

## The Tradition Of Saṅgīti And Pāli Literature<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

*Pāli* literature named after its language, *Pāli*, refers to the Literature of *Theravāda* Buddhist canonical and non-canonical literatures. The form of the *Pāli* literature, which we have at present, has come down to us through the tradition of *Saṅgīties*. History of Buddhism has records of more than a dozen *Saṅgīti* which has, so far, been convened in order to recite and preserve the original form of the Buddha's teaching. Of these twelve, only two *Saṅgīties* (the Councils held in Kashmir and Lhasa) were organized by two Buddhist schools (other than *Theravāda*), which adopted respectively Sanskrit and Tibetan languages as the mode of transmission of the Buddha's teachings among their followers. It is the work of these Councils due to which we have been able to preserve from centuries the tradition and teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha's teachings currently available in *Pāli*, Tibetan, and Sanskrit (most of which though not available in its original form but in Chinese translations) are the result of the *Saṅgīties* held from time to time. Hence, it appears pertinent, firstly, to decipher the meaning of the term *Saṅgīti* and the role played by it.

### Meaning of *Saṅgīti*

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Literally, the term *Saṅgīti* (*Sam + giti*, originally rooted from root *ga*) means reciting together. In pre-Buddhist era people particularly the Brahmins or *Purohitas* used to gather at a place of worship and recite the various hymns attributed to the different gods (*Devas*) in order to invoke their blessings. Thus in general parlance the term *Saṅgīti* assumes the meaning of simple recitation but in Buddhist context it has a distinct, deeper and wider meaning and in that sense it means the recitation of the teachings of the Buddha for their collection, compilation, classification, verification, or authentication, approval and memorization. In short, the preservation of the teaching of the Buddha through recitation may be termed as *Saṅgīti* (Council).

### **Purpose of *Saṅgīti***

In the history of Buddhism, *Saṅgīti* has a distinct meaning as referred to above, and a specific purpose to maintain the unity among members of the Holy Order, the purity of the words of the Buddha in their true senses, and thus to ensure the longevity of the *Buddha-Dhamma*. It is apparent from the utterance of Mahākassapa who, while convening the First Buddhist Council, asked the monks to recite the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* prior to the advent of any distortion or interpolation in it or the origination of unwanted evils in the Buddhist community/order that prevention of interpolation and maintenance of purity of the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* was the prime aim of the Council. The Second Council also testifies this fact when some of the dispute that had arisen was settled in the Council on the basis of *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* approved by the First Council and the pure form of the teachings of the Buddha was re-approved once again. On the basis of this fact and the outcome of some other Councils it may be stated that the *Saṅgīti* acts with dual purpose: preserving or maintaining the purity of *Buddhavacana* (*Dhamma* and *Vinaya*) and propagating for its longevity.

### **Role of *Saṅgīti* (First Four Councils of the *Theravāda*):**

As recorded above, more than a dozen *Saṅgīties* have been convened so far in order to collect, compile, classify, preserve and propagate the original form of the Buddha's teaching. Of these, the First Council (*Pathama Saṅgīti*) was convened under the aegis of Magādhā King Ajātshatru just three months after the *Mahāparinibbāna* of Buddha in Rājagaha (Rajgir) in which the 500 immediate disciples of Buddha under the presidentship of Mahākassapa Thera collected, compiled, classified, approved and recited the teachings of Buddha in *Saka nirutti* (which was Magādhī later known as *Pāli*) as directed by the Buddha on an earlier occasion with sole intention to present an original and authentic form of *Buddhavacana* for guidance in time of need. Though the *Cūlavagga*, which

presents a vivid picture of the proceedings of the First Council, enumerates that the three *Pīiakas* compiled in this Council, it appears from the enumeration of the proceedings that only *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* were compiled in it in conformity with line of the Buddha's exhortation that the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* would be your teacher after him. Obviously as the tradition maintains, the term *Dhamma* includes both the *Sutta* and *Vinaya*.

The form of *Buddhavacana* decided in the First Council became the basis for deciding the dispute that arose after 100 years after the *Mahāparinibbāna* of the Buddha when the *Vajjiputtaka* monks were found practicing the *Dasavatthūni-dhammas*, contrary to the *Vinaya* rules. The dispute leads to convening the Second Council under the aegis of authenticated as done before in the First Council. And the practice of *Dasavatthūni dhammas* was declared outlawed. Of course the dissenters with the decision of this Council parted away from the *Mūlasaṅgha* and declared themselves as *Mahāsaṅghika*. Here begins the formal division of the Buddhist Order. But, even then the separatist section of the followers of the Buddha continued to believe in the basic teachings of the Buddha. They made no alteration in it but only varied in the practice of *Vinaya* rules.

Then 234 years after the *Mahāparinibbāna* of Buddha, The Third Buddhist Council held at Pataliputra (Patna) was primarily convened to check the veracity of some monks who were part of the Buddhist Order but not acting in accordance with the *Vinaya* rules. It is known to us that a number of persons having different faiths and practices being lured with the comforts provided by Asoka, the great Mauryan King, ordained as Buddhist monks but continued to act in accordance with their previous faiths and beliefs. This led to a deadlock in the case of observance of *Uposatha* ceremonies and creating great confusion about some religious, philosophical and psychological issues. Consequently, *Uposatha* ceremony could not be organized for years, and hence, the king had to intervene but the matter deteriorated further when the minister, dispatched to ask the monks to observe *Uposatha*, ordered the killing of some original monks who refused to do so with the heretics i.e. disguised Buddhist monks. Filled with remorse King Asoka sought the help of Moggalliputta Tissa *Thera* who suggested him to convene the Third Buddhist Council to settle the matter forever. In this Council, not the teachings approved earlier was recited and authenticated, but a book named *Kathāvatthu*, composed to refute the heretical's views, was added as a part of the *Abhidhamma*. Thus the present form of *Abhidhamma* took final shape in this Council. Besides, the purity and unity of the *Saṅgha* was re-established by expelling those who were termed as impure monks. This Council proved a landmark in that it dispatched nine missionaries to the different parts of India and

beyond India to propagate *Buddha's Dhamma*. Consequently, the Buddhism officially reached countries like Sri Lanka, Suvaṇṇabhūmi (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia) etc. and even beyond that.

The *Saṅgīti* held in Anuradhapura during the reign of King Vattagamani in 25 B. C. marked the beginning of the written form of *Buddhavacana*. In this Council after the re-approval of the Buddhist canon (*Tipiṭaka*) a decision was taken to commit them to writing on palm leaves (*Talapanna*). This step of the Council increased the longevity of the *Buddha-dhamma* as it minimized the fear of loss of original teachings of the Buddha. Remarkable here to note that the teachings of the Buddha continued to be transmitted from one generation to another through oral tradition up to the time of convening the Fourth Buddhist Council. Prior to this, particularly during the Third Council, whether the teachings of the Buddha were committed to writing or not, it is not known to us but there is no denying fact that India has developed scripts by then as evidenced from evidences of the time found in archaeological excavation and inscriptions etc. We, however, find no evidence which could corroborate the fact the teachings of the Buddha would have been committed to writing during the Third Council. May be they would have been written but due to some natural calamities or some other reasons they would have been destroyed. In the Fourth Council the monks participated in it perhaps foresighted the possibility of interpolation or disappearance of the teachings of the Buddha, if it was not committed to writing. The decision of the Council to encrypt the teachings of the Buddha further enhanced its longevity.

### **Non-Theravāda Councils**

Another Council which was the Fourth in India, was convened in Kashmir during the reign of Kaniska. This was the Council in which *Mahāvastu*, a new *Vinaya* text on *Jñāna-prasthānaśāstra*, was composed. It was encrypted and said to have been deposited in a golden casket beneath a *Stupa*. Here we find the emergence of *Sarvastivāda* school of Buddhism. After this Council the missionaries went to the areas of Central Asia, Tibet, China, etc. to propagate Buddhism. A Council was also held in Lhasa (Tibet) to compile and preserve the teachings of the Buddha, received by the Tibetans. It is the only conference held by followers of the Buddha to preserve *Tripitaka* in Tibetan language. Of course this *Tripitaka* is different from *Pāli Tipiṭaka* but contains in toto the essential teachings of the Buddha.

### **Other Theravāda Councils:**

Thereafter several Councils were held in the Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand. All these Councils were devoted to re-approval of the *Pāli Tipiṭaka*. The Council held during the reign of Parakkamabahu under the

presidentship of Mahākassapa is notable in the sense, it for the first time made revision of the commentaries on the *Tipiīaka* (*Aīihakathā*). In the succeeding Council held in Ratanpura the *Tipiīaka* was recited along with its commentaries. Mandalay council held in 1871 AD took the decision of engraving the *Tipiīaka* on marble slabs. Consequently it was engraved on 729 slabs of marble. It was a better step as the durability of stone in comparison to Palm leaves is much more. The Chiangmai Council held in Thailand is marked important for the revival of Buddhism. The Council convened in 1954 AD in Yangon (Rangoon), apart from executing usual work, showed the solidarity of the *Theravāda* Buddhists. The *Pāli Tipiīaka* texts approved in the Council became the base for the *Tipiīaka* we have now. Only exception in this regard is that the Burmese Buddhists accept even the *Milindapañha* and *Nettippakaraṇa* as part of *Tipiīaka* while others do not.

From the perusal of the sources, providing us the detail of the proceedings and outcomes of different Councils, it appears that individual act is not sufficient for the preservation of such a voluminous work as the *Pāli* canonical and non-canonical literatures. A collective act is required for it. Besides, it also requires the support of nodal agency as we perceive that not a single Council was held without the support of the State. Initially the kings supported the cause of preservation as we see in the case of India and Sri Lanka, and then the Governments as we see in the case of Myanmar. Hence, in the present era, the preservation and spread of *Pāli* Literature require collective efforts of all of us, particularly the agency like UNESCO. Indeed the Governments of India and other countries are making efforts in this direction but not proving fruitful as it should have been due to some or other reason.

Remarkable to note here that *Pāli* being the main language of the Buddhist tradition in *Theravāda* countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia has been a great source of understanding psyche and society in the region. Of course it developed around 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. in the Magādha region of Eastern India following its use by Lord Buddha in delivering his sermon. Buddhism grew out of India from this very language, and in course of time the words and literary expressions crossed the boundaries and reached countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, etc.

The richness and flavour preserved in this works mostly dealing with the History, Ethics, Psychology, Cosmology, Logic, Biography, Grammar, *Abhidhamma*, *Vaèsa*-literature (Chronicles), etc. is not only the legacy of a single country or the *Theravāda* Buddhist countries but of the entire humanity in that the messages the *Pāli* literature carry have universal and timeless importance, that means they could be applicable in all times and to all human societies. Besides enriching the

literature of many countries and affecting constructively the languages of those countries also, this literature has left a long-lasting imprint on the life of the people of different countries. In fact, it though preserves primarily the teachings of the Buddha, is secular in nature as it presents before us a way of life rather than a dogma or blind belief, giving utmost importance of human mind to adopt it or not adopt it. It depicts a true picture of the humanity. This is why, the *Pāli*, which may be a dead language in India, is still very much alive in countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, etc. not only as medium of Buddhist prayers and daily chanting, but also in the local daily expressions. Hence, as reflects from the role played by different *Saṅgīties*, it is the earnest duty of all of us, particularly the Governments of different countries to preserve it otherwise a valuable source or treasure of learning will be lost forever.

### **Future Plan**

At this juncture once again referring to the contribution of the different Kings or Governments I would like to remind that no organizer or patronizer supported the cause of Council for own purpose or promote himself or to gain something for self but for the masses, for the good of *Dhamma*, for the propagation and spread of *Dhamma* and so on. They consider their royal or governmental and pious duties to serve the cause of the humanity. In doing so, they felt pleasure and were benefited by reaping good results, and being termed as *Dhammarāja*, benevolent and so on. Hence it becomes our duty to provide the next generation the Buddha's teaching in its pure form as we are not in position to provide them any lasting mundane comforts. It is only the *Buddhavacana*, which we can certainly bestow upon them for bringing lasting peace and tranquility in their life and on the mother earth. For this purpose we should strive for collecting fund which could be utilized by a central committee for the publication and free-distributing of the books on the various aspects or subjects of Buddhism. Besides we should also make an effort to train selected monks from all the countries as *Dhammadūta* for the further spread and propagation of the Buddha's teachings. These monks should compulsorily be trained in the use of electronic media as books would not be sufficient to reach the huge population we have at present. The use of electronic means will not only provide a greater coverage and longevity of the *Buddha-dhamma* but it would also provide us easy access to the people all over the world.

### **Conclusion:**

**Proposal:** Hence, a next Council (*Saṅgīti*) should be called for with a sole aim to reach the masses, preserving the teachings of the Buddha through the means of electronic media, and also to tap the untouched and unpublished works whether

they are in any script or language or on any subject of Buddhism. The use of electronic means, as stated before will further enhance the longevity and enable us to reach the modern minds in better way and on organized manner. This has now become imperative also to ward off the misconception being created by some of the self-proclaimed experts of Buddhism by interpreting the teachings of Buddha in wrong or different ways. I, therefore, would like to move the following two categories of resolution.

**Resolution: A.** Following steps be adopted for the preservation of *Buddhavadana*:

1. Efforts be stressed for the collection of rare manuscripts of Buddhist Literature written in any script and language of the world.
2. Efforts be stressed for the creation of Archives and Libraries for the preservation of such endangered or worm-eaten manuscripts.
3. Efforts be made for deciphering the texts.
4. Efforts be made for the scripturisation of those rare texts in any of the scripts internationally acceptable by modern scholars.
5. Efforts be made for giving the traditional training to the scholars to read and recite primarily the *Pāli* texts.
6. Efforts be made for giving education to the scholars to interpret the texts traditionally convincing the modern minds.
7. Efforts be made for imparting the traditional training of memorization of the *Buddhavadana*.
8. Efforts be made for educating the interested learners the art of debate and delivering the public discourse through the modern mass-medias.

**Resolution: B.** Following steps be adopted for the propagation of the *Buddhavadana*:

1. Efforts be made to develop a unified course of study of the Tipiṭaka, traditionally, systematically, and effectively.
2. Efforts be made to highlight the pragmatic, rational, and humanistic value of the *Buddhavadana*.
3. Efforts be made to extend invitation to at least five monks or nuns from each country every year for a short time *Dhammadūta* course of training (*Pariyatti* and *Paīvedha*).

4. Efforts be made for dispatching the *Dhammadūtas* (missionary monks) to various countries where the spread of Buddhism is needed for the establishment of peace.
5. Efforts be made for rendering the Reliefs/ Social welfare services to the needy persons, communities, countries in the time need viz. in the time of natural calamities by way of dispatching *Dhammadūtas* (missionary monks) as part of the academic courses run by our Academic Institution/Universities.
6. Efforts be made for writing textbooks highlighting the historical importance of various Buddhist sites, *Stupas, Viharas, Cetiya, Aramas*, (discovered and undiscovered) to be preserved for various academic sources so as to remind the learners about the golden past and heritage.
7. Efforts be made for writing the biographies and contribution of the supporters and patronisers who have contributed remarkably for the preservation, promotion and propagation of the Dhamma of Buddha.

**Congratulations:** Of course it's a matter of great pleasure that International Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) and the Myanmar Government have organized this conference, perhaps the first of its nature, in which educationists, administrators along with monks have been invited to participate in the conference and deliberate on the *Buddha-visaya*. I would like to congratulate the organizers for their concerted noble efforts leading to the successful and fruitful end of the conference.

**Thanks:** We must be thankful to the organizers for making such effort in order to preserve, promote and propagate the Buddha's *Dhamma*. From the core of my heart, I personally, on behalf of the Delhi University Authorities, and on behalf of the millions of Indians for organizing such an International Conference on unique and burning issues mostly pertinent to *Theravāda* Buddhist academicians. I also thank the organizers for providing all possible facilities and hospitalities during our stay period.

End

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