

FLOURISHING OF THE RELICS OF THE BUDDHA

Ven. Kirimetiya Dhammasiri¹

Ven. Boliyedde Dhammakusala²

Ven. Balangoda Ananda Chandrakirithi³

Introduction

This research paper will examine the historical development of the relics of the Buddha. It is possible to note that the veneration of Holy object is a part of sacred requirement of a religion. From the Buddhist point of view, the veneration of relics became a part of in the ritualistic and devotional Buddhism. The historical expansion of the legend of Buddhist relics can be seen in the Pali texts. The first glimpse of Buddhist relics is reported with the story of prince Siddharta's great renunciation. According to the report of Apadana commentary in Khuddakanikaya illustrates that when the prince was cut his hair to be an ascetic on the occasion King of God came and accepted hair of prince and built Silumina Stūpa in his place. The second reference of relics is reported on the occasion of offering honey-ball by two merchant brothers for the Buddha. The Buddha gave hair (hair relics) as memory to them (*dakkhiṇa hatthena attano sīsaṃ parāmasitvā kesadhātuyo adāsi*).

Research Problem

These two occasions signify relics as hair but those two stories are not reported in the early Buddhist texts. Both references are later developed concept and reported in Apadana commentary. Apart from those two reports, The Mahaparinibbanasutta illustrates the legitimacy of relics as a prominent requirement in Theravada tradition. It takes into account term of

¹ Lecturer, Department of Pali & Buddhist Studies, University of Peradeniya.
kdhammasiri@yahoo.com

² Lecturer, Department of Languages, Bhiksu University of Sri Lanka.

³ Lecturer, Department of Practical Buddhist Studies, Bhiksu University of Sri Lanka.

relics as corporeal material of Buddha's remains. The account of Suttamentions (bhagavatosarīrāniatṭhadhāsamaṃsavibhattaṃvibhajāhī'ti) remains of the body of the Buddha grouped into eight portions. The interesting point in this clarification is that there is no any particular name as Dhatu (relics) in the sutta, the only term Sarirani is given in order to understand the Dhatu. How this term Dhatu came and develops in Buddhism?

The early Buddhist teaching is condemned the practice of any ritual as mean for liberation; therefore one might argue that "what legitimate place such a relic cult could have in the Buddhist tradition which has as its central insight the transience of human consciousness and corporeality. If the Buddha is the one who is revered by his followers precisely because he gained utter liberation from the cycle of rebirth, by what conceivable logic do his followers cling to his physical remains and make them the object of the highest veneration?" (Kevin M. Trainor)

According to the report of Mahāparinibbānasutta relics is conceived as valued material. How much the relics was valued, at the time of distribution of Buddha's relics, the rulers came from different places and were ready for a war in order to receive the relics of the Buddha. Why did those rulers much more attach to the relics of the Buddha? Do the relics contain special power? Whether the relics make something esoteric on their territories? According to the report given in the Mahāparinibbānasutta, a major blood-bath is averted only by the intervention of a Brahmin named Dona (Drona in Skt.) who proposes that the relics be divided into eight equal portions and distributed to the eight claimants. "When representatives of another clan arrive after the distribution has been completed, they are given the cinders from the funeral pyre. Finally, Dona takes the vessel used to measure the relics, resulting in a tenfold distribution. The recipients, we are told, go to their respective lands and enshrine the relics in Stūpas, marking

out in a tangible fashion the region in which the Buddha taught and his Dhamma was established" (*Kevin M. Trainor*).

Having looked at this particular incident, it is possible to note that the veneration of relics of the Buddha and construction of Stūpas could be noted as the first light on the shadow of development of devotional, ritualistic and cultic Buddhism. According to the exposition of Divyavadana explains the fact that two boys: Vijaya and Jaya were playing at making houses of dust. They recognized the signs which stamped him as a very great personage. And Jaya, having nothing else to offer, threw into the alms-bowl a handful of dust...Buddha accepted the offering. And, reading the thought, he turned to his companion, and said This boy, Ananda!, by reason of this groundwork of merit, shall, a hundred yours alter the death of the Tathagata, become, at the city Pataliputra, a king, Asoka by name, a universal monarch over the whole globe, a pious man, a very king of religion; and he shall cause my corporeal relics to be spread far and wide and shall establish 84000 monuments of religion. The Devyavadana exposition of Buddhist relics shows the intention of Buddha about the relics and future of Buddhism. According to the reports of Theravada and Mahayana texts about the relics are conceived as corporeal remains of Buddha. The Buddhavams (a "Chronicle of Buddhas"), one of the last texts to be added to the Theravada canon, provides additional evidence of this tendency to produce more extensive lists detailing previously unmentioned relics. The relics recorded in a series of verses include not only corporeal relics, but also "relics of use" (*paribhogika-dhatui*) objects used by the Buddha during his lifetime, the Buddha's robes, his alms bowl, walking staff, bed-covering, drinking vessel, belt, bathing cloth, sitting mat, coverlet, fire-stick, water-strainer, razor, and needle-case etc. Buddhist literature mentions two types of Dhatu (relics) *SaririkaDhatu*

(corporeal relics) and Paribhogika Dhatu (the relics of the use objects of Buddha).

When we look at the names of those objects in comparison with list of eight requests for a monk or the Buddha, it has considerable similarities. According to the report of Mahavamsa, venerable Mahamahida informed to the king Devanam Piyatissa that 'O great king, it has been a long time since we saw our Teacher, the Fully-enlightened One; we have dwelt without a refuge; there is nothing here for us to worship. The king, confused by the monk's words, replied: "But did you not tell me, sir that the Buddha is passed away?' "Mahinda's response leaves no doubt as to the essential equivalence between the living Buddha and his corporeal remains. In later period, King received relics of Buddha and enshrined them in Thuparamaya in Sri Lanka.

Discussion

Here, the question what we have to raise is that "Buddhist relics are construed as the distilled essence of human corporeality; they are what remains after the human form has been destroyed and the material substrate purified by the funeral pyre. Note that one of the two common terms for relics, Dhatu is also used to refer to the fundamental or constituent element (s) of the universe itself. In so far as relics are devoid of discernible representation qualities. They were well situated to serve as instances of purified essence or vital substance.(Kevin M. Trainor) Dhatu came to play a significant role in the transformation of mere image or object into a living icon. Can this be happened? In later period, the concept of Dhatu has significantly developed and it has become the symbol of kingship in Sri Lanka. Why this happened? Moreover, the mentality of People has more or

less belief of Dhatu which contains enormous power. Therefore, the concept of Dhatu develops throughout the history of devotional Buddhism.

Keywords: Buddha, Buddhism, relics, veneration, devotion

Bibliography

John S. Strong. (2004) *Relics of the Buddha*. Princeton and Oxford: A Princeton University Press Series.

Kevin M. (1992) *When Is a Theft Not a Theft? Relic Theft and the Cult of the Buddha's Relics in Sri Lanka*. Trainor.