

Significance of Rev. Mahākassapa

Khin Moe Hlaing

Abstract

During the life time of the Buddha, the history of Rev. *Mahākassapa* is distinctly found. He is not like the other monks because he ordained with the *Ovādapati*. Besides he led the convention of the first Buddhist council. So he was known as a *saṃgha Nāyaka Thera* in the Buddhist *Sāsanā*. It describes the name, the meaning, the past existence, the present existence and the attribute of the *Thera*.

Keywords : Etadagga, Aggasāvaka, Significance

Introduction

During the life-time of the *Gotama* Buddha, the Rev. *Mahākassapa* was the sixteenth of the Buddha's forty right-hand side chief disciples, *aggasāvakas*.¹ He was named *Mahākassapa* in honour of his family lineage.² There were other persons bearing the *kassapa* name in the Buddhist Scriptures. They were *kassapa* Buddha³ *Kumara Kassapa*⁴, *Uruvela Kassapa*⁵, *Kassapa Thera*⁶ *Kassapa* hermit⁷, *Kassapa* Turtle⁸, *Kassapa*, an *acelaka*⁹ (naked a scetic), and *Kassapa*, arich man.

Past Existence

During the life-time of *Padumuttara* Buddha, the *thera*-to-be was a man of wealth in the city of *Hamsāvātī*. His name was *vedaha*. One day at a *dhamma* assembly, the Buddha praised and bestowed the *Etadagga* title in the practice of austerity, *dhutanga* on a monk named Rev. *Nisabha*. The wealthy man *vedaha* attended that *dhamma* assembly. Feeling treaty reverent of the *dhamma* delivered by the Buddha, the wealthy man offered alms-foods on the next day. While the Buddha and the *saṃgha* were having meals, the *dhutanga-etadagga* winner Rev. *Nisabha* came to the street. *Vedaha*, after taking the alms bowl from the *thera* to put the alms-food. When the *thera* deplaned, the wealthy man approached the Buddha and asked the special Virtues of this *thera*. The Buddha extoled the special virtues of the *thera* relating to the practice of thirteen kinds of austerity, *dhutanga*. On learning this *vedaha* became more reverent of the Rev. *Nisabha*. Accordingly, the wealthy man offered the three kinds of robes to the Buddha and the *saṃgha* after offering alms-foods for seven days. Then he prayed for achieving *etadagga* in austere practice like Rev. *Nisabha*. After expiring he reached the abode of devas.

¹ Kyannoohamatphwe myah 80.

² Ud. A. 54-55

³ Buv.A 376

⁴ Ap. A. ii, 231

⁵ Vin.iii, 37

⁶ J. I, 262

⁷ Ibid. 80.

⁸ D . I 44-130

⁹ S. A. ii, 289

During the lifetime of *vipassī* Buddha, the *thera*-to-be became a poor *Brāhmin* as a consequence of his past deeds. He and his wife *Brāhmanī* each had only a piece of clothing they were wearing but only one piece of upper garment.

Being a long-lived Buddha, *Vipassī* Buddha delivered discourses only once in every seven years. On the day of *dhamma* delivery, the poor *Brāhmin* took the upper garment from his wife's body and went to the *dhamma* assembly of the Buddha. Being very reverent of the Buddha and *samgha*, the poor *Brāhmin* got an idea of offering the upper garment to the Buddha but because of his stinginess he was undecided from the first to middle watch of the night to offer the garment. Finally he reached a decision, folded the garment and put it at the feet of the Buddha to offer. After doing this deed of merit, he shouted three times about his success¹. Upon inquiring about this episode by the king, he was informed that it was a victory of conquering the stinginess, not the victory cry of battle. Being pleased with the self-conquering of the poor man king *Bandhumati* gave him a pair of upper garments. Firmly believing to be due to blessing of the Buddha the poor man again offered the new upper garments to him. Then the king gave him garments many times over. He was also appointed to the post of a royal *Brāhmin* invested with sacerdotal functions².

After the extinction of *Konāgamana* Buddha's religion but before the existence of *Kassapa Buddha*, the *thera*-to-be was a man of wealth in the city of Benares. His name was not found. He offered his upper garment for bordering to a monk trying to stitch a robe from a piece of cloth. One day a *paccekabuddha* (non- preaching silent Buddha) came in front of their house while his wives and sister were quarrelling. The exceedingly angry wife put mud after emptying the content of the alms-bowl of the *thera*. Later being repented, the wife put oil, honey, molasses and butter in the alms-bowl after thoroughly cleansing it.

During the life-time of *kassapa* Buddha the husband and wife became son and daughter of wealthy men. They were married by their parents when they came of age. Due to the misdeed in the past, the body of daughter of the wealthy man became stinking as if a cesspit was opened when she reached the front door of her husband's house. Consequently the husband had to return her to her parent's house. Soon after, the *kassapa Buddha* entered *parinibbāna*. The remaining relics were enshrined in a golden *cetiya* by the disciples. The wife who was returned to her parents by her husband became weary of wearing gold ornaments. Gold ornaments were made into a brick. Then she offered gold brick together with eight blue lotus flowers to the *cetiya*. Then she prayed for the body odour like that of sandal-wood and the mouth odor like that red woolen rug and offered golden sacred lotus flowers of the size of cart wheel³.

When *kassapa* Buddha's *sāsana* became extinct, the *thera*-to-be was born as a man called Nanda at a place about one hundred *yojanas* from the city of *Bāranasī*. The woman who was his wife in the past existence became the daughter of king *Bāranasī*. When Nanda came of age, he proceeded to *Bāranasī*. One day he was fast asleep on the auspicious stone slab in the royal garden of the city. It was the seventh day after the expiry of king *Bāranasī*. The king had no son to succeed him. He had only a daughter. In searching for the king-to-be, the ministers found the sleeping man on the stone slab. On reading the signs on the soles of the sleeping man, the ministers found him to be a man of power and glory. Accordingly he was given both the throne and the daughter of the king⁴.

¹ Th. A ii, 431

² Ibid. 432

³ Ibid. 433

⁴ Th. A. ii. 433-434.

The king, as a consequence of his past meritorious deeds, enjoyed kingship for a long time and performed many meritorious deeds for the betterment in the next existences. The king and the queen invited five hundred *paccekabuddhā* who were the sons of *Padumavatī*, Queen to the royal park. They were then offered five hundred hermitages, five hundred cloisters and prerequisites of the monks. Alms-food and robes were also offered.¹

Present Existence

During the life-time of the *Gotama* Buddha, the *thera*-to-be was born in a large village called *Mahātiṭṭhi* in the Kingdom of Magadha. His father was a wealthy *Brāhmin* called *Kapila* but his mother was not mentioned. He was named *Pippali*. His former queen in the previous existence became a daughter of a wealthy *Brāhmin* belonging to *Kosiya* lineage in *Sāgalagaha* in the Kingdom of *Maddarājā*. Her name was *Bhaddā*. When *Pippali* came of age, his parents urged him to get married but he was uninterested in matrimonial matters. But his parents continued to urge him. Being unwilling to get married, he asked his parents to find him a wife who looked like a golden statue. They eventually found *Bhaddā* who looked like a golden statue.²

Even then he told *Bhaddā* that he was determined to enter monkhood to avoid marrying her. *Bhaddā* neither wished to marry him. But they had to get married under the pressure of both parents. At the wedding night garlands of flower were laid in middle of the bedstead. Both said that the owner of the garland that withered was the one who was lustful. Thus they pretended to be husband and wife according to the wish of the parents. When the parents passed away, they continued to work on the land inherited. Later they came to know that the Plowing of land caused the death of small insects and animals, the source of which was the owner of the land. Being man and woman of *pāramitā*, *Pippali* and *Bhaddā* got an idea to enter the religious order to avoid this sin. Then, after ordination they left the *Brāhmin* village of *Mahātiṭṭha*. When they came to a road fork, reverend *Pippali* asked *Bhikkunī Bhaddā* to choose the road to go their separate ways. Then she chose the left-hand fork.

At that time, the Buddha was residing at the *Veluvana* Monastery. Knowing the real nature of these of two persons the Buddha was awaiting sitting under the banyan tree called *Bahuputtaka* on the way from *Rājagaha* to *Nālanda*.³

Pippali, walking along the road alone, found the seated Buddha in full effulgence under the golden banyan tree. After making obeisance, he said that the Buddha was his teacher. Then the Buddha delivered the three kinds of instruction thus:

“*Kassapa*, you were a haughty person because of your noble ancestry you should conduct yourself with bashfulness in dealing with fellow residents of younger, older and of the same age”.

“*Kassapa*, you are a knowledgeable person. Therefore when you listen to the noble *dhamma*, you should make effort to give attention to each and every word whole- heartedly”.

“*Kassapa*, you are a person of elegant physical appearance and so take pleasure in yourself. Therefore you should conduct yourself keeping mindful of the bodily pleasure”

Listening to these kinds of instruction made him attain monkhood. There was only one *thera* who attained monkhood just receiving the Buddha’s instruction. This kind of initiation was called “*Ovāda-patiggahamupasampada*”. The Buddha called him *Mahākassapa* in honor of *thera*’s ancestry.

¹ Ibid. 435-437.

² Ibid. 438-443.

³ Th. A ii 438

After initiation of the Rev. *Kassapa*, the Buddha continued journeying with the *thera*. The Buddha gave the *thera* a double-layered robe. Thus the *thera* was the only one who had the permission to wear Buddha's double-layered robe.¹

On the eighth day after initiation into monkhood, the *thera* attained the arahattaphala as he had purified himself by extinguishing all defilements.²

Attribute of the Thera

Even after attaining the arahatship, the Rev. Mahākassapa continued to practice the thirteen kinds of austerity. Therefore, the Buddha bestowed *etadagga* title on the *thera* saying thus;

“Etadaggam bhikkhave mma sāvakānam dhutavādānam yadidam mahākassapo.”³

“Among my disciples who practice the thirteen kinds of austerity and who urged others to practice the same to extinguish the defilements, *Mahākassapa* is the superlative”.

The most outstanding performance of the *thera* in the *Buddha's sāsana* was his leadership as a *samghanāyaka* in the convention of the first Buddhist Synod. In the year of the demise of the Buddha, the *Pathamasamgayanā* council was convened in a pavilion constructed by king *Ajātasattu* under a sari tree (*A stonia Scholaris*) in front of *Sattapanni* cave at the foot of *Vebhāragiri* near *Rājagaha*. After the successful completion of the contention, the Rev. *Mahākassapa* delivered the following discourse with a view to admonishing the assembly of the *samgha*.

“Pañnavantaṃ tathā tādiṃ sīlena susamāhitaṃ.

Cetosamathama nuttaṃ tañce Viññū pasamsare.

Yassa Sabrahma Cārisu gāravo nūpalabbhati.

Arākā hoti saddhamma nabhato Pathavā yathā.

Ye sañca hiriottappam sadā sammā upatthitaṃ.

Virūlabrahmacariyā te tesam khīnā punabbhavā”⁴

“The sages praise the persons perfect with *arahattaphala*, unmoved by the vicissitudes of the mundane world, keeping the *sīlas* of *arahat* and attain *arahattaphala*”

“The person, who has no respect for the fellow resident *samgha* is too far away from the noble *dhamma* like the earth is distant from the sky”.

“The persons who have both the shame and fear of doing sin will be able to develop noble *magga* practice. Those persons have reached the end of the cycle of rebirth”.

¹ Ibid. 443 A. A. i. 142.

² A. A. i. 143

³ A. i, 23

⁴ Khp. II, 352

Conclusion

In this research, the cause of merit made by the *thera* in the past and the advantage of merit obtained by him in the present can be known. Moreover not only he was an outstanding *thera* among the monks in the Buddha's *Sāsana* but also his teachings were very precious.

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