

## The Four Assemblies in Pāli Buddhism

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The expression “four assemblies” refers to a basic division of the members of a Buddhist society, which could be monastic or lay, male or female. Hence the full set of four comprises monks, nuns, male lay followers, and female lay followers. The importance of these four emerges in a passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, according to which the Buddha declared that he would not pass away until he had achieved his mission of having competent disciples from each of these four assemblies (DN 16 at DN II 104). The importance this statement carries in the Theravāda tradition is reflected in the fact that it recurs again in other discourse collections in the Pāli canon, namely in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, and the *Udāna*.<sup>1</sup>

The rationale underlying this need concerns both the lay/monastic and the male/female divide. The teachings given by the Buddha, in the way these have come down in the Pāli discourses, were not limited to only privileged members of society. Caste, for example, was considered to be of no direct

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<sup>1</sup> SN 51.10 at SN V 261, AN 8.70 at AN IV 310, and Ud 6.1 at Ud 63.

In the printed version of this article the bibliography was lost and changes to the text were made without consultation. For this reason, the present file is based on the original manuscript, formatted in such a way that it corresponds closely to the pagination of the printed version.

relevance for the ability to realize awakening, and so was gender. In fact the only passage among Pāli discourses that openly questions the ability of women to reach awakening is a statement by Māra (SN 5.2 at SN I 129). The nun he addressed with this challenge was quick to dismiss his silly ideas.

Nor were the teachings only meant for monastics. To go forth as a monk or nun was of course considered the most appropriate way of life for dedicating oneself fully to the path to liberation discovered by the Buddha. But numbers of lay disciples are also on record for having reached levels of awakening. One of them, the householder Citta, on several occasions even clarified to monks teachings that had been given by the Buddha.<sup>2</sup>

In this way the coming into existence of four assemblies of disciples lays the foundation for the Buddha's message to reach out to mankind and for its practice to be undertaken in harmonious collaboration by those devoted to its implementation. Both men and women have thereby in principle the option to decide whether to dedicate themselves to the monastic life or rather implement the teachings within the setting of family life. Monks and nuns are to provide guidance and direction for such implementation and serve as the meritorious field of offerings for lay followers who through their generosity make it possible for monastics to live their mendicant life.

The significance of establishing these four assemblies in order for a Buddhist society to grow and be strong emerges from a range of other passages. One of these concerns the thirty-two superior bodily marks with which according to tradition the Buddha was endowed. The *Lakkhaṇa-sutta* sets each of these marks in relation to past life virtues and former deeds of the Buddha-to-be. One of these concerns the soles of the Buddha's feet, which were

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<sup>2</sup> SN 41.1 at SN IV 282, SN 41.5 at SN IV 292, and SN 41.7 at SN IV 296.

adorned with auspicious wheel-marks. The *Lakkhaṇa-sutta* relates the possession of these auspicious marks, already evident at the time of birth, to the future Buddha being surrounded by a large retinue of four assemblies of disciples (DN 30 at DN III 148). This makes the existence of each of these four assemblies an integral, even indispensable part of the very condition of being a Buddha as a teacher of mankind.

According to the *Pāsādika-sutta*, the completeness of the holy life taught by the Buddha was evident in the accomplishments reached the four assemblies of his disciples (DN 29 at DN III 125). This confirms that the Buddha had indeed achieved his mission, as proclaimed in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, of having competent disciples from each of these four assemblies. The same also emerges from the *Mahāvaccagotta-sutta*, according to which the completeness of the Buddha's teaching was evident in the high numbers of monks and nuns who had become fully liberated, and in the fact that similarly high numbers of male and female lay followers had reached other levels of awakening (MN 73 at MN I 490). Clearly, without accomplished disciples from each of the four assemblies, the Buddha's dispensation would not have been considered complete.

Another statement describes the distinct contribution made by the members of each of these four assemblies. The discourse proceeds as follows (AN 4.7 at AN II 8):

Monks, these four, being competent, disciplined, self-confident, learned, upholders of the Dhamma, practitioners of the Dhamma who follow the Dhamma, illuminate the community. What are the four?

Monks, a monk who is competent, disciplined, self-confident, learned, an upholder of the Dhamma, a practitioner of the Dhamma who follows the Dhamma, illuminates the community.

Monks, a nun who is competent, disciplined, self-confident, learned, an upholder of the Dhamma, a practitioner of the Dhamma who follows the Dhamma, illuminates the community.

Monks, a male lay follower who is competent, disciplined, self-confident, learned, an upholder of the Dhamma, a practitioner of the Dhamma who follows the Dhamma, illuminates the community.

Monks, a female lay follower who is competent, disciplined, self-confident, learned, an upholder of the Dhamma, a practitioner of the Dhamma who follows the Dhamma, illuminates the community.

Monks, these four, being competent, disciplined, self-confident, learned, upholders of the Dhamma, practitioners of the Dhamma who follow the Dhamma, illuminate the community.

One who is competent and self-confident,  
learned and an upholder of the Dhamma,  
who lives according to the Dhamma,  
such a one is reckoned an illumination of the community.

A monk endowed with virtue,  
a nun who is learned,  
a male lay follower with faith  
and a female lay follower with faith,  
these illuminate the community,  
these are the community's illumination.

Other discourses more specifically address the contribution to be made by the four assemblies in order to prevent the decline of the Dhamma. According to a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, such a decline can be prevented when the members of the four assemblies dwell with respect for their teacher, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, the training, and concentration (SN 16.13 at SN II 225). Similar presentations can be found in three discourses in the *Aṅ-*

*guttara-nikāya*. In agreement with the *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse just mentioned, these three discourses present respectful behaviour by the members of the four assemblies as what prevents decline. Besides respect for the teacher, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, and the training, these three discourses also mention respect of the four assemblies for each other, heedfulness, and being helpful (to one another).<sup>3</sup> In fact, mutual respect and being helpful to each are clearly qualities required in order to ensure the smooth cooperation and continuity of the four assemblies of the Buddha's disciples. This is how the four assemblies can help and support each other in the implementation of the Buddha's teachings.

In the history of Theravāda Buddhism, this continuity became interrupted at some point in the early eleventh century, during a period of warfare and political turmoil in Sri Lanka. The order of nuns appears to have become extinct during this time. At that time, neither in India nor in other countries in Southeast Asia a Theravāda order of nuns seems to have been in existence. Presumably based on the assumption that full ordination of female candidates is not possible without the collaboration of nuns, the order of nuns as one of the four assemblies of a Theravāda Buddhist society was not revived later on.

The account of the foundation of the order of nuns in the Pāli *Vinaya* in fact conveys the impression that the coming into being of an assembly of nuns was not seen as an unequivocally positive event. Particularly prominent here is a prediction allegedly made by the Buddha that, due to women being allowed to go forth in his teaching, the future duration of his dispensation has been substantially diminished. Comparative study of the account of the order of nuns in the Theravāda *Vinaya*, in the light of records of the same

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<sup>3</sup> AN 5.201 at AN III 247, AN 6.40 at AN III 340, and AN 7.56 at AN IV 84.

event in the *Vinayas* of other Buddhist schools, puts this into perspective.<sup>4</sup> It shows that the account in the Pāli *Vinaya* stands good chances of having suffered during the prolonged period of transmission and can no longer be taken as an accurate reflection of what happened on the ground in India some two thousand five hundred years ago.

Even taking this account at face value, however, at least according to the assessment of the famous Thai scholar-monk Phra Payutto (2013: 49),

the Buddha laid down the eight *garudhammas* as a protective embankment. With such protection the teachings will last for a long time, just like before.

These *garudhamma* were according to the *Vinaya* were set by the Buddha as a precondition for starting an order of nuns. Independent of whether one considers these eight special rules as preventing decline, one would hardly expect the Buddha to start an order of nuns if he knew this will inevitably result in a decline of his dispensation. In fact a positive assessment of an assembly of nuns and its potential contribution clearly emerges from the passages surveyed earlier. All four assemblies, including the assembly of nuns, have their distinct contribution to offer for the wellbeing and continuity of the Buddha's dispensation.

How could one expect a nun to be “competent, disciplined, self-confident, learned” and to become “an upholder of the Dhamma, a practitioner of the Dhamma who follows the Dhamma” such that she “illuminates the community”, unless Buddhist nuns have come into existence in the first place? This much alone, even without recourse to the *Vinayas* of other schools, should suffice to sound a note of caution concerning the impression conveyed by the account of the foundation of the order of nuns in the way it is now found

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. in more detail Anālayo 2016.

in the *Vinaya*. At the very least, it needs to be considered alongside the various passages mentioned above, each of which clearly implies a positive attitude towards the existence of Buddhist nuns.

Not only the action taken by the Buddha himself, but even later times reflect a positive attitude towards the coming into being of an order of nuns. Here it is instructive to turn to the account of the famous arahant Mahinda's propagation of Buddhism in Ceylon. His teachings had apparently so profound an impact that Queen Anulā wanted to go forth together with her female entourage. When informed about her aspirations by her husband, the king, Mahinda clarified that he was not able to grant Anulā ordination on his own. Since an order of nuns was in existence, the proper procedure was to bring nuns from India to confer ordination on the queen and her followers.

It is noteworthy that Mahinda showed no trace of hesitation or misgivings regarding the establishing of an order of nuns in Ceylon as such, as long as this is done in the proper way by bringing nuns from India to confer ordination. Clearly the famous arahant, credited with the conversion of Ceylon to Buddhism and thus with a missionary activity that could have hardly been more important from the viewpoint of the Theravāda tradition, did not consider the coming into being of nuns as something detrimental. Rather than trying to prevent this in some way or another, he did what he could to facilitate this development by inviting his own sister, Saṅghamittā, to come to Ceylon. This leaves hardly room for others nowadays to view a comparable development of establishing a Theravāda order of nuns with suspicion in principle, influenced by the negative impressions conveyed by the account of the foundation of the order of nuns.

According to the *Dīpavaṃsa*, Mahinda described how his sister and other nuns will come to Ceylon to grant ordination to the queen and her followers (Dīp 15.77–80):

My sister Saṅghamittā  
will come here, o King;  
having conferred the going forth on Anulā,  
she will make her find release from all bondage.

Saṅghamittā of great wisdom [will come],  
[together with] Uttarā the discerning one,  
Hemā and Māsagallā,  
Aggimittā of measured speech,  
Tappā and Pabbatachinnā,  
Mallā and Dhammadāsiyā.

These nuns  
are concentrated and have shaken off lust,  
their mental thoughts are pure  
and they delight in the true Dhamma and Vinaya.

They have destroyed the influxes and attained [self-]control,  
the three knowledges, and skill in supernormal feats.  
Being established in the highest,  
they will also come here.

The *Dīpavaṃsa* reports that these highly accomplished nuns, headed by Saṅghamittā, brought a seedling of the Bodhi tree to Ceylon; an auspicious token of the transmission of the order of nuns to Ceylon.

It is in Ceylon again that in recent times the missing nun assembly has been restored to Theravāda Buddhism. This development has met with considerable opposition. Following in Mahinda's footsteps is no longer possible nowadays, as no Theravāda order of nuns is in existence in India or elsewhere. Hence nuns of the Dharmaguptaka order from China or Korea have served a role comparable to that of Saṅghamittā and her companions in granting ordination. However, the rules and legal procedures in the Dhar-



maguptaka *Vinaya* differ from those in the Theravāda *Vinaya*. From a legal viewpoint, this makes it problematic if not impossible to accept the validity of each other's legal acts. This would hold for male candidates as well and it not merely a problem for females. A male ordained according to Dharmaguptaka law would not count as a Theravāda monk, at least from a strictly legal perspective.

However, close inspection of the relevant passages in the Pāli *Vinaya* show that such revival is indeed a legal possibility, if it is carried out by Theravāda monks alone. When no order of nuns is in existence that could collaborate in granting ordination to female candidates, under such exceptional circumstances monks can grant female candidates ordination on their own.<sup>5</sup> This endows the ordinations carried out since 1998 in Sri Lanka and elsewhere with the needed legal validity, ensuring that the missing assembly of Theravāda Buddhism can be restored to full life.

Comparable to the manifold benefits that the increased participation of laity in insight meditation has brought since its inception in the early twentieth century, the revival of the order of nuns can safely be expected to have similar beneficial repercussions for the twenty-first century and beyond. It offers a much needed strengthening of the role of monastics in modern society, which is in dire need of the harmonious cooperation of the four assemblies to live and practice the Buddha's timeless teachings.

#### Abbreviations

AN    *Aṅguttara-nikāya*  
Dīp    *Dīpavaṃsa*

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion cf. Anālayo 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2017.

DN *Dīgha-nikāya*  
MN *Majjhima-nikāya*  
SN *Samyutta-nikāya*  
Ud *Udāna*

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