

# Buddhist Ceremonies and Rituals of Burma

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In the early stage of Buddhism, the rituals and ceremonies had neither a place of importance nor any one of significance. In fact, early Buddhism was a congregation of persons who had renounced all family ties, committed to self-restraint and accumulation of merit, forming a Brotherhood which was free from traditional hierarchy, priestly domination and reflected no single pattern of ceremonial observations. Alike other prevalent religion early Buddhism totally discarded the theory of any divine existence as well as rituals and practices which meant uttering of hymns and offering of sacrifices and yagnic oblations etc.<sup>1</sup>

Purification of self if so factorise in moral standard in an individual's life was his principal concern, nowhere in his preaching did he put stress on ceremonial ritualism which formed a very common characteristic of Hinduism. Even before his Mahaparinibbana, Buddha being asked by his close disciple, Ananda to appoint his successor gave definite instructions that after his death there would be no successor of him, it was rather his intention that his instructions would serve as guiding principles for his followers in future.<sup>2</sup>

It is striking to note that during the religious councils which were held after Buddha's Mahaparinibbana, his teachings were compiled and had been given the shape of canonical texts which, suprisingly enough, contained a number of popular ceremonies and rituals.

In this context it is relevant to make reference to the order of monks (Samgha) which was initially formed by Buddha himself with the help

1. Reference can be made in this connection to *Brahmana-dhammika sutta of Sutanipata, Khuddaka Nikaya* where Buddha discarded the importance of Vedic religious rites.
2. *Mahaparinibbana Suttanta of Dighnikaya*.

of his sixty close disciples. But side by side problems cropped up during the admission into the Sangha since no restriction had been imposed regarding the admission and no guideline of requirements for prospective candidate was set. But unfortunately, the Sangha at that moment was not equipped with proper rules and regulations through which it could impose discipline over a heterogeneous body of disciples.

No restriction for admission into Sangha

To put an end to this crisis, Buddha himself set down numbers of certain norms which in the long run got identified with Buddhism itself. Then in course of time those disciplinary methods formulated for keeping the integrity of the Sangha ultimately got access in the Buddhist religious texts in the form of unbreakable rituals and ceremonies.

Buddha formulated certain norms

Buddha also introduced some rules and regulations for the sole purpose of guiding lay-devotees, they were less strict in nature as compared to those for the ordained disciples of the Sangha. The lay-devotees were, in fact, responsible for the introduction of many ceremonies and social practices in Buddhism. Through them, the ordained ones in the Sangha came into contact with different popular religious manoeuvres of the society hitherto unpractised and the members of the Sangha and the lay-devotees used to hold religious functions jointly. The ultimate result of such a joint participation in religious festivals thus led to a surreptitious infiltration of popular ritualism in the strict and austere monastic life of the Sangha, the process of synthesis remained unnoticed and unhindered until the ceremonies and rituals got identified with Buddhist religion.

Buddha's guidance for lay-devotees

Here is given a brief account of the then Buddhist ceremonies and rituals prevalent throughout the country during the regime of the kings as found in the Burmese texts, among them, we may refer to Tisarana, Pabbajja and Upasampada, Uposatha, Vassavasa, Pravarana, Kathina and Paritta or Pirit ceremony as the principle ecclesiastical ceremonies and rituals. It is to be noted here that not only some rules and

Account of ceremonies and rituals in Burmese texts

regulations were formulated with a view to regularising the lives of the ordained monks but also some more rules were laid down against the violation of ecclesiastical norms. Methods of punishments and rules and laws were also formulated according to the gravity of the offences committed.

The Ceremonies and rituals :

Tisarana ( Three Refuges ) was practically a ritual much like the Brahmanical Upanayana ceremony of the Hindus, on the eve of joining the Samgha by a new entrant. As a rule such lay-devotees desiring to enter the Samgha had to observe first of all certain formalities as codified by the Samgha. But in the later period the admission was more restricted and graduation of new entrants were strictly maintained. The novices usually were asked to adhere to the first five moral Precepts called Pancasilas<sup>2</sup> and to chant the Mangala Sutta<sup>3</sup> after having the Tisarana completed. These Pancasilas ( Five precepts ) did not constitute commandments but were rather resolutions in form, composed by individual monks.<sup>4</sup>

Tisarana

In the very beginning, Buddha used to ordain monks with the words 'ettha bhikkhave' come follow me. The intending candidates were entitled to the membership of the Samgha by these simple utterance of the Master. Later on, the entry into the Samgha became more rigid and subsequently the ordination was divided in two forms : (i) Pabbajja, Lower ordination and (ii) Upasampada, Higher Ordination.

Pabbajja and  
Upasampada

Pabbajja (Skt. Pravrajya, denotes generally "leaving the world by adoption of ascetic life") means the ritualistic admission of novices

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1. *Mahavagga.*
  2. *Panca Silas denote : not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to say lies and not to drink intoxicating liquors.*
  3. *It contains thirty-six auspicious blessing of Buddha.*
  4. *Buddhism : Beliefs and Practices in Sri Lanka, L. A. De Silva P.62, Sri Lanka, 1974.*

into the Order and Upasampada (accession) means conferring full membership to those novices or would-be Bhikkhus. Persons admitted to the first degree of monkhood were called Samanera ( Skt. Sramanera or novice ).

Primarily, no differentiation was made between adults and minors while imparting initiation in Pabbajja and Upasampada. The comfortable way of life led by the monks of the Samgha fascinated so much the minds of the guardians of the boys, that even at the cost of school education of their wards, they preferred to get their boys admitted to the Samgha. But when the behaviour of those boys proved unbecoming and not up to the expectation, the Samgha imposed age restriction for admission. In case of Pabbajja boys below the age of fifteen and in case of Upasampada candidates below the age of twenty were not eligible for admission into the Samgha.

In the modern history of Buddhism, however, the above regulation has been relaxed almost entirely specially in Lower Burma and the boys in the age group of even eleven and twelve are granted admission. The belief that worked behind admission of the tender-aged boys was that until a boy was so admitted, he would be counted as nothing more than an animal.<sup>1</sup>

One more thing may be mentioned that in later times for doing minor works of the Samgha, such as, driving of crows etc. tender-aged boys were admitted to the Samgha through special system of Pabbajja. These children were fondly called "Kakuttepaka Samaneras."

During later period in Burma the initiation ceremony on the occasion of first entrance in the Samgha used to be carried out with much pomp and grandeur. When a person settled his mind to get himself admitted in the Buddhist Samgha, he had to comply with some preliminary conditions at once, such as, he had to declare whether he had learnt before hand all the paraphernalia of the form of worship and whether he had the knowledge of ordeals he would be required to undergo during his monastic life.

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1. M. M. William, 'Buddhism' P. 307, London, 1889.

On the auspicious day fixed for holding the ceremony the young convert dressed in his gayest clothes and mounted on a pony had to make through footway within a town or village. As per custom a band of musicians preceded him playing music. All friends of the neophyte having dressed themselves in their best garments used to follow him dancing and singing. The girls also accompanied the jovial crowd smiling and laughing.<sup>1</sup>

Having completed his round of visits the neophyte would then turn back to his parent's abode with the procession. There he would find large congregation and also the Head of the monastery seated on a raised dias along with his brother monks. In front of the dias were laid offerings consisting of fruit, cooked food, yellow cloth etc. intended to be presented to those monks.

After portions from the Vinaya having been recited the new convert was made to throw off all his fine attire and wind round his loins a fragment of white cloth. Then his head was neatly shaved and once again partially clothed, he was brought before the monks present there. He would then prostrate three times before them and raising his hands as a token of reverence would beseech in Pali language for being admitted to the brotherhood of the Samgha. After the prayer had been granted, the Head of the monastery would take over to the neophyte 'tecivara' or yellow garments which the latter had to put on. The customary mendicant's bowl also was hung round his neck. With a formal announcement to the effect that he had been admitted into the Samgha and had become a member of the monastery, the ceremony came to end.<sup>2</sup>

It will be pertinent to discuss here some of the procedural enactments of the Upasamapada ceremony. Upasamapada was nothing but a higher sanction and a solemnised consecration of Pabbajja which was

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1. *This celebration virtually was a mimic show of Gautama Buddha's "Mahabhinis-kramana" or "the great going forth from home" when the Master abandoned his home, his dear and near ones and all worldly ties.*
  2. *Shway Yos The Burman. His Life & Notions. London, 1892.*

but a formal declaration to cling to the vows. A candidate seeking Upasampada duly equipped with alms-bowl, yellow robes, and had his spiritual guide or 'Uppajjhaya' chosen already, was to appear before a chapter consisting of atleast ten monks.<sup>1</sup> The Leader or President of the chapter examined him and he had to answer a questionnaire, such as, his personal name, his spiritual tutor's name, his eventual shortcomings or disabilities etc. When these things were ascertained, the candidate could pray for ordination. On his request the President formally proposed to the chapter to accord their consent to the candidate's prayer. The proposal used to be repeated twice by the President. If the Assembly remained silent, it indicated their consent and in that event the President accepted him as newly ordained brother and urged him to stick to the Four Necessaries ( Four Nissayas ) and to avoid Four capital sins throughout his life. It may be stated that all things besides the Four Nissayas were not forbidden in to and those were considered as something redundant.

When a person was admitted into the Samgha after the initiation through the formal Kammavaca ( ritual formula ) he was considered as a full-fledged member of the Samgha and all rights and privileges enjoyed by a member were vested in him. Thence'-forward he usually lived under the Nissaya or spiritual tutelage of an Uppajjhaya<sup>2</sup> or an Acariya having at least ten years' standing. The Uppajjhaya acted as the spiritual guide (Dikkhaguru) while the Acariya was in actual charge of his training (Sikkhaguru).

For persons coming from other religious sects seeking initiation in Pabbajja and Upasamapada, a ceremony called 'Parivasa' used to be held. The willing converts previously holding different religious leanings (annatitthiyapubba) had to undergo a probational period of four months<sup>3</sup> for getting disciplined. But this rule was not strictly adhered to always.

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1. *The number of monks sometimes varied and under certain circumstances it was only five e.g. Sronokotikarnavadana of Avadanasatakam.*

2. *Mahavagga.*

3. *Mahavagga.* 'It was a sort of personality test to find out whether the desirous person was keen enough to accept the Dhamma and the Vinaya of the Buddha', C. S. Upasak, *Dictionary of Early Buddhist Monastic terms*, P. 144.

The Uposatha ceremony was one of the most sacred and significant ceremonies of the Buddhists. According to the tradition of the Buddhists Uposatha was introduced at the instance of King Bimbisara. It is setting up of fortnightly religious Assembly, later came to be known as Uposatha. The purpose was to strengthen the bond of union inside the Samgha and to purge it from impurities by uplifting the moral standard of an individual monk.

The term Uposatha is allied to the word 'posatha' which literary means 'fasting' but the Buddhist Uposatha conveys a denotation, meaning a fortnightly ceremony or sitting of monks either on the 8th, 14th or 15th day of month to discuss matters concerning the Dhamma and Vinaya and to recite the rules of Patimokkha Sutta (the disciplinary and penal code of the Samgha) containing 227 rules arranged according to gravity of offences.

For holding the Uposatha ceremony the 'Sima' or boundary could be demarcated by a mountain, a rock, a wood, a path, an ant-hill, a river etc. In case, there were difficulties to fix up a boundary, the village or Nigama boundary proximate to the residence of the Bhikkhus was accepted as the 'Sima' for holding the Uposatha celebration.<sup>1</sup> All the existing numbers of an avasa (abode), were required to be present in the Uposatha. Participation by members belonging to other avasas was welcome. On certain occasions when the members of other avasa happened to be present in Uposatha in large numbers and as per rule the Assembly had to be prorogued for a fresh session.

The quorum of the Assembly constituted the physical presence of four members, while for declaration of Parisuddhi,<sup>2</sup> the presence of two Bhikkhus at the minimum was necessary. Whatever might be the

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1. *Mahavagga.*

2. *The parisuddhi was considered as an act having high moral value. Before the recitation of Patimokkha, each member of the Assembly had to offer a declaration of Parisuddhi to the effect that he had not committed any breach of the Patimokkha rules during the preceeding fortnight.*

purpose of organising the Uposatha assembly, it was beyond doubt that subsequently the institution degenerated into mere ritualistic form. It attracted monks of mediocre calibre who cared more for observance of Patimokkha rules and formalities than seeking inner spiritual realisation and self-development. But inspite of all the later shortcomings and outward religious festivities which had little to do with the real spiritual attainment, Uposatha had a great moral impact on the monks.

Vassavasa or 'Vas' meaning retreat during the monsoons had a great significance among the Buddhist monks. During the rainy season when usual travelling was difficult, monks used to take shelter in a fixed abode in a particular area and this observance

Vassavasa

was called Vassavasa ( 'Rain-Retreat' ). Actually, the purport of Vassavasa was mainly twofold, viz., (i) to avoid inconvenience of travelling in the rains ; (ii) to avoid injuring sprouts and insects and germs which grow abundantly during the rainy season. For observance of Vassavasa, generally two periods were earmarked, one commencing from the day after the full-moon of Asalha (June-July) and the other a month later-both were to conclude with the fullmoon of Kattika<sup>1</sup>. The narration goes that at the very early stage, the monks had no fixed abodes (avasa) to reside in and they used as their dwelling, woods, foot of a tree, rocks, grotto, mountain cave, cemetery, forest, open air, heap of straw etc. Later on, five kinds of abodes (lena) were built for the purpose of Vassavasa or rain-retreat with the sanction of Buddha, viz.,

- i) Viharas ( monastery ) ;
- ii) Addhayoga ( dwellings with slopping roofs without walls ) ;
- iii) Pasadas ;
- iv) Hammiyas ( stone-houses with flat roof ) ;
- v) Bhumiguha ( crypts ).

It was obligatory on the part of the monks to observe Vassavasa and non-compliance of the same was liable to punishment. During this period the monks had to depend on the alms from the laity living

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1. *Mahavagga.*



nearby the avasa for livelihood, but sometimes high personages used to invite other monks to spend the Vassa in their company in lēna (abode) specially prepared for the purpose.

It may be said that Vassavasa, in fact, aimed at offering relief to the monks from their tedious jobs of preaching and talking. Buddha, in fact, prescribed a code for meditation that was to be practised by the monks to make these recess hours fruitful through spiritual attainments.

Pavarana is a ceremony which is held at the end of Vassavasa. Usually, Pavarana was held on the fourteenth or the fifteenth day of the month of Kattika ( Oct.—Nov. ). The purpose for holding this ceremony was to exonerate the monks from their acts of omission and commission done during Vassavasa period through confession, and the formalities observed were almost identical to those laid down for Uposatha ceremony.

The festival of Pavarana was also held in high esteem in Burma. The procedural paraphernalia followed for observance of Pavarana, in short, was like this—on the auspicious day fixed for observance of Pavarana, the monks had to assemble in the evening at a particular spot for confession of their erroneous acts, if any, committed during the term of Vassavasa. The erring monks received punishment according to the gravity of the acts. There were two kinds of Pavarana :

- i) Mahapavarana or the Great Pavarana—this was a lengthy process and was executed in details ;
- ii) Samgha Pavarana or the shortened Pavarana—this was less time consuming and executed in abridged form.

The Pavarana ceremony could be postponed till the next "Komudi Catumasini"<sup>1</sup> day, in case, the bhikkhus staying at an avasa expressed their desire to prolong the period of Vassavasa. In celebra-

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1. 'Komudi' literary means moonlight' and the whole word is usually a phrase (Vinaya 1, 155, 176), meaning 'the fullmoon day in the month of Kattika'.

ting the festival, presents were given to the monks who were also invited to the dinner and for taking out processions. Pavarana, undoubtedly had an effective influence on the Bhikkhus who released from the confining state of Vassavasa emerged with fresh energy and vigour to take up their mission of deliverance supported and encouraged by the laity.<sup>1</sup>

Kathina ceremony implied offering of special robe to the monks by the laity on the occasion of Pavarana, as such, it constituted a part of the Pavarana. On the scheduled date during the Pavarana ceremony the laity used to offer unsewn clothes to the monks. The burnt of the task had to be borne by a band of monks who were entrusted with the cutting, sewing and dyeing the Kathina cloth-gift in course of a day.

As a rule, a chapter of atleast five monks used to receive the raw cotton cloth or Kathina from the donors, and nobody other than the selected persons of the chapter was authorised to receive the gift. The chapter having had the gifts, decided which of the monks stood in dire necessity of garments and then the cloths were sewn into robes by the monks assisted by the laity<sup>2</sup> and distributed to the eligible candidates. The team of monks who performed this special work, were allowed certain privileges in respect of their food, dress, etc. which were usually not provided to other monks.

The general rule as regards the distribution of the robes is that all the monks of the avasa ( residence ) are to get a share of the robes, excepting on eight grounds when they were debared from having their due shares. Under certain circumstances, the Kathina ceremony could be set back or abandoned altogether.

Apart from those ceremonies and rituals discussed above, there was one more important ceremony called "Pirit or Paritta ceremony" which has practically gained greater importance in Burma in modern times. The word 'Pirit' is a corrupt form of

Pirit or Paritta  
Ceremony

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1. *Mahavagga.*

2. *Hardy, Eastern Monachism. 1850.*

Pali 'Paritta' and the name 'Paritia' is supposed to be derived from Sanskrit 'Paritra' or 'Paritrana' meaning "Protection".<sup>1</sup>

Paritta was a small collection of texts gathered from Pali Suttapitaka, and contained various charms, spells and exorcism. Much like the Tantric cult, the Paritta was learnt by memory and recited by the monks on appropriate occasions to ward off various physical ailments and mental disbalances. It was also practised to keep off harm from the beasts of prey and vengeance of raptiles etc. No social or religious festival is considered as complete and promotive without the chanting of Paritta. According to the occasion, it would be a concised ritual ( Khanda Paritta ) or an elaborate ceremony.

Possibly, the Paritta had the sanction of Buddha as a substitute for Rakshanamantras (protective incantations) prevalent in the contemporary Brahmanic religion with some modifications having more of religious value and ethical fervour.

Among the Paritta Suttas the three are most commonly recited :— i) the Mangala Sutta<sup>2</sup>, ii) the Ratana Sutta<sup>3</sup> and iii) the Karanyametta Sutta.<sup>4</sup> The procedural follow up for reciting the Paritta was like this—the monks used to hold in their hands a long thread technically called Pirit Nula. This thread was wound round the neck of a new clay jar filled to the brim (Purna Kumbha) with consecrated water. The other end of the thread was held by the assembled monks squatting on the floor. After the final incantations, the sanctified thread used to be broken in such lengths as to tie the same round the wrist and neck of the persons initiating the ritual and then the sanctified water contained in the Pot ( Purna Kumbha ) was sprinkled on all persons assembled there, which can be compared to the sprinkling of 'Shantibari' by the Brahmins in the present days as a token of blessings.

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1. This derivation has been given by Childers. Sometimes it is suggested that the term may have some connections with Preta (ghost) M. M. Williams, Buddhism, p. 317, f.n. 1.
  2. Containing thirty-six auspicious blessings of Buddha.
  3. Uttered by Buddha when the people of Vesali were afflicted with sickness, pestilence drought, famine caused by malignant spirits.
  4. Recited by Buddha to calm and pacify a tormenting evil spirit.

The site for holding the ritual (Pirit) could be a temple, a home, a temporary recitation hall, or a pavilion (Paritta Mandapa) specially constructed for the purpose. There was no limited period for chanting, the duration of which could last from one hour to one day and on some occasions for weeks. It may be performed any time throughout the year even during the days of Vassas.

When the Pirit ceremony extended for a longer period, it was known as Maha Paritta or the Great Paritta. For a Paritta lasting for an hour or so, the required number of monks conducting the ritual was not less than three and if the participating monks exceeded in number then that group should consist of odd numbers. In case of Mahaparitta ritual, lasting over a day, the operating monks should have consisted of even number, such as, eight, ten, twelve and so on. A Maha Paritta had to be started on an evening and ended on a morning. The recitation might continue day and night at a stretch for a week without interruption. In a Maha Paritta, big in dimension, even twenty-four monk-priests happened to be engaged, two of whom were constantly seated on the raised dias to recite. When the recitation of all the Suttas of the Paritta were chanted to the last, it was repeated again and again from the beginning. After utterance of a benediction the Paritta recital came to an end and robes etc. were offered to the monk-reciters.

These ceremonies and rituals apart, there were lots of festivals in Burma which were domestic in nature, performed with the assistance or guidance of the monks. As well-wisher, adviser and religious guide of a family, the Bhikkhus actually maintained a close relation with the laymen and they used to participate in various domestic functions from birth to death and even thereafter.

