



Provenance of Theravada Buddhist Ordinance and Current Procedures in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper explores the historical origins and evolution of Theravada Buddhist ordination procedures, with a specific focus on Myanmar. By delving into the traditional practices and textual sources, as well as examining contemporary procedures, this paper aims to provide insights into the continuity and changes in the ordination process within the Theravada tradition. Additionally, it analyzes the significance of ordination rituals and their role in shaping the monastic community in Myanmar.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism, Myanmar, Ordinance, Monastic, Provenance, Buddhist Philosophy

Introduction :

- The ordination process stands as a cornerstone of Theravada Buddhism, serving as a sacred rite of passage that signifies the formal entry of individuals into the monastic order and signifies their unwavering commitment to the Buddhist path. In Myanmar, a nation steeped in Theravada Buddhist tradition, the ordination procedure holds a venerable place within the religious and cultural tapestry, with roots extending back over centuries. This research paper endeavors to unravel the historical origins and evolution of Theravada Buddhist ordination while delving into the contemporary practices observed in Myanmar.
- Theravada Buddhism, often regarded as the "Doctrine of the Elders," traces its lineage directly to the teachings of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. It upholds the Pali Canon, comprising the Tripitaka (Three Baskets), as its authoritative scripture, providing meticulous guidelines for the monastic life, including the ordination process. Within this tradition, the act of ordination symbolizes a solemn commitment to renounce worldly attachments and embrace a life dedicated to spiritual pursuit, ethical conduct, and liberation from suffering. Myanmar, with its deeply ingrained Theravada Buddhist ethos, has been a bastion of Buddhist ordination practices for generations. The ordination ceremony, steeped in ritualistic significance and cultural reverence, remains a pivotal event in the lives of devout Buddhists across the country. This paper seeks to unravel the historical provenance of Theravada Buddhist ordination, tracing its evolution through the annals of time to its contemporary manifestations in Myanmar.
- The ordination process in Theravada Buddhism finds its roots in the time of the Buddha himself, who established the monastic sangha as a community of practitioners committed to the pursuit of enlightenment. The Vinaya Pitaka, a key component of the Pali Canon, meticulously delineates the rules and regulations governing the ordination of monks and nuns, offering invaluable insights into the early ordination procedures practiced during the Buddha's lifetime. Over the centuries, Theravada Buddhist ordination practices have evolved in response to varying socio-cultural contexts and geographical landscapes. In Myanmar, this evolution has been shaped by indigenous customs, regional influences, and historical developments. The ordination ceremony, conducted with meticulous attention to detail and spiritual fervor, represents a sacred rite of passage for aspiring monks and nuns, marking their formal entry into the monastic fold.
- Contemporary Myanmar continues to uphold the sacred tradition of Theravada Buddhist ordination, albeit amidst the backdrop of modernity and globalization. The ordination process remains a revered institution, attracting individuals from all walks of life who seek solace, spiritual guidance, and liberation from the cycle of suffering. In the following sections, this research paper will delve deeper into the historical origins, evolution, and contemporary practices of Theravada Buddhist ordination in Myanmar, shedding light on its enduring significance in the country's religious and cultural landscape.

Historical Origins of Theravada Buddhist Ordination:

The roots of Theravada Buddhist ordination can be traced back to the time of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in ancient India around the 6th century BCE. Central to the Buddha's teachings was the establishment of the monastic sangha, a community of ordained monks and nuns dedicated to practicing and propagating the Dhamma, or the Buddha's teachings. The ordination of monks and nuns played a pivotal role in the dissemination of Buddhism and the preservation of its teachings.

The Vinaya Pitaka, one of the three baskets of the Pali Canon, contains the rules and regulations governing the monastic discipline and conduct of the Sangha. Within the Vinaya Pitaka, the Khandhaka section provides detailed guidelines for the ordination process, outlining the procedures to be followed by both the ordaining preceptor (upajjhaya) and the candidate (samanera or bhikkhu). These early texts serve as the foundation of contemporary Theravada Buddhist ordination practices and offer valuable insights into the rituals and protocols observed during the Buddha's time. The ordination process typically begins with a period of probation during which the candidate undergoes training and preparation under the guidance of a qualified preceptor. This period allows the candidate to familiarize themselves with the monastic rules and regulations, as well as to demonstrate their commitment to the monastic life. Once the candidate has completed the probationary period and met the requisite criteria, they are deemed eligible for ordination.

The ordination ceremony itself is a solemn and sacred occasion, marked by ritualistic observances and symbolic gestures. The candidate, dressed in white robes, approaches the ordaining preceptor and expresses their intention to join the Sangha. The preceptor then administers the Triple Refuge (Tisarana) and the Ten Precepts (Dasasila), guiding the candidate through the vows and commitments of monastic life. Following the recitation of the vows, the candidate is formally ordained as a novice monk (samanera) or fully ordained monk (bhikkhu), depending on their level of commitment and readiness. Throughout the ordination ceremony, various rituals and chants are performed to invoke blessings and spiritual merit. The shaving of the candidate's head symbolizes the renunciation of worldly attachments and the embrace of the monastic life. The donning of the saffron robes, representing simplicity and humility, signifies the candidate's commitment to the principles of poverty and contentment. These ritualistic acts serve to reinforce the candidate's resolve and dedication to the Buddhist path.

In addition to the ordaining preceptor, the ordination ceremony may also involve the participation of a quorum of monks, known as the Sangha, who bear witness to the candidate's vows and offer their blessings and support. The presence of the Sangha underscores the communal aspect of the ordination process and the interconnectedness of the monastic community. The ordination of nuns follows a similar process, with the candidate undergoing training and preparation under the guidance of a qualified preceptor. However, due to historical and cultural factors, the ordination of nuns in Theravada Buddhist countries has been subject to greater scrutiny and controversy compared to the ordination of monks. In recent years, efforts have been made to revive the Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha and reinstate the full ordination of women in line with the Buddha's original teachings.

The historical origins of Theravada Buddhist ordination can be traced back to the time of the Buddha, who established the monastic sangha as a vital institution for the preservation and propagation of his teachings. The Vinaya Pitaka provides detailed guidelines and regulations governing the ordination process, which form the basis of contemporary Theravada Buddhist ordination practices. The ordination ceremony, marked by ritualistic observances and symbolic gestures, serves as a sacred rite of passage for individuals seeking to embark on the path of monastic life.

Evolution of Ordination Procedures in Myanmar:

Throughout its long history, Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar has witnessed the evolution and adaptation of ordination procedures in response to changing socio-cultural contexts and regional variations. While the fundamental principles of the ordination process remain consistent with the teachings of the Buddha, specific rituals and ceremonies have evolved over time, reflecting local customs, traditions, and cultural influences. This section explores the evolution of ordination procedures in Myanmar, highlighting key rituals and ceremonies observed in contemporary practice. The ordination process in Myanmar typically begins with a period of preparation and training for prospective candidates. This preparatory phase, known as the novitiate or samanera training, allows individuals to familiarize themselves with the monastic lifestyle, ethical precepts, and fundamental teachings of Buddhism. During this period, candidates may reside in monasteries under the guidance of experienced monks, engaging in study, meditation, and communal activities to cultivate spiritual virtues and discipline.

Once deemed ready for ordination, candidates undergo a formal ceremony known as the "ordination proper" (upasampada), during which they receive higher ordination as fully ordained monks (bhikkhus). The ordination ceremony typically takes place in a monastery or a designated ordination hall, with the participation of senior monks, lay supporters, and family members. The ceremony is presided over by a preceptor (upajjhaya), who acts as the officiant and guide for the candidates throughout the ordination process. The ordination ceremony begins with the chanting of Pali verses, including the Triple Refuge (Tisarana) and the Ten Precepts (Dasasila), reaffirming the candidate's commitment to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, as well as the ethical principles of monastic life. The recitation of these verses serves as a solemn invocation of spiritual blessings and protection, setting the tone for the ordination proceedings.

Following the chanting of Pali verses, the candidate undergoes symbolic rituals that signify their renunciation of worldly attachments and their formal entry into the monastic community. One of the most significant rituals is the shaving of the candidate's head, symbolizing the relinquishment of vanity, ego, and attachment to physical appearance. The act of shaving the head is often performed by the preceptor or senior monks, accompanied by prayers

and blessings for the candidate's spiritual journey. After the shaving of the head, the candidate is clothed in traditional monastic robes, symbolizing their commitment to simplicity, humility, and detachment from material possessions. The robes are typically saffron-colored, though variations may exist depending on regional customs and traditions. The donning of monastic robes is accompanied by ceremonial gestures and recitations, reinforcing the candidate's resolve to live according to the principles of the Vinaya, or the monastic code of discipline.

Once the candidate has been formally ordained as a bhikkhu, they are welcomed into the monastic community with expressions of joy, reverence, and support from fellow monks, lay supporters, and family members. The newly ordained monk is then guided through the post-ordination procedures, including instruction on monastic rules, daily routines, and ethical conduct, to ensure their smooth transition into monastic life. In addition to the ordination of monks, Myanmar also has a long-standing tradition of ordaining nuns (bhikkhunis), though the revival of the Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha has been subject to greater challenges and controversies compared to the ordination of monks. Efforts have been made in recent years to reintroduce the full ordination of women in line with the Buddha's original teachings, though progress has been slow and met with resistance from traditionalist quarters.

The evolution of ordination procedures in Myanmar reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and adaptation within the Theravada Buddhist tradition. While the fundamental principles of ordination remain rooted in the teachings of the Buddha, specific rituals and ceremonies have evolved over time to accommodate changing cultural, social, and institutional contexts. The ordination process continues to serve as a sacred rite of passage for individuals seeking to embark on the path of monastic life, symbolizing their commitment to spiritual cultivation, ethical conduct, and the pursuit of liberation from suffering.

Contemporary Ordination Procedures in Myanmar:

In modern-day Myanmar, the tradition of ordination continues to be a revered and integral aspect of Theravada Buddhist practice. The process of ordination serves as a significant milestone for individuals who aspire to lead a monastic life dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment and enlightenment. In Myanmar, prospective candidates for ordination undergo a rigorous process of training and preparation before participating in the ordination ceremony, which is conducted with great solemnity and reverence.

Prospective candidates for ordination typically begin their journey by expressing their intention to ordain to a qualified preceptor or senior monk. This initial step marks the beginning of a period of preparation and training, during which candidates are required to undertake various practices aimed at cultivating the qualities and virtues necessary for monastic life. These practices may include studying Buddhist scriptures, observing precepts, and engaging in meditation and contemplation under the guidance of experienced monastics.

Throughout the training period, candidates receive instruction and guidance from senior monks or preceptors who serve as mentors and spiritual advisors. These mentors provide support and guidance to candidates, helping them navigate the challenges and complexities of monastic life and offering insights into the teachings of the Buddha. Candidates are expected to demonstrate their commitment to the monastic path through their conduct, adherence to precepts, and dedication to spiritual practice. Once candidates have completed the required period of training and preparation, they are deemed ready to participate in the ordination ceremony. The ordination ceremony itself is a solemn and elaborate affair, steeped in ritual and tradition, and attended by family members, friends, and members of the local community. The ceremony typically takes place in a monastery or temple, with the candidate surrounded by a gathering of monks, lay devotees, and well-wishers.

The ordination ceremony begins with a period of recitation and chanting, during which the candidate and attending monks invoke blessings and spiritual merit. Pali verses, drawn from the Buddhist scriptures, are recited to invoke the presence and blessings of the Triple Gem – the Buddha, the Dhamma (his teachings), and the Sangha (the monastic community). These verses serve to affirm the candidate's commitment to the monastic life and to express their reverence for the Buddha and his teachings. Following the recitation of Pali verses, the candidate undergoes a series of symbolic rituals that mark their formal entry into the monastic order. One of the central rituals involves the shaving of the candidate's head, symbolizing the renunciation of worldly attachments and the adoption of a life of simplicity and humility. The candidate is then presented with the traditional saffron robes, which symbolize their commitment to the monastic life and their role as a member of the Sangha.

Throughout the ordination ceremony, the candidate receives the guidance and blessings of the attending monks, who offer words of encouragement, advice, and support. Family members and friends also play an active role in the ceremony, offering their blessings and support to the candidate as they embark on their spiritual journey. The ordination process in modern-day Myanmar remains a sacred and revered tradition, attracting individuals from diverse backgrounds who seek spiritual fulfillment and enlightenment. Prospective candidates for ordination undergo a rigorous process of training and preparation before participating in the ordination ceremony, which is conducted with great solemnity and reverence. The ceremony serves as a significant milestone in the lives of individuals who aspire to lead a monastic life dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual awakening and liberation from suffering.

Significance of Ordination Rituals in Myanmar:

The ordination rituals in Myanmar, deeply rooted in Theravada Buddhist tradition, hold profound significance for both individual candidates and the broader monastic community. These rituals mark a pivotal moment of transition, symbolizing the formal entry of candidates into the monastic life and

their commitment to following the teachings of the Buddha. Additionally, ordination ceremonies serve as occasions for rejoicing and reaffirming the commitment of the monastic community to upholding the precepts of the Vinaya.

For individual candidates, the ordination ceremony represents a transformative milestone in their spiritual journey. It signifies their decision to renounce worldly attachments and dedicate themselves to the pursuit of spiritual awakening and liberation from suffering. The ordination rituals, including the shaving of the head and the donning of monastic robes, serve as powerful symbols of this renunciation and commitment. Through these rituals, candidates publicly declare their intention to lead a life of simplicity, ethical conduct, and spiritual practice in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. Moreover, the ordination ceremony provides candidates with a sense of belonging and connection to the broader monastic community. By undergoing the same rituals and ceremonies as countless generations of monks and nuns before them, candidates become part of a lineage that stretches back to the time of the Buddha. This sense of lineage and tradition instills a deep sense of reverence and respect for the monastic path and the teachings of the Buddha.

Furthermore, the ordination rituals serve as a powerful reminder of the impermanence and transience of worldly existence. The act of shaving the head and donning the monastic robes symbolizes the ephemeral nature of physical beauty and material possessions, highlighting the importance of inner qualities such as wisdom, compassion, and equanimity. By embracing a life of renunciation and simplicity, candidates acknowledge the fleeting nature of worldly pleasures and commit themselves to the pursuit of lasting happiness and liberation. For the monastic community, ordination ceremonies represent moments of celebration and reaffirmation of their shared commitment to the Buddha's teachings. As candidates are welcomed into the Sangha, the monastic community rejoices in the continued vitality and growth of the Buddhist tradition. The presence of senior monks and mentors at the ordination ceremony reinforces the sense of lineage and tradition within the monastic community, fostering a spirit of mentorship and support for newly ordained monks and nuns.

Moreover, ordination ceremonies provide opportunities for the monastic community to reflect on the importance of upholding the precepts of the Vinaya and maintaining the purity and integrity of the monastic lineage. By witnessing the ordination of new candidates, monks and nuns are reminded of their own vows and commitments, reinvigorating their dedication to the practice of ethical conduct, meditation, and the study of Buddhist scriptures. The ordination rituals in Myanmar hold profound significance for both individual candidates and the broader monastic community. These rituals mark a transformative moment of transition, symbolizing the formal entry of candidates into the monastic life and their commitment to following the teachings of the Buddha. Moreover, ordination ceremonies serve as occasions for rejoicing and reaffirming the commitment of the monastic community to upholding the precepts of the Vinaya and preserving the vitality and integrity of the Buddhist tradition.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the provenance of Theravada Buddhist ordination can be traced back to the time of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who established the monastic sangha as a vital institution for the preservation and propagation of his teachings. Over the centuries, the ordination process has evolved in response to changing cultural and social dynamics, adapting to varying regional contexts while remaining rooted in the foundational principles of renunciation, ethical conduct, and spiritual awakening.

In Myanmar, the ordination process holds a central place in Buddhist practice, embodying the ideals of Theravada Buddhism and serving as a foundational pillar of Myanmar society. The ordination ceremony, with its solemn rituals and symbolic gestures, represents a sacred rite of passage for individuals seeking to embark on the monastic path. By undergoing ordination, candidates demonstrate their commitment to following the Buddha's teachings and participating in the wider monastic community.

Moreover, the ordination process serves as a vehicle for the transmission of Buddhist teachings and values from one generation to the next. As candidates undergo training and preparation for ordination, they immerse themselves in the study of Buddhist scriptures, ethical precepts, and meditative practices under the guidance of experienced monastics. Through this process, they not only deepen their own understanding of the Dhamma but also prepare themselves to serve as custodians and disseminators of Buddhist wisdom and compassion. By understanding the historical origins and contemporary procedures of ordination, we gain deeper insights into the role of monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and its enduring significance in Myanmar society. The ordination process serves as a tangible manifestation of the Buddha's vision of a harmonious and virtuous community dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual awakening and liberation from suffering. In Myanmar, as in other Theravada Buddhist countries, the ordination ceremony continues to inspire reverence, awe, and devotion, serving as a testament to the enduring legacy of the Buddha's teachings in the modern world.

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