

BUDDHIST COUNCILS

While the unity of the Sangha was preserved with a certain ease during the lifetime of the Buddha, a traumatic experience awaited the Order at the time of Buddha's death. This was felt the more severely because Buddha consistently refused to establish any certain authority or to name any personal successor to guide the community after his death. Shortly before parinirvana, the Buddha told his disciples to regard the Dhamma as their teacher after his death. He did not tell them to worship or pray to him but to strive hard for their attainment through their own effort. That Buddha established no central authority was due to his exceptional insight into the mind, emotions and the needs for freedom experienced by the mendicants. It also represents a superb confidence in the doctrine he taught. He emphasized the essentially democratic character of the Order, and the fact that the Order would not decay and disappear because the Buddha was no more, so long as there remained the Teaching. He remained that if anyone reported having heard that a particular teaching was his, it should not be judged by the authority cited but by its consistency with what they knew of his Teaching.

According to Cullavagga, the incident which prompted Mahakassapa Thera to call this meeting was his hearing a disparaging remark about the strict rule of life for monks. Mahakassapa was alarmed by his remark and feared that the Dhamma and the Vinaya might be corrupted and not survive intact if other monks were to behave like Subhada and interpret the Teaching as they pleased.

About three months after the parinirvana of the Buddha, Mahakassapa Thera, convened a Council of five hundred Arahants that took place at Rajagaha in Sattapanni Cave during the reign of King Ajattasatu in order to determine and settle the authentic teaching of their Master. The chief protagonists of this extremely important historical event were Ananda Thera, the Buddha's closest companion and attendant, considered to be the custodian of the Dhamma (dhamma bhandagarika), and Upali Thera who has been declared by the Master himself as the greatest expert in the Vinaya. Mahakassapa Thera who presided at the Council, first took up the Vinaya as it was regarded as the life of the Sanana (vinayasa sanassa ayu), and questioned Upali Thera about every precept beginning with the first parajika – where the precept was laid down, on account of what person, what was the offence, etc. When the vinaya pitaka was settled in this manner and accepted by the council as authentic, it was entrusted to Upali Thera himself with the request that he should, with his pupils, preserve the text. After the vinaya, the dhamma was taken up.

Mahakassapa Thera questioned Ananda Thera about the thirty-four suttas of the Digha-Nikaya beginning with Brahmajala Sutta. He answered all the questions and recited the Suttas. The perpetuation of the Digha Nikaya was entrusted to Ananda and his pupils. In this manner the other four nikayas also were settled. Since Sariputta Thera has passed away before the Master the preservation of the Majjhima Nikaya was entrusted to his pupils. The Samyutta Nikaya was to Mahakassapa Thera himself and his pupils. The Anguttara Nikaya was put in charge of Anuruddha Thera and his pupils. In this way all the five Nikaya were settled. These developments provided the Buddhist with a systematic body of doctrine that met the needs and streamlined what the Buddha's ultimate teaching during his 54 year of ministry. The major concern of this Council was to stabilize the Buddhist scriptures by coming to an agreement as to what were the acceptable scriptures as spoken by the Buddha.

At the end of the Council Ananda announced that the Buddha had told him that the Sangha could abolish or amend minor rules if they so desired, after his death. Ananda was reproved by the Council for not ascertaining from the Buddha what rules the Master meant by the term "minor". No unanimity was possible. Therefore, the Sangha unanimously decided neither to lay down new rules nor to remove any of the existing rules, but to follow the rules as they were laid down by the Buddha. This meant that to a certain extent the interpretation of what was genuine Buddhist scripture and what was not was left up to the individual.

The First Council was completed in seven months. As it was accomplished by eminent Arahant, it is called theriya sangiti "Convocation of Thera". Of much more significance at this council was the fact that the Arahants assumed control of the Order. This eventually proved the source of great tension discipline that favoured the Arahants over the rest of the Buddhist community. It also failed to recognize the high value of the faith and devotion as a way of salvation.

The Second Buddhist Council was held in Vesali, 100 years after the Buddha's parinibbana during King Kalasoka reign. Although many of the differences between the various practices seem minor, they show that the early Buddhist monks were grappling with a major issue common to all religions after the death of the founder : how to extract the spirit of the founders' message from his recorded teachings in such a way as to convey it meaningfully to new generations. The Council became a necessity as the learned Vajjiputtaka monks began making changes in the monastic code eg relatively minor (dosa vatthu). But these amounted to modifying or disregarding some minor rules, which was against the

unanimous decision of the Rajagaha Council. Therefore a Council of 700 hundred selected eminent bhikkhus, headed by Yasa, Revata and Sabbakami where the 10 practices were rejected as unlawful while the Vinaya and Dhamma were recited as at the First Council. The second council took eight monks to complete its task.

About ten thousand bhikkhus, condemned by the Vesali Council for unlawful, wrong practices formed a separate, unorthodox school (acariya vada) named Mahasanghika 'Great Community'. The Manasanika position was that the Pali Canon were not the sole authority in determining the Buddha's true teaching. The Mahasanghika reportedly allowed monks to participate in their deliberations on the proper way to interpret the Dhamma, free from the tyranny of scholastics. All accounts indicate that the Mahasanghikas had a liberal attitude towards the tradition. These groups were more open to a relaxed interpretation of the rules, and to the belief that an arahant in this lifetime could still be subjected to human uncertainties and frailties. It was definitely a parting of the ways as a direct result of this schism, other sects came into being, finally leading to the development of Mahayana Buddhism.

The Mahavamsa commented that the 'split original community' (mulasangham bhinditva) and 'founded another opposing, rival community' (annam sangham vilomam akamsu). Whether this unorthodox sect (acariya vada) Mahasanghika could be considered as sangha bheda 'schism' is an interesting question. The Mahasanghika bhikkhus did not reject the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. They did not agree with the orthodox community on certain disciplinary questions. Today there are many sects (nikayas) within the Sangha in Buddhist countries due to various minor matters, but they have nothing to do with sangha bheda.

During the years that followed the Second Council, there arose many sects such as Gokulika, Ekavyoharika, Pannttivada, Bahulika, Mahimsasaka, Vajjiputtaka, Bhadrayanika, Sammiti, Sabbatthavada, etc. They promulgated various theories and doctrines. On the whole, it does not seem that this division within the Sangha had any particular effect on the expansion of Buddhism or on its continued success among the people in India.

Asoka the great Emperor of India embraced Buddhism and became its ardent patron. At first he paid only token homage to the Dhamma and the Sangha and also supported members of other religious sects as his father had done before him. However, all this changed when he met the novice, Nigrodha who preached Appamada Vagga. Therefore he ceased

supporting other religious groups and his interest in and devotion to the Dhamma deepened. Allured by the high status and comfort granted to the Sangha by the Emperor, undesirable and corrupting elements entered the Order thereby disturbing its unity and peace. Asoka was compelled therefore to hold at Pataliputra a sangiti which is generally known as the Third Council to settle authoritatively the Canon of the Scriptures and to rid the Sangha dissensions.

Theravadin sources recored that another split further rent the Sthaviravadins. The 3rd Council resulted in two factions: Vibhajyavadin and Sarvastivadin. The latter chief thesis was that past and future things really exist, as do present things.

This view was advanced to solve one of the issues that had begun to plague Abhidharma analysis after the acceptance of the belief that dharma have only momentary existence. If such is the case, how can karma have long term effects? The solution was to say that dharmas have a permanent existence whose mode changes from future to present to past. Thus, even when in the past mode, a dharma is still able to exert an influence on other dharmas as they approach the momentary present mode. Similarly, every intentional deeds leave seeds that carry effects latent in the personality stream until their time comes for fruition. This doctrine later played a major role in Yogacara thought. The orthodox objected to this solution on the grounds that it constituted a denial of the Buddha's teachings on impermanence and dependent co-arising. In the midst of the Council Thera Tissa set forth the Kathavatthu pakarana wherein the heretical doctrines were thoroughly examined and refuted. Thus ended the Third Council in which a thousand distinguished bhikkhus participated and its works was completed in nine months.

More important for the future of Buddhism, however, was the decision to expand Buddhist missionary efforts outside of India.