, based primarily on the finished text of the international Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti held in Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma) from May 1954 to May 1956. The finished work of the MDS Fund will be published in two parallel editions of identical contents, one in Thai script and another in Roman. One thousand 40-volume-sets of the Roman script edition will be humbly presented to His Majesty King Bhumibol of Thailand on commemoration of His 72nd Anniversary, so that they should become a Royal Dhamma gift to one thousand international academic institutions throughout the world.

The editing of the Tipiṭaka by the MDS Fund is now going into the third year. The members of the Editorial Board of the MDS Fund were carefully selected,

⁸ To the best of the writer's knowledge, Mahāvamsa was the first Pali text ever edited (by G. Turnour, A.D.1837), followed by the Dhammapada, in 1855, the Five Jātakas, in 1861, and The Jātaka, together with its commentary, in 1875, by the Danish scholar V. Fausboll.)

consisting of traditionally trained Pali experts as well as modern scholars of Pali and Sanskrit. Of the available Theravāda Tipitaka editions, the editorial board of the MDS Fund has chosen the text of the Burmese Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti Council as the standard. The texts utilized by the Editorial Board are as follows:

1. Three Burmese-alphabet editions:

1.1 The Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti, B.E. 2499 printing,

1.2 The Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti, B.E. 2500 printing,

1.3 The Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti, B.E. 2541 printing.

2. Five Thai-alphabet editions:

2.1 Siam Ratṭha edition, B.E.2431 printing,

2.2 Siam Ratṭha edition, B.E.2470 printing,

2.3 Siam Ratṭha editions, B.E. 2502 / 2538 printing,

2.4 Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya edition, B.E.2500 printing,

2.5 Deyya Ratṭha edition, B.E. 2530 printing, (popularly called the Thai Ratṭha edition).

3. Two Roman-alphabet editions:

3.1 The Pali Text Society editions, (from A.D. 1883 printing up to the present),

3.2 Vipassana Research Institute (VRI) Edition, India, B.E.2542 printing.

4. The Sinhalese Buddha-Jayanti Tipitaka Series (1982 edition)

5. The VRI Devanagari-alphabet edition.

6. One Mon-alphabet edition.

7. One Lanna-alphabet edition.

8. One Chiangtung-alphabet edition, B.E. 2541 printing.

9. Two CD-ROM editions :

9.1 BUDSIR (Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand) edition,

9.2 VRI Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana CD-

ROM, version 1, 2 and 3.

In addition to these, commentaries to the Tipitaka from various sources are being utilized by the Editorial Board.

It was found soon after the beginning of the editorial work that the Burmese character Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti editions were oftentimes unsatisfactory. The three printed editions were not *identical*, in spite of the *identical title*. Data given in the errata sheets sometimes did not agree, and were oftentimes missing. The variant readings in the notes were occasionally arbitrarily. This has taken the Editorial Board an unduly longer amount of time than originally estimated.

In addition to the significant variant readings, the printing format and *traditional* convention have been considered, to conform to the *feel* of the *traditional Buddhist scholars* as well as to practical requirements of the *traditional faithful*, and also of *modern academicians*. The minor points which are taken into consideration are :

1. The variation in spellings of Pali words as found in the *standard lexicons* and in the *actual usage in Buddhist Theravāda countries*,

2. Printing format of versified passages,

3. The use of Roman majuscule,

4. Right justification and hyphenation,

5. The declension form of words in the headline,

6. The critical apparatus and the cross reference to be given in footnotes,

7. The use of punctuation marks.

Despite the fact that the total number of items in the footnotes exceeds 30,000, the editorial work, including the *saṃvadhya* (proof reading to elimi-

nate mis-spelling and/or omission or repetition of words in the edited text by actual word-by-word oral recitation) of the "edited" text, is now about 90 to 95 percent completed, and the final layout of each page for printing is being made.

The writer will give two examples of the "significant" variant readings which were found.

1. *samadhikāni* and *samādhikāni*
(*Anāpāna-ssati-kathā*, Gaṇanavāra 152, Paṭisambhidāmagga, Khuddakanikāya),

"soḷasa-vatthukaṃ ānāpāna-ssati-samādhim bhāvayato *samadhikāni/ samadhikāni* dve nāna-satāni uppajjanti"

(In the attempt to attain the ānāpāna-ssati-samādhī correlated with sixteen bases, two hundred nānas, "plus those in excess of that number (200) / in connection with that *Samādhī*" appear to him).

Both readings make sense, but it has to be decided which one is to be adopted.

Two Burmese printed editions (1.2 and 1.3) and the Thai Raṭṭha edition (2530) have *samadhikāni* against *samādhikāni* of all others.

It is found that in spite of the higher frequency of the reading *samādhī kāni*, the commentary explicitly indicates what the minority reading *samadhikāni* actually means (the actual number of nānas implied in this case should be 220, therefore the word should be *samadhī kāni* - plus those exceeding two hundred), and it goes on how the word is formed, confirming the correctness of the term *samadhikāni*.

2. One passage was very puzzling to the members of the Editorial Board. In the preparation for the cremation ceremony of the body of the Buddha after his Parinibbāna, the body of the Buddha was wrapped with 500 pairs of special cloth. After the cremation, it was found that two pairs of the wrapping cloth were "consumed / not consumed" by fire.

(tesañca pañcannam dussa-yuga-satānam dveva dussāni "*dayhimsu / na dayhimsu*" yañca sabba-abbhantarima yañca bāhiram)

"Of the 500 pairs of wrapping cloth, two pairs, i.e., one being the inmost of all layers and another being the one pair outside," were consumed by fire / were not consumed by fire.

No commentary offers help in this case.

The frequency of the readings in this case is rather indecisive (8 for *dayhimsu* and 7 for *na dayhimsu*)

The problem arose: is the variant readings in this case *significant* or not.

The Editorial Board holds the view that the case in question is based rather on the "tradition" of the believers than on what is expected from everyday experience. This necessitated finding other "related texts" for comparison, and finally they settle on the "*Paṭhama-sambodhi-kathā*", a relatively popular Pali text found in Thailand, Burma, Mon, and other neighboring countries. It appears that the reading "*na dayhimsu*" has an overwhelming majority, and in agreement with the reading of the *Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti* text as well

It is earnestly expected that the Buddhavasase 2500 *Mahāsaṅgīti*

Tipiṭaka will come off the press in the first half of the next year (B.E.2546 / A.D. 2003).

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