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REVIEW ARTICLE

ORDINATION PROCEDURE OF THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM IN MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

The pabbajjāordination procedures currently being practised in Myanmar will be discussed here. The prevalent standard procedures conform with the original Vinaya Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. From these prevalent procedures, some items can be dropped to minimize the formality of the ceremony. Such procedures as *bandukamma* as said in the *Pācīyādi Atthakathā* to be a light action “(kamma)”¹. Prior to the actual ceremony, the applicants should be trained to recite some important Pāli articulately. However, this training is not essential as long as one is of age and able to pronounce Pāli as conveyed by the teacher monk “(bhikkhu)”².

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, an analysis was presented of the later changes to the sequence of practice of ordination in Myanmar. In that sequence, the newly created items were also pointed out along with the addition of the indispensable requirements for the ordination, like preceptor “(upajjhāya)”¹, the ecclesiastical “(kammavācā)”², ordination hall “(simā)”³ and concluded with formal disavowal. Now, this chapter will endeavour to show the current practices of ordination. Therefore, this chapter begins with a description of the systematic procedures of ordination. This is to clearly present how the sacred practice of ordination should be performed on valid candidates. The procedures which are currently practised in Myanmar are congruent with the Vinaya Pitaka and its commentaries except for some minor additional items unique to Myanmar ordination. This presentation will outline the commonly used ordination procedures in Myanmar divided into two major sections covering the pabbajjā and upasampadā⁴ ordinations. The section of upasampadā ordination procedure will furthermore distinguish between the pattern of ordination for a single candidate and for a pair of candidates. This study will take the procedure of a candidate for the monk “(pabbajjā)”⁵ ordination as its starting point. In this article, there is a lot of dialogue. Some are the formal one that must be said for the

ordination. There are first presented in language “(Pāli)”⁶ and then in translation. Other dialogues usually not preceded by Pāli are samples of the informal dialogues that go on in the course of the ordination conveying instructions and advice to the candidates. They are in a more colloquial style representative of Myanmar ordination ceremonies.

The candidate for the monk of ordination procedure

The applicant should be trained to recite some important Pāli articulately. However, this training is not essential as long as one is of age and able to pronounce Pāli as conveyed by the teacher monk “(bhikkhu)”⁷. The procedure is a sequence of the following nine items. The applicant:

1. Supplicates to the Samgha for permission to shave the applicant's head,
2. whilst meditating on the five constituent parts of the body has his head shaved,
3. formally offers the robes to the teacher,
4. formally requests the robes from the teacher,
5. changes from lay into monastic robes,
6. formally requests admission to the Samgha,
7. pays homage by the devotional formula,
8. takes the Three Refuges and pledges to observe the Ten Precepts and
9. takes an upajjhāya.

1. Supplicating to the Samgha for permission to shave the applicant's head

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¹Upajjhāya = preceptor

²Kammavācā = the ecclesiastical

³simā = ordination hall

⁴upasampadā = to be ordained

⁵Pabbajjā = a candidate for the monk

⁶Pāli = language

⁷Monk = bhikkhu

As a prelude, the applicant should have obtained his parents' consent to receive the pabbajjāordination. As a rule, it is not wise to give the pabbajjā ordination to any applicant without the consent of his parents. The teacher bhikkhu on behalf of the applicant supplicates to the Samgha:

Venerable Sirs, I request the Samghato shave the head hair of this boy-applicant”.

2. The shaving of the head whilst meditating on the five constituent parts of the body

When a number of the Samgha⁸ have agreed to the applicant's request to have his head shaved, his head is shaved by a bhikkhu, a novice or a layman. Meanwhile, the teacher or upajjhāya should teach the reflection on five constituent parts of the body, the tacapañcakakammathāna, to the applicant who should contemplate upon them as instructed: There are in this body, hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin which are unclean, abominable, filthy, lifeless and unsubstantial”.

3. Formally offering the robes to the teacher

Then the applicant equipped with the requisites of a novice is brought to the teacher to formally offer robes with the intention to be ordained by the teacher. The applicant squats properly holding the robes in hand while paying due respect to the teacher and should say:

Venerable Sir, would you be kind enough to accept this robe and out of compassion, ordain me as a novice in order that I may realize nibbāna, the perfect emancipation from the entire cycle of sufferings”. Next, the teacher accepts the robes handed over to him.

4. Formally requesting the robes from the teacher

“Venerable Sir, would you be kind enough to return that robe and out of compassion, ordain me as a novice in order that I may realize nibbāna, the perfect emancipation from the entire cycle of sufferings”.

5. Changing from lay into monastic robes

Then the teacher helps the applicant to change from lay into the ochre monastic robes. Others assigned by the teacher may also perform this task. It is only at this stage that the applicant has the legal right to put on the robes and take the appearance of a novice.

6. Formally requesting admission to the Samgha

The applicant, once clad in robes, squats properly facing the teacher and formally supplicates for pabbajjāordination thus:

Venerable Sir, I request admission to the novice-hood in view of the perfect liberation from the cycle of rebirth”. “For the second time, For the third time, This is the way of making a

formal request to the teacher for promotion to the status of a novice from laity”.

7. Paying homage by the devotional formula

While sitting as before, the applicant should continue to recite the devotional formula and aspirations to the teacher thus:

“Okāsa, okāsa, okāsa, in order to overcome all kinds of unwholesome deeds that I have committed be it physical, verbal or mental, I pay my humble homage three times with due respect and with palms joined in honour to the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Samgha.”

[Devotional formula] “Due to this act of humility and devotion, being always freed from the four woeful states, three calamities, eight states of opportunity, five great enemies, four un 271 accomplishing states and five regressions, may I realize the noble Dhamma of magga⁹, phala¹⁰ and nibbāna¹¹.”

8. Taking the Three Refuges and pledges to observe the Ten Precepts

Then, the applicant should say;

Venerable Sir, I request for the Ten Precepts to be observed by a [sāmanera], together with the Three Refuges. Would you be kind enough to counsel me on the precepts? For the second time, Venerable Sir, I request For the third time, Venerable Sir, I request ” The teacher leads for one applicant “Yamaha vadāmi, tam vadehi” for more than one applicant, meaning, “Repeat after me”. The applicant acknowledges this by saying: “Yes, Venerable Sir.” Then, the teacher leads recital of the sacred words of the Refuges, sentence by sentence starting with the words of paying homage to the Buddha. “I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dhamma. I take refuge in the Samgha. For the second time, I take refuge in the Buddha. For the second time, I take refuge in the Dhamma. For the second time, I take refuge in the Samgha. For the third time, I take refuge in the Buddha. For the third time, I take refuge in the Dhamma. For the third time, I take refuge in the Samgha.” Then, the teacher says at this point “Tisaranagamanamparipunnam.”

“You have accomplished taking the Three Refuges.”

The teacher, as a rule, should counsel the new novice to observe the Ten Precepts.

1. I observe the precept not to harm any sentient being.
2. I observe the precept not to steal what is not given.
3. I observe the precept not to indulge in ignoble sexual pleasure.
4. I observe the precept not to tell falsehood.
5. I observe the precept not to take intoxicating drugs and alcoholic drinks which cause heedlessness.

⁹magga⁹=pathway to nirvana

¹⁰phala¹⁰=the resultant of magga=fruition; fruitional consciousness (fruitional consciousness is of four types)

nibbāna¹¹= liberation from the endless rounds of suffering

⁸Samgha⁸=the organization of the Buddhist

6. I observe the precept not to take any solid food in the afternoon at the improper time.
7. I observe the precept not to enjoy any dancing, singing or playing of musical instruments.
8. I observe the precept not to indulge in the use of flowers, perfumes, or any other cosmetics.
9. I observe the precept not to use high and grand seats and beds.
10. I observe the precept not to engage in monetary matters and handling of silver and gold.

9. Taking an upajjhāya

The newly ordained novice thereafter has to seek an upajjhāya and having chosen a suitable elder bhikkhu approaching saying three times:

The novice should repeat word by word following the upajjhāya's lead, "Bhante, kindly forgive me out of compassion if I am undutiful to you and I also forgive you if you are not dutiful to me." By doing so, both avoid the possibility of committing a dukkata offence for failure to fulfill their duties to one another. In some respects, this is a better way to conclude the ceremony than the formal way. The novice now begins the novice life of abiding by the precepts and performing the associated duties. A novice, on reaching the proper age, can proceed to the upasampadā ceremony without disrobing. But if there are any doubts regarding one's precepts being intact, the pabajjā may be received again according to the formal procedures given above, prior to receiving the upasampadā¹²

Conclusion

The upasampadā ordination must be performed within a correctly demarcated and consecrated sōmā. In that sōmā hall, the invited bhikkhus with the candidate, the upasampadāpekkha, have to assemble together as a group separated from each other by no more than one and a half cubits, a hatthapāsa, in preparation for the ordination kamma. The invited bhikkhus who cannot attend that kamma must send their chanda to the Samgha. And also all the bhikkhus need to confess any offences prior to the actual ordination, to ensure the purity of their virtue. It is necessary to ensure that any of the twenty-one types of persons are not in the midst of the Samgha during the very act of ordination.

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¹²upasampadā¹²= get to be monk