

Buddhist Councils: Means and Ends for Clarity and Revitalization

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Abstract

Buddhism is continuously refined and evolved through practices, conventions and councils. Buddhist councils are very less often talked topic about Buddhism. What Buddhist councils are, when they were held and what their significance were, are some of the areas this article tries to impart some light on. This article examines the history of Buddhist councils and synods from the early gatherings after the demise of the Buddha to the 4th Buddhist Council in the 1st century (though there have been six such councils held). These events followed a role-model, defined by the first three councils, of creating and handing down an authoritative version of the Buddha's teachings (dhamma) while they could also lead to a 'purification' of the monks' order (sangha) if monks sticking to divergent textual traditions were expelled from the sangha. Despite their importance, however, councils have received rather little attention in scholarly literature. This article takes a fresh look at Buddhist synods with a focus on those convened since the Mahaparinirvana of Buddha. It explores how the latter sought to comply with inherited forms and functions, while at the same time becoming innovative in order to adapt Buddhism to its modern environment.

INTRODUCTION

In daily speaking, councils are referred to as more permanent type of organizations or bodies with defined sets of rules and roles of committee members and for the councils itself. Councils are formed or organized to accomplish certain tasks or to oversee other organized bodies, may it be governmental or non-governmental.

Buddhist councils were different than this general meaning. After the Buddha's death, Buddhist monastic communities have convened together over the period of time *to recite approved texts of scriptures and to settle doctrinal disputes*. These conventions or formal gatherings are called 'Buddhist Councils' by historians. Holding of Buddhist councils are recorded in the Buddhist *sutras* as having begun immediately after the death of the Buddha. Evidences say that these councils have continued to the modern times too. Yet, very little reliable evidence of the historicity of the councils exists, and not all councils are recognized by all the traditions; on occasion they resulted in schisms within the Buddhist community.¹ Apart from major objectives of the Buddhist councils, there were certain council specific agendas too.

The agendas of the councils held, and their major outcomes as well as the findings are covered on this article. This article is based on review of *existing literatures* about Buddhist councils with analytical descriptive method. There have been six Buddhist councils altogether since the beginning of the Buddhism. Out of them, the first four councils were instrumental in regard to discussing on the essence of Buddhism. Thus, this article attempts to explore the availability and authenticity of texts of the councils.

PHASES OF AUTHENTICATION AND CLARIFICATION OF BUDDHISM

FIRST BUDDHIST COUNCIL

While evidences of all the Buddhist councils cannot be found and all the scriptures do not mention about all the Buddhist councils, the scriptures of all Buddhist schools agree that the first Buddhist Council was held soon after the death of the Buddha. It was held at Rajagraha (modern Rajgir, Bihar state of India) during the first rainy season following the Buddha's death. This council was held under the patronage of the king Ajatashatru with the monk Mahakasyapa, an outstanding student of the Buddha who became leader of the sangha after the Buddha's death. Mahakasyapa had heard a monk's remark that the death of the Buddha meant for the monks that they could abandon the rules of discipline and can do whatever as they wished to.² So, the Council's first order of business was *to review the rules of discipline for monks and nuns*.

In this council, there was considerable agitation over the admission of Ananda to the Synod. Mahakassapa is said to have entertained misgivings regarding his admission on the ground of his failure to reach to Arhathood, which he did actually reach to on the eve of the session of the Council. But in spite of this achievement and of the belief and convention that the attainment of Arhathood emancipates a man from all guilt and punishment, Ananda was arraigned by the monks on several charges which he explained as follows: (1) He could not formulate the lesser and minor precepts, as he was overwhelmed with grief at the imminent death of the master. (2) He had to tread upon the garment of the Master while sewing it as there was no one to help him. (3) He

¹ www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhist-council, accessed 01 June 2018.

² *Alam avuso ! ma sochitha! Ma paridevitha...yam na ichhisama tam na karissama.*

Dunda Badhur Bajracharya(ed.and trans.), *Digha Nikaya*, Lalitpur: Bir Purna Sangrahalaya, 2000, p. 285.

permitted women to salute first the body of the Master, because he did not want to detain them. He also did this for their edification. (4) He was under the influence of the evil one when he forgot to request the Master to enable him to continue his study for a kalpa. (5) He had to plead for the admission of women into the order out of consideration for Mahaprajapati who nursed the Master in his infancy. The charges are differently framed in the other Vinayas. According to the *Dulva*, two other charges also seem to have been brought against Ananda, first that he failed to supply drinking water to the Buddha though he had thrice asked for it and secondly, that he showed the privy parts of the Buddha to men and women of low character. His replies were (6) that the water of the river was muddy, and (7) that the exhibition of the privy parts would rid those concerned of their sensuality. These replies may be taken as having satisfied the Assembly.¹

Another important item of business transacted at the First Council was the passing of the highest penalty (Brahmadanda) on Channa who was the charioteer of the Master on the day of the Great Renunciation. This monk had slighted every member of the Order, high and low, and was arrogant in the extreme. The penalty imposed was a complete social boycott. When the punishment was announced to Channa, he was seized with profound repentance and grief and was purged of all his weaknesses. In short, he became an Arhat. The punishment automatically ceased to be effective. Briefly, the proceedings of the First Council achieved four results:

(1) the settlement of the Vinaya under the leadership of Upali, (2) the settlement of the texts of the Dhamma under the leadership of Ananda, (3) the trial of Ananda, and (4) the punishment of Channa. There is, however, a difference between the account of the *Cullavagga* and that of the *Dulva* regarding the trial of Ananda. According to the former, the trial took place practically after the conclusion of the main business, whereas in the *Dulva* it comes before his admission to the Council.²

The first Buddhist Council's main objective was to preserve the Buddha's sayings (suttas) and the monastic discipline or rules (Vinaya). Compilations were made for the Buddha's rules of vinaya (monastic discipline), under the direction of the elder Upali, and of the sutras (instructive aphorisms), under the direction of the disciple Ananda. The Suttas were recited by Ananda, and the Vinaya was recited by Upali. The entire assembly of 500 monks then recited the approved texts, this council went on for nine months.³

SECOND BUDDHIST COUNCIL

The second Council was held in the reign of King Kalasoka, About a hundred years after the Buddha's death and this council was said to have been convened at Vaisali, India, around 383 B.C. The council was called mainly to discuss certain serious differences that arose within the Buddhist Order over the true interpretation of the Buddha's teachings and certain practices followed by some monks, especially the monks of Vaisali. The dispute arose over the 'Ten Points.' This is a reference to claims of some monks breaking ten rules, some of which were considered major. The specific ten points were: 1) Storing salt in a horn. 2) Eating after midday. 3) Eating once and then going again to a village for alms. 4) Holding the Uposatha Ceremony with monks dwelling in the same locality. 5) Carrying out official acts when the assembly was incomplete. 6) Following a certain practice because it was done by one's tutor or teacher. 7) Drinking sour milk after one had his midday meal. 8) Consuming strong drink before it had been fermented. 9) Using a rug which was not of the proper size. 10) Using gold and silver. The key issue was the use of 'gold and silver', which is an Indic idiom that includes any kind of money. The monks of Vesali had taken to wandering for alms with the specific goal of collecting money, to which the visiting monk Yasa objected.⁴

The orthodox followers of the Buddha believed that the monks of Vaisali were taking liberties with the rules prescribed in the Vinaya Pitaka. The council discussed the matter at length, but could not reach an agreement. This resulted in the great schism within the Order and led to the formation of the two divergent schools of thought. The first school advocated strict adherence to the age old traditions of Buddhism and compliance with the original teachings of the Buddha. They were called The Sthaviravadins. The second group did not find a problem in having a liberal attitude towards the rules prescribed in the Pitakas and the deviations followed by the monks of Vaisali. They became known as the Mahasamghikas.⁵

The *Dipavamsa* mentions that the bhiksus of Vaisali held another Council which was attended by ten thousand monks. It was called the Great Council (Mahasanghti). According to the *Mahavamsa*, a council of seven hundred theras compiled the Dhamma. In the *Samantapasadika*, Buddhaghosa observes that after the final judgment, the seven hundred bhiksus engaged in the recital of the Vinaya and the Dhamma and drew up a new

¹ B. Jinananda, "Four Buddhist Council", In: PV Bapat(ed.), *2500 Years Of Buddhism*, New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1997, pp.35-36.

² *Ibid.*

³ Tashi Paljor, *Ladakha Prabha*, Ladakha: Kendriya Bauddha Vidhya Sansthan, 2002, p. 79.

⁴ Jinananda, f.n. no. 3. pp.36-37.

⁵ Bharat Singh Upadhyaya, *Pali Sahityaka Itihas*, Ilahabada: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 2000, p. 95.

edition resulting in the *Pitakas, Nikayas, Ahgas* and *Dharmaskhandhas* which went on for eight months.¹

THIRD BUDDHIST COUNCIL

Third Council was convened at Pataliputta (Patna) by Emperor Ashoka on the request of Venerable *Moggalliputta Tissa*. The Third Council was held primarily to rid the Saṅgha of corruption and bogus monks who held heretical views.² The council is recognized and known to both the Theravada and Mahayana schools, though its importance is centred only to the Theravada school. According to tradition, one reason for the corruption was The Emperor's generous support of the monasteries had caused many men to seek monk's ordination to receive food, clothing and shelter, but they weren't terribly interested in the dharma and held many non-Buddhist views. Thera *Moggaliputta Tissa* headed the proceedings and chose one thousand monks from the sixty thousand participants for the traditional recitation of the Dhamma and the Vinaya, which went on for nine months.³

The Emperor, himself questioned monks from a number of monasteries about the teachings of the Buddha. Those who held wrong views were exposed and expelled from the Saṅgha immediately. In this way, the Bhikkhu Saṅgha was purged of heretics and bogus bhikkhus.⁴

At the end of this Council, the Venerable *Moggalliputta Tissa* composed a book, the *Kathavattu*, in which he set out to disprove the wrong opinions and theories of a number of sects. The teaching that was approved and accepted by this Council, was known as Theravāda. The Abhidhamma Pitaka was also compiled during this council. One of the most significant achievements of this Dhamma assembly and one which was to bear fruit for centuries to come, was the Emperor's sending forth of monks, well versed in the Buddha's Dhamma and Vinaya who could recite all of it by heart, to teach it in nine different countries.⁵

The following are the names of the elder monks (Theras) and the nine areas where they went to teach Dhamma: Majjhantika Thera: Kasmira and Gandhara (Kashmir, Afghanistan, Peshawar and Rawalpindi in Northwest Pakistan), Mahadeva Thera: Mahisamandala (Mysore), Rakkhita Thera: Vanavasi (North Kanara in South India), Yonaka Dhammarakkhita Thera: Aparantaka (Modern Northern Gujarat Kathiavar, Kachcha and Sindh). Mahadhamma Rakkhita Thera: Maharattha (parts of Maharashtra around the source of Godavari). Maha Rakkhita Thera: Yonakaloka (Ancient Greece). Majjhima Thera: Himavanta Padesa Bhaga (Himalayan region). Sona and Uttara Theras: Suvanna Bhumi (Burma). Mahinda Thera and others: Tambapannidipa (Sri Lanka), Asoka also sent teachers to as far away as present day Syria and Egypt. He paved the way for coming generations to spread the sublime Dhamma to the entire world.⁶

The Dhamma missions of these monks succeeded and bore great fruits in the course of time and went a long way in ennobling the peoples of these lands with the gift of the Dhamma and influencing their civilizations and cultures.⁷

FOURTH BUDDHIST COUNCIL

The Fourth Buddhist Council was held in Alu Vihara (Sri Lanka) under the patronage of King Vattagamani Abhaya. The main reason for its convening was the realization that it was now not possible for the majority of monks to retain the entire Tipitaka in their memories as had been the case formerly for the Venerable Mahinda and those who followed him soon after. Therefore, as the art of writing had, by this time developed substantially it was thought expedient and necessary to have the entire body of the Buddha's teaching written down.⁸

King Vattagamani supported the monk's idea and a council was held specifically to commit the entire Tipitaka to writing, so that the genuine Dhamma might be lastingly preserved. To this purpose, the Venerable Maharakkhita and five hundred monks recited the words of the Buddha and then wrote them down on palm leaves. This remarkable project took place in a cave called, the Aloka lena, situated in the cleft of an ancient landslip near what is now Matale. Thus the aim of the Council was achieved and the preservation in writing of the authentic Dhamma was ensured.⁹

After the Council, palm leaves books appeared, and were taken to other countries, such as Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. The Tipitaka and its commentaries were originally brought to Sri Lanka by the missionary monk Mahinda of the Third Buddhist Council.

¹ *Ibid*, p. 96.

² Vimalkriti, *Ladakha Prabha*, Ladakha: Kendriya Bauddha Vidhya Sansthan, 2002, p. 40.

³ *Ibid*, p.42.

⁴ Upadhyaya, *f.n. no. 7*. p. 98.

⁵ Akhileshwor Dube, *Baudha Rajdarshan*, New Delhi: Northern Book Center, 1988, p. 17.

⁶ Upadhyaya, *f.n. no. 7*. p. 100.

⁷ Baladev Upadhyaya, *Baudhadarshan Mimamsa*, Varanasi: Chaukhamba Vidhyabhavan, 1999, p. 35.

⁸ Rahul Sankrityayan, *Buddhacharya*, Delhi: Gautam Book Center, 1930, pp. 536-537

⁹ *Ibid*, p.540.

The second Fourth Buddhist Council (Sarvastivada tradition) is said to have been convened by the Kushan emperor Kanishka, perhaps around 100 CE at Jalandhar or in Kashmir. *The Fourth Council of Kashmir is not recognized as authoritative in Theravada*; reports of this council can be found scriptures which were kept in the Mahayana tradition. The Mahayana tradition based some of its scriptures on (refutations of) the Sarvastivadin Adhidharma texts, which were systematized at this council.¹

It is said that for the Fourth Council of Kashmir, Kanishka gathered 500 monks headed by Vasumitra, partly, it seems, to compile extensive commentaries on the Sanskrit Tripitaka: Vinaya Vibhasha Shastra, Upadesha Vibhasha Shastra and Abhidharma Vibhasha. Each Vibhasha consists hundred thousands slokas. The main fruit of this Council was the vast commentary known as the Mahā-Vibhāshā ("Great Exegesis"), an extensive compendium and reference work on a portion of the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma.²

FIFTH BUDDHIST COUNCIL

The Fifth Buddhist Council was held in Mandalay, Burma (today's Myanmar) in the year 1871 under the patronage of King Mindon. This council was presided by Jagarabhivamsa, Narindhahidhaja and Sumangalasami. During this council, 729 stone slabs were engraved with Buddhist teachings.³

The Fifth Buddhist council was said to be a Burmese affair, and most other Buddhist countries were not involved in it. It is not generally recognized outside of Burma.

SIXTH BUDDHIST COUNCIL

The two year long Sixth Buddhist Council was held in 1954 in Burma at Kaba Aye, Yangon. It was held under the patronage of Burmese government and it was presided by Prime Minister U Nu of then. The council commemorated 2500 years of Buddhism.⁴ In the tradition of past Buddhist councils, a major purpose of the Sixth Council was to preserve the Buddha's teachings and practices as understood in the Theravada tradition.

During this council, the entire text of the Pali Theravada canon was reviewed and recited by the assembly of monks from Burma, India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Nepal, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and Pakistan.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FIRST COUNCIL: Upon analyzing the degree of accusations on *Anand* for striving towards the establishment of *Bhikkhuni Sangha* and allowing the *Bhikkhunis* to have the first glimpse on Buddha's corpse, it is safe to say that the *Bhikkhus* during Buddha's period had a strong sense of patriarchy and misogyny.

There is absence of any mention or allusion to the female nuns and laywomen in the First Council, despite the fact that Buddha, on the 43rd annual retreat two years prior his *Mahaparinirvana*, bestowed *Arapada* status on 13 *Bhikkhunis* and 10 laywomen.⁵

Bhikkhunis like Utpalvarna, Pattacara, Khema and laywomen like Visakha and Suppiya were prominent figures with paramount roles in the propagation of early Buddhism. The fact that none of them were invited to the Council shows a prejudice towards women in the First Council.

The absence of the same temperament and respect that the Buddha had for women (*Arhant Bhikkunis* and *Laywomen*) in The First Council was a grave issue. It would have been ideal had they received equal acknowledgement, inclusion, responsibility and status in the First Council.

SECOND COUNCIL: It is found that the Buddha, in times of necessity, amended or bent the rules of the *Sangha* on multiple occasions; and during his final retreat, he clearly instructed that rules of the *Sangha* should always be kept open for amendment with the need of time. Thus, the dispute and conflict surrounding the *Dasa Vatthuni* (the ten matters), could have been easily resolved by peaceful dialogue. Development is a dynamic process of positive progress. It is clear in The Second Council that the *Theras* were intent on constant uniform and staticity, while the youths in the *Sangha* were open to dynamic change and adaptation. This is a case seen universally, not just limited to the Second council, for the younger generation always represents change and acceptance while the older are adamant on stable constancy.

THIRD COUNCIL: The Third Council took place during the reign of Emperor Ashoka. When upon hearing the *Appamadavagga* from the *Bhikku Nigarodh*, if even the cruel tyrant *Chanda Ashoka* immediately renounced all his cruelty and violence, and commenced a form of active support towards multiple religious groups, there has been posed a strong implication that the proper Buddhist teachings can help strive humanity into a more peaceful tomorrow.

¹ Sharada Poudel, "Baudha Sanskrit Sahityako Utpati ra Vikash", *Lumbini Prabha*, Vol.3, Lumbini: Lumbini Buddhist University, Central Campus, 2018, p.145.

² *Ibid*, 146.

³ Jinananda, f.n. no. 3. p.46.

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Sankrityayan, f.n.no.15, p.436-437.

Due to *Samrat Ashok's* incompetence and irresponsibility, his court was unable to separate the true *Bhikkus* from the false pretenders, and as a result, a mass of true *Bhikkus* were executed subsequently which can be considered as the greatest loss for the then-Buddhist era.

Under the pretense of endeavor towards uniformity and purity, Ashoka's exile of monks from all 18 sects of Buddhism apart from the *Vibhajyabad* (which he highly encouraged), seems quite contradictory to Buddha's teachings of compassion and loving-kindness.

FOURTH COUNCIL: There have been two separate councils, both known as the Fourth Council – one took place in Sri Lanka among the *Theravadi* monks whereas the second one happened in Kashmir among the *Sarvastivadi* monks. The *Sarvastivadis* were generally acceptant and respectful of the authority of the *Theravadi* council but the *Theras* were intolerant, disrespectful and unable to accept the *Sarvastivadi* council. This temperament of the *Theras* can be deemed as active intolerance which absolutely contradicts the founding principles of Buddhism. Moreover, the division of Buddhists into eighteen sects strongly suggests that there was discord, contempt and malice between the sects.

If the interpretation and regulation of the *Silas* was to be consistent in all of Buddhism (be it *Thervada* or *Mahayana*), Buddhism would be held in higher regard and esteem by the outside world.

The Sanskrit *Tripitaka* needs to be organized systematically and given proper priority for better knowledge of Buddhism, much as the Pali one has been, and for that, extensive search is required. Moreover, new *Mahayana* Council needs to be held to support the search and organization of the Sanskrit *Tripitaka*.

Since both the origins of *Mahayana* and *Theravada* ultimately lead to Buddha, the attitude of these two sects towards one another must be improved, and the malice, contempt and intolerance must be gradually resolved so the wholly united Buddhism can strive towards achieving a better world.

CONCLUSION

The councils, despite having taken place during different time periods and situations, can be viewed as a strong initiative with the intent of preserving Buddha's words and teachings. Although the First Council succeeded in chronologically arranging all of Buddha's teachings, that seemed to be failed in resolving some small problems related to *Vinaya*; which subsequently resulted into the Second council taking place. But unfortunately, the Second Council also failed to resolve the *Vinaya* matters, and in return, the discord on the *Vinaya* matter arose strife among the Buddhists which divided them into different sects. By the time of Ashoka, Buddhism had already been divided into 18 *Nikayas* (sects). Their conflicts were more personal and behavioral than ideological or philosophical.

Ashoka conducted the third Council to overcome such hostility among Buddhist sects. To put an end to that strife, Ashoka's *Guru 'Moggaliputta Tisya'* created a narrative, which still exists as "*Abhidhamma Anga*". The formation of *Abhidhamma* and the purification of the *Sangha* were the two major accomplishments of the Third Council. But there's still disagreement amongst the Buddhist philosophers regarding the establishment of the *Abhidhamma*. The *Sountantrika* Buddhists adamantly believe that the formation of the *Abhidhamma* took place along with the 'Sutra'. The fourth council, which took place as two separate events in Sri Lanka and Kashmir, recognized the transcription of the *Tripitaka* into Pali and Sanskrit respectively; but it also signifies the degree of resentment and intolerance of the *Theras* towards the *Sarvastivadins*.

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