

## The First Council and Suppression of the Nuns

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### ABSTRACT:

The First Buddhist Council is traditionally seen as the origin of Buddhist canonical literature, the Tipiṭaka. The details of the Council are described in a section in the monastic code for Buddhist monks and nuns. Close examination of the account of the First Council, and the comparison of that account with numerous passages throughout the Tipiṭaka, and with Brahmanical texts and traditions, reveals serious contradictions and an unstated agenda. It appears that those who called for and attended the First Council (or those who wrote its story) were most likely faithful followers of Brahmanical law who were dissatisfied with the Buddha's instruction that women were to be ordained as equals to men. The focus of the account of the council meeting; the charges made against Ānanda (half of which center on women, and concern violations of Brahmanical law, but not violations of Buddhist Dharma or *Vinaya*); the fact that the First Council ignored the Buddha's instructions that the entire Saṅgha should meet together to set down the Dharma and *Vinaya*, and that the Dharma (not any individual person) should become the Saṅgha's leader after his death; as well as considerable other evidence found throughout the Tipiṭaka, all strongly suggest that one of the primary motives of the First Council or its writers was to marginalize and disempower Ānanda and the nuns, who emerge in the texts as having been especially active and important in the promotion of Buddhism.

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## 第一次結集與對尼衆的壓制

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### 摘要：

第一次的佛教結集是佛教聖典文獻（即巴利文聖典）的起源，結集內容詳載於比丘與比丘尼的僧團戒法中。在王舍城所召開的第一次結集會議，其本質並非如其向來所聲稱的：將佛陀的言論編集成聖典，以防佛教未來走上腐敗，乃至衰亡之途；而是想要壓制那群曾在宣教事業上展現高度活力與成就的尼衆。王舍城結集出現了要求尼衆必須終身奉持的八敬法，由於八敬法高度歧視女性，遵循這些法條之後，比丘尼僧團的力量逐漸衰弱，最後終於導致印度佛教的式微與沒落。當我們把一些耆那教的經文和印度教的法典，以及佛教聖典的許多段落，一併拿來進行比對時，我們會發現，在敘述比丘尼僧團之起源的故事中，有關八敬法的部分，實際上是在佛陀去世後不久被插補進去的。第一次結集的成員雖然被譽為聖者，但他們仍然比較像是奉行婆羅門律法的忠實信徒，而非佛教的托鉢僧，在此之前，這群人對於佛陀允許女衆可像男衆一樣受戒出家的作法，是很不滿意的。因此，第一次結集的真正意圖，並非如傳統所聲稱的欲令正法久住，而是要將尼衆的地位邊緣化。

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## Introduction

In general, the status of women is much lower than that of men in most schools of Buddhism worldwide. The exceptions include one Buddhist monastic tradition in Japan -- Soto Zen, the Buddhist monastic tradition of Taiwan, and a few communities in South Korea where women and men are ordained on an equal basis. Elsewhere in the Buddhist world, women are generally not allowed to be ordained - nor do they have the right to be viewed or treated as men's equals.

The worst conditions are seen in Theravāda countries where women are not allowed to be ordained on an equal basis to men, or permitted to enter into sacred shrines. According to the Theravāda tradition, women have no ability to be enlightened and are responsible for the decline of the religion. Buddhist women in these countries have been taught that they have to be reborn as men in their next lives in order to have a chance at success in their meditation practices – only then can they be enlightened. Though women are major contributors to Buddhist communities, they are not allowed to step into shrines and sacred areas, which are only reserved for men. Furthermore, women's right to ordination in Theravāda countries is an issue of controversy even among most learned scholars in Buddhism.

Personally, my interest has never been in gender issues and I accepted without question the traditional Theravāda Buddhist views that women were inferior to men, and that every word in the Tipiṭaka must be interpreted literally. My interest in this issue, and my change of mind, were the result of secondary findings that came to me via my research on the cause of death of the Buddha.

Thirty years ago, as a young medical student, I was inspired to research the cause of the death of the Buddha, based on information in the Tipiṭaka. In 2000, after my graduation from University of Hamburg, I published my findings in the *Journal of the Pali Text Society*. In that article, I proved it likely that the Buddha died from natural causes due to an illness known as “mesenteric infarction,” a disease of the vascular system of the bowel which is common among the elderly.<sup>1</sup> This conjecture was based on descriptions given

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<sup>1</sup> Mettanando Bhikkhu & Oskar von Hinüber, *The Journal of the Pali Text Society*, Vol. XXVI (2000), The Cause of the Buddha's Death, pp. 105-118.

in the *Tipi-aka* illustrating the events at the time of the passing away of Siddhārtha Gautama. The text also provides information about the timing and the location of the Buddha's death, as well as descriptions about the cremation of the body of the Buddha, which had not previously been considered by historians.

Later, the findings from my research drew me to probe deeper into the social circumstances surrounding the Buddha's death by comparing and contrasting information given in different parts of the *Tipiṭaka*. As I did this, I became aware that the issue of the passing away of the Buddha was inextricably related to the First Buddhist Council, which all schools of Buddhism view as the origin of the canonization of the Buddha's teachings.

The outcome of my research forced me to challenge both my previous belief in the traditional, literal interpretation of the *Tipiṭaka*, and the Theravāda belief that the primary purpose of the First Council was to canonize the words of the Buddha to prevent the future corruption and decay of the Buddhist religion. Inconsistencies and contradictions in the stories, and similarities between certain passages in the *Tipiṭaka* and passages in Brahmin texts, increased my suspicions and my sense that the purpose of the story was to suppress the nuns, who I had come to realize, from numerous accounts and descriptions in the *Tipiṭaka*, had eventually become more active in their promotion of Buddhism than the monks, who were more often engaged in solitary meditation.

From the information given in the *Cullavagga*, I surmise that the writers of the account of the First Council were indeed followers of Brahmanical Law. They most likely were dissatisfied with the Buddha's instruction to ordain women on an equal basis to men, and his decision to allow them to teach kings and monks, some of whom became enlightened as a result of those teachings. Cross-checking various passages in the *Vinaya* and *Sutras* revealed more discrepancies between the claimed purpose, process and outcome of the Council meeting, and the actual facts. Thorough investigation led me to the conclusion that one of the primary intentions of those who wrote the story of the First Council, was to limit the power and authority of Ānanda and of the

nuns' order.<sup>2</sup>

The evidence I found, much of which is presented in this paper, suggests that the Council (or a later group of monks who wrote its story) most likely constructed a set of Eight Rules (the *Garudhammas*) and other regulations for each member of the nuns' order to follow for the rest of their lives. By being forced to follow the rules, which are highly discriminatory against women, the nuns' order would have naturally been weakened. Other evidence in the *Tipiṭaka*, presented in this paper, suggests that these rules were part of a series of oppressions of the nun's order. All this would have been a major setback for the nuns' community. This, and the monks' practice of secluding themselves, may well have been important factors in the decay and destruction of Buddhism in India.

Elsewhere in the *Tipiṭaka* I found numerous passages in which the Buddha highly praises the nuns and laywomen, and supports gender equality and the equal treatment of the two genders. Three references in the *Tipiṭaka* mention visits of a king to see a nun while the Buddha was alive. In one episode, King Pasenadi of Kosala praised the teaching ability of nun *Khemā* in front of the Buddha, claiming that her teaching was as good as that of the Lord himself!<sup>3</sup>

The evidence presented here strongly suggests that Buddhism, as understood by most Buddhist orders today, is not the same as that taught by the Buddha, whose teachings emphasize, and were grounded in equality, respect, human dignity, compassion, and free will. According to the Buddha's version of the origin of the human race, male and female characters emerged as a result of the continuous decay of the physical world, i.e., they do not belong to the true nature of what we are. Since gender is only an external appearance of our true nature, men and women should be viewed equally and treated as equals, and they are equally endowed with an equal ability to attain the highest enlightenment.

Every school of Buddhism believes the First Council took place soon after the *Mahāparinibbāna* of the Lord Buddha. And every school views this

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<sup>2</sup> Mettanando Bhikkhu, *Hed Kued Por Sor Nueng*, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> PTS, *Buddhist Pali Tipiṭaka*, SN IV, 380; See also Mettanando Bhikkhu, *Hed Kued Por Sor Nueng*, p. 169.

event as the origin of the Tipiṭaka (the Three Baskets), the canonical text of the Buddhist religion. However, within the Tipiṭaka it is stated that the process of compiling and categorizing the Buddha's teachings had been begun by Sāriputta long before, while the Buddha was still alive, with his express approval.<sup>4</sup>

The commentarial tradition, *Mahāvamsa*, in the Theravāda tradition, describes the council as having taken place in a cave under the patronage of King Ajātasattu in the city of Rājagaha which was then the capital of Magadha, attended by 500 monks (an oddly round number) who were all *arahants* (enlightened). In the *Cullavagga*, detailed information is given to make explicit the reasons behind the formation of the First Council, as well as the issues raised at the council's meeting. This account is inextricably related to several events, namely the passing away of the Buddha, the origin of the nun's order, and the ongoing political situation within the Buddhist community. A thorough understanding of this story of the First Council leads to new discoveries about a lost chapter in the history of early Buddhism. Those discoveries support the view that the Buddha viewed women and men equals, and taught that they should be viewed and treated as such. These findings also affirm the claims of those who have advocated women's equality and empowerment, both in the religion and in secular society.

### Were Subhadda's words really the cause of the Council?

*That is enough, brother; do not lament. We are now free from the great sage; we have been oppressed: 'this is good for you,' 'this is not good for you.' Now, whatever we wish, we can do, whatever we do not wish to do, we will not do.*<sup>5</sup>

Vin V, 284

<sup>4</sup> According to number of items that appear in the *Saṅgītisutta*, a discourse in the Dīgha Nikāya, we learn that Sāriputta proposed such a project, recorded and wrote down some of the Buddha's teachings, and produced a categorization of doctrines.

<sup>5</sup> *Athakho āvuso Subhaddo vuḍḍhapabbajīto te bhikkhū etadavoca alaṃ āvuso mā socittha mā paridevīttha sumuttā mayaṃ tena mahāsamaṇena upaddūtā ca mayaṃ homa idaṃ vo kappatī idaṃ vo na kappatī. Idāni pana mayaṃ yaṃ icchissāma taṃ karissāma yaṃ na icchissāma na taṃ karissāmāti*

The above statement is attributed to Subhadda, a monk who ordained in his old age, and is portrayed here and elsewhere in the story of the Council as having comforted his friends who were grieving the death of the Buddha, by telling them that at least they could now do as they liked. Mahākassapa is said to have overheard these words while he was sitting in the shade of a tree, taking a rest with his entourage of 500 monks (coincidentally the same number of monks as were invited to the First Council) between the city of Pāvā and Kusinārā, only seven days after the Buddha had passed away. According to the story, Mahākassapa took Subhadda's words very seriously, as a bad omen. He gave this as the reason for calling a council that would have the task of preventing the decline of Buddhism. According to Therāvada tradition, the First Council was held three months after the passing away of the Buddha.<sup>6</sup> The story of this Council was to become one of the most significant events in the history of Buddhism, conditioning the development of the religion for over two thousand years to come.

The commentarial tradition reports that the Council gathering took place in a cave called Sattpanna cave, in Rājagaha<sup>7</sup>, the capital of Magadha, under the patronage of King Ajātasattu.<sup>8</sup> According to tradition, Mahākassapa acted as leader of the Council meeting, and as interrogator, with Upālī as the respondent on the *Vinaya*, and Ānanda the respondent on the discourses. According to the story, five hundred monks, all *arahants*, participated in the council meeting, which lasted three months.

According to tradition, this was the most important council because it gave birth to the canonical literature of Buddhism. In Theravāda Buddhism particularly, the First Council is the most important of all, since its resolutions became the core tenets of the tradition, and have been viewed as the means for

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<sup>6</sup> In spite of variations on the details of the Council, according to Lamotte, the date of the First Council is generally fixed by all Buddhist traditions on the year one of the passing away of the Buddha. See Lamotte, p.139-141, English translation, pp. 128.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* According to Lamotte, besides Rājagaha there are other locations mentioned in other traditions, such as Kusinārā, Sāṃkāśya, and Shaloka; the exact location is dubious.

<sup>8</sup> Mahāvamsa, Chapter III., Geiger pp.14-18; Dīpavaṃsa Chapter IV, Oldenberg, pp. 133-135.

allowing Theravāda Buddhism to maintain its purity and orthodoxy for over 2,500 years. The goal of the First Council was expressed in the *Cullavagga* of the *Vinaya* with the following words of Mahākassapa:

Let us convene a council to compile the Dharma-*Vinaya* into a canon. In the future, the anti-Dharma will progress, and the Dharma will decay, the anti-*Vinaya* will progress and the *Vinaya* will decay. Unrighteous people will be strong and the righteous will perish. Non-followers of the *Vinaya* will be strong, and followers of the *Vinaya* will perish.<sup>9</sup> Vin V, 284

These words of Mahākassapa are precise and clear: the council was called in order to protect Buddhism from future decay. The speech also reflects Mahākassapa's conservative attitude towards change. It is noteworthy that Mahākassapa's speech also echoes words and concerns voiced in the legend of the nuns, in which the Buddha is alleged to have said that women (whom he likens to a disease or pests in a rice or sugarcane field) will destroy any religion they enter. The Buddha then goes on to claim that the ordination of women would lead to the decay and decline of Buddhism, and that the lifespan of the religion would be cut short from 1000 to 500 years.

### Pāli Tipiṭaka references to the First Council

Although the *Vinayaṭṭaka* does not contain any narrative from the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, the latter discourse and the *Vinaya* contain many identical details – from the seven *aparihāniya dhamma*, in both secular and the religious versions, down to the Buddha's permission for the Saṅgha to abrogate minor monastic rules. The third *aparihāniya dhamma*, it will be recalled, states that as long as the rules of monastic discipline are observed and unchanged, progress is to be expected.

The account of the First Council is found in the *Cullavagga* of the *Vinayaṭṭaka* (Vin II, 284-295). In that account there is no reference to the

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<sup>9</sup> *handa mayaṃ āvuso dhammañca vinayañca saṅgāyāma pure adhammo dhippati dhammo paṭibāhi yatiavinayo dhippati vianayo paṭibāhiyatipure adhammavādino balavanto honti dubbalā honti avinayavādino balavanto honti vinayavādino dubbalā hontīti.*

patronage of King Ajātasattu<sup>10</sup> (as was later claimed by the commentators). On the contrary, there is no indication of state involvement at all. The Council seems from the account to have been an exclusively monastic affair led by Mahākassapa, who enjoined the council participants to take their rains-retreat in the city of Rājagaha and all others to take their retreat elsewhere. It seems, moreover, to have been an exclusive convocation of ordained males: not a single nun or member of the laity was invited to attend.

The Second Council, about a hundred years later, as it appears in the *Vinaya*, seems also to have been an internal affair of the monks – an attempt to resolve an internal conflict. The Third Council, however, had the participation of the state. It was convened after King Aśoka expelled a large group of heretic monks. It is reported that Aśoka defrocked 80,000 monks and proceeded to restore Buddhism and build 84,000 Buddhist monasteries and shrines.<sup>11</sup> It was then that Buddhism came to depend on the patronage of the state. Subsequent councils all took place under the patronage of the state or government. The *Vinaya* account includes details of preparation and planning for the First Council. For example:

The elder monks consulted one another: “Where shall we organize the council to compile the Dharma-*Vinaya*?” They unanimously agreed that the city of Rājagaha had many places for alms-round, and sufficient dwelling places. “It is appropriate that we take our rains-retreat in Rājagaha, to compile the Dharma-*Vinaya*. Other monks should not take their rains-retreat in Rājagaha.”

Vin II, 284

The council, then, was to take place during the three-month rains-retreat. The description of pre-council preparations continues:

At that time, the elders went to Rājagaha for the Council, to compile the Dharma-*Vinaya*. Then they consulted with one another, agreeing — since the Lord praised the repair and restoration of dilapidated quarters, “We should repair those quarters in poor condition during the first month, and hold the council in the middle

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<sup>10</sup> According to Lamotte, all schools of Buddhism, however, agree that King Ajātasattu was patron of the First Council. See Lamotte, pp. 152-153, English translation, p. 139.

<sup>11</sup> The *Dīpavaṃsa*, Chapter VII; Oldenberg, pp. 155.

month.” Then they repaired the quarters in poor condition in the first month. Vin II, 285

The above narrative portrays the First Council as purely an internal affair of monks, and makes clear that not all monks were invited. The reported activity also included the repair of dilapidated monastic quarters within the city of Rājagaha. The narrative also states that the actual meeting began in the second, or middle, month of the rains-retreat and therefore lasted only two months at the most.<sup>12</sup>

### **The agenda of the First Council: more concern for the monastic code than for the teachings of the Buddha**

Although the narrative explicitly says that the First Council addressed both the Dharma and the *Vinaya*, the conclusions of the Council itself state that it was a council “on the *Vinaya*”, that is, on the monastic code.

In the council on the *Vinaya*, exactly 500 monks participated; therefore, the council is called by the wise, “the 500 recitations.”<sup>13</sup>

Vin II, 292

This is confirmed by the fact that the Council seems to have issued only one resolution: that the Saṅgha will not abrogate any monastic rule in any section of the *Vinaya*. There is no specific reference to any discourse or saying of the Buddha. Moreover, the account of the proceedings focuses on the castigation of Ānanda for a series of supposed wrong doings that were not part of the *Vinaya*, but did violate Brahmanical rules – half of which concerned women. It can therefore be concluded that the main agenda of the First Council (or of those who wrote its story) was with rules – i.e. the *Vinaya* and the Brahmanical tradition – not with the Discourses.

<sup>12</sup> The Cullavagga makes no reference to the Abhidhamma, indicating that the Abhidhamma was composed later than the time of the First Council. It is only in the comentarial tradition and sub-comentarial tradition, composed hundreds of years later, that the Abhidhamma is associated with the First Council.

<sup>13</sup> *imāya kho pana vinayasāṅgūtiyā pañca bhikkhusatāni anunāni anadhikāni ahesu.*

### **Mahākassapa' s reason for calling of the Council**

According to this account, Subhadda's sentiment that the Buddha's death would result in greater, or total, latitude of behavior, and that would be a good thing, made Mahākassapa afraid for the well-being of the entire Buddhist community. And that concern became a major issue for him.

A council is not a routine monastic gathering like the fortnightly meeting for the recitation of the Pāṭimokkha, when members of the Saṅgha gather to purify themselves of infringements of monastic rules. The Council, rather, was a time-consuming gathering of 500 monks, which required the preparation of quarters for the participants, all of whom were elders. This endeavor was said to have been triggered by the shallow and careless remark of a single recently ordained but elderly monk. It is noteworthy, however, that there is no mention of Subhadda at the Council. He was not called for interview or investigation, nor was he charged with any offence against the Buddha or the *Vinaya*. Not one of the 500 participants asked any question concerning the words of Subhadda. Seemingly, they concurred with Mahākassapa on every item raised in the Council, and felt no need to modify the agenda. The incident is perhaps best understood as a literary device constructed by those who wrote the story of the council meeting: Subhadda and his remark provide an effective and simple catalyst for, and explanation of, the reasons behind the formation of the Council.

By reviewing Mahākassapa's background as it is portrayed in the Tipi-aka, we can better understand the logic behind the reasons given for a council. Fortunately, the Tipiṭaka has sufficient references to Mahākassapa, especially in *Samyutta Nikāya*, for us to get a fair idea of his personality and views, as they are presented by the writers of the text. The *Ovādasuttas* show us the attitude of Mahākassapa regarding the training of monks.

Mahākassapa took his seat and the Lord said to him: "Kassapa, you must teach the monks and admonish them. You or I should teach the monks; you or I should admonish the monks." Mahākassapa then said to the Lord: "Lord, nowadays monks are difficult to teach. They do not comply with teaching, are not patient. They do not receive instruction with respect. Lord, in this religion, I see Bhaṇḍa, a

student of Ānanda, and Ābhijjika, a student of Anuruddha abusing each other with what they have learned, saying ‘O monk, who will talk more than the other? Who will talk better than the other? Who will talk longer than the other?’” (*Ovādasutta 1*)

Mahākassapa then said to the Lord: Lord, nowadays monks are difficult to teach. They do not comply with their teaching, are not patient. They do not receive instruction with respect. Some of them have no faith, are shameless, not sensitive, not diligent, not wise in virtue. Their days and nights depart them without any progress, but only decline. They make no progress but are like the waning moon, diminishing in beauty, brightness, width and length. Days and nights pass, for those who have no faith, shameless, not sensitive. (*Ovādasutta 2*)

Mahākassapa then said to the Lord: Lord, nowadays monks are difficult to teach, they do not comply with their teaching, are not patient. They do not receive instruction with respect. (*Ovādasutta 2*)

SN II, 204-210

These three discourses reveal two things: On one level they indicate Mahākassapa’s negative opinion of the newly ordained monks. They were, he felt, difficult to teach, lacked patience and respect, failed to comply with instructions, and were regressing rather than progressing. This was his day-to-day perception of monks as expressed in his dialogues with the Buddha. Seen as a literary device, this passage is a “set up” for Subhadda and the story of the creation of the Council as a response to the threat of such monks. The passage is especially noteworthy for the questionable way in which it establishes Mahākassapa as a figure of authority—foreshadowing and seemingly legitimizing his later assumption of leadership: Here, Mahākassapa is both confidante to the Buddha, and a figure of authority of apparently equal status to the Buddha – a figure with whom the Buddha shares responsibilities. His portrayal as the Buddha’s equal is also conveyed by his language, which is almost exactly the same as that of the Buddha. The passage portrays Mahākassapa as a figure of super status within the Saṅgha. Seen as a literary device, it establishes his natural authority to lead the Saṅgha after the Buddha’s death, but is also problematic because it elevates

Mahākassapa to such a degree that it causes the reader to question the legitimacy of the passage, or of Mahākassapa's spiritual attainments, as he comes across as being too proud.

However, Mahākassapa's de facto leadership of the Council in the story conflicts with the Buddha's insistence in the *Gopaka Mogallānasutta* and *Ānandatheragāthā* (Thga. 1041-1043) that none of his disciples was capable of taking on the role of leadership after his death, as well as with his statement before his *parinibbāna* that the Dharma itself should be their teacher after his death: "The Dharma-*Vinaya* that the Tathāgata has expounded will remain the leader of the Saṅgha."

Perhaps the most doubtful issue in the story of the calling of the first Council concerns the choice of participants for the First Council. According to the *Vinaya*, 500 monks were invited to participate. Details given in the *Vinaya* explain that all the monks were handpicked by Mahākassapa himself. Though, in the *Cullavagga* of the Pāli Tipiṭaka, only three of them are named, Mahākassapa, Ānanda and Upālī. However, as stated earlier, according to the Buddha's own instructions in the *Pāsādaniyasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (DN III, 127), the whole Saṅgha – including nuns, monks, laywomen and laymen – should have been invited. (This, and the Buddha's instructions that none of his followers was fit to become leader of the Saṅgha after his death, are discussed at greater length later in this paper)

It seems likely that Subhadda's remark was used as a pretext in the story of a meeting to which only senior monks were convened to address another issue – one that Mahākassapa (or the writers of the text) felt to be urgent. The details and outcome of the account of the Council meeting point to the motives of whoever it was who wrote the story of this assembly, shaping the future of the religion for over two and a half millennia. Those details may be schematized as in the following table:

### Summary of Pāli Tipiṭaka account on the First Council

Time	Activities	Related events	Notes
1.Pre-council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mahākassapa relates the account of Subhadda and calls for a council.</li> <li>• The monks support Mahākassapa, authorizing him to select 500 <i>arahants</i> to participate in the council.</li> <li>• Resolution to have council at Rājagaha with one month's preparation</li> <li>• Ānanda becomes an arahant the night before the council.<sup>14</sup></li> </ul>		<p>No reference to the miracles at the funeral of the Buddha</p> <p>No reference to Ajātasattu</p> <p>No nuns, laywomen, or laymen are invited—despite the Buddha's explicit instructions in DN III, 127 that they should be included in the compilation of the canon.</p>
2. Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mahākassapa appoints himself interrogator, Upālī is the respondent on <i>Vinaya</i> and Ānanda is the respondent on the discourses</li> <li>• Ānanda reports the Buddha's permission to abrogate minor rules</li> <li>• Council cannot decide the criteria for determining which rules are minor.</li> <li>• Mahākassapa asks for a resolution, based on the third <i>apairhāniya</i></li> </ul>	No mention of Abhidhamma in the council.	<p>Mahākassapa appears as leader despite the Buddha's direction that no person should be the leader—the Dharma should be the teacher after the Buddha's death.</p> <p>No list of monks in the Council apart from the three.</p>

<sup>14</sup> Last minute arrival of Ānanda appears in the *Vinaya* of all traditions. Lamotte, p.142, English translation p. 129.

Time	Activities	Related events	Notes
	<p>-dhamma, stipulating that no rule can be changed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ānanda is accused of five mistakes; his confession is demanded.</li> </ul>		
3.Post-Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purāṇa, who has many disciples from the southern mountains, acknowledges the resolution of the Council, but holds to what he personally heard from the Buddha<sup>15</sup>.</li> <li>• Ānanda reports to the Council the order of the Buddha to penalize the monk Channa</li> </ul> <p>Ānanda goes to Ghositāram to deal with Channa. Remains until Channa is enlightened</p>	<p>Ānanda given 1,000 pieces of cloth from King Udena and the Queen.<sup>16</sup></p>	

<sup>15</sup> Several other sources mention the episode of Gavaṃpati that before the assembly was convened, the young Purāṇa had gone to invite Gavaṃpati, an arahant, to participate in the session; the latter, however, on learning of the decease of the Buddha and considering the world henceforth devoid of interest, had declined the invitation and entered nirvana. See Lamotte, p.139, English translation p.126; Bareau, pp.16-21.

<sup>16</sup> The story that Ānanda received gifts of cloth from King Udena and his queen is a single story in the Tipiṭaka. But it is interesting that it is inserted as allegorical to the First Council, in the same way of the legend of monk Purāṇa. Both allegories might be useful to explain certain situations facing the Saṅgha of Sthaviravada, such as the difference of opinions of the Buddhists living in the Deccan or the later story about the popularity of Ānanda and his generosity to other monks in giving them new robes.

### Points of interest in the Pāli *Vinaya* account of the First Council

The details given in the Theravāda *Vinaya* account of the First Council include a number of interesting points.

1. Among the 500 participants, all said to have been elders and *arahants*, there were no nuns. It is not plausible that there would have been no enlightened nuns available, as in the *Pāsādanīyasutta* the Buddha said that there were hundreds of enlightened nuns. It is also noteworthy that the number 500 was also the number of Mahākassapa's followers at the time when he learned of the Buddha's death.
2. Initially Mahākassapa did not invite Ānanda to attend. Ānanda was eventually invited after some of the elders lobbied Mahākassapa to include him. Ānanda was enlightened as an *arahant* the night before the Council started.
3. Mahākassapa invoked the monk Subhadda's remark as an indication of the onset of decay in Buddhism and thus the need to convene a council. But Subhadda was not mentioned at all in the account of the Council.
4. Upālī was the expert in *Vinaya* who responded to the inquiries of Mahākassapa concerning the monastic rules for monks and nuns.
5. Ānanda was the only one who responded to the inquiries of Mahākassapa on the discourses of the Buddha.
6. There is no reference to the Abhidhamma.
7. The resolution to annul the right of the Saṅgha to abrogate minor rules was passed after the compilation of the canon had been concluded.
8. Although Upālī was honored as the expert on *Vinaya*, he was not asked for his opinion on criteria for determining which rules are "minor". Instead the elders offered arbitrary and conflicting opinions leading to no conclusion.
9. Ānanda was accused of five misdeeds, one of which consisted of two parts—so there were a total of six complaints against him. None of the misdeeds or complaints had anything to do with the

infringement of *Vinaya* rules. Three of the complaints, however, had to do with women. In particular, the last complaint was that 20 or more years earlier he had advocated the establishment of the nun's order. It seems very likely that real agenda of the First Council, organized by Mahākassapa (or the agenda of those who wrote the First Council story), was not to respond to the threat implied by Subhadda's remark, as claimed, but rather to resolve the "problem" of women's ordination, which, according to the *Tipi-akav*, Mahākassapa, among others, had opposed from the beginning.

### **Buddha's advice for organizing a council**

As mentioned, Mahākassapa was not the first to think of collecting the teachings of the Buddha into a canon for the sake of the progress and security of the religion. According to a number of items that appear in the *Saṅgītisutta*, a discourse in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, we learn that Sāriputta proposed such a project, recorded and wrote down some of the Buddha's teachings, and produced a categorization of doctrines. Also we find that there are a number of discourses in the *Tipiṭaka* which were composed some time after the death of the Buddha. From evidence in the *Tipiṭaka* itself, it is clear that the process of composing and compiling the canon began long before the First Council, and continued for a long time thereafter. In the following passage in the *Pāsādaniyasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha, speaking to Cunda, a brother of Sāriputta, makes clear that he supports the process of creating this canon, and most important, he clearly states how councils should be formed to investigate his own teachings – the entire Saṅgha should be involved in considering and compiling them:

Because of this, Cunda, all the four groups of Buddhists [monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen], should assemble together, should council together, examining meaning with meaning, detail with detail. By this method, the noble practice will last long and securely for the benefit of the many, for the welfare and happiness of deities and humans.<sup>17</sup>

DN III, 127

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<sup>17</sup> *tasmātiha Cunda ye te mayā dhammā abhiññā desitā. Tattha sabbeheva*

Here the Buddha does not reserve this authority for monks, but specifies that representatives of all classifications of disciples – nuns, monks, laywomen and laymen—should be convened to compile a canon of his teachings.

This passage is consistent with the Buddha's refusal to appoint a successor to lead the Saṅgha after his death. Even such an obvious candidate as Ānanda, his first cousin, a learned master of the Dharma, who had attended him closely for 25 years, was not appointed as heir to the Buddha.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the Buddha named his teachings as the leader of Buddhism. This approach reflected the Buddha's confidence in the body of his teachings and in his trained disciples' ability to maintain the religion without a leader. With this in mind, it is even more significant that he entrusted the compilation of his teachings to nuns, laymen and laywomen as well as to monks.

According to the story of the Council, however, there were no nuns or laity at the First Council. It would appear, then, that the Buddha's instructions for compiling a canon were completely disregarded. How could this have happened? Why was there no objection from any *arahant* attending the Council? The mystery of the First Council cannot be resolved without taking into account all possible options concerning the missing representatives.

### The uninvited parties to the First Council

The absence of members of three of the groups of disciples that, according to the Buddha's instruction should have been represented, is striking. In the preparation for the First Council, Mahākassapa is said to have ordered the participants to take up residence within the city of Rājagaha, while others were to remain outside the city. According to the story, all of the participants in the Council were personally selected by Mahākassapa.

Why were there no nuns? Was it because there were no *arahant* nuns? That is unlikely. The Buddha said in the *Pāsādaniyasutta* that there were hundreds of *arahant* nuns. Surely, many of them were still alive at the time of the Council.

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*saṅgama samāgama atthena atthaṃ byañjanaena byañjanaṃ saṅgāyitabbaṃ vicaritabbaṃ.* (DN III, 127)

<sup>18</sup> Ānandatheragāthā Thga. 1041-1043.

Was it because the city of Rājagaha was not safe for nuns? This is also unlikely, as we learn from other parts of the Tipiṭaka that there were nuns who ordained and lived within the city. Also, had the organizers been concerned with following the Buddha's instructions, they would have certainly chosen a place that was suitable for all the attendees.

Was it because Mahākassapa simply forgot the nuns and others? This is also inconceivable. Preparation took months, and Mahākassapa was sufficiently aware of those not participating to remember to tell them to remain outside the city during the council. The exclusion of these groups was clearly intentional. One plausible reason for the exclusion of nuns was fear that they would balk at the, perhaps hidden, agenda. Or, rather, the nuns may have been part of the "problem" that Mahākassapa and his colleagues wanted to overcome. (It is also possible that the decision not to include the nuns and laypeople was made by a later group with a similar agenda, who wrote the story of the proceedings).

### **The timing of the First Council**

According to the Theravāda tradition, the First Council took place three months after the passing away of the Buddha. That would appear to be a relatively short time for the preparation of such a large and important meeting of the Saṅgha. At that period in history, communication was relayed by travelers. The news of the death of the Buddha would take time to reach the Buddhist communities in the major cities. If the Council were convened in the third month after the passing away of the Buddha, many would only very recently have received the news. And some might still have been unaware that the Buddha had died. From a practical standpoint, it was probably too soon for a methodical, sophisticated, and important meeting such as the Council to take place. According to the *Vinaya*, the Council took place during a rains-retreat. We have placed the death of the Buddha between November and February<sup>19</sup>. The rains-retreat begins in mid-June. The earliest that we can place the council after the death of the Buddha, then is five to seven months.

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<sup>19</sup> From Mahāparinibbāna (DN II 138), it is clear that the Buddha died soon after the end of the last rain retreat, and not in May as believed in the Theravāda tradition. See also, Mettanando Bhikkhu, *Hed Kued Por Sor Nueng*, Vol. I, pp. 193-194.

The details of the account of the Council reveal a focus on the castigation of Ānanda and other concerns of the monks unrelated to the recording of the *Vinaya* and the Dharma (which receives only the briefest mention). A significant motivation for calling the meeting, then, seems to have been to resolve an urgent issue that required immediate action in order to correct some mistake of the past, rather than to address the danger of a sudden decline in the religion. For such an action, it would have been provident for the Council to move quickly, so that the grieving community (especially those who gave support and protection to the monks) would later accept its decisions. Seen from this view, the First Council may be seen as a short, sharp, shock intervention intended to correct a “wrong” of the past.

The sudden departure of the Buddha would have created a vacuum of leadership, a golden opportunity for a new leadership to emerge and to make fundamental alterations in the structure of the community. It would have been a time when much of the community was distraught with grief and perhaps pliable. The short notice, moreover, would have guaranteed that many or most Buddhists were unaware of the Council and its agenda until after its decisions had become *fait accompli*. Mahākassapa may well have struck while the iron was hot. Later, change would have been more difficult. (It is also possible that the story of the Council is a redaction by later monks, and that the triggering event (Subhadda’s statement), the reasons given for the meeting, and its speedy organization, are part of a literary strategy to stress the urgency of the threat to the religion, and set up Mahākassapa as a Buddha-like savior who acted quickly to save the faith. Ānanda is painted as a rule breaker and a bumbling incompetent whose negligence led to the Buddha’s death and the future downfall of the religion – thus discrediting him, and diminishing his authority in the Saṅgha, and his influence over the Buddhist canon.)

In either case, the account resulted in the formalization of the teachings of the Buddha. And this story of the Council was to leave a permanent imprint on future generations.

### **Resolution on the controversies over minor rules**

In the account of the First Council in the *Vinaya*, there was only one resolution issued by the Council. The Council unanimously resolved that the

Saṅgha would keep the rules of the *Vinaya* as they were, and that the Saṅgha did not have the right to abrogate any rule. That resolution has been viewed with the utmost seriousness in the later Theravāda tradition, which has remained quite conservative – no rule has been amended. It is interesting that this resolution came before the Council by way of Ānanda's relation of the Buddha's instruction, before he passed away, that the Saṅgha had the right to abrogate minor rules. Due to the lack of clarity over which rules should be considered "minor," the 500 monks unanimously ruled that no rule could be changed or abrogated. Changing the rules, they reasoned, would violate the third *aprihāniya dhamma*, leading thence to the decline and decay of the Saṅgha and of Buddhism. What is surprising is that the resolution simply disregards the will of the Buddha.

Why did the 500 respected *arahants* pass a resolution against the will of the Buddha? The answer is in the details of the report of the Council:

At that time, the Venerable Ānanda informed the elders, "Sirs, when the Lord was about to pass away, the Lord said to me, 'Ānanda, when I am no more, if the Saṅgha is willing it may abrogate minor rules.' The elders questioned Ānanda, "Venerable Ānanda, did you ask the Lord which rules are minor?" Venerable Ānanda responded, "I did not ask the Lord which rules are minor."

Some elders said that all except the four *pārājikas* are minor. Some elders said that all except the four *pārājikas* and the 13 *sanghādisesas* are minor. Some elders said that all except the four *pārājikas*, the 13 *sanghādisesas* and the two *aniyatas* are minor. Some elders said, that all except the four *pārājikas*, the 13 *sanghādisesa*, the two *aniyatas*, ...etc. are minor...etc.

Then Mahākassapa proposed a resolution to the Council: "May the Saṅgha listen to me...for the sake of the harmony of the Saṅgha, The Saṅgha will not issue any rule that has not been issued by the Lord, the Saṅgha will not abrogate those that have been issued by the Lord; it will be steadfast in following the rules that were issued by the Lord. This is the resolution."

From the above passage we can conclude when Ānanda informed the council about the Buddha's permission for the Saṅgha to abrogate minor rules, the elders questioned Ānanda as to whether he had asked the Buddha which

rules were minor. Ānanda responded in the negative. His answer led to various proposals and an inconclusive debate about which rules should be considered minor. That in turn led Mahākassapa to propose a resolution denying the right of the Saṅgha either to issue new rules, or to abrogate rules made by the Buddha. The reason behind this argument is what is known as the *aparihāniya dhamma* given by the Buddha in the first section of *Mahāparinibbānasutta*.

The outcome of the debate is very surprising. Ānanda was severely chastised by the *arahants* for failing to ask the Buddha which rules were minor. As we shall see, the Council also chastised Ānanda for several other “misdeeds”.

It is surprising that in the account of the debate, Upālī was never asked for an opinion. As the named *Vinaya* respondent, and thus the acknowledged expert on the rules, Upālī was an obvious choice for clarifying the issue. Instead, what was recorded was the rather arbitrary proposals of various elders. Their proposals are clearly irrelevant and do not demonstrate any systematic approach to the rules. The instruction of the Buddha was finally nullified simply due to a lack of definition.

The proposal of Mahākassapa to remove the right of the Saṅgha to abrogate minor rules or to issue new rules implies that the instruction of the Buddha before passing away contradicted his own earlier *aparihāniya-dhamma* doctrine, that states that monks should neither abrogate old rules nor create new ones. This, indeed, brings us back to this same dilemma as it is found in *Mahāparinibbānasutta*.

### Controversies over minor rules

The thematic connections between the *Vinaya* account of the First Council and the narrative of *Mahāparinibbānasutta* are striking. Mahākassapa’s proposed resolution referred to the *aparihāniya-dhamma* expounded by the Buddha to Ānanda in the discourse in both a secular and a monastic version. The third monastic *aparihāniya-dhamma* is:

Monks, as long as monks do not issue any rule which has not been issued, do not abrogate any rule that has been issued, and follow well those rules that have been issued, they should expect

only progress and no decay.<sup>20</sup>

DN II, 77

Later in the discourse, however, the Buddha authorized the abrogation of minor rules by the Saṅgha:

Ānanda, when I am no more, if the Saṅgha is willing, it may  
abrogate minor rules.<sup>21</sup>

DN II, 154

Superficially, it seems as though the Buddha contradicted himself. The former statement tells monks neither to issue new rules, nor to abrogate old rules; while the latter allows the Saṅgha to abrogate minor rules. According to the story, the apparent contradiction could not be resolved in the Council, leading the Council to disallow the changing of any rule.

It is not possible to resolve the contradiction without a careful analysis of the Buddha's statements on both occasions. In the latter, the key words are "if the Saṅgha is willing".

The term "*saṅgha*" is a technical term in Buddhism, which means "community". It does not refer to individual monks, or groups of monks (such as the *arahants*), but to the entire organization – nuns, monks, laywomen and laymen. A community is not just a collection of independent individuals, but a corporate institution comprised of all its members, who are dependent on one another, and who, in this case, follow a set of rules and regulations.

Accordingly, the statement "if the Saṅgha is willing", refers not to individual monks, nor to the *arahants*, but to the institution of the monastic community as a whole. The Buddha, therefore, did not grant individual monks or groups of monks the right to abrogate rules. Rather, he intended that authority for the Saṅgha as an organization. He was designating the Saṅgha as a corporate whole as the rule-making authority after he died.

Therefore, after the Buddha died, it was up to the Saṅgha as a whole to decide which rules were minor and which rules were not. This view is substantiated by the Buddha's instruction that the whole Saṅgha should meet to compile the Dharma and Vinaya. The third *aparīhāniya dhamma*, on the other

<sup>20</sup> *yāvakaīvaṅca bhikkhave Bhikkhū apaññattaṃ na paññapessanti paññattaṃ na samucchindissanti thāpaññattesu sikkhāpadesu samādāya vuttissanti vuḍḍhiyeva bhikkhave bhikkhūnaṃ pāṭikaṅkhā no parihāni.*

<sup>21</sup> *ākaṅkhamāno Ānanda saṅgho mamaccayena khuddānukhuddakāni sikkhāpadāni samūhantī.*

hand, does not refer to the community, but to individual monks, "...as long as monks do not issue any rule... abrogate any rule..." Here, the Buddha was talking about the morality of individual monks, not of the community as a whole. He was telling the monks individually to avoid creating or abrogating rules. Therefore, there is no conflict between the two statements and no dilemma in carrying out the teachings of the Buddha. The statements do not contradict each other, but are supportive of each other. It is clear that both these instructions promote the integrity and harmony of the Buddhist community, and give the Saṅgha freedom in pursuing its goals. Mahākassapa's resolution, however, was:

The Saṅgha will not issue any rule that has not been issued by the Lord; the Saṅgha will not abrogate those that have been issued by the Lord.

Although the wording of the resolution passed by the Council is very close to that of the third *aparihāniya dhamma*, it is not the same. The resolution shifts the prohibition to alter the rules from individual monks to the Saṅgha itself, withdrawing the right of the Saṅgha to abrogate existing rules and thus limiting the authority of the Saṅgha – contrary to the express wishes of the Buddha. The practicability of the monastic rule and the authority of the Saṅgha were reduced by the resolution.

Did the Council have any other options for resolving the problem of the minor rules?

### **Other possible ways of identifying “minor” rules**

There were a number of ways in which the Council could have attempted to resolve the debate over which rules were “minor”. For example, they could have requested an expert opinion. Upālī, the recognized authority, who had been praised by the Buddha as an expert in *Vinaya*, and therefore in the rules themselves, was present. It is surprising that Upālī is not mentioned in this regard. The arbitrary opinions of the elders were inconclusive and led to confusion. The Council also had access to Ānanda, the expert in the discourses. He could have been consulted in more detail concerning the Buddha's intentions for the administration of the Saṅgha, and asked to clarify the apparent contradiction with the *aparihāniya dhamma*.

Even without the opinions of Ānanda and Upālī, it would seem that the Council, out of respect for the Buddha's instructions would have endeavored to find both a resolution to the apparent contradiction and to the problem of defining "minor", rather than simply rejecting the instruction.

In the story, Ānanda appears sincere when he informs the Council of the Buddha's instruction, granting authority over the minor rules to Saṅgha, thus giving it the flexibility to carry out the Buddha's intentions and to administer the Saṅgha effectively, and in conformity with *aparihāniya dhamma*. The outcome of the Council, as portrayed in the Tipi-aka, was unfortunately the opposite. Seemingly, the Council did not understand the intention of the Buddha, and passed a resolution contrary to the Buddha's teaching. Moreover, Ānanda was chastised by the Council for this and four other "misdeeds".

An interesting question is: Why would these senior monks, supposedly all *arahants*, unanimously go along with such an unreasonable process?

### **Analysis of the charges against Ānanda**

According to the *Vinaya*, a monk who has infringed (*āpatti*) the monastic rule must purify himself through confession to a fellow monk who is not guilty of the same infringement. In case of serious, *sanghādisesa*, infringement, the monk can redeem himself only through a period of probation, equal to the period that he concealed the infringement. His rehabilitation can then be restored only by unanimous decision of the Saṅgha. Ānanda was charged with "āpatti", infringement of the code, by the Council for five actions, none of which had anything to do with any monastic rule. (None of the rules are even in Pāṭimokkha.<sup>22</sup>) The charges, and judgment against him, are ironic, given that the Council had just passed a resolution not to create any new rules.

Two of these charges had to do with actions which had taken place not long before the Council: He was accused of allowing women to pay respect to the body of the Buddha before men, and for letting their tears drop onto the

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<sup>22</sup> The commentarial tradition explains that the charges against Ānanda in the Council were special treatments outside of the *Vinaya*, but it does not give any reason for this. From the context given in the Council, it is clear that the accusations had nothing to do with the Buddhist Monastic Code, but were based on newly created, arbitrary rules which were rooted in Brahminical values.

Buddha's body. This is supposed to have occurred the night of the passing away of the Buddha, but surprisingly, it is not mentioned in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*. It is significant that neither offense violates any Buddhist principle – but both violate Brahmanical rules. Concern for the women's safety (the reason Ānanda gave for letting the women pay respects to his body first) would be in conformity with Buddhist principles. According to Brahmanical law, women's tears are one of the 12 bodily defilements of women. (This is specified in *The Law Book of Manu*, where tears are listed along with menstrual fluid, urine, etc.) Ānanda was also chastised for his failure to ask the Buddha to stay on to the end of the aeon, and for his negligence in not asking the Buddha what constituted a “minor” rule. There were also two accusations for actions that cannot be relegated to a specific time—one was holding the Buddha's bathing cloth with a foot when stitching it. But there is no prohibition in the *Vinaya* for using the foot in pressing bathing cloths. Again, it is a Brahmanical rule found in *the Law of Manu* – there the bathing cloth is the purest piece of cloth and must not be touched by the foot. The other “misdeed” was advocating for the ordination of women – an event that probably had taken place no less than twenty years prior to the passing away of the Buddha.

In practice, the first resolution of the Council (not to allow any changes to the rules) overturned a right that the Buddha had granted the Saṅgha, thus countermanding the intentions of the Buddha as presented in an instruction given shortly before he passed away. Mahākassapa's resolution, while close to the wording of the third *aparihāniya dhamma*, is, in fact, very different in meaning. The debate in the Council shows that the Buddha's instruction was not implemented because the criteria of “minor” were not clear and because it seemed contrary to the third *aparihāniya dhamma*. The report of the Council demonstrates that the monks lacked an appropriate methodology for determining what the Buddha had meant by “minor” and for resolving the apparent contradiction with the *aparihāniya dhamma*. The Buddha was highly respected and it was not directly suggested that his instructions were unclear. Rather his close attendant was blamed, censored, and punished for failing to ask the Lord for definite criteria of what was meant by the term “minor”.

In the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, the Buddha praises Ānanda for being an

excellent attendant. Even the Buddhas of the past, he says in the discourse, and those to come, did not and will not have attendants better than Ānanda, who, the Buddha says, is educated and well-learned, and knows which guests should see the Buddha first and which should see him last, and is endowed with an excellent memory of the Buddha's teachings. And yet, none of these good qualities are mentioned in the report of the Council; rather Ānanda is chastised before 499 *arahants* for infringements of five newly created rules.

The chastisement could not have been intended to benefit Ānanda, as he was recognized as an *arahant* who therefore had no need of further training. Channa, on the other hand, was penalized by the Saṅgha, but after he was enlightened, the penalty was annulled. From the record of the Council and its outcomes, no apparent good could have come to Buddhism or the Saṅgha from Ānanda's chastisement. It had a direct impact on Ānanda, however: he was discredited among the monks. The question is: Why?

### Ānanda's "Infractions" (*Āpatti*)

Infraction	Time	Defense	Notes
1. Failure to ask the Buddha the criteria for identifying "minor" rules.	Shortly before the Buddha's death.	Did not recognize the need; did not see that failure to ask was an infraction.	The above analysis, suggests that there was no need for Ānanda to ask.
2. Holding the bathing cloth of the Buddha with his foot.	Not specified.	Did not do it with disrespect for the Lord, he was stitching his bathing cloth, had no one to help; did not see it as an infraction.	No prohibition in the <i>Vinaya</i> for using the foot in pressing bathing cloths. However, in <i>the Law of Manu</i> (Brahmanical law) the bathing cloth is the purest piece of cloth and must not be touched by the foot.

Infraction	Time	Defense	Notes
3. Allowed women to honor the body of the Buddha before men; the women's tears fell on the body.	Immediately after the Buddha passed away.	He thought that the women should not be out late at night, so he allowed them to honor the body first. Did not see that allowing women to honor the body of the Buddha was an infraction.	There are 2 complaints in this charge: 1. The offense was giving priority to the women over the men, and 2. The fact that the women's tears fell on the body of the Buddha. Neither violates any Buddhist principle. Concern for the women's safety would be in conformity with Buddhist principles. Women's tears are one of the 12 bodily defilements of women specified in <i>the Law Book of Manu</i> along with menstrual fluid, urine, etc.
4. Failed to invite the Buddha to stay on to the end of the aeon.	During the last rains-retreat of the Buddha. (3-6 months before the Council)	His mind was clouded by Māra, so he was not able to invite the Lord to stay to the end of the aeon.	The Buddha died of natural causes. No invitation could have prevented his death.
5. Advocated women's ordination.	20-25 years prior to the Council	Advocated women's ordination in the religion of the Tathāgata in support of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī the nanny of the Lord, who had nurtured and breast-fed the Buddha after his mother had passed away. There is	The Buddha did permit women's ordination. However, according to the Tipiṭaka, the Buddha then said that women's ordination would shorten the duration of Buddhism from 1,000 (the maximum length of time the religion would survive) to 500 years.

Infraction	Time	Defense	Notes
		no evidence in the Tipitaka that would lead one to see this as an infraction.	

Ānanda explained his actions on each charge and, except for the fourth, stated that he did not see his action as wrong-doing (*āppatti*). However, in the end he complied with the elders' demands and confessed that he had acted wrongly. He did not respond to the complaint that women's tears had fallen on the body of the Buddha, perhaps seeing that as inevitable and something for which he was not culpable.

The last accusation deserves our attention since it is the only "infraction" that could realistically have influenced the future of the religion. Ānanda's advocacy of women's ordination, and the Buddha's subsequent acceptance, occurred 20 to 25 years earlier, judging from Ānanda's remark that he had followed the Buddha like his shadow for 25 years.

The elders of the Council did not give any reason for raising this issue. The accusation is tied up with the story of the origin of the nun's order in which Ānanda intervenes with the Buddha in favor of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī who had requested ordination for herself and a group of women. According to the story, the Buddha is persuaded, and permits the ordination of women, contingent upon their accepting eight conditions, the *garudhammas*. The Buddha then prophesies that the core practice of Buddhism, the *saddhamma* or *brahmacariya*, would remain for only 500 years, whereas if women had not been permitted ordination it would have lasted 1,000 years. This is the only time in the Tipitaka that the Buddha explicitly prophesies the lifespan of his religion. The *garudhammas* appear also in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* account of the founding of the nun's order but nowhere else in the Tipitaka.

The fact that the five charges against Ānanda are referred to as "wrong-doing" (*āpatti*), makes them quite serious, though the actions are not mentioned in the code of the *Vinaya*. To accept that these were wrong (*āpatti*), as demanded by the Council, was significant even though no penalty was imposed. These charges have nothing to do with Mahākassapa's stated aim for

convening the Council: to prevent the decline of the religion. Their importance lies in the fact that, in practice, when Ānanda accepted that his actions had been wrong, he was discredited in the Saṅgha.

Counting the decision to allow women to honor the body of the Buddha before the men, and the act of “allowing” the women’s tears to fall on the body as two separate charges, there are six complaints against Ānanda, three of which are related to women and women’s ordination. (The women who honored the body of the Buddha were almost certainly nuns, although the text does not specify whether or not they were ordained). The last “infraction,” dating over two decades before the Council, had not been forgotten, but was remembered, apparently with resentment, until the opportunity should present itself of excoriating Ānanda. Even though the Council was organized with no mention of women, the proceedings against Ānanda, which specifically invoked the prophecy that women’s ordination would shorten the lifetime of the religion, and the time given to these issues in the account itself, suggest that the actual motives for convening the First Council (and/or the act of writing the account of the Council’s creation and proceedings) had far less to do with Subhadda and a need to record the *Vinaya* and Dharma, than with women’s ordination.

### **Origin of the nun’s order and the prophesied decline of Buddhism**

The Buddha’s prophecy of the decline of Buddhism brought about by the existence of the nun’s order (*Bhikkhuni Saṅgha*) appears both in the *Bhikkhunīkhandhaka* in the *Vinaya* and in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, and both share the same message:

At that time the Venerable Ānanda went to see the Lord. Having sat at one side, he said to the Lord, “Lord, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī has accepted the eight *garudhammas*. The aunt of the Lord has now been ordained.” The Lord said to Ānanda, “Ānanda, if women had not renounced their household lives and ordained in the religion of the Tathāgata, the noble practice would have lasted long, the true Dhamma would have remained for a thousand years. Because the

ordination of women has occurred in the religion of the Tathāgata, the noble practice will not last long; the true Dhamma will last for only 500 years. Ānanda, in whatever religion women are ordained, the religion will not last long, as families that have more women than men are easily destroyed by robbers. As when mildew infests in a plentiful rice-field, that field cannot last long. As when blight invades a sugarcane-field, that field cannot last long. Ānanda, like a man builds a large surrounding dyke to prevent the escape of water, I prescribe the eight *garudhammas* for the nuns to adhere to all their lives without breaking them. Vin II, 256

Here the Buddha uses an unusual and interesting simile “like a man builds a big surrounding dyke to prevent the escape of water.” The image suggests the prevention of future problems. That – and the fact that the Buddha establishes the eight rules as a precondition to the nuns’ ordination – both run counter to the usual *Vinaya* pattern in which the Buddha issues a rule against a specific class of action, only after a specific act has been committed and judged to be wrong. That pattern is consistently followed throughout the *Vinaya* in the promulgation of rules for both monks and nuns. That is, the Buddha issued rules to address actual problems as they arose, rather than anticipated problems. The rules corrected problems those problems after the fact. They were never established in an attempt to prevent an imagined problem, threat or decline in the religion in the future.

The *garudhammas*, however, appear to be aimed at the prevention of future decline; according to the story they are preemptive rules for nuns issued even before the order was established. This is the only place in the *Vinaya* where the Buddha issued preemptive rules. The concern for the future decline of the religion in the above passage is notably similar to the Mahākassapa’s expressed concerns in asking for a council, cited above: “In the future, the anti-Dharma will progress, and the Dharma will decay, the anti-*Vinaya* will progress and the *Vinaya* will decay” (Vin V, 284).

### **Understanding the images of mildew, blight and dyke**

The prediction attached to the story of the founding of the nun’s order is interesting. In the story the Buddha justifies the *garudhammas* as a preemptive

set of rules for the prevention of the future decline of the religion. But even so, he predicts the shortening of the lifespan of the practice of Buddhism from 1,000 years to 500 years.<sup>23</sup> Nuns, he says in the story, are like “mildew” infesting a rice-field, like “blight” invading a field of sugarcane, and the *garudhammas* are like a “dyke” to prevent the flow of water. Just as infestations and pests destroy fields, so the presence of nuns would destroy the Saṅgha: monks would no longer become enlightened.

The image of the *garudhammas* as a dyke may require a little explanation. Rice agriculture depends on the ability to control the level of water in the fields. For most of the growth cycle, the field must be flooded, but as harvest time nears the fields are drained. Dykes built around the fields allow water both to be held in the field and to be kept out. One ancient technique for eliminating pests was to seal the dyke so that the field would dry out and go barren so that the pests would either die or leave. The reference appears to imply that the *garudhammas* would act as a dyke, robbing the nun’s order of nourishment and forcing the elimination of the nuns – the mildew and blight infesting the Saṅgha.

The use of such demeaning and dehumanizing metaphors for women is rude and immoral. It is not credible that the all-compassionate and all-loving Buddha would have spoken in such a way, not to mention discriminate against half of humanity. Neither would he have harbored such a radically sexist attitude, having just affirmed that women and men had equal potential for enlightenment. It is far more credible that the eight *garudhammas*, their justification, and the inaccurate prediction of the demise of Buddhism were interpolated into the canonical literature after the time of the Buddha, and after the initial compilation of the canon. This theory is confirmed by the fact that the dyke is sealed off to control pests only after the field is infested with them; the *garudhammas*, then, was most likely issued only after women had been ordained in sufficient numbers and for a sufficient period of time to be

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<sup>23</sup> The belief that the Truth Doctrine (Saddhamma) disappeared from Buddhism since the religion was 500 years old is widespread among Buddhists in the modern world. Some even deny the possibility of the attainment of arahatship by anyone, while some claim they have re-discovered the True Doctrine which was lost for 2000 years.

perceived as constituting an “infestation.”

According to the Pāli Tipiṭaka, the organization of the First Council and the Buddha’s issuance of the eight *garudhammas* are both based on the same reason: a preemptive action to prevent the future decline of the Buddhist religion.<sup>24</sup>

### **Influence of Brahmanism on the First Council**

The Tipiṭaka is silent about the process and reasoning behind the chastisement of Ānanda by the Council. None of the actions for which he was chastised would have negatively affected the future of Buddhism. The charge that Ānanda failed to invite the Buddha to stay on to the end of the aeon, would seem to have been the most serious, as it would have been much better for the world to have a living Buddha. However, in reality, such an invitation would not have changed the progress of the Buddha’s illness. The story in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* about Māra’s invitation and the resolution of the Buddha to pass away is most likely a later interpolation. The Buddha died of natural causes, of his own illness. No invitation to live longer from anyone would have prevented his death.<sup>25</sup> The motivation for the accusation was likely to blame Ānanda for the untimely death of the Lord; and hence, to disqualify him from being the successor to the leadership of the Buddhist community.

Among the six complaints against Ānanda, three show the influence of the Brahmanical tradition on the judgment of the elders: the priority of male over female, the defilement of women’s tears, and the impropriety of contact of the foot with the bathing cloth.

As mentioned earlier, women’s tears, according to *the Law Book of Manu*, are equivalent to menstrual fluid. From that point of view, it was unforgivable for Ānanda to allow them to fall on the body of the Buddha. This is similar to the belief that the foot is a low and impure organ. According to *the Law of*

<sup>24</sup> See also: Ute Husken, The Legend of the Establishment of the Buddhist Order of the Nuns in the Theravāda *Vinaya-piṭaka*. *Journal of Pali Text Society*, Vol. XXVI (2000) pp. 43-70.

<sup>25</sup> Mettanando Bhikkhu and Oskar von Hinüber, The Cause of Death of the Buddha, *JPTS*, 2000. Also, Mettanando Bhikkhu, *Hed Kued Por Sor Nueng*, Vol. 1, p.220-221.

*Manu*, the foot must not touch the bathing cloth because the cloth must be very clean<sup>26</sup>.

In Buddhist monasticism, there was no prohibition against a robe's being in contact with a foot. There is also no rule to prohibit placing robes or monastic utensils on the floor. On the contrary, for example, a bowl must be placed on the floor as otherwise it may fall and break. There is no superstitious concern over the use of monastic items. Robes, for instance, are used for warding off heat, cold, insects, etc. They are not for beautification or pleasure. Ānanda told the elders that he did this act with respect and that he had no assistance. His response appeals to the fundamental Buddhist ethical principle, "intention is karma": the ethical value of an act is in its intention, not its conformity to ritual form. That approach to ethics was not shared with contemporary Brahmanism.

It is rather surprising that after Ānanda was praised by the Buddha for his excellent services as his personal attendant, he should have been accused of wrong-doing by the elders in the Council. The reason that Ānanda arranged for the women to pay their respects to the Buddha's body before the men was a reasonable, and laudable concern for their safety. If they had had to wait for the men, they would have been exposed to the dangers of returning home late at night. Yet he was compelled to acknowledge that the action was wrong. The story of the chastisement of Ānanda reads not like a confrontation among the elders of the Saṅgha so much as a confrontation between one learned and liberated Buddhist monk and a group of monks who were still attached to the caste and gender taboos of Brahmanism and traditional superstition.

We know from other parts of Tipiṭaka that Mahākassapa was a Brahmin by birth; he was a world-renouncer – most likely a member of ājivaka or Jain community – before meeting the Buddha and being accepted into the Saṅgha. According to the Tipiṭaka account of the Council, it was he who picked the 500 council participants and, given that he did not follow the Buddha's instructions and invite the entire Saṅgha, nor did he invite all those who were enlightened, it appears likely that he selected monks who shared his beliefs and opinions. (It

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<sup>26</sup> Manu Law, Sacred Books of the East Vol. 25, edited by Max Müller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Reprint, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1970

is also noteworthy that his own entourage at the time he learned of the Buddha's death, was also made up of 500 monks.)

### **Mahākassapa and his conservative view of the *Vinaya***

It is noteworthy that in one dialogue between Mahākassapa and the Buddha, the Buddha tells Mahākassapa that the true Dharma is what is essential for the survival of Buddhism – Buddhism will not decay as long as “false Dharma does not arise in the world.” The *Vinaya*, he implies, is of secondary importance, a symptom of depravity among his disciples – it only came into being as a means of dealing with problems that arose because of their shortcomings.

Once, the Lord was staying at the Jeta-grove of Anathpiṇḍika the businessman in the vicinity of Savatthī. At that time, the Venerable Mahākassapa went to see the Lord at his residence. Having approached the Lord, he paid respect and sat at one side. Having seated himself, the Venerable Mahākassapa asked the Lord, “Sir, what is the cause of the fact that when there were few rules, there were many *arahants*? And what is the cause of the fact that when there are more rules, few monks have achieved *arahantship*?” The Lord responded, “Kassapa, the cause is that when beings are more depraved, the true Dharma fades away, therefore there are more rules and the number of monks who become *arahants* are fewer. As long as false Dharma does not arise in the world, the true Dharma will not decay.

SN II, 223

Mahākassapa's question in this passage hints at a possible criticism. The passage may be interpreted as an implication that the increasing number of rules issued by the Buddha had become a hindrance to monks to achieving enlightenment, or it may be seen as being based on an entirely objective observation. The idea that fewer rules are better than many rules, is a view shared by Subhadda, who anticipated fewer rules after the Buddha died. The response of the Buddha was that the need for more rules and the reduction in the number of people becoming enlightened were both due to a decline in the quality of people, thus refuting any possible criticism. This dialogue probably

took place some time in the later years of the Buddha's mission, when hundreds of monastic rules were issued.

According to *the Law Book of Manu*, the Hindu laws were given by Manu, the first man and ancestor to the human race. Those laws are held to be eternal and not subject to change. Since Mahākassapa was of the Brahmin caste, he was not accustomed to rules which grow in number and are subject to change. A similar feeling might have been shared by members of the Saṅgha who were also of priestly caste.

The system of the *Vinaya* is very different from that of the Brahmanical *Manu's* Law. The rules are not eternal. They were merely created as the need arose, and they are subject to amendment. The *Vinaya* makes clear that in the early Buddhist community, the monks shared their lives together without any system of rules. The Buddha issued monastic rules only when a mistake was made and brought to his attention for judgment. Each time he would state the purpose of the *Vinaya*: it is for the well-being of the Saṅgha, for the lasting of the true Dharma, etc. No rule was issued with preemptive intention. So the Buddha's response to Mahākassapa is consistent with the principle of the *Vinaya* that rules were created only in cases of concrete misconduct. As misconduct grew more common rules were made; but that same increase in misconduct resulted in fewer people becoming *arahants*. In effect, the Buddha told Mahākassapa that he should accept the process of making and changing rules to address current conditions, and most important, that it is not the *Vinaya*, but the Dharma that is essential to the survival of the religion. This view is confirmed by the fact that the *Vinaya* was only created in response to problems that arose – the Buddha did not see fit to set down a set of rules on his own. Here, (unlike at the First Council meeting) the Dharma is what is essential to the survival of the religion: “As long as false Dharma does not arise in the world, the true Dharma will not decay.”

Mahākassapa's remarks, “when there were few rules, there were many *arahants*,” and “when there are more rules, few monks have achieved *arahantship*,” may betray traditional views on the practice of the *Vinaya*, and a conservative attitude to monasticism, based on Brahmanical ideals. The Buddha, however, was not concerned with the increase in the number of rules, and in fact seems almost unconcerned with the rules, but concerned rather with

the increase in false teachings. The increase in the number of rules is a symptom and not a cause of decline in the true Dharma. Again, this exchange is significant because the values it sets forth are the opposite of those of the First Council (referred to in the Tipi-aka as “the Council on the Vinaya”), where the recording of the Dharma is only given the briefest mention. The focus of the meeting in the story is on whether or not the Saṅgha can abrogate the minor rules of the *Vinaya*; and on Ananda’s castigation for violating a new set of rules.

### **Hidden agenda of the First Council: to get rid of the nuns?**

As we have seen, the motivation given for calling the First Council – a decline in the religion evidenced by Subhadda’s careless remark – would not likely have been the actual reason for convening 500 senior monks in a major convocation. The remark was trivial, and did not constitute “false Dharma” which, in the above passage, the Buddha declares to be the element that threatens the survival of the religion. Also, Subhadda is never even mentioned in the Council proceedings. A primary concern of the Council, rather, was clearly to chastise Ānanda, who would have been an obvious choice as a leader of the Saṅgha after the death of the Buddha. The result of such a chastisement would be to substantially discredit him, and the nuns whose cause he had championed. We have also seen that half the charges against Ānanda focused on issues relating to women.

According to the *Cullavagga* in the *Vinaya*, the Council consisted of dialogues between Mahākassapa and Upālī on the *Vinaya*, and between Mahākassapa and Ānanda on the discourses. The agenda also included injunctions given by the Buddha before he passed away, for example, the penalty of Channa, and the right of the Saṅgha to abrogate minor rules. The recorded dialogues, however, give no evidence of the compiling the whole of the Buddha’s teachings into a canon. It is true that the *Brahmajālasutta* of the Dīgha Nikāya, is mentioned by Ānanda and that the *Sudinna* of the *Vinaya* is mentioned by Upālī, but mentioning the names of two discourses hardly constitutes selecting discourses for inclusion and compiling an authoritative recitation of the hundreds of discourses selected.

The names of the two sections of the Dharma and *Vinaya* may have been

interpolated by later generations who noticed the gap. There are indeed several problems here, such as an apparent disregard for the Buddha's advice about who should be included in such a council and how it should be conducted, and the fact that of 500 participants – a strangely round number – only three are named. Although all schools of Buddhist *Vinaya* agree that the First Council was the origin of all canonical literature, and that the entire corpus of the canon was set down in the First Council, substantial evidence leads to the conclusion that this was not the case. The Tipiṭaka indicates that the process of creating a canon was initiated by Sāriputta and others before the passing away of the Buddha. That a number of discourses are clearly the work of later generations shows that the process of collecting the teachings of the Buddha and of compiling them into a canon continued for a long period of time. Also, the process clearly could not have been completed in a matter of two or three months (according to the story it was two – the first month of the three being devoted to housing repairs). Apart from the five charges against Ānanda, there was one resolution: the Saṅgha annulled its right, granted by the Buddha, to abrogate minor rules. It seems most probable that either the actual Council had to do with resolving what some senior monks perceived as long-standing “problems” of women's power and high status in the community, and with establishing and consolidating a new leadership – or it may be that the account of the Council was the work of a later generation who had these same goals in mind.

It seems likely that the outcome of the council meeting was not accepted by all factions of the Saṅgha. Indication of this is seen in the story of the monk Purāṇa, who had many disciples but was not honored to take part in the Council, and only learned about it later.

At that time, the Venerable Purāṇa was in the mountainous area of the south, with his entourage of about 500 monks, when the elders completed their Council on the Dharma-*Vinaya*. Having been staying in the mountainous area of the south, as was his want, he went to visit the elders in the Monastery of Bamboo Grove, the feeding ground for squirrels in Rājagaha. Having greeted the elders, he sat at one side. The elders told the Venerable Purāṇa who sat at one side. “Purāṇa, the elders have

completed a council on the Dharma-*Vinaya*. You are to know the Dharma-*Vinaya* that the elders have compiled.” The Venerable Purāṇa responded, “Sirs, the elders have compiled the Dharma-*Vinaya* in a council; however, what I have heard directly from the Buddha, to that will I adhere.” Vin V, 289

Based on the above passage it appears there may have been two versions of the Dharma-*Vinaya* just after the Buddha’s passing: one that was compiled and promoted by the Council, and another that contained the original “old” teachings of the Buddha.

### **The mystery of monk Purāṇa**

Nothing more is known about Purāṇa from the Tipiṭaka. He may have been an historical person who spread Buddhism in the southern mountainous area, or the Deccan. Or, he may have been a mythical figure, used by the writers of the account of the Council to represent a group of monks in the Deccan who maintained a version of the Dharma-*Vinaya* different from that promulgated by First Council (or its writers). The word “purāṇa” in Sanskrit means “ancient” or “old”.<sup>27</sup> It seems too much of a coincidence that the “Venerable Old” refused to accept the version of the Council, but insisted rather on the “old” version, which he himself had heard from the Buddha. The reference to Purāṇa’s many followers might simply have been a way of saying that there were many monks in the Deccan who adhered to the “old” version of the Buddha’s teachings.

Another interesting point is that Purana refers to the First Council as “the Council of the Elders” rather than “the Council of the Saṅgha”, possibly suggesting that the Southern monks did not accept the authority of the Northern monks, and that they may have been following a different version of the *Vinaya*. Modern scholars believe that there were two very early sects of Buddhism, known, in Sanskrit as Sthaviravādin and Mahāsaṅghika. A group of monks in the south is believed to have followed the more liberal Mahāsaṅghika

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<sup>27</sup> Monier-Williams, Monier: Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Oxford, 1982, p.635, “belonging to ancient or olden time”; Rhys Davids & Stede, Pali English Dictionary, PTS, Re-printed 1996, p. 469, “ancient, past, form, late”.

version of the *Vinaya*.<sup>28</sup> The Purāṇa vignette might have been added to the Theravāda *Vinaya* account of the First Council in order to account for the existence of different versions of Dharma-*Vinaya* in different regions, or in order to account for the difference of attitude between monks living in the south and those who lived in the Rājagaha area.

It has been hypothesized that Purāṇa was the originator of Mahāyāna Buddhism. That hypothesis seems far-fetched. Mahāyāna is known to have emerged in Northern India whereas according to the story, Purāṇa was from the south. It is more likely that the story was interpolated into the canon in order to delineate two early monastic schools. This does not entirely explain the development of the six versions of *Vinaya* known to us, each attached to a different sect.<sup>29</sup> All of them identify themselves with the First Council and many questions remain unanswered regarding the relationships among the six schools of *Vinaya*. A comparative study of the *Vinaya* of the nuns shows that the oldest version is most likely that of the Mahāsaṅghika, not the Pāli, Theravāda version, which has evidently been amended in many places.<sup>30</sup>

### Why were the nuns suppressed?

Comparing the descriptions and stories told in the verses in the *Theragāthā* with those of the *Therīgāthā*, it is clear that both the communities of monks and nuns had tight-knit communities in which each member was respected like a member of the same family. Teachers were respected as parents and students as children. The accounts of the two orders suggest that the nuns had more intimate relationships in their community than the monks,

<sup>28</sup> The Mahāsaṅghika was one of the two oldest schools of Buddhist mendicants, the other being the Sthavira. There is no clear explanation of the difference. According to the Theravāda tradition, the Mahāsaṅghika later developed into Mahāyāna Buddhism. It has been shown, however, that the Mahāsaṅghika likely had nothing to do with Mahāyāna. The term “*mahāsaṅghika*” simply means the “large order”.

<sup>29</sup> They are, namely: Mahāsaṅghika, Sarvāstivāda, Mūlasarvāstivāda, Mahiśāsaka, Dharmaguptaka and Theravāda.

<sup>30</sup> Kabil Singh, C., *A Comparative Study of Bhikkhuni Patimokkha*, Varanasi & Delhi, Chaukhambha Orientalia, 1984, p. 178.

and were more socially aware and more active in teaching and training within their community, and in spreading the teachings of the Buddha in the world at large.<sup>31</sup>

In general, the Tipiṭaka is silent about the success of the nuns' mission as a whole. But there are clues in the stories about the successes of several individual nuns. We know that the Buddha was not alone in the promotion of the Dharma, and many outstanding *arahants* who were experts in many fields of Buddhist practice also taught--some are highly praised as skillful teachers. Among these there is no discourse clearly describing a situation in which an *arahant* monk was visited by a king. Two discourses describe a dialogue between an *arahant* monk and a king, but these dialogues took place some time after the passing away of the Buddha. However, the Tipiṭaka includes two episodes in which King Pasenadi paid a visit to the nun Thūlanandā and one in which he went to listen to the teaching of Khemātherī, whose wisdom, according to the Buddha, was as great as that of Sāriputta, his right hand disciple. King Pasenadi later praised her in front of the Buddha, saying that her teaching was not inferior to that of the Buddha himself, remarkable praise given the cultural attitudes toward women.<sup>32</sup>

The *Therīgāthā* indicates the great variety of people that the nuns addressed in their dialogues, including, for example, the Buddha, Māra, mother, father, friends, Brahmins, students, teachers and monks. The *Theragāthā* indicates much less diversity among the monks' interlocutors. Many who shared in the nuns' dialogues were converted or enlightened by the nuns' teaching. One among these was a monk. There are no episodes in which a nun is enlightened through the instruction of a monk, unless he be the Buddha himself.

A comparison of these two collections of verses suggests that there may have been about one nun for every four monks, but that the nuns were more active in the teaching and training of new members of their community.<sup>33</sup> The texts also reveal that the nuns were not only concerned with the achievement of

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<sup>31</sup> Mettanando Bhikkhu, *Hed Kued Por Sor Nueng*, Vol. II, p.180.

<sup>32</sup> Buddhaghosa's comentarial tradition maintains that Khemātherī was one of King Pasenadi's queens, but there is no canonical evidence in support of this.

<sup>33</sup> Mettanando Bhikkhu, *Hed Kued Por Sor Nueng*, Vol II, pp.178.

spiritual enlightenment but were also more concerned than were monks with contemporary problems in Indian society. A comparison of the texts also suggests that the nuns may have been more loyal to the Buddha, and more conservative in following his teachings than were their male counterparts.

The very existence of the nun's order, and the nuns' success as teachers, let alone the order's expansion, would have been a threat to those monks who remained under the influence of Brahmanical values, who would have seen women's participation in religion as decadent and threatening. Given the difficulty in overcoming engrained cultural biases, it seems safe to say that most monks would have viewed women as impure, and as pests infesting the Buddhist religion, who would bring the end to the *Saddhamma*, and would have opposed their acceptance into the Saṅgha from the beginning. Their greatest disapproval and dismay would have been aroused by nuns teaching monks or kings who, in turn, respected them as their mothers. Those monks who retained Brahmanical biases would have interpreted this as a sign of decay and the impending end of the world. They would have longed to purify the religion of women and to restore the male-only Saṅgha.

However, eliminating the nun's order was impossible while the Buddha was alive. The Buddha had been against Brahmanism from the beginning and it was the Buddha himself, after all, who permitted the ordination of women. The only hope the latent Brahmins had, was to wait until the Buddha passed away to correct his "mistake." Seen as a literary construct, the character Subhadda, who serves as the catalyst for calling the First Council in the Council's story, may well be the psychological projection of such Brahmin monks who wished to cast off the teachings they did not like after the Buddha's death.

### **Conflict between Mahākassapa and Ānanda**

*Ānanda: Sir, is the hair on my head not already gray? Nevertheless, I cannot escape the Venerable Mahākassapa's calling me a child.*

*Mahākassapa: So it is, Venerable Ānanda. You are still associating with these new monks who do not guard their senses, who are not moderate in their consumption, and who are lazy. You are always trampling young plants and oppressing*

*families. Venerable Ānanda, your companions are falling away. Most of your students are still young and are falling away. You are indeed a child lacking judgment.*

SN II, 219

This exchange is in the *Cīvarasutta* of the Saṅgīyutta Nikāya and commonly puzzles readers. What really happened that led Mahākassapa to criticize Ānanda in this way? This exchange is clearly not light banter between friends. Rather Mahākassapa is uncompromising in his condemnation of the junior monks and Ānanda's handling of them. Although the discourse does not give the place or time of the conversation, we may surmise that it took place after the death of the Buddha. During the last 25 years of the Buddha's life Ānanda was always with him, "like a shadow", as his close attendant.<sup>34</sup> In this discourse, however, Ānanda is represented as having been traveling about the southern regions with his entourage, not with the Buddha.

The prelude to the dialogue is:

Once Mahākassapa was staying in the Bamboo Grove, which is the place for feeding squirrels in the city of Rājagaha. At that time the Venerable Ānanda had been traveling in the southern mountainous regions with a large group of monks. Many of his disciples who were young, around 30 in number, disrobed and returned to the lower, lay way of life. SN II, 217-18

Mahākassapa criticizes Ānanda as a "child lacking judgment" for associating with young monks who were not behaving appropriately. There was in the Saṅgha an etiquette of receiving criticism from an elder or an equal. A criticism was treated as a "treasure" for self-improvement. In community life, when behavior is criticized, mistakes of judgement can always be made. According to the Tipiṭaka, both of the monks, moreover, were *arahants* and thus free of egoism. However, in the story Mahākassapa comes across as

<sup>34</sup> The commentarial tradition maintains, (and it is the official teaching of Buddhism in Thailand), that Ānanda was born at the same time as the Buddha (sahajāti) and was therefore the same age. However, there is no evidence in the Tipiṭaka to support that claim. It would seem rather that Ānanda was much younger than the Buddha. The belief that they were born in the same moment was probably derived from the way that later generations in Sri Lanka understood the law of karma.

arrogant, angry and confrontational, and Ānanda seems not to appreciate being called a “child”.

If we are right in placing this exchange after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, then Ānanda, who had by this time spent no less than 25 years in robes, was an acknowledged *arahant*, known to have the most complete and accurate memory of the teachings of the Buddha and to have been praised by the Buddha for his mature decisions in the role of personal attendant. In the context of a community like Saṅgha in which status and authority are largely determined by seniority, for Mahākassapa to address Ānanda as a “child” in public was indeed inappropriate. The story does not end there.

Unfortunately the discourse, which seems here to act as a community record of some unknown authority living in the monastery where Mahākassapa was staying, does not give any account of the circumstances under which the 30 young monks left the order. Mahākassapa seems to be very cross with everything Ānanda had been doing: wandering to many places, trampling young plants, oppressing families, and associating with youths of poor quality. Ānanda is said to have been traveling in the southern mountains, the region of the monk Purāṇa, who declined to accept the authority of the First Council. As we have seen, modern scholars believe that the Mahāsaṅghika sect flourished in this region, while the Theravāda sect, or its early precursor, flourished to the north. Available evidence suggests that in the Mahāsaṅghika, the highest respect was reserved for Ānanda and Rāhula rather than for Mahākassapa as in other sects known to us.

From the information given above we may surmise a number of reasons for Ānanda to have been wandering rather than staying in a fixed place. What could he do after being formally chastised and discredited at the First Council? Ānanda was held to be responsible for the death of the Buddha and he was accused of precipitating the decline of the Saṅgha by advocating women’s ordination. Sedentary life in a monastery would have been very unpleasant for Ānanda. However, this does not mean that Ānanda was all alone in the community.

Sister Thullanandā, having heard the news that the Venerable Mahākassapa had demeaned the Venerable Ānanda, the wise sage, by calling him a child, was displeased and said, “How does the

*former heretic*<sup>35</sup>, Mahākassapa, dare to call the Venerable Ānanda, the wise sage, a child?” SN II, 219

The words of the nun reached the ears of Mahākassapa who complained to Ānanda at length (it is interesting that he did not speak directly to the nun. Throughout the Tipiṭaka, Mahākassapa has a constant misogynous trait – he never speaks to a female human being.<sup>36</sup>):

Venerable Ānanda, the nun Thullanandā spoke without judgment. Since I shaved my hair and beard, donned the saffron robe and become a world renouncer, I never dedicated myself to any teacher except the Fully Enlightened Buddha. When I was a householder, I thought that lay life was narrow, full of defilement. The life of a renunciant is free. It is hard for a layperson to follow the noble practice and to be as pure as a well-polished conch shell. I preferred to shave my hair and beard, don the saffron robe and become a world renouncer. Later, I made a monastic cloak out of an old piece of cloth, shaved my hair and beard, donned the saffron robe and renounced the world, *dedicated to the arahants of the world*. Having been a world renouncer and treading a long journey, I came across the Lord between the city of Rājagaha and the Village of Nālanda while he was sitting at the Shrine for Many Sons. Having met him, the thought came to me that I have met my teacher, the Lord; meeting the Sugata is meeting the Lord; meeting the Fully Awakened One is meeting the Lord. I, a venerable man, bowed to the feet of the Lord at that place, and said to him: “Sir, you are my teacher; I am your disciple. Sir, you are my teacher; I am your disciple.”

My having said this, the Lord said to me, “Kassapa, who does not clearly know a whole-heartedly inspired disciple like this, but says that he knows, or not having not seen one, says that he has seen one, his head would break into pieces. Kassapa, I know and so I say

<sup>35</sup> The term in Pali is “*aññatitthiya-pubbo*”, Mahākassapa the former heretic.

<sup>36</sup> The character of Mahākassapa might have influenced the way in which the Buddha is portrayed in the *Vinaya* – there he never speaks directly to any of his nuns. Though he does so elsewhere in the Tipiṭaka.

that I know; I see and so I say that I see. Because of this, Kassapa, you should fix in your mind: ‘I will maintain utmost moral shame and fear before the elder, the junior, and the mid-level monks. I will listen to whatever is wholesome, and will do whatever is beneficial, be mindful of all teachings, and will recollect with all my mind all the teachings which I have heard... I will maintain awareness of the body which is associated with wholesome delight.’<sup>37</sup> Kassapa, this is the way you should train yourself.” Brother, the Lord, having given this instruction to me, rose from his seat and went away. Brother, for seven days I was indebted to the people for their daily offerings of rice. On the eighth day, the fruit of *arahantship* appeared to me.

Once, the Lord turned out of the way and went straight to the shade of a tree. I laid down a fourfold cloak of old cloth for him, and said to the Lord, “Sir, may the Lord sit on this cloth for my long lasting benefit.” Brother, the Lord sat on that seat. Having sat there, the Lord said to me, “Kassapa, this cloak of old cloth of yours is soft.” I said him, “Sir, may the Lord do me the kindness of receiving this cloak of old cloth from me.” The Lord responded, “Kassapa, will you wear my dust-robe made of new cotton?” And I told him, “Sir, I will wear the Lord’s robe made of new cotton.” Brother, I offered the Lord my cloak made of old cloth, and was given the dust-robe made of new cotton of the Lord.

Brother, if a person speaks correctly [about me], he says, “Whosoever is the son who is born through the mouth of the Lord, born from the Dharma, created by the Dharma, heir of the Dharma, he it is who receives the dust-robe made of new cotton [from the Buddha],” this he says correctly about me. It is I who was born of

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<sup>37</sup> The Buddha’s instruction in this passage implies that there was already a system of seniority in the Saṅgha in which monks with more than ten years in robes were referred to as *theras*, or “elders”. The passage suggests Mahākassapa was ordained at least ten years after the Buddha first began accepting disciples. However, we do not know how long he had followed other movements. It is worth noting also that no mention is made of the *Vinaya* here.

the bosom, the mouth of the Lord, out of the Dharma, created by the Dharma, heir of the Dharma, who received the dust-robe made of new cotton.

Brother, longing to be away from sensual desire, free from unwholesome thoughts, I reached the first *jhāna* endowed with discursive thoughts, joy and happiness born of solitude. Brother, [... stock description of the attainment of the nine *anupubbavihāras* and nine *abhiññās*].

Brother, I have achieved the liberation of the mind and liberation of wisdom which is free of all defilement, because of the extinction of the defilement, through the self-illuminated wisdom in the Truth which has been seen. Whoever thinks that I should conceal my achievement of the six paranormal powers, should think to conceal a seven or seven-a-half foot elephant with a palm leaf.

In the end, Sister Thullanandā left the order. SN II, 19-222

The discourse concludes with the fall of Thullanandā from the Saṅgha. It is, however, strange that the conflict would end in such a way. The Tipiṭaka has no explanation of her departure from the Saṅgha. Her name appears 401 times in the Tipiṭaka.<sup>38</sup> Most of stories in which she figures have to do with misconduct in the nun's order. She is described as a greedy woman, full of jealousy, who teamed up with monks who were notorious for fomenting schism in the Buddhist community, such as Devadatta<sup>39</sup> and Ariṭṭha.<sup>40</sup> The former is known as a rival of the Buddha, the latter as a stubborn monk.

“Thullanandā” would not have been her given name. *Thulla* in Pāli (Sanskrit, *sthula*) means “thick”, “fat”, or “rude”. None of these would have been appropriate for a woman's name. Moreover such a name would have

<sup>38</sup> Counts done with the Mahidol University CD version of the Thai Tipiṭaka.

<sup>39</sup> The ninth rule of the *Ovādavagga* in the *Pāṭimokkha* says that Thullanandā persuaded householders not to invite Sāriputta, Moggallāna, Mahākaccāyana, Mahākoṭṭhita, Mahākappina, Mahācunda, Anuruddha, Revatta, Upālī, Ānanda and Rāhula, but to invite Devadatta, Kokālika, Kaṭamorakatissaka, Baṇḍadevīputta and Samuddadatta instead.

<sup>40</sup> In the *Bhikkhunivibhaṅga*, *pārājika* II, Thullanandā is said to have supported Aritta, a descendant of vulture hunters, a monk who was known to have been banished by the Saṅgha for his wrong views.

violated the traditional rules for naming a girl. Her given name may have been “Nandā”, which means “delightful girl”, and was, and continues to be, a common name for an Indian woman. The adjective *thulla*, which is disrespectful, would have been added to her name by people who were not sympathetic to her. In the Pāli Tipiṭaka she is cited as the agent of hundreds of wrongs. On the other hand, in spite of her name and the negative stories about her, she was also referred to elsewhere as “well learned,” “orator,” “having many students,” and the like. And she appears to have had her own school and her own disciples. These facts and the positive portrayals of “Thullanandā” suggest that she was one of the most outstanding nuns in the early Buddhist community. The *Vinaya* records two occasions when King Pasenadi of Kosala went to listen to her teachings. On both occasions the King offered her a gift of his own cloth (Vin IV 255, 256).

As a leader in the nuns’ community, Thullanandā would have earned a great deal of respect from students and other members of the Sangha. Monks who were attached to Brahmanical values, however, would see her as a troublemaker. That consideration leads us to view with suspicion the accusation that she belonged to the gang of Devadatta or Ariṭṭha who are portrayed in the Tipi-aka as troublemakers who are known for their misconduct – especially when we see her in a dispute with Mahākassapa who we know was opposed to Devadatta and Ariṭṭha.

From the information given in the discourse, and given Ānanda’s acknowledged status, Thullanandā was obviously not mistaken to question Mahākassapa’s referring to Ānanda as a child. Mahākassapa’s response is not merely self-flattering, but arrogant. It reads like the angry outburst of someone trumpeting his own glory in compensation for his insecurity, rather than like the wise, calm, dispassionate speech of an *arahant*. Such an outburst would not have subdued his opposition, who was not wrong in saying that he had formerly been an ascetic of another movement. The passage may have been as poorly executed attempt by the writers to lend greater credibility to Mahākassapa’s claim to the leadership of the Saṅgha, by attempting to portray him as superior to Ānanda and the nuns (who are depicted as angry and somewhat weak, respectively) – and who, according to the story, are “defeated” by Mahākassapa in the end when Thullanandā leaves the order.

According to his own account (above), Mahākassapa did not first ordain as a Buddhist monk. He renounced the worldly life, and became “dedicated to the *arahants*”. “The *arahants*” would have included any ascetic who claimed enlightenment for himself/herself. He met the Buddha later in his life on his travels as a wandering ascetic. Mahākassapa did not indeed accuse Thullanandā of telling a lie, but of failing to recognize his importance.

According to the *Vinaya*, Mahākassapa’s boasting<sup>41</sup> is against the *Pāṭimokkha* rule that prohibits monks from telling other people of their own spiritual attainments, even when their boasts are true (*Musāvādvagga*). In reality, his outburst did not bring an end to the conflict; rather, it led to a more heated argument from this nun, who is portrayed as having had a very strong will.

An interesting point here is that in the *Vinaya* stories of how and why the nuns’ rules were issued, there are no cases in which the Buddha personally interrogated a nun, though the Buddha is shown speaking to nuns elsewhere in the Tipitaka. For the monks’ rules, the Buddha himself questioned the monk whose actions were thought to be inappropriate. For the nuns, however, the Buddha is said to have issued rules upon receiving reports from monks. This may reveal that the monks were especially critical of the nuns, and frequently complained about them. Or it may be the result of the efforts of those who wrote down the *Vinaya* to make the texts conform to Brahmanical law (in which men avoid all forms of contact with women).

The *Cīvarasutta*, in which Thullanandā defended Ānanda against Mahākassapa, ends by reporting that Thullanandā left the order. We may well wonder why. Was she pressured to leave, or treated so badly that life in the order became intolerable? Did she leave voluntarily because she was ashamed at having challenged the authority of a senior monk? We would not expect either from such a strong and determined personality. But perhaps the conclusion of this discourse is merely an invective against Thullanandā, allowed to stand because nuns had so little input in the compiling and editing of the Tipitaka. It is possible that the dispute in this discourse reflects a much larger conflict, and that her appellation, and the records of her mischievous

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<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the wording could also be seen as an expression of the monk’s insecurity.

behavior, are slander, written by monks in authority who did not like strong women.

We have seen above that Mahākassapa is portrayed as having long been in the habit of criticizing young monks, complaining to the Buddha that they were difficult to teach, lacking in patience and so forth. He even went so far as to accuse disciples of Ānanda and Anuruddha of abusing each other with the Dharma that they had learned:

Mahākassapa then said to the Lord, “Lord, nowadays monks are difficult to teach. They do not comply with teaching, are not patient. They do not receive instruction with respect. Lord, in this religion, I see Bahṇḍa, a student of Ānanda, and Ābhijjika, a student of Anuruddha abusing each other with what they have learned, saying ‘O monk, who will talk more than the other? Who will talk better than the other? Who will talk longer than the other?’”  
*Ovādasutta 1, SN II: 204*

This is consistent with the way in which he reprimanded Ānanda after his disciples had allegedly disrobed and it confirms Mahākassapa’s authoritarian, orthodox personality. I have suggested that the reprimand of Ānanda occurred after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, and, hence would have been much later than his complaint to the Buddha. Mahākassapa appears to have expanded his legitimate range of criticism to include the teachers of the young monks, even where those teachers are senior and highly revered monks. In particular, he now makes bold to insult Ānanda himself as a child who lacks judgment. This suggests that Mahākassapa expanded his assumed area of authority after the death of the Buddha. The question is how far did it expand? And on what authority could he (or his followers) claim that expanded authority, given that the Buddha stated clearly before his *parinibbāna* that he would not appoint any person as the leader of the Saṅgha?

Thullanandā is not the only nun who is portrayed as having been in conflict with Mahākassapa. A similar incident takes place when Ānanda invites Mahākassapa to talk to the nuns at their convent. As soon as Mahākassapa began to speak:

At that time, Sister Thullatissā was displeased and expressed

her disappointment, “How is it that the Venerable Mahākassapa sees himself as suitable to take precedence over the Venerable Ānanda, the wise sage. It is like a needle dealer who is selling needles to a skillful needle maker. In the same way, Mahākassapa speaks in the territory of the Venerable Ānanda, the wise sage.” The Venerable Mahākassapa, having heard the words of the nun Thullatissā, spoke to the Venerable Ānanda, “Brother Ānanda, am I the needle dealer and you are the needle maker? Or, I am the needle maker, and you are the needle dealer?” The Venerable Ānanda replied, “Dear Venerable Mahākassapa, please forgive the woman. She is stupid.”

Mahākassapa said, “Hold on, Ānanda. Your party must not be too offensive! Ānanda, what do you think of this statement? Have ever you been brought for comparison in front of the Buddha in the community where the Buddha said, ‘Monks, longing to be away from sensual desire, freed from unwholesome thoughts, I reach the first *jhāna*, endowed with discursive thoughts, joy and happiness, born of solitude, for whatever length of time; and just like me, Ānanda, when he longs to be away from sensual desire, free from unwholesome thoughts, can reach the first *jhāna* endowed with discursive thought, joy and happiness born out of solitude for that length of time?’”

“No, sir,” Ānanda replied.

Mahākassapa said, “Brother, I have been brought in front of the Buddha in the community where the Buddha said: Monks, longing to be away from sensual desire, free from the unwholesome thoughts, I reach the first *jhāna*, endowed with discursive thoughts, joy and happiness, born of solitude, for whatever length of time; and Kassapa, too, when he longs to be away from sensual desire, free from unwholesome thoughts, he can reach the first *jhāna*, endowed with discursive thoughts, joy and happiness, born of solitude for that length of time.” [Stock description of the attainment of the nine *anupubbavihāras* and the nine *abhiññās*]

Mahākassapa continued, “Brother Ānanda, what do you think? Have ever you been brought for comparison in front of the community by the Buddha where the Buddha said, ‘Monks, I have

achieved the liberation of the mind and liberation of the wisdom which is free of all defilement, through the extinction of defilements through self-illuminated wisdom in the truth which has been seen in that way; Ānanda, too, has achieved the liberation of the mind and liberation of the wisdom which is free of all defilement, through the extinction of defilements through self-illuminated wisdom in the truth which has been seen in that way”?”

Ānanda replied, “No, sir.”

Mahākassapa continued, “Brother, I have been brought in front of the Buddha in the community where the Buddha said: Monks, I have achieved the liberation of the mind and liberation of the wisdom which is free of all defilement, through the extinction of defilements through self-illuminated wisdom in the truth which has been seen in that way; and Kassapa, too, achieves the liberation of the mind and liberation of the wisdom which is free of all defilement, through the extinction of defilements through self-illuminated wisdom in the truth which has been seen in that way.

Brother, whoever thinks that I should conceal my achievement of the six paranormal knowledges, should think to conceal a seven or seven-and-a-half foot elephant with a palm leaf.

In the end, Sister Thullatissā left the order. SN II, 215-217

Here again, Mahākassapa appears arrogant and makes himself out to be the equal of the Buddha in his attainments of transcendental knowledge. No one else in the Tipiṭaka is recorded as having made such a grandiose claim. The claim is belied, however, by the fact that Mahakapassa did not know of the Buddha’s death until seven days after the fact, when he learned of it from others. Had his powers been as great as he claims in this passage, he should have known of the Buddha’s impending death before the Buddha’s passing.

Some of the terminology used in the discourse is also indicative of a split in the Saṅgha. Thullatissā says, “in the territory of the Venerable Ānanda”, and Mahākassapa speaks to Ānanda of “your party”. This suggests lines of division among members of the Buddhist community – one party being that of Mahākassapa, and another being that of Ānanda and the nuns. It would be

interesting to discover the cause of the division.

Mahākassapa's behavior in this discourse is similar to that in his dispute with Thullanandā: he does not speak directly with the nun even though it is clear that she is present. Such behavior is unnatural and especially strange for one who is said to be enlightened – that is, one who has let go of all attachment to “self” and “self identity views.” His actions, however, are understandable, in terms of ritualized Brahminical society in which a Brahmin must not see or associate with menstruating woman. According to the *Dharmaśāstra*, menstrual blood is one of the twelve impurities of a woman's body. A strict Brahmin always endeavors to avoid contact with any woman, as he does not know whether or not she is menstruating. Mahākassapa is shown exhibiting this pattern of behavior in the *Vinaya* and in all the discourses in which he figures. It appears that someone who had a good understanding of Brahmanism carefully edited these passages to make it conform to Brahmin standards.

In neither discourse was Mahākassapa's response appropriate to the situation. In the former, he did not answer Thullanandā's question as to why he called Ānanda a child, and he did not answer of Thullatissā's question as to why he should teach in the territory of Ānanda. In neither case did he respond directly to the nun, but rather spoke to Ānanda who comes across as apologetic and asks Mahākassapa to forgive Thullatissā on the grounds that she is stupid. It is clear that both nuns were trying to protect Ānanda from Mahākassapa's mistreatment and that their actions had nothing to do with themselves or the well-being of the nun's order.

Mahākassapa did not forgive Thullatissā as Ānanda asked. Rather he accused Ānanda of taking sides with her. It seems bizarre that an *arahant* would make such petty accusations, complain, and be so proud as to boast about his supernatural achievements to his brothers and sisters in the Saṅgha. In both scenarios Mahākassapa responds to the challenge simply by claiming superiority over Ānanda, possibly implying that the nuns had chosen the wrong teacher. The results were the same in that, according to the stories, both nuns disrobed as a result of the disputes.

A literal interpretation of these two discourses may be unrealistic and inappropriate, as they were likely designed to serve as teaching tools in the Saṅgha – and indeed have served as such for no less than two thousand years. The character of Mahākassapa in the Pāli Tipiṭaka is quite consistent,

indicating firm confidence and pride in his achievements, and a tendency to see and point out the failings of other members of the Saṅgha – especially the nuns and Ānanda. He is also sometimes rather conspicuously portrayed (or portrays himself) as the Buddha’s equal. In the case of Thullatissā he presents himself as equal to the Buddha in his ability to access transcendental knowledge, although he acknowledges that his position is not accepted by everyone.

It appears that Mahākassapa commanded a significant number of followers among the members of the Saṅgha. Those who believed in him saw him as talented in meditation and possessing extraordinary paranormal abilities, with no less skill than that of the Buddha, while others saw him as a former heretic who had an imperfect knowledge of the teaching of the Buddha. The latter group appears to have constituted a minority faction within the Saṅgha – or at least, they were not the faction that wrote and redacted much of the Tipi-aka which survives today. These two nuns were likely outstanding leaders among that minority faction, which had little or no control over what has survived as the Buddhist canon. They may well have been portrayed unfairly as angry, complaining and disrespectful, and may have been depicted as having disrobed as a cautionary tale to other nuns who might consider challenging the authority of the male leaders of the Saṅgha.

In the Tipiṭaka, there are three persons whose name begins with the adjective “*thulla*”, the two nuns discussed above and a monk Thullatissā who was said to have been an *arahant*. Before his enlightenment, however, he is said to have had a rough personality. The two nuns who were called *thulla* were the only women who are recorded as having challenged Mahākassapa’s authority. Perhaps they failed to recognize how important he was. There may well have been other nuns who were displeased with Mahākassapa, but only Thullatissā and Thullanandā are named, and both suffer the same fate in the stories. These stories appear to reflect the power of Mahākassapa’s faction to eliminate those they saw as rivals – or to rewrite history as they saw fit.

### **Mahākassapa’s ascension to Saṅgha leadership**

In the Tipiṭaka Mahākassapa emerges as one of the most important disciples of the Buddha. His former name was Pippali and he was the son of a wealthy Brahmin family. His father’s name was Kapila and his mother’s

Sumanā. We learn that from his early childhood he was not happy with household life, and did not want to marry. However, his parents forced him to marry Bhaddā Kāpillannī, who was also unhappy with the householder's life. The newly wed couple agreed that they would not have a sexual relationship. They placed a garland of flowers on their bed to keep them apart. As soon as their parents were no more, they both renounced the world. One day, Kassapa met the Buddha and offered himself as one of his disciples; in the same way, Bhaddā Kāpillannī was ordained a nun under the Buddha, and they both soon attained enlightenment.

It is clear from his own words that Mahākassapa was a world renouncer of some other sect, who had renounced the world and dedicated himself to life of "the *arahants*", which was quite common in India. He was honored as a senior monk, expert in the practice of *dhutaṅga* (monastic austerity for shaking off defilements). His name frequently appears in the Tipiṭaka as one of the most famous *arahants* of the Buddha. He was not, however, in the inner circle of the Buddha's disciples, as were Sāriputta, Moggallāna and Ānanda. The latter was known to be the closest attendant of the Buddha and was also his first cousin who followed him like his own shadow for 25 years.

Mahākassapa apparently took on the leadership of the Saṅgha immediately after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha. That is not directly reported in the discourses or the *Vinaya*. But the description of the Buddha's cremation in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* suggests that the leadership (or at least that of the faction who wrote the account) had already passed to him. In the story, the pyre would not ignite because the deities wanted to wait for the arrival of Mahākassapa. The pyre ignited spontaneously once Mahākassapa had paid homage to the feet of the Buddha. From the description it is clear that, as the pyre burned, he was standing in front of the pyre, in the position of the male heir, the chief mourner, of the deceased according to *Smṛti* tradition.

It was highly unlikely, however, that the body of the Buddha was cremated seven days after his death. According to *Smṛti* tradition, the body should be cremated on the day of death or the day after. The *Mahāparinibbānasutta* does not mention any reason to delay cremation for an entire week. There are conflicting accounts in the discourse regarding the treatment of the Buddha's body. In one place the Buddha tells Ānanda that it is the duty of the laity to arrange for the cremation ceremonies. Later, he says that his body should be treated as

the body of a wheel-turning monarch (*cakkavattin*), and that the body should be wrapped in 500 folds of cloth, and placed in an iron container. In neither discussion is there any mention of the timing of the cremation. In Mahākassapa's own account, he heard about the death of the Buddha from a *Parivrājaka* as he was sitting on the road between Pāvā and Kusinārā. It was then too that he heard Subhadda's remark which, according to the story, prompted him to call for a council. In this vignette Mahākassapa mentions nothing about his intention to attend the Buddha's funeral, nor does the *Parivrājaka* tell him anything about the preparations for the funeral at Kusinārā.

It is likely that the Mahākassapa's arriving in time for the cremation was interpolated later, after Mahākassapa had assumed leadership of the Saṅgha in place of the Buddha. As mentioned, his physical location during the cremation was that of the heir of the deceased.<sup>42</sup> That the pyre is described as having ignited spontaneously is in keeping with the precept of some ascetics of that time in India, to keep no fire. Since lighting a fire may kill many tiny beings, these ascetics would not light fires.

Three times in the Tipiṭaka Mahākassapa is termed the "heir" of the Buddha; that is more often than anyone else. A passage in the "Moggallānatheragāthā" gives a strong endorsement to Mahākassapa as heir to the Buddha:

Brahmin, you must pay homage to the peaceful Venerable Kassapa,  
who takes delight in peace, and stays in peaceful places, the sage,  
the heir of the Buddha, who is the foremost among all humans.

Whosoever is a warrior, a Brahman descendant of 100 lives who is  
the master of the Three Vedas, even though he has mastered the  
mantra, and reached the shore of the three sensations:

homage to him, even frequently, is not equal to the sixteenth of the  
sixteenth of homage given only once to the Venerable Kassapa.

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<sup>42</sup> According to the most favored Āryan custom, the corpse was to be carried down to the burning ground as soon as possible after death, followed by mourners, the eldest leading; it was cremated, to the accompaniment of sacred texts; the mourners circumambulated the pyre, not in the auspicious clock-wise direction, but anti-clockwise; then they bathed in the nearest river, tank or lake and returned home; Basham, pp. 176.

Whosoever, a monk who in the morning enters the eight liberations,  
 forward and backward, and going on alms-round after leaving the  
 meditation,  
 O Brahmin, do not trouble him. Do not destroy yourself.  
 Take delight in the *Arahant*, the Constant One,  
 Raise your hands together in salutation to him!  
 Otherwise, your head will break into pieces. Thag. 1167-1173

Although the verse is attributed to Moggallāna, one of the chief disciples of the Buddha, it is more likely that the composition was the work of a later generation. The verse gives full support to Mahākassapa as the heir of the Buddha, and includes the threat that failure to honor him would result in one's head breaking apart.

Apart from these, there are a number of discourses in the Tipiṭaka that are attributed to Mahākassapa, rather than to the Buddha. Such prestige is shared by no one else in the Pāli Tipiṭaka.

### **The similarity of the format of the discourses of the Buddha and of Mahākassapa**

The discourses in the Tipiṭaka are structured in a limited number of ways. Most of them begin with the short sentence in Pāli "*Evaṃ me sutam*", commonly translated into English as "Thus have I heard", followed by stock phrases giving the location of the Buddha, "*Ekam samayaṃ bhagavā*", then the social setting, and finally leading to the discussion that is the substance of the discourse. Often the opening includes the Buddha's calling the monks to come and listen to him speak. At the end of the discourse, the listeners always express their appreciation.

Among the four most frequently addressed disciples of the Buddha are, Sāriputta (1991 times), Moggallāna (932 times), Mahākassapa (176 times) and Ānanda (3066 times). In no discourse attributed to Sāriputta does he call the monks to him, as is common for the Buddha. Only one of Moggallāna's discourses shares that feature.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Saṅyutta Nikāya, *Salayatanavagga*, *Moggallāsaṅyutta*, *Sakkasutta*, page 298, number 514.

At one time, the Venerable Mahāmogallāna was staying at Jeta Grove, the monastery of Anāthapiṇḍika near the city of Sāvathī. There, the Venerable Mahāmogallāna called upon the monks. The monks responded to the word of the Venerable Mahāmogallāna. The Venerable Mahāmogallāna said to them, “Brother, when I was staying in solitude, a thought arose in my mind that what indeed is called the First Jhāna?” SN IV, 263

Interestingly, this format is three times attributed to Mahākassapa:

The Buddha	Mahākassapa
<p>At one time, the Lord was staying at the Monastery of Bamboo Grove, a feeding ground for squirrels in Rājagaha. There, the Lord called upon the monks, "Monks." The monks responded to the Lord.</p> <p>The Lord said, "Monks, the lives of humans is very short..."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">SN I, 108</p>	<p>At one time, the Venerable Mahākassapa was staying at the Monastery of Bamboo Grove, a feeding ground squirrels in Rājagaha, There, the Venerable Mahākassapa called upon the monks: "Monks". The monks responded to the Venerable Mahākassapa.</p> <p>The Venerable Mahākassapa said, "Brother, monks in this religion..."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">AN V, 162</p>

In these two discourses, the same stock phrase, calling the monks to listen, is used to introduce the story. But significantly, Mahākassapa appears in the introductory portion of two discourses as the point of reference around which the discourse, and by implication the Saṅgha, is situated. In these discourses, he has, in effect, not only taken over the leadership of the Saṅgha, but *replaced* the Buddha himself.

<p>At one time, the Lord was staying at the Jeta Grove, the monastery of Anāthapiṇḍika, near Savatthī. At that time, in the morning, the Venerable Ānanda having put on his robe and taking hold of his bowl, entered the</p>	<p>At one time, the Venerable Mahākassapa was staying at the Jeta Grove, the monastery of Anāthapiṇḍika, near Savatthī. At that time, in the morning, the Venerable Ānanda, having put on his robe and taking hold of his bowl, entered the</p>
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home of Migasālā the lay woman... AN V, 137	residence of the Venerable Mahākassapa and said to him: "Sir, I invite you to the place of the nuns with me..." SN II, 215
At one time, the Lord was staying at the Monastery of the Bamboo Grove, a feeding ground for squirrels in Rājagaha. Early in the morning of an Uposatha Day, the Venerable Ānanda, having put on his robe and taking hold of his bowl, entered the city of Rājagaha. The Venerable Devadatta saw the Venerable Ānanda who was walking on alms-round in the city... Ud 60	At one time, the Venerable Mahākassapa was staying at the Monastery of the Bamboo Grove, a feeding ground squirrels in Rājagaha. At that time the Venerable Ānanda was wandering in the mountainous region to the south with a large group of monks. At the time, about 30 of his disciples, most of them still young, disrobed and returned to low way of life of the laity... SN II, 217

The stock phrases used to refer to the Buddha are also used to refer to Mahākassapa more often than for any other monk, in spite of the fact that there are monks whom the Buddha appears elsewhere in the Tipi-aka to have respected more highly, and who are mentioned more often than he is. This is not, I suggest, a matter of chance. We know that among the disciples of the Buddha, Sāriputta was most honored for his wisdom, yet discourses attributed to him are not framed in phrases seemingly reserved for the Buddha; yet such phrases are used to frame discourses attributed to the less highly esteemed Mahākassapa.

It seems likely that the use of such phrases in discourses attributed to Mahākassapa by those who wrote the Tipitaka, was influenced by his political power in the Saṅgha after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*. The impression conveyed of Mahākassapa's greatness was thus passed on to later generations, influencing the formation of the Tipiṭaka over the centuries.

Further evidence of Mahākassapa's assumption of power is seen in his willingness to publicly chastise Ānanda as "a child lacking judgment". In an earlier dialogue with the Buddha before his death he had criticized the younger monks, singling out the disciples of Ānanda and Anuruddha for their competition over mastery of the Buddha's teachings. Now, however, almost

certainly in the period after the Buddha had died, he is openly criticizing one of the most revered monks in the Saṅgha, a recognized *arahant* with a large following. Moreover, Mahākassapa's boasts of spiritual supremacy reveal the same competitiveness he had so loathed in the younger monks. His boasting also seems ethically inappropriate, and out of step with the Buddha's teaching. Such boasting to laity, indeed, would directly violate the *Vinaya*. His confrontational style also appears to flout that rule.

Brother, whoever thinks that I should conceal my attainment of the six paranormal powers, should think to conceal a seven or seven-and-a-half-foot elephant with a palm leaf.

Many who read his long, rather megalomaniacal responses to the two nuns are led to question his spiritual achievement. Nevertheless, other discourses indicate that he was a well accepted authority, at least among those who compiled the canon. Even his breach of the rules was left unquestioned. These discourses are evidence that Mahākassapa's faction controlled the composition of the canon.

### **Conflict between Mahākassapa and Ānanda**

In the *Cātumasutta* (MN I, 459), in which the Buddha learns of the death of his two most outstanding disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, the Buddha expresses worry. He says, "Only Sāriputta, Moggallāna or I could lead the Saṅgha."

In the Tipiṭaka, the names of *arahants* appear in stock lists headed by Sāriputta and Moggallāna with Mahākassapa as the third. Given that Sāriputta and Moggallāna died before the Buddha, it appears that Mahākassapa rose to the top of the list, and thus became heir apparent to the leadership of the Saṅgha. It is quite possible, however, that the stock list of senior monks was produced *after* the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, as part of a movement to consolidate Mahākassapa's leadership. We have seen the attempt in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* to place Mahākassapa in the position of the legitimate heir of the Buddha in the scene of the Buddha's cremation. Any member of the contemporary Indian community who was acquainted with its traditions and culture and who heard this account would understand Mahākassapa's physical position at the cremation as certain indication that Mahākassapa was the

designated leader. Other discourses in the Tipiṭaka appear also to be deliberate attempts to present Mahākassapa as the legitimate successor to the Buddha. As we have seen, he claimed to have received the dust-robe made of new cotton from the Buddha, and he was, at least in his own words, a monk whose skill in meditation was equal to that of the Buddha himself. But the strongest proof that he took on the leadership of the Saṅgha (or an important faction thereof) is in his convening of the First Council, the most important post-*parinibbāna* event in the history of Theravada Buddhism.

However, Mahākassapa's leadership had already been challenged well before he assumed the role, by the Buddha's instructions before his *parinibbāna*: "The Dharma-*Vinaya* that the Tathāgata has expounded will remain the leader of the Saṅgha." This and two other declarations made by the Buddha (discussed below), remembered by Ānanda and others, were among Mahākassapa's chief obstacles.

### **Cause of conflict: rivalry for leadership of the Saṅgha?**

The following dialogue between Ānanda and an officer of the King Ajātasattu, Vassakāra, in the *Gopaka Mogallānasutta* confirms that the Buddha did not want any one person to be in charge of the community after his death.

Vassakāra said, "Dear Venerable Ānanda, is there any monk who the Blessed Gotama appointed so that after his *parinibbāna* that monk will be the refuge of the other monks, and whom you should now approach?"

Ānanda replied, "O Brahmin, there is no monk who the Lord, the Fully Awakened *Arahant* saw and appointed so that after his *parinibbāna* that monk would be our refuge, and whom we should now approach. MN III, 9

This exchange is a part of Vassakāra's inquiry. In the Tipiṭaka, he was the most well known officer of the king of Magadha – probably the officer accountable for religious affairs within the state. (It was also possible that Vassakāra, literally, "rain-maker" was not actually a name, but rather, was a title of a senior officer who was the head of the religious affairs of the state

of Magadha.)<sup>44</sup> He was perplexed by the fact that the Buddha had appointed no monk to take his place as head of the community, simply because it did not conform to the *Smṛti* tradition.

Jainism (according to Jain scriptures) split into two sects after the death of the founder Mahāvīra, because the two most prominent leaders had different ideas of how to manage the community. The schism has been seen by some as a result of Mahāvīra's failure to appoint a successor. According to the *Dharmaśāstra*, a religious community is like a family in which authority will be passed to the eldest son or closest relative when the founder dies (in case of the Buddhist community this would mean the position should have been passed to Ānanda or Rāhula<sup>45</sup>).

But the Tipiṭaka gives endorsement to Mahākassapa whom it describes as the most excellent son of the Buddha, and heir of the Buddha. That endorsement makes it appear as though Mahākassapa's ascension to leadership was already prefigured before the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, though – given the Buddha's clear instructions that no one was suitable to become leader after his death – it was more likely interpolated after that ascension. It seems likely that Mahākassapa had a great deal of support from an important faction of monks for his taking the leadership, and that he marshaled this support to convene the First Council despite the instructions that there should be no leader, given by the late founder of the community.<sup>46</sup> (It is also possible that the story of the First Council was the construct of a later generation of monks seeking to

<sup>44</sup> See also, Malalasekera, G.P., Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Vol II, Indian Text Series, London, 1938, p.846-848.

<sup>45</sup> According to the *Smṛti*, the heir to the succession of a deceased mendicant, ascetic, or hermit, are those who are close members of the family who are also disciples or adopted disciples. See also, Grady, S G, A treatise on Hindu Law of Inheritance, London, 1868, p.305, and Sarkar, R N, A Treatise on Hindu Law, Eastern Law House, Calcutta, 1927. pp. 775-777. According to Manu IX, 187, the nearest Sapinda is the heir to the inheritance.

<sup>46</sup> See also, Gombrich, Theravāda Buddhism, pp.56. The majority of monks and nuns in early Buddhist community were from large cities (86% from just four cities), and 40% of them were Brahmin (majority). This could explain Mahākassapa's ascension to the leadership of one group – he would have received support from many members of his caste in the Buddhist community.

validate and glorify their leader and sect.)

According to the *Vinaya* account of the First Council, many elders petitioned Mahākassapa to include Ānanda in the council, despite the fact that Ānanda was not yet an *arahant*. Mahākassapa gave in and Ānanda was invited. The commentarial tradition maintains that Mahākassapa had prepared a list of 499 monks to which he anticipated Ānanda would be added, but because the latter was not yet an *arahant* he was not included. The Tipiṭaka then gives a dramatic account of Ānanda's enlightenment the night before the council was to begin. The dramatic nature of this account of Ānanda's "last minute enlightenment," and other details like the funeral pyre bursting into flames and the strangely round figure of 500 *arahants* invited to attend the meeting, suggest an effort by those who wrote the story to revise events in order to legitimize and give a myth-like quality to Mahākassapa's succession to leadership of the Saṅgha.

But the Tipiṭaka also tells us that the attainment of *arahatship* is not something that anyone can detect. Only the Buddha could identify whether or not a person was an *arahant*. A discourse in the Khuddaka Nikāya, *Bhaddiyasutta II* (Ud. 75), tells us that even the great Sāriputta failed to recognize that the monk Lakunṭhaka Bhaddiya, who he was teaching, had been an *arahant* for some time.

It is odd then that the state of being an *arahant* was required for an invitation to the council. If even an *arahant* of great wisdom like Sāriputta could not identify one, how did Mahākassapa know who was and who was not an *arahant*? And how was it determined that Ānanda had become an *arahant* at the last minute?

From the description of the Council meeting, it is difficult, indeed, to accept that the participants were, in fact, *arahants*. In their chastisement of Ānanda, and their responses to the question of which rules constituted minor rules—and thus could be abrogated – they come across more as Brahmins under the influence of *Smṛti* than as well-informed followers of the Buddha – let alone *arahants*.

The Tipiṭaka contains evidence that Ānanda might in fact have been an *arahant* even before he became an attendant of the Buddha. The following humble story, in which Ānanda's claim that he is enlightened is framed with reverence to his teacher, to whom he was indebted, contains more credibility than the boastful utterances of Mahākassapa. According to this passage,

Ānanda was an *arahant* even before he served the Buddha as his attendant.

being liberated, you know that you are liberated. You know that this birth is your last. The noble life has been lived. Your duty is done. There is no other duty you must do.” Brother, the Venerable Mantānīputta whose name is Puṇṇa, to whom I owed so much as a newly ordained monk, taught me with these words. Because of listening to the teachings of the Venerable Puṇṇa Mantānīputta, I am enlightened. SN III, 105

The Tipiṭaka also has several references to the Ānanda’s status. He is said to have had as many students as Sāriputta, Anuruddha, Moggallāna, and Mahākassapa, and he is praised highly by the Buddha. A question we may ask is: What criteria did Mahākassapa use to identify an *arahant*?

### **The outcome of the suppression**

It seems clear that the *garudhammas* would create social dilemmas and conflicts in the nuns’ community and the community as a whole. The first rule alone, which is neither practical, nor compassionate, would have resulted in serious negative health consequences for elderly nuns, and would have undermined their status in the community. It requires all nuns – including those well over the age of a hundred (the passage stipulates “even those who have been ordained for a hundred years”) – to bow down in reverence to the feet of all monks, including even those who had “just been ordained that day.” For elderly nuns (the most likely also to be among the most important and revered leaders in the Buddhist community), who might encounter dozens, if not hundreds, of monks in a given day, the rule is clearly impractical and harmful, and designed to lower their status in the community. It would also have forced such elderly nuns who were incapable of bowing down to the ground, to remain in isolation.

Also, we learn from the *Therīgāthā* that the nuns were actively engaged in teaching and propagating Buddhism in the larger society. Many of them would have been successful in converting both men and women. If nun’s male student ordained as a monk, trouble would immediately arise since the nun whom he then revered and respected would be required to bow down at his feet.

Such situations would have been awkward and destructive to the growth of Buddhism, and would serve no good for any individual monk, nun or the Buddhist community. They would also have resulted in feelings of great disillusionment and the sense that the “false Dharma had arisen in the world.”

According to the Legend of the nuns’ order, the purpose of the *garudhammas* was to contain women’s disease-like influence. However, close examination of the Tipi-aka reveals women and nuns to be no more guilty of negative behavior than men/monks – to the contrary nuns are clearly portrayed as being among the most important teachers and gifted disciples of the Buddha. The evidence found in numerous passages in the Tipi-aka strongly suggests that the rules were not established by the Buddha, but rather by a group of monks who were proud of their caste and their gender and serious about their Brahmanical values – Brahmins who had not abandoned their belief system and remained attached to the mandates of the Law Book of Manu.

The *garudhammas* would not immediately have succeeded in disbanding the order of nuns. But rules like the two year postulancy (in the *garudhammas*), and rules in the *Vinaya* such as rule twelve in the *Pācittiyakaṇḍa* of the *Kumārīvagga*, which prohibits a preceptor of nuns from ordaining women in consecutive years; and rule thirteen, which limits the number of candidates for ordination to no more than two in any one year (with the justification that there was not sufficient space for nuns’ residences), would have significantly slowed the growth of the order. Brahmanical cultural influence would have made enforcement of these rules easier. Their purpose was clearly to undermine the authority and credibility of the nun’s order, and to place the nuns under the authority of the monks.

These two rules are framed as the words of the Buddha. But they are inconsistent with the other rules in the *Vinaya*. They show that efforts to reduce the number of nuns most likely lasted for several generations after the passing away of the Buddha. In the end, as we know, the nun’s order disappeared from its motherland, together with the Buddhist religion.

### **A voice of a *bhikkhūṇī* in despair: a testimony of discrimination**

One short verse, a saying of Gotamī Therī in her valediction to the Saṅgha, satirically comments on the stupidity of an unknown teacher, who was

once a member of a heretic sect, whose intelligence is compared to that of a 7-year-old girl. In this particular verse, she mentions many names of respected monks who were dedicated specifically to Ānanda. More interestingly, the name of Mahākassapa is not included in the list of her revered *arahants*.

The fact that the term “*former heretic*” which is also used by Thullanandā when she refers to Mahākassapa in the quote cited earlier, gives support to the argument that the “*former heretic*” Gotamī Therī is referring to is indeed Mahākassapa. It is eventful that the passage has been preserved in a male-dominated community for over two thousand years. This is the echo of the voice of one of the most important and accomplished bhikkhunis, whose words make clear that she was an ally of Ānanda at a time of serious disagreement over the interpretation of the Dharma and the future of the Buddhist religion, after the passing away of the Buddha.

Gotamī Therī, addresses the Venerable Ānanda, the Master of the Doctrine,

The Ocean Depth he is, meticulous attendant of the Buddha,

Saying this: My child, when the time of joy arrives,

You should not be sad about my death, the end of my Nibbāna is at hand.

My dear, the Teacher gave me permission to be ordained.

My dear, do not be sad.

Your effort is not fruitless.

***Whatever words have escaped the mind of the honorable teacher who was a former heretic,***<sup>47</sup>

***those words are clearly understood by a 7-year-old girl.***

Take care of the Buddhist religion.

<sup>47</sup> “*yaṃ na diṭṭhaṃ purāṇehi tiṭṭhikācariyehi ca, taṃ padaṃ sukumārīhi sattavassāhi veditaṃ.*”

I translate the term “*tiṭṭhikācariyehi*” as an honorific plural. It can be also literally translated as “teachers who were former heretics” – thus, it could also refer to a faction of heretic monks. This sarcasm would have been very serious in the misogynous culture of the ancient Buddhist community, just as it would be in a modern Saṅgha now. It is an echo from over two thousand years ago from the oppressed Buddhist nun’s order which has managed to be heard in our modern time.

This is my last sight of you.  
 To the direction unperceivable by people,  
 Son, I am leaving you for that.

Ap. 53

One of the most important roles that religions play in the world is to promote and perpetuate morality, care and compassion among all of humankind. Religions that discriminate against people, within or without their ranks – whether based on gender, race, ancestry, or any other characteristic – weaken the religions themselves. Gender discrimination immediately limits the development of half the human potential of those who practice the religion, and also has a similar negative affect on the culture at large. This is especially damaging when the half discriminated against has such great talent and ability as nurturers and educators. To exclude women from the religious community would seem to cripple the community as it performed its central functions. Equally important, such discrimination undermines the most fundamental beliefs of religion—compassion, equal respect for others, non-judgment, kindness, and non-discrimination.

As it turned out, Buddhism did not withstand the challenge of time in India. Evidence revealed in the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, and throughout the Tipi-aka clearly demonstrates the importance of nuns in the early Buddhist community, and the monks' tendency to focus on solitary meditation, rather than spreading the Dharma. This suggests that the later suppression of the nun's order may well have been an important factor in the extinction of Buddhism from its motherland.<sup>48</sup>

Portraying women as “mildew or blight” that would destroy the religion seriously undermined their opportunity for personal development within the religion and in cultures where the religion spread. Yet in the time of the Buddha women were in the forefront of the community, and played an important role in promoting the new religion. They were denied these functions after the passing away of the Buddha. Suppressed and robbed of its vital role, the order of nuns would have likely lost its coherence, declined and finally disappeared from the spiritual circle of Buddhist India.

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<sup>48</sup> Mettanando Bhikkhu, *Hed Kued Por Sor Nueng*, Vol II, p. 318.

## **The Therīgāthā: monument of the golden age of women in Buddhism**

Virtually all canonical material that has survived until today from the very early days of most world religions appears to have been composed, or at least edited by men. This is not to say that all the texts were initially written by men, but rather, because of the inevitable close relationship between religious leaders and those who ruled through physical might, it was men who were able to control access to the texts, and who could edit, rewrite, or eliminate passages within them.

This was also true of Buddhism, the religion of peace, liberation, equality, compassion, and wisdom. The *Therīgāthā* is the only book composed entirely by women that found its way into the Tipiṭaka. Those woman authors were honored as *arahants*.

The *Therīgāthā* is a monument to the period of Buddhist history in which women made their greatest achievements – though many passages in the Tipiṭaka seem tailored to delegitimize and limit their power. It was an age in which Buddhism offered equal opportunities and rights to all of its ordained members, regardless of gender – a time in which women had social acceptance and recognition in the Sangha, and fulfilled their greatest potentialities, achieving the highest spiritual states.

The wording and images in these verses of the enlightened nuns portray the personal impressions of nuns inspired by the Buddha's teachings. These verses often reveal an unshakable loyalty, and the total trust that their authors had in the Buddha. They also reveal the care and trust that the Buddha had for each of his female disciples. The nuns were also bold in promoting the teachings of the Buddha in the male-dominated Brahmanical society of ancient India. These verses, and many others found throughout the Tipiṭaka, demonstrate that the nuns were just the opposite of pests that would destroy the religion as claimed in the *Vinaya* on the origin of the nun's order at the end of the Eight Garudhammas.

From the *Therīgāthā*, we learn that the Buddha gave a great deal of instruction to his nuns. However, less than one percent of the discourses in the canon are addressed to nuns. In the *Vinaya* there is no record of the Buddha

speaking directly to a woman. It is reasonable to suppose that if all four groups of disciples – monks, nuns, laymen and lay women – had been included in the compiling of the canon, as the Buddha had instructed, the contents of the canon would have been quite different. As we have seen, however, according to the *Tipi-aka*, the First Council, which is credited with compiling the canon, included only 500 monks – monks selected, moreover, not by general consent, but by one man. Whether it was the Council itself, or those who wrote its story – those who compiled and reconstructed much of the canon were deeply concerned with Brahmanical values, especially the status of women. The views and writings of that group played an important role in shaping the beliefs and direction of the religion in millennia to come.

## Conclusion

Evidence found throughout the *Tipiṭaka* strongly suggests that one of the primary agendas of the First Council (or of its writers) was the suppression of the nun's order – a process which likely lasted for several centuries under the domination of Brahmanism in the *Saṅgha*. The Council was not conducted according to the Buddha's suggestions in his dialogue with Cunda, the brother of *Sāriputta* – in which the Buddha stipulated that the whole *Saṅgha* should gather to compile the canon. The fact that *Mahākassapa* became the leader also violates the Buddha's instruction that no one individual was qualified to be the leader – the Dharma itself would be the Teacher. Given the time and attention spent describing the accusations against, and castigation of *Ānanda* at the Council meeting (half of which concerned issues relating to women) compared with the very brief mention of the discussion and recording of the Dharma and *Vinaya*, it can be seen that those who wrote the account of the Council were more interested and concerned with the former. Their agenda is also suggested by information found in numerous passages throughout the *Tipiṭaka*; and by similarities between a number of those passages and Brahmanical texts and traditions, revealed by comparing and contrasting sources.

*Sāriputta* encouraged the Buddha to organize his teachings and the Buddha agreed. This makes clear that the canon began to be formed while the Buddha was still alive, and was not solely created or begun by the First Council, as claimed. This is confirmed by the fact that the entire *Tipiṭaka*, as it

stands today, is far too large and substantial a collection of material to have been solely the work of the First Council. Considerable evidence suggests that the process of compiling the canon took centuries to complete. A passage in the sutras even refers to a special dispensation for monks to go out collecting stories about the Buddha, long after his death. Evidently, many parts of the *Vinaya* and the sutras were composed long afterward.

The eight *garudhammas* were likely introduced some time not long after the Buddha's passing, and retroactively put into the mouth of the Buddha. The nuns who had most likely lived quite independently when the Buddha was alive, would have been forced to be dependent on monks, and their right to ordain new members without the participation of monks was denied. All nuns, including the very old, were obliged to bow to the feet of every monk, regardless of seniority. Monastic rules seriously restricted the ordination of nuns while monks could be freely ordained at any time: women had to serve a two-year postulancy before they were fully ordained, and preceptors of nuns were allowed to ordain no more than two women at a time, and no more frequently than once every two years.

Sadly, the karma of sexism is still healthy and strong in Buddhist countries, especially in Theravada countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, and Cambodia. Only in Sri Lanka are women allowed to be legally ordained in Theravāda monastic orders. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the ordination of women is illegal. The Ecclesiastical Council of Thailand, for example, announced publicly that any monk who supports the ordination of women would be subject to severe punishment. In the Theravāda tradition as a whole, sexist rules and teachings are followed faithfully as the authentic words of the Lord Buddha. Hundreds of millions of Buddhist women, and women who live in Buddhist countries today, are treated as inferior, and are often unwelcome in Buddhist communities. But gender discrimination or sexism was not a part of the original teaching of the Buddha, who excluded no one.

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