

The First Council

Translated from the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya by Bhikkhu Sujato and Bhikkhuni Samacitta.
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At that time the Blessed One had not long entered Parinibbana. Kassapa was staying in Vesālī at the Monkey Pond, the Hall with the Pointed Roof. There was a great Sangha of 500 bhikkhus there, and all were *arahants* except for Ānanda.

[Mahakassapa] said to the bhikkhus: ‘Earlier I was travelling from Pāvā towards Kusinārā. While in between the two countries I heard that the Buddha had passed away. At that time I was confused and lost in my heart, not able to contain myself. All village bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, and laywomen cried, fell down and rolled on the ground; there was no-one who was not crying and wailing, sighing: “Too soon the world is afflicted, empty, the world’s eye is gone.” At that time Upananda had already arrived there: “Stop everyone” he said. “That elder was always saying, you should do that, you should not do that, you should train like that, you should not train like that. Now we’re free from this suffering! We can do what we want with no opposition. Why are you all together crying?” I heard what he said, and was seriously worried. Even though the Buddha has entered Parinibbana, the Vinaya still remains. We should gather in unity for a Council. Don’t let Upananda establish a separate following and ruin the true Dhamma.’

All the bhikkhus completely agreed, and said to Kassapa: ‘Ānanda always waited on the Buddha; he is intelligent, has learnt much, and remembers the Dhammapitaka. Now he should be allowed to be numbered among the bhikkhus.’

Kassapa said: ‘Ānanda is still a trainee. Because he still has greed, hatred, delusion and fear, we should not include him.’

At that time Ānanda was staying in Vesālī, day and night teaching Dhamma to the fourfold assembly. People were coming and going almost like when the Buddha was alive. There was a Vajjīputtaka bhikkhu sitting meditation upstairs in that building. Because of the noise and confusion he could not get the liberation of samadhi. He thought: ‘Now Ānanda is a trainee, he has not yet finished what he has do do, and always is among the bustle of teaching.’ Then he entered samadhi and observed that [Ānanda] could achieve the task. And then he thought: ‘Now I should speak to shake him up and be a cause for awakening.’ So he went to Ānanda and spoke the following verse:

‘In a secluded place, sitting under the tree
The mind goes to Nibbana
If you meditate not heedless
Why is there much talking?’

All the bhikkhus also said to Ānanda: ‘You should quickly do what is to be done. Kassapa now wishes to collect the Vinaya-dhamma, and won’t allow you to be in the gathering.’

Having heard that verse from the Vajjīputtaka bhikkhu, Ānanda further heard that Kassapa would not let him in the Vinaya gathering. Throughout the night he practiced walking meditation, reflecting on gaining liberation. But he was not able to get it. As night was ending, his body was so tired, he wished to have a little lie down. While his head had not yet reached the pillow, suddenly his mind was freed from the defilements.

All the bhikkhus now said to Kassapa: ‘Last night Ānanda found liberation! Now he should be included in the Vinaya gathering.’

Kassapa approved, and then had the thought: ‘Where can we find sufficient food and drinks, and lodgings? Where we can get sufficient support to hold a Vinaya gathering? Only in Rājagaha is there

sufficient wealth to support such a gathering.’ Thereupon he announced in the Sangha: ‘These 500 arahants should stay in Rājagaha for the vassa, not even one other person should go there.’

Having made that rule already, the 500 arahants went to Rājagaha. In the first month of the vassa they repaired the dwellings. In the second month they all freely enjoyed the various jhanas and liberations. In the third month they all gathered in one place.

Then Kassapa said to the Sangha: ‘May the venerable Sangha hear me. I will now question venerable Upāli in the Sangha regarding the Vinaya. If the Sangha is ready may it consent to listen.’

They said: ‘So be it’.

Then Upali also said to the Sangha: ‘May the Venerable Sangha listen. I will now answer Kassapa regarding the Vinaya. If the Sangha is ready, the Sangha should listen.’

They said: ‘So be it’.

Kassapa then questioned Upāli: ‘The Buddha was staying in what place when he laid down the first precept?’

Upali said: ‘At Vesālī.’

He further asked: ‘On who’s behalf was it laid down?’

‘On behalf of Sudinna Kalandakaputta.’

He further asked: ‘What was the grounds?’

He answered: ‘Having sex with his former wife.’

Again he asked: ‘Was there a second formulation?’

The answer: ‘Yes. There was a bhikkhu having sex with a monkey.’

Kassapa then asked: ‘Where was the second precept laid down?’

Answered: ‘At Rājagaha.’

Asked: ‘On who’s behalf?’

Answered: ‘Dhaniya.’

Again asked: ‘What was the grounds?’

Answered: ‘Stealing Bimbisara’s timbers.’

Kassapa asked: ‘Where was the third precept laid down?’

Answered: ‘At Vesālī.’

Again asked: ‘On who’s behalf?’

Answered: ‘On behalf of many bhikkhus.’

Again asked: ‘What was the grounds?’

Answered: ‘Taking the life of oneself and others.’

Kassapa then asked: ‘Where was the 4th precept laid down?’

Answered: ‘At Vesālī.’

Again asked: ‘On who’s behalf?’

Answered: ‘On behalf of the Vaggamudā bhikkhus.’

Again asked: ‘On what grounds?’

Answered: ‘Vainly boasting of superhuman dhammas.’

Kassapa thus proceeded to question all in the midst of the bhikkhus. In the Sangha said: ‘This is the bhikkhu Vinaya. This is the bhikkhuni Vinaya. Together is called the Vinayapitaka.’

Then Kassapa said to the Sangha: ‘May the venerable Sangha hear me. I now wish to question venerable Ānanda in the Sangha regarding the Suttas. If the Sangha is ready may it consent to listen.’

They said ‘So be it’.

Then Ānanda also said to the Sangha: ‘May the venerable Sangha listen. I will now answer Kassapa regarding the Suttas. If the Sangha is ready, the Sangha should listen.’

They said: ‘So be it’.

Kassapa then questioned Ānanda: ‘Where did the Buddha teach the Ekottara Sutta? Where did he teach the Dasuttara Sutta? Where did he teach the Mahānidāna Sutta? Where did he teach the Saṅgīti Sutta? Where did he teach the Sāmaññaphala Sutta? Where did he teach the Brahmajāla Sutta? Which Suttas

were taught to bhikkhus? Which Suttas were taught to bhikkhunis, laymen, laywomen, male and female deities?

Ānanda answered all as taught by the Buddha. When Kassapa had taught all the Suttas, in the Sangha he said: 'Here the long suttas are collected in one part called the *Dirgha Āgama*. Those suttas neither long nor short are collected in the *Madhyama Āgama*. Those taught to bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, laywomen, and male and female deities are now collected and called the *Samyutta Āgama*. Those from 1 dhamma up to 11 dhammas now collected and called the *Ekottara Āgama*. Miscellaneous teachings are now gathered in the *Khuddaka Pitaka*. This is called the *Suttapitaka*.

'From this day on we have now already gathered the Dhamma. What Buddha has not established should not be mistakenly established; what is already established should not be deviated from. As the Buddha instructed we should sincerely train.'

Ānanda then said to Kassapa: 'I personally heard it from the Buddha: "After my Parinibbana, if it is wished, I allow for the lesser and minor precepts to be rescinded."

Kassapa immediately asked: 'Do you know which are the lesser and minor precepts?'

Answered: 'I don't know.'

Then asked: 'Why don't you know?'

Answered: 'I didn't ask the Buddha.'

Then asked: 'Why didn't you ask?'

Answered: 'At that time the Buddha's body was in pain, so I was afraid to trouble him.'

Kassapa insisted: 'That is a wrong-doing for not asking. You should see your fault and confess.'

Ānanda said: 'Venerable sir; It was not out of disrespecting precepts that I didn't ask this question. I didn't wish to disturb the Buddha. So I didn't dare. So I don't see it as a fault. But out of faith in the Venerable I confess.'

Kassapa again interrogated Ānanda: 'When sewing the Buddha's sanghati you used your toes. This is a wrong-doing. You should see your fault and confess.'

Ānanda said: 'Venerable sir; It was not out of disrespecting the Buddha; there was no-one to hold the fringe, so I used my toes. So I don't see it as a fault. But out of faith in the Venerable I confess.'

Kassapa again interrogated Ānanda: 'Three times you begged the Buddha to allow the going forth for women in the *saddhamma*. This is a wrong-doing. You should see your fault and confess.'

Ānanda said: 'Venerable sir; It was not out of disrespecting the Dhamma. But Mahāpajāpati Gotamī raised the Blessed One until he was grown up and could go forth and achieve the great path. Because of this merit should fruit, I asked three times. So I don't see it as a fault. But out of faith in the Venerable I confess.'

Kassapa again interrogated Ānanda: 'Near the time of the Parinibbana, the Buddha hinted to you that one who had developed the four bases of psychic power could, if they wished, live for an aeon or more than an aeon. The Tathagata is accomplished in measureless *samādhi*dhammas. So he dropped a hint to you three times. You didn't beg the Buddha to remain in the world for an aeon or more than an aeon. This is a wrong-doing. You should see your fault and confess.'

Ānanda said. 'It was not that I didn't wish the Buddha to live on. Mara the Evil One had clouded my mind, that's why this happened. So I don't see it as a fault. But out of faith in the Venerable I confess.'

Kassapa again interrogated Ānanda: 'The Buddha asked you for water three times but you didn't give it. This is a wrong-doing. You should see your fault and confess.'

Ānanda said. 'It wasn't because I didn't wish to offer. At that time 500 carts had just crossed over upstream and the water was muddy and not clear. I was afraid of causing affliction, so I didn't offer any. So I don't see it as a fault. But out of faith in the Venerable I confess.'

Kassapa again interrogated Ānanda: 'You allowed women to first worship the [Buddha's] corpse. This is a wrong-doing. You should see your fault and confess.'

Ānanda said. 'I didn't want to enable women to worship first. But the day was ending and I didn't want them to not be able to enter the city gate. That's why I allowed them. So I don't see it as a fault. But out of

faith in the Venerable I confess.’ Ānanda out of faith in Kassapa confessed six wrong-doings in the midst of the Sangha.

Kassapa again interrogated Ānanda: ‘If we agree that the *sekhiyas* are lesser and minor training precepts, some bhikkhus will say that up to the four *pāṭidesanīyas* are also lesser and minor training precepts. If we agree that the *pāṭidesanīyas* are lesser and minor training precepts, some bhikkhus will say that up to the *pācittiyas* are also lesser and minor training precepts. If we agree that the *pācittiyas* are lesser and minor training precepts, some bhikkhus will say that up to the *nissaggiya pācittiyas* are also lesser and minor training precepts. Now we have these four kinds of opinions, how can we gain certainty?’

Kassapa then said: ‘If we don’t know what the characteristics of the lesser and minor rules are and mistakenly rescind them, members of other sects will say: ‘The Dhamma of the ascetics, sons of the Śākyan, is like smoke. While their Teacher was alive they practiced what was laid down, but straight after the Parinibbana they were not willing to train.’

Kassapa then said in the midst of the Sangha: ‘We have now already gathered the Dhamma. What Buddha has not established should not be mistakenly established; what is already established should not be deviated from. As the Buddha instructed we should sincerely train.’

At that time Thera Purāṇa was living in the southern districts. He heard that the Buddha passed away in Kusinara and the elder bhikkhus had gathered in Rājagaha to recite the Vinayadhamma. Like a strong man would bend his arm he and his followers appeared in the assembly and said to Kassapa: ‘I hear that the Buddha has passed away and the elder bhikkhus have gathered in Rājagaha to recite Vinayadhamma: is this true?’

Kassapa said: ‘Venerable sir, it’s true.’

Purāṇa said: ‘Please repeat that recitation.’ Kassapa repeated the recitation as above.

When recited, Purāṇa said to Kassapa: ‘I personally heard it from the Buddha: storing [food] indoors; cooking indoors; cooking oneself; oneself taking food to have another person offer; oneself pick up fruit to eat; receiving from pond water; when there is no-one to make allowable, eating allowable fruit after ejecting seeds.’

Kassapa said: ‘Venerable Sir, these 7 items were temporarily allowed by the Buddha while staying at Vesālī during a time of famine when almsfood was hard to come by. He immediately rescinded four, and when he returned to Sāvattihī he rescinded [the remaining] three.’

Purāṇa said: ‘The Blessed one would not allow what was already restricted, or restrict what was already allowed.’

Kassapa said: ‘The Buddha is the Lord of Dhamma, he dwells in Mastery of Dhamma. If he were to allow what was already restricted, or restrict what was already allowed, what blame would there be?’

Purāṇa said: ‘I accept these extra reasons regarding these seven items, and am not able to practice them.’

Mahakassapa then said in the midst of the Sangha: ‘What Buddha has not established should not be mistakenly established; what is already established should not be deviated from. As the Buddha instructed we should sincerely train.’

[Following this is recounted in brief the episode regarding the punishment and rehabilitation of the bhikkhu Channa. Unlike the Pali, there is no mention of King Udena]

At this gathering of the Vinayadhamma, Aññākoṇḍañña sat in the elder seat. Purāṇa sat in the second seat. Tan mi sat in the third seat. Tuo bha Kassapa sat in the fourth seat. Bhaddakassapa sat in the fifth seat. Mahākassapa sat in the sixth seat. Upāli sat in the seventh seat. Anuruddha sat in the eighth seat. There were a full 500 arahants, neither more nor less, that’s why it is called the 500 gathering-dhamma.