

Ordination In Theravada Buddhism

An Early Account

by

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Edited, with an Introduction and Notes

by

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Introduction

This general introduction briefly explains the history of the Novice Ordination (*pabbajjá* or 'going forth'), the Higher Ordination (*upasampadá*) and the functions of a novice (*sámanera*) and a monk (*bhikkhu*), in Theraváda Buddhism.

The article that follows gives a graphic account of a Higher Ordination ceremony as witnessed by Mr. J. F. Dickson at Malwatta monastery, Kandy, Sri Lanka, in 1872. A few shortcomings and errors in the essay have been corrected.

The followers of the Buddha were four-fold: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen (*bhikkhu, bhikkhuni, upásaka, upásiká*). ... [In the present text, however, we limit ourselves merely to the Bhikkhu Order.]

To know the origin of the Bhikkhu Order, we should go back twenty five centuries, when at the Deer Park, at Isipatana (modern Sarnath), near Váránasi in India, the Buddha Gotama on a full moon day of July, addressed the five ascetics, his former friends, and revealed unto them the Right Way, the Noble Eightfold Path, which leads to calm, realization, enlightenment and Nibbána: This is known as setting in motion the matchless *Wheel of Truth (Dhamma-cakka)*.

The five ascetics were convinced and became followers of the Buddha. With the proclamation of the Dhamma, for the first time, and with the conversion of the five ascetics, the Deer Park became

the birth place of the Buddha's dispensation (*Buddha-sásana*) and of the Saògha, the community of monks, the ordained disciples. Before long, fifty five others headed by Yasa, a young man of wealth, joined the Order of the Saògha. Now there were sixty disciples altogether.

Their novice ordination and higher ordination were granted by the Buddha in these words: '*Come monks, well proclaimed is the Dhamma. Live the noble life (brahmacariyaí) for the complete ending of suffering (dukkha).*'

When the *vassa*, the rainy season of three months, July-October, ended, the Master addressed his sixty disciples, the Accomplished Ones (*Arahats*), and said:

'Released am I, monks, from, all ties whether human or divine. You also are delivered from fetters whether human or divine. Go now and wander for the welfare and happiness of gods and men. Let not two of you proceed in the same direction. Proclaim the Dhamma that is excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end, possessed of meaning and the letter and utterly perfect. Proclaim the life of purity. the holy life consummate and pure. There are beings who will understand the Dhamma. I shall go to Uruvela, to Senanigama, to teach the Dhamma.'

In accordance with this admonition, the disciples walked the high-ways and by-ways of India spreading the Dhamma, the new message of wisdom and compassion. Men and women from different

walks of life who listened to the message of the Master manifested their willingness to follow the Buddha and his teaching.

Among them there were those who wished to enter the Order of the Saḍgha; The monks brought these followers to the Master for ordination from various districts. The long journeys, however, fatigued both the monks and the seekers for ordination.

To avoid this hardship and inconvenience, the Buddha allowed the monks to ordain the followers in any district. The manner of ordination was explained to the monks by the Buddha himself in this wise :

“The hair and beard must be shaved first, and then the saffron robe put on. Adjusting his robe on one shoulder (the left), the seeker for ordination should pay homage to the monks, and squatting (if this is inconvenient one can kneel) before them with hands raised and palms together, he should say:

Buddham saranata gaccha mi

Dhammam saranam gacchami

Saḍgham saraaatn gacchami

Dutiyampi Buddham saranala gacchami

Dutiyampi Dhammam saranade

gacchami

Dutiyampi Saḍgham saranam gacchami

Tatitampi Buddham saranam gacchami

Tatīyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami
Tatīyampi Saḍḍham saranam gacchami

I go for refuge to the Buddha (the
Teacher)

I go for refuge to the Dhamma (the
Teaching)

I go for refuge to the Saḍḍha (the Taught)

For the second time I go for refuge to
the Buddha

For the second time I go refuge to the
Dhamma

For the second time I go for refuge to
the Saḍḍha

For the third time I go for refuge to the
Buddha.

For the third time I go for refuge to the
Dhamma

For the third time I go for refuge to the
Saḍḍha.

This was the manner in which a follower gained ordination in those early days. But with the passage of time, this short formula had to be expanded as various unsuitable and undesirable men sought admission into the order.

As it stands now, in the Novice Ordination, the follower has to recite the ten precepts in addition to the three refuges. In the case of a Higher Ordination, *Upasampada*, the novice who is to be ordained is examined and questioned by senior monks (see the essay which follows).

It may be noted that these additions were made by the Buddha himself, and they are not later arbitrary inclusions. Hence in the conducting of a novice or bhikkhu ordination every detail has to be observed.

In the Order of the Saṅgha, a novice is expected to observe the ten precepts, study the Dhamma and Vinaya (doctrine and discipline) from his elders, attend upon the senior monks, prepare himself and become eligible for the Higher Ordination.

Samanera (*samana* + *nera*) literally means son (*nera*) of the samana or the monk, in the sense that a novice should be taught, disciplined and taken care of by a competent and an understanding monk. A novice need not observe the *vassa*, the rainy season, which a bhikkhu is expected to observe.

He is given bhikkhu - or Higher Ordination when he has reached the age of twenty and not before. But age alone would not do, for it is not a sufficient qualification; if he lacks in intelligence, has not studied necessary Dhamma and Vinaya for leading the

bhikkhu life, he is not a fit candidate eligible for the Higher Ordination,

A bhikkhu is expected to observe the essential (*patimokkha*) precepts which are 220 (227) in number. It is difficult to adequately translate the word bhikkhu. Monk may be considered as the best rendering. The words, *Thera* and *Maha Thera* are only titles. A bhikkhu who has counted ten or more years of *vassa* may be called a Thera (literally elder or senior), and a bhikkhu who has spent twenty or more years of *vassa* is eligible to be called a Maha Thera. Still he is a bhikkhu, and as the *Dhammapada* (260, 261) says:

‘One is not a Thera merely because his head is grey. Ripe, he is in age; and "a man grown old in vain" is he called.’

‘In whom there is truth and righteousness, harmlessness, restraint and control, that wise man who has thrown off impurities, is indeed; called Thera.’

The word *priest* cannot, however, be used as a substitute of bhikkhu; for Buddhist monks are not priests who perform rites or sacrifices. They do not administer sacraments and pronounce absolution. An ideal Buddhist monk cannot, and does not, stand as an intermediary between man and ‘supernatural’ powers’ for Buddhism teaches that each individual is solely responsible for his own liberation. Hence there is no need to win the favour of a

mediating priest. 'You yourselves should strive on: the Buddhas show the path.' (*Dhammapada*, 276)

The purpose of 'going forth' (*pabbajja*) is to turn away from thoughts of sensuality (*kilesa-kama*) and objects of sense (*vatthu-karha*). It is, therefore, really a self-sacrifice, and the urge to do so should be a genuine one if it is to bear pleasant fruit. This is certainly not a path that all can follow; for to leave behind the world's attractive and sensuous life is no easy task.

It is not possible for all to cut themselves off from the world with all its attraction. And the Buddha does not expect all his followers to become monks or ascetics. Again the *Dhammapada* (302) says: '*Hard it is to go forth from home to homelessness, To take delight in it is hard.*'

In the Buddha's Dispensation, full liberty is granted to the disciples to leave the Order if they find it difficult to live the monk's life any more. There is no coercion or compulsion, whatsoever, and the person reverting to the lay life is not stigmatized.

Genuine renunciation, it may be borne in mind, is not escapism. Those who do not understand the real significance of renunciation, and those who judge it from bogus 'recluses' who lead an indolent, worthless and parasitical life, hastily conclude that 'going forth' is a sort of escapism, a selfish way of life. Nothing could be more untrue. The ideal monk, the bhikkhu, however, is an

altruist of the highest type who takes least from, and gives much to society.

'As a bee without harming the flower, its colour and fragrance, takes away the honey (pollen) even so should the sage move in the village.' (*Dhammapada*, 49).

It is true with the passage of time, many changes have take place, yet the genuine Buddhist monk who has given up worldly pleasures, endeavours to lead a life of voluntary poverty and complete celibacy with the high aim of serving others selflessly within the bounds of his bhikkhu life, and attain the deliverance of mind.

There are two ways of leading the life of a bhikkhu: one entails continuous meditation (*vipassaná-dhura*) and the other part-time meditation, studying and teaching of the Dhamma (*gantha-dhura*). It is obligatory on every bhikkhu to take up one or other of these ways according to temperament, age and environment.¹

The robe that a novice or a bhikkhu puts on is his dress and he is expected to wear it always and not on special occasions only.

In conclusion, it must be said that the Higher Ordination or *Upasampadá* ordination should be conducted in a duly consecrated 'Chapter House' (*simá*) and not in any place considered convenient.

¹ For a detailed account of the bhikkhu life the reader is referred to *The Buddha's Ancient Path*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy. 1979.

Piyadassi Thera

An Early Account of an Ordination Ceremony in Sri Lanka

by J. F. Dickson, B.A.

Reprinted from a paper published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* for 1874

In May, 1872, I was invited by my learned friend, and pandit Kewitiyagala Unnanse, of the Malwatte Monastery in Kandy, to be present at an ordination service, held according to custom on the full-moon day of Wesak (May, June), being the anniversary of the day on which Gautama Buddha attained Nirvana, B.C. 543.

I gladly availed myself of this opportunity of witnessing the celebration of a rite of which Englishmen have but little knowledge, and which has rarely, if ever, been witnessed by any European in Ceylon.

Nothing could be more impressive than the order and solemnity of the proceedings. It was impossible not to feel that the ceremony was being conducted precisely as it was more than two thousand years ago. The chapter house (Sinhalese. Poya-ge) is an oblong hall, with rows of pillars forming an inner space and leaving broad aisles at the sides. At the top of this inner space sat the aged Abbot (Sinhalese, Mahá Náyaka) as president of the chapter; on either side of him sat the elder priests,² and down the

² Use the word bhikkhus or monks throughout

sides sat the other priests in number between thirty and forty. The chapter or assembly thus formed three sides of an oblong. The president sat on cushions and a carpet; the other priests sat on mats covered with white calico. They all sat cross-legged. On the fourth side at the foot, stood the candidates, behind the pillars on the right stood the deacons,³ the left was given up to the visitors, and behind candidates at the bottom was a crowd of Buddhist laymen.

To form a chapter for this purpose, not less than ten⁴ duly ordained monks are required, and the president must be of not less than ten years's standing from his Upasampada ordination.

The monks attending the chapter are required to give their undivided, unremitting and devout attention throughout the service. Every priest is instructed to join heart and mind in the exhortations, responses, formulas, etc, and to correct every error, lest the oversight of a single mistake should vitiate the efficacy of the rite.

Previously to the ordination the candidates are subjected to a strict and searching examination as to their knowledge of the discourses of the Buddha, the duties of a priest etc. An examination

³ Use the word novices throughout.

⁴ Not necessarily. The minimum required is five. In Middle Country, in India, it is said, that not less than ten are required.

and ordination is held on the full-moon day in Vesak,⁵ and on the three succeeding Poya days, or days of quarters of the moon.

After witnessing the celebration of this rite, I read the *Upasampadá Kammavácá* or book setting forth the form and manner of ordering of priests and deacons, and I was subsequently induced to translate it. This manual was translated into Italian in 1776, by Padre Maria Percoto (missionary in Ava and Pegu), under the title of "*Kammuva, ossia trattato della ordinazio dei Talapoini del secondo ordine detti Penzi,*" and a portion of it was edited in 1841, in Pali and Latin, by Professor Spiegel. Clough translated it in 1834, and Hardy has given an interesting summary of it his *Eastern Monachism*; but neither the text nor any complete translation is readily accessible, and I have therefore thought that this edition might possibly be acceptable to those who desire information respecting the practice of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, where, as is well pointed out by Mr. Childers, in his *Pali Dictionary*, (s: v. *Nibbánaí*, p. 272, note), "Buddhism retains almost its pristine purity."

With regard to the transliteration, I have used the system adopted (after Fausböll) by Mr. Childers in his *Dictionary*. In the translation I have placed in italics the rubrical directions in the text, and all explanations and amplifications of the text I have placed in the square brackets. I have thus endeavoured to give a translation of

⁵ It need not be a full moon day or Vesak. There is no hard and fast rule regarding the days of Ordination.

the text as it stands, and, at the same time, to set out the ordination service fully and completely, precisely in the form in use in Sri Lanka at the present time as I have myself witnessed it.

No one who compares this form with that given in Article XV of Hodgson's "*Literature and religion of the Buddhists in Nepaul*," can fail to be struck with the purity and simplicity of the Ceylon rite as contrasted with that in use among the Northern Buddhists.

J.F. Dickson, B.A,

Kandy, 9th January, 1873.

The Ordination Service

*Praise Be to the Blessed One, the Holy One, to Him who has Arrived
at the Knowledge of All Truth.*

(The candidate, accompanied by his Tutor, in the dress of a layman, but having the yellow robes of a priest in his arms, makes the usual obeisance and offering to the President of the chapter, and standing says.)

"Grant me leave to speak. Lord,⁶ graciously grant me admission to deacon's orders.⁷ *Kneels down.* Lord, I pray for admission as a deacon. Again, lord, I pray for admission as a deacon. In compassion for me, lord, take these yellow robes, and let me be ordained, in order to the destruction of sorrow, and in order to the attainment of Nirvána." *To be repeated three times.* The President takes the bundle of robes.)⁸

"In compassion for me, lord, give me these yellow robes,⁹ and let me be ordained in order to the destruction of all sorrow, and in order to the attainment of Nirvana." *To be repeated three times.*

⁶ The Pali word is bhante which may be translated as "Venerable Sir." This is the term used by a junior monk when addressing a senior. The word "Lord " is sometimes used when referring to the Buddha.

⁷ Admit me into the Novice's Order (*pabbajetha*)," in other words "grant me Sámáóera ordination."

⁸ Under robe and upper robe.

⁹ The Pali word '*kásává*' stained or dyed robe. It may be yellow or the colour of banyan fruit (orange colour).

(And the President then gives the bundle of the robes, and the yellow band which he ties round the neck of the candidate, reciting the while the *tacapañcaka*, or formula of meditation on the perishable nature of the human body, as follows:) "*Kesa lomd nakha danta taco—taco danta nakha kesa loma*. Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin - skin, teeth, nails, hair of the body, hair of the head " (The candidate then rises up, and retires to throw off the dress of a laymen, and to put on his yellow robes. While changing his dress he recites the following:) 'In wisdom I put on the robes, as protection against cold, as a protection against heat, as a protection against gadflies and mosquitoes, wind and sun, and touch of serpents and to cover nakedness, i.e., I wear them in all humility, for use only, and not for ornament or show." (Having put on the yellow robes, he returns to the side of his tutor, and says) "Grant me leave to speak. I make obeisance to my Lord. Lord, forgive me all my faults. Let the merit that I have gained be shared by my lord. It is fitting to give me to share in the merit gained by my lord. It is good, it is good. I share in it. Grant me leave to speak. Graciously give me, lord, the three refuges and the precepts." He kneels down.—Lord, I pray for the refuges and the precepts." (The tutor 'gives the three refuges and the ten precepts as follows, the candidate still kneeling, and repeating them after him sentence by sentence.)

1.

THE THREE REFUGES

I put my trust in Buddha.

I put my trust in the Law.

I put my trust in the Priesthood.

Again I put my trust in Buddha.

Again I put my trust in the Law.

Again I put my trust in the Priesthood.

Once more I put my trust in Buddha.

Once more I put my trust in the Law.

Once more I put my trust in Priesthood.

II

The Ten Precepts Or Laws Of The Priesthood.

Abstinence from destroying life;

Abstinence from theft;

Abstinence from fornication and
uncleanness;

Abstinence from lying;

Abstinence from fermented liquor,
spirits and strong drinks which cause
intoxication and heedlessness;

Abstinence from eating at forbidden
times;

Abstinence from dancing, singing, and shows;

Abstinence from adorning and beautifying the person by the use of garlands, perfumes and unguents;

Abstinence from using a high or a large couch or seat:

Abstinence from receiving gold and silver:

are the ten means (of leading a moral life).

(The candidate says,)

"I have received these ten precepts. Permit me. (He rises up, and makes obeisance to his tutor.) Lord, I make obeisance. Forgive me all my faults. May the merit I have gained be shared by my lord. Give me to share in the merit of my lord. It is good, it is good. I share in it."

(This completes the ordination of a deacon, and the candidate retires.)

The foregoing ceremony is gone through previous to the ordination of a monk in all cases, even where the candidate has already been admitted as a deacon. If the candidate is duly qualified for the monk's office, he can proceed at once from deacon's to monks' orders; otherwise, he must pass a term of instruction as a

deacon : but a candidate who has received deacon's orders must solicit them again, and go through the above ceremony when presented for ' priest's orders.

The candidate being duly qualified, returns with his tutor, and goes up to the President of the chapter presenting an offering, and makes obeisance, saying; }

"Permit me to speak. Lord, graciously grant me your sanction and support." *He kneels down,* `Lord, I pray for your sanction and support; a second time. lord, I pray for your sanction and support: a third time, lord, I pray for your sanction and support. Lord, be my preceptor." *This is repeated three times* The President says "It is well" and the candidate replies, "I am content." *This is repeated three times.* "From this day forth lord is my charge. I am charged to my lord." (This vow of mutual assistance) *is repeated three times.*

(The candidate rises up, makes obeisance, and retires alone to the foot of the assembly, where his alms-bowl is strapped on his back. His tutor then goes down, takes him by the hand, and brings him back, placing him in front of the President. One of the assembled priests stands up, and places himself on the other side of the candidate, who thus stands between two tutors.¹⁰ The tutors say to the assembly,) "With your permission," (and then proceed to examine the candidate as to his fitness to be admitted to priest's orders.) "Your name is Nága? It is so, lord. Your preceptor is the

¹⁰ Tutors may be two or even three.

Venerable Tissa? It is so, lord. (The two tutors together say,) "Praise be to the Blessed One, the Holy one, to Him who has arrived at the knowledge of all Truth." (They then recite the following commands¹¹ of Buddha.) "First it is right to appoint a preceptor. When the preceptor has been appointed, it is right to inquire whether the candidate has alms-bowl and robes" (which they do as follows). Is this your alms-bowl? It is so, lord. Is this the Double Robe? It is so, lord. Is this the single robe? It is so, lord Is this the under robe? It is so, lord. Go and stand there."—(The candidate here retires, going backwards in a reverential posture, and stands at the lower corner of the assembly. The tutors remain in front of the President, and one of the them says,) "Priests, hear me. The candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. Now is the time of the assembly of priests I will instruct the candidate." (The tutors make obeisance to the President, and go down to the foot of the assembly, and join the candidate, whom they instruct and examine as follows:) "Listen, Nága. This is the time for you to speak the truth, to state what has occurred. When asked concerning anything in the midst of the assembly if it be true, it is meet to say so; if it be not true, it is meet to say that it is not. Do not hesitate. Conceal nothing." They inquire of the candidates as follows; Have you any such diseases as these? Leprosy? No, lord. Boils? No, lord Itch? No, lord. Asthma? No, lord. Epilepsy? No, lord. Are you a human being? Yes, lord. Are you a male? Yes, lord. Are you a freeman? Yes, lord. Are you free from

¹¹ They are not commands, but admonitions.

debt? Yes, lord. Are you exempt from military service? Yes, lord. Have you come with the permission of your parents? Yes, lord. Are you of the full age of twenty years ? Yes, lord. Are your alms-bowl and robes complete? Yes lord. What is your name? Lord, I am called Nága. What is the name of your preceptor? Lord, my preceptor is called the Venerable Tissa." (The two tutors here go to the top of the assembly, and make obeisance to the President, and one of them says,) "Priests, hear me. The candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. He has been duly instructed by me. Now is the time of the assembly of priests. If the candidate is here, it is right to tell him to approach." (One of the tutors says) "'Come hither." (The candidate comes up, and stands between the tutors, makes obeisance to the assembly, and kneels down.) "Priests, I ask the assembly for ordination. Priests, have compassion on me, and lift me up. A third time, lords. I ask the assembly for ordination; lords, have compassion on me and lift me up." (The candidate rises up, and makes obeisance. The tutors say:) "Priests, hear me. This candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. Now is the time of the assembly of priests. I will examine the candidate respecting the disqualifications for the priestly office."

“Listen, Nága. This is the time for you to speak the truth, to state what has occurred. I will inquire of you concerning facts. If a thing is, it is right to say it is; if a thing is not, it is right to say it is not. Have you any such diseases as these? Leprosy? No, lord. Boils? No, lord. Itch? No, lord . Asthma? No, lord. Epilepsy? No, lord. Are

you a human being? Yes, lord. Are you a male? Yes, lord. Are you a free man? Yes, lord. Are you free from debt? Yes, lord. Are you exempt from military service? Yes; lord. Have you come with the permission of your parents? Yes, lord. Are you of the full age of twenty years? Yes, lord. Are your alms-bowl and robes complete? Yes, lord. What is your name? ...

Lord, I am called Nága. What is the name of your preceptor? My preceptor, lord, is called the Venerable Tissa."

(Here ends the examination in the midst of the assembly, and one of the tutors reports the result as follows :)

"This candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. He is free from disqualifications. He has his alms-bowl and robes complete. The candidate asks the assembly for ordination under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. The assembly gives the candidate ordination under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. If any of the venerable assembly approves the ordination of the candidate under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa, let him be silent; if any objects, let him speak. A second time . . . a third time I state this matter. Priests, listen, This candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. He is free from disqualifications from the priestly office. His alms-bowl and robes are complete. The candidate asks the priesthood for ordination under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. The assembly gives the candidate ordination under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. If any of the venerable assembly approves the

ordination of the candidate under his superior, the Venerable Tissa, let him be silent; if any objects, let him speak." (The two tutors here again make obeisance to the President, and say:) "The candidate has received ordination from the priesthood under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. The assembly approves the resolution: therefore it keeps silence, So I understand your wish."

Note to the reader: While J.F.Dicksen chooses to use the word 'priest' in the above account, we must be reminded of Venerable Piyadassi's words in the introductory essay that *in Buddhism, strictly speaking, the word 'priest' cannot, be used as a substitute of bhikkhu; for Buddhist monks are not 'priests' who perform rites or sacrifices. They do not administer sacraments and pronounce absolution. An ideal Buddhist monk cannot, and does not, stand as an intermediary between man and 'supernatural' powers' for Buddhism teaches that each individual is solely responsible for his own liberation. Hence there is no need to win the favour of a mediating priest. 'You yourselves should strive on: the Buddhas*