

The Six Buddhist Councils

The first Three Buddhist Councils

First Buddhist Council - c. 486 BCE

Second Buddhist Council - c. 386 BCE

Third Buddhist Council - c. 250 BCE

The First Council

- Took place 3 months after the Buddha's Passing (c. 486 BCE).
- Held at Rajagaha (the modern city of Rajgir), in the Sattapanni cave.
- Sponsored by King Ajatasattu, son of King Bimbisara.
- Presided over by Venerable Maha Kassapa with 500 monks.

A monk called Subhadda resented the strict rules and rejoiced at not having to follow them anymore. Ven. Maha Kassapa convened the First Council to prevent the Dhamma and Vinaya from being corrupted and to protect and preserve the teachings of the Buddha.

The Buddha told Ananda that some of the minor rules could be changed but Ananda did not ask which ones. It was decided that no changes were to be made, and the Monastic rules were preserved as originally laid down.

The rest of the 500 monks then agreed on and formalized the Vinaya and Dhamma. These were compiled into the Vinaya Pitaka and Sutta Pitaka and memorized, handing them down by oral tradition. The process took 7 months.

There was no written record of the teachings yet and the monks had to memorize them and then teach the next generation of monks in the same way. They were recited by groups of people cross-checking with each other to ensure that no omissions or additions were made.

The Second Council

- Took place 100 years after the Buddha's Passing (c. 386 BCE).
- Held at Vesali.
- Patronage of King Kalasoka.
- Presided over by Venerable Revata with 700 monks.

Whilst visiting Vesali, Ven. Yasa saw that a group of monks known as the Vajjians were soliciting and accepting gold and silver. He criticized them but their response was to offer him a share in the hope that he would be won over.

Ven. Yasa reported these breaches to the highly respected Ven. Revata, who advised that a council should be called. Ten disputed points were brought before a council of the most senior monks at the time.

1. Using salt in horns.
2. Eating after mid-day.
3. To eating once and then going again to a village for more food.
4. Holding the Uposatha Ceremony in a separate building (in a large sima).
5. Performing a Vinaya ceremony first, then getting consent from absent monks.
6. Following a certain practice because it was done by a monk's tutor or teacher.
7. Drinking sour milk after the mid-day meal.
8. Drinking unfermented palm wine.
9. Using a mat that has fringes.
10. Accepting and using gold and silver.

The Council passed a verdict against the Vajjian monks and declared their conduct unlawful. A total of 700 monks present then reaffirmed the teachings of the Buddha by reciting the Dhamma and Vinaya together.

However, the Vajjian monks refused to accept this verdict and left to hold a council of their own. This resulted in the Buddhist Order formally splitting into two sects, and became known as the 'Great Schism' of Buddhism.

The liberal Vajjian monks became known as the Mahasanghikas or the 'Great Community'. The orthodox monks associated with Ven. Revata became known as the Sthavarivadins or the 'Community of the Elders'.

The Third Council

- Took place about 200 years after the Buddha's Passing (c. 250 BCE).
- Held at Asokarama in Pataliputta.
- Patronage of King Asoka.
- Presided over by Ven. Moggaliputta Tissa and 1,000 monks.

King Asoka was originally a particularly ambitious and ruthless man who attained the throne by killing all of his father's sons, except his own real brother. He went on to conquer the neighbouring states, causing untold death and destruction.

He eventually realized the suffering he caused to hundreds of thousands of people and was converted to Buddhism by a young novice monk called Nigrodha. He then ruled according to the Buddhist ideals of pacifism and compassion, and his empire flourished greatly.

He prohibited animal sacrifices and eventually also forbade the killing of animals in the palace for consumption. He spread Buddhism throughout India through Rock Edicts and Pillars which had important teachings inscribed on them. Many of these archaeological treasures have survived till now.

He used his vast wealth to build countless stupas, temples and monasteries throughout India and provided generous support to the Sangha. But this led to many unwholesome and greedy people joining the Sangha who held wrong views and preached heretical teachings.

King Asoka then asked the respected Elder, Ven. Moggaliputta Tissa to help rectify this sorry situation. The Elder selected 1,000 monks to recite and reaffirm the Dhamma and Vinaya. This took 9 months to complete.

The King also questioned monks from many monasteries, and those who held wrong views were exposed and immediately expelled from the Sangha. In this way, the Sangha was purged of heretics, and corrupt and bogus monks.

In addition, the fifth book of the Abhidhamma Pitaka called the Kathavatthu, was compiled to examine and refute heretical teachings. Possibly the most significant achievement of this Council was the sending of missionary monks to nine different regions around India.

By far the most important and successful mission was to Sri Lanka. It was led by King Asoka's own son, Ven. Mahinda who converted the Sri Lankan king, and eventually all his subjects, to Buddhism. The Tipitaka was also brought over and eventually compiled into writing in Sri Lanka about 300 years later.

The Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Buddhist Councils

Fourth Buddhist Councils - c. 29 BCE / 100 CE

Fifth Buddhist Council - 1871

Sixth Buddhist Council - 1954

The Fourth Council (Theravada)

- Took place around 29 BCE.
- Held at Aluvihara in Sri Lanka.
- Patronage of King Vattagamani.
- Presided over by Ven. Maharakkhita and 500 monks.

During the last century BCE, Sri Lanka suffered a civil war and foreign invasion. Thousands of people died from starvation and Buddhism went into a severe decline. This was because its teachings were passed down orally and this was no longer possible in the chaotic state of the country.

The remaining theras, thus made it their utmost priority to preserve the teachings by having them written down on ola, or palm, leaves. The Fourth Buddhist Council was convened with Vattagamani as its patron and for the first time in Sri Lanka's history, the Tipitaka was committed to writing.

The Fourth Council (Sarvastivada)

- Took place about 100 CE.
- Held at Kashmir in Kushan.
- Patronage of King Kanishka.
- Presided over by Vasumitra and Asvaghosa and 500 monks.

After invading Pataliputra, King Kanishka came into contact with the great Mahayana scholar, Asvaghosa, who introduced him to Buddhism. Like Asoka, he then proceeded to devote his life to Buddhism, but in the Mahayana tradition. He organized this Fourth Council which was headed by Vasumitra.

The Sarvastivadin Abhidharma texts were systematized and translated from vernacular languages, eg. Prakrit, into the classical language of Sanskrit. This enabled a far wider audience to gain access to the Buddhist teachings. Thus, all major Mahayana Buddhist scholars in India later wrote their commentaries and treatises in Sanskrit.

Kanishka made Mahayana Buddhism the state religion spread it to central and north Asia. This stressed prayer, devotion and faith, rather than self-salvation through the Theravada practice. The worship of symbols like the Buddha's footprint, Dharmachakra, stupa or Bodhi Tree was replaced by the worship of Buddha and Bodhisattva images.

The Fifth Council

- Took place in 1871.
- Held at Mandalay in Burma.
- Patronage of King Mindon.
- Presided over by Ven. Jagarabhivamsa and 2,400 monks.

The chief objective of this meeting was to recite all the teachings of the Buddha and examine them in minute detail to see if any of them had been altered, distorted or dropped. It was also to inscribe the entire Tipitaka on 729 marble slabs, the world's largest book that still stands in the Kuthodaw Pagoda at the foot of Mandalay Hill.

The Fifth Buddhist council was a Burmese affair, and most other Buddhist countries were not involved in it. It is not generally recognized outside Burma. Its results were limited to the Burmese edition of the Pali Canon only.

The Sixth Council

- Took place in 1954.
- Held at Yangon in Burma.
- Patronage of the Burmese Govt. led by the then Prime Minister, U Nu .
- Presided over by Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw and 2,500 monks from eight different countries.

The Sixth Council's aim was to affirm and preserve the genuine Dhamma and Vinaya. Burma, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam participated.

This took two years with all the scripts painstakingly examined with their differences noted down, the necessary corrections made, and collated.

After the Council had approved the texts, all of the books of the Tipitaka and their Commentaries were prepared for printing on modern presses. At the end of this Council, all the participating countries had the Pali Tipitaka rendered into their native scripts, with the exception of India.

Summary

First Council – Recite and reaffirm the Dhamma and Vinaya to protect and preserve the teachings of the Buddha.

Second Council – The 10 disputed points led to the split between the liberal Mahasanghikas and the orthodox Sthavarivadans, the ‘Great Schism’.

Third Council – The purification of the Sangha by King Asoka, and the sending of missionary monks to 9 different regions, including Sri Lanka.

The Fourth Council (Theravada) – The Tipitaka committed to writing for the first time, and the original Buddhist teachings were more effectively preserved. These texts were then able to be brought over to other countries.

The Fourth Council (Sarvastivada) – Sanskrit became the main language for Mahayana Buddhism. Prayer, devotion and faith emphasized. Cemented the schism between Theravada and Mahayana.

The Fifth Council – Recited, examined and approved the teachings and inscribed on marble slabs.

The Sixth Council – Affirm and preserve the genuine Dhamma and Vinaya. Printed on modern presses. Rendered in the languages of all the participating countries (except India).

Time for another Council?

Perhaps yes. For example :

Consolidate and reaffirm the teachings, as there are many beliefs and practices in the present day which diverge from the original teachings.

All countries should be included and participate, so as to unify and strengthen Buddhism and encourage Buddhists of all traditions to support each other.

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