

A REFLECTION ON THERAVADA POSITION OF MINOR AND LEAST SIGNIFICANT PRECEPTS

(*KHUDDANUKHUDDAKA SIKKHAPADA*)

Raluwe Padmasiri¹

Introduction

This paper has two objectives. The first is to reflect on Theravada position on minor and least significant precepts (MLSP) (*khuddanukhuddaka sikkhapada*). The second is to suggest that the decision of the first Buddhist council on this matter is not responsible for not changing them ever in its history. Finally, I wish to suggest that changing of lesser and minor rules is not against the Vinaya since the Theravada tradition has followed different indirect ways to adopt it to the needs of the time and space in its historical existence.

Materials

Cullavaggapali and *Mahaparinibbana of Dighanikaya, Milindapanha* are the primary sources while some key secondary sources from the bulk of the literature on this matter are studied for reference.

Methods

Since this research is a philosophical investigation on MLSP it will be conducted on library references plus a conceptual analysis.

Discussion

Throughout the Buddhist history the issue of MLSP is widely discussed and heavily debated. Among them *Cullavaggapali, Mahaparinibbanasutta*, Commentators like Buddhagosa and Dhammapala and later Theravada texts like *Milindapanha* are prominent. Not clarifying what the Buddha intended by minor and lesser precepts was one of the five accusations leveled against Ven. Ananda at the first Buddhist council. At the end of it the Order had to decide whether MLSP are to be changed or not

¹ Head, Dept. of Buddhist Philosophy, Postgraduate Institute of Pali & Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya raluwe.padma@gmail.com

since it is said that the Buddha before his demise allowed the monks to do change them if they wish to do so (*Cullaavaggapali* and *Mahaparinibbana sutta*). At this juncture, a unanimous decision was taken not to change any of the disciplinary rules including MLSP. This crucial decision is said to have taken based on arahant Mahakassapa's attitude and insight. Both Theravada and Mahasanghika literature record this incident though with some minor differences.

The relevant early sources show two reasons that supported to take this decision. Firstly, none of the participants of the first council were aware what are MLSP exactly. Secondly, arahant Kassapa's view shows that it was not the proper time to take such a decision. For him, the others specially lay people may accuse monks if monks change MLSP saying that the discipline of the Buddha was limited until he was existing and disciples of the Buddha changed disciplinary rules even before disappearance of smoke of the funeral fire of the Buddha.

However, it is interesting to see how two accepted commentators of Theravada tradition explained the matter. For Buddhagosha's explanation on the issue was that "The import is, if the *Sangha* desires, let the *Sangha* repeal them. Why did the Buddha, without directly asking them to repeal them, use these optional terms? Because He foresaw the power of Mahakassapa. Indeed even the Buddha though enjoining the *Sangha* to repeal them after His demise realised that Mahakassapa would not do away with those rules in question. Hence the Buddha left the problem to be decided by the *Sangha*. However, Dhammapal commenting on the event has provided somewhat liberal explanation in his sub-commentary. He assumed three reasons for the conclusion: there shall be monks who do not like to observe the lesser and minor rules but they will be prompted to think that even though the Buddha had enjoined them to repeal them they are bound by them because of the decision of the *Sangha* at the first council; the entire dispensation belongs to the monks themselves. It is clear from the fact that even though they had been allowed by the Buddha, they did not like to repeal the lesser and the minor rules; the monks prefer to observe these rules even though the Buddha had asked them to do away with them. This is clear evidence to the magnanimity of the *Sangha*. In *Milindapanha*, Nagasena has commented on this issue when king Milinda raised the issue in a different way. Nagasena

raised a counter question to reply King Milinda as follows. The monks will observe an even extra hundred and fifty rules with the intention of getting rid of suffering. If this is the case, how could one think of repealing the already levied hundred and fifty rules? These three positions are crucially important to realize two aspects of the issue.

A considerable number of modern scholars (Tilakaratne, A.: Dharmarakshita: Dheerasekara etc.) have discussed this point. Some scholars like Dheerasekara has attempted to reject even the very statement on MLSP claiming that it is relatively later. However, some others like Tilakaratne have attempted to take this stance as one of the distinctive features of Theravada tradition. Some others have reached so far even to label Theravada Buddhist tradition as a kind of hypocrisy on this matter since Theravada tradition has changed MLSP indirectly and secretly.

Conclusion

The research will question validity of the present Theravada view on MLSP and illustrate why it is not justifiable to hold this position further. Moreover, it is expected to comprehend what are the MLPS and explain why it is significant investigate on this issue seriously and examine the possibility of deciding on it for the betterment of the future Buddhism.

Keywords: *Vinaya* rules, minor and least significant precepts, change,

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