

Myanmar Meditation Master and the Sixth Great Buddhist Council

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ABSTRACT

With the intention of safeguarding the teachings of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, in its authentic form, the assembly of the *Sangha*, Buddhist monks, gathered together to preserve The *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*; discourse and discipline systemically just after the demise of the Buddha. The assembly of the *Sangha* is called *Sangiti*. The Buddha told Ven.Ananda, his personal attendant that The *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* that the Buddha taught and promulgated shall remain in place of the teacher after his demise. So, the disciples of the Buddha have to preserve their Master's teachings until today by gathering. The gathering of the *Sangha* is termed as the Great Buddhist Council, *Sangayana*. According to the history of Theravada Buddhism, the Great Buddhist Council had been held for six times; First, Second and Third in India, Fourth in Sri Lanka and the last two (the Fifth and the Sixth) times in Burma (now Myanmar) respectively. There appeared prominent noble disciple monks at Every Great Buddhist Council. For instance, Ven.*Mahakasspa*, Ven.*Ananda* and Ven.*Upali* played the most important role in the First Buddhist Council. In the same way, in the Sixth Buddhist Council, Ven.*Jagara*, Ven.*Sobhana* and Ven.*Vicittasarabhivamsa* took the most important task. Therefore, the role of meditative master Ven.*Sobhana* well known as Mahasi Sayadaw for Burmese people as well as in abroad will be shed light on.

Key Words : Buddhist council, Buddhist monks, Theravada Buddhism

INTRODUCTION

The name Sixth Buddhist Council had become widely known since the eve of Burma's Independence. Soon after regaining her Independence from British, the Burmese Government led U Nu, the Prime Minister, had made a decision to hold the Sixty Buddhist Council for the promotion of the Buddha's *Sasana* with all its might. The holding of this Buddhist Council would perpetuate and bring about improvement to Buddhism. It would also harmonize and erase the discrepancies in the Buddha's teachings appearing in many *Pali* texts of the Discourses and Disciplines (*Dhamma*, *Vinaya*) which would bear the fruits of future positive beneficial results. With these aims and objects, the governments had striven in haste to hold the general council of Buddhist monks.

Strictly speaking, the business of the Buddhist

Council is exclusively the function of the *Sanghas*. However, a tremendous task such as this Council could not possibly be borne by the *Sanghas* without the assistance of the lay benefactors. Moreover, as it was intended to make the Sixth Buddhist Council a grand ceremonious function of magnificent splendor with the joint participation and effort of the five Theravada countries namely, Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, the volume of work involved became all the more expansive and wider in scope. The sincere intention was to make it more distinguished than the conventions of the Buddhist Council held in the past. It was usual to hold such conventions only by *Sanghas* of the country that sponsored it. However, with regard to this Sixth Buddhist Council, the intention was that not only the Burmese *Sanghas* but also the *Sanghas* from other

Theravada countries should collaborate and participate. The objective was to hold this Council jointly by all five countries which had embraced the Theravada Buddhism instead of by Burma alone.

From the time of its Independence, the Government of the Union of Burma started making arrangements for convening the Sixth Buddhist Council. In this regard, the Government of Burma took over all the responsibility that would normally be performed by the lay benefactors. In shouldering this responsibility, the Government not wishing to reserve the privileges entirely to itself, benevolently shared the responsibilities with the people to whom the chance of becoming benefactors of the Council had been given, thereby making this Buddhist Council's Convention a glorious achievement of the entire populace.

The Sixth Great Council and the Role of Ven.Sobhana known Mahasi Sayadaw:

To carry out the great mission successfully, the Governments of the Union of Burma deputed and sent a religious mission to Theravada Buddhist countries as well as Mahayana Buddhist countries such as China, Japan and Korea in early 1952 to implement the organization scheme for the ensuing Sixth Buddhist Council. This mission was led by Nyaungyan Sayadaw payagyi and Mahasi Sayadaw representing the Order of Sanghas, while Shwe-pyadaw U Ba Thin who was to act as a translator for the Sayadaw and U Than Sein, Parliamentary Secretary in the role of a lay attendant, represented the laymen. This four-member mission headed by Ven.Jagara known as Nyaungyan Sayadawpayagyi left Burma in 1952. The mission first visited Thailand where they called on the Supreme Head of the Sangha (Sangha raja), and apprised him of the fact relating to the proposed Sixth Buddhist Council. The *Sangharaja* expressed his opinion that it would be impossible to hold such a council in the absence of a ruling monarch and a *Sangharaja* (Sasana-paing in Burmese). The Venerable Jagara explained him that undoubtedly there was no king in Burma, but being an independent republic, there was a President, popularly elected by the people of Burma, and he was a de facto as well as de jure Head of State who must be considered a king. He kept on saying that although there was no *Sangaraja* in Burma, the entire assembly of monks who constituted the Order of *Sanghas* had been relentlessly making effort for the promotion of *Buddha Sasana* in the field of both *pariyatti* (learning) and *patipatti*

(practicing), and that because of this sustained effort, Burma had now already produced an eminent personage who was able to recite from memory the whole of Buddhist Scripture, i.e., the *Tipitaka*, unsurpassed in her history. Under these circumstances, Ven.Jagara precisely and effectively stated that Burma was competent to hold the Buddhist Council as envisaged.

Then, *Sangharaja* of Thailand responded; "If that is so, Burma alone was in a position to hold the proposed Buddhist Council," and further stated, "when Burma convened the Buddhist Council, Thailand would have no objection whatsoever and would even gladly encourage that holding of a Buddhist Council."

After having done what was to be fulfilled in Thailand in conformity with the terms of reference laid down for the mission, the Sayadaw (Venerable monk in Burmese) and party flew to Cambodia. After meeting with the Cambodia Chief Monk at his monastery, the affairs of the Sixth Buddhist Council were promptly discussed. As the Cambodia Chief Monk was originally interested in and satisfied with idea of holding such a Convention as the Sixth Buddhist Council.

The task of convening such a Buddhist Council was really stupendous since it had to be performed with world-wide co-operation. To implement such an enormous project to reach a successful completion, leaders of outstanding ability monks were indeed essential. It was probably because of the greatness and remarkable glory of the nature of the Sixth Buddhist Council, three most essential prominent figures of distinctive character and ability had appeared figures of were (1) Ven.*Sobhana*, Mahasi Sayadaw; (2) Ven.*Visuddhabhivamsa*, Vijjalankara Sayadaw and (3) *Tipitakadara Dhammabhandagarika Ven. Vicittasarabhivamsa*, Mingun Sayadaw.

Organizing Committee Members of the Council:

There were two main significant items of business or divisions of workload in the matter of holding such a convention. One was the performance of ceremony of the Buddhist Council and the other was the work of printing the *Pitaka* Scripture after close scrutiny and dissection. The above mentioned three Venerable monks had taken active part in the performance of these two immense tasks.

Ven. *Vicittasarabhivamsa* had with utmost endeavor personally indulged in two of these supremely important tasks, while Ven. *Vicittasarabhivamsa* took

the responsibility in sifting, analyzing and amending the *Pitaka* Scriptures apart from taking the role of answering and explaining the questions put to him on *Pitaka* Scriptures which might contain dissentient views or ambiguities. Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw competently performed the onerous duties of revising and printing the *Pitaka* Scriptures and also acted unremittingly as the Main Interrogator (*Chattha-Sangiti-Pucchaka*). In the Organizing Committee of Sanghas, which might be regarded as the Central Committee with full authority of the Sixty Buddhist Council, Mahasi Sayadaw and Ven. *Vicittasarabhivamsa* were also included as members.

The Final Proof-Reading Sayadaws:

Sangayana means the assembly of *Sanghas* of the Buddhist hierarchy for deliberation and recital of all the Buddha's Teachings or scriptures through consultations to harmonize the points of divergence and of errors found in the scriptural texts. There cannot be a Council if there are no good, faithful, correct and errorless specimens of *Pitaka* Scriptures. That is the reason why this task of paramount importance in vetting, amending, interpolating and explaining the erroneous writings or misleading words or phrases contained in the *Pitaka* Scriptures, was given the top priority.

First and foremost, for the purpose of amending the *Pitaka*, the Scriptures were sent to all places within the Union of Burma with a request to all intellectual *Theras* to compare the various draft copies with the originals of the scriptures within the ambit of their knowledge and capability, and correct the mistakes. The Sayadaws who first took the work of amending or correcting, purifying and cleansing the scriptures, are called *Mula Visodhaka* Sayadaws. Then, the amended drafts sent by them were again scrutinized and corrected by another Committee of *Visodhaka*. This was done to make it more perfect and thorough by eliminating all possible mistakes in the least. These Sayadaws were called *Pati-Visodhaka*.

The fair and final drafts were sent to the Buddha Sasana Printing Press only after the final vetting and approval of the said *pativisodhakas*. After putting the drafts into the printing press under the close supervision of skilful printers and press correctors, these had reached the stage of proofs. Again, these proofs were repeatedly put to careful scrutiny and then, the final proofs were put up to the Committee consisting of five Sayadaws. This Committee again went through the final proofs and after corrections were made where necessary, these were

eventually approved as the final fair drafts and sent back to the press for final printing. The last Committee which vetted the proofs that came out of the printing press was called *Osanasodeya Pattapathaka* Committee. Later, it was given the name of *Osana* Committee, in brief.

Mahasi Sayadaw was one of the members of the said *Osana* Committee. The responsibility of the *Osana* Committee was really onerous. Although *Mula Visodhaka* and *Patii-Visodhaka* Sayadaws' duties were to examine and confirm the correctness of the words and usages, *Osana* Sayadaws had to sift, correct or interpolate the words and usages of *Pali* from the outset. They had also to examine thoroughly the sequence of tenses, appropriateness of the chronological order, the spelling, the punctuation marks, etc., and of the terminology; In short, the responsibility of *Osana* Committee was to vet and cleanse all the expressions, passages and writings in the whole book, and to make it faultless and flawless.

Mahasi Sayadaw had to invariably perform the duties as a member of that extremely responsible Committee. At the initial stage, the Buddha Sasana Council being accommodated within the precincts of Sasana Yeiktha, the meeting place for *Osana* Committee was allotted at the Monastery where Mahasi Sayadaw was residing. The five member Sayadaws together with a layman editor sat together for consultation in a group at that monastery and implemented the *Pitaka Pali* Scriptures for the Sixth Council. When they came across difficult grammatical expressions, etymology and dictions, the other members of the Committee sought for the opinion of Mahasi Sayadaw, and they were generally pleased to accept his decision. Mahasi Sayadaw had performed this task of *Osana* from start to finish. The *Osana* Committee had to go along with the Buddha Sasana Council when it changed its headquarters to Kaba-Aye just before the commencement of the Sixth Synod.

At that time, Mahasi Sayadaw had to attend to his duties of *Osana* by daily visiting Kaba,-Aye. Eventually when he had to sift and examine the drafts relating to the Commentaries and Sub-commentaries, there was hardly any time for him to go to Kaba-Aye and to carry out his duties there.

After the *Pali* Scriptures had been recited and approved by the Synod, the Commentaries and Sub-commentaries had to be also vetted and approved which thereby necessitated the printing of these amended

scriptures. Mahasi Sayadaw again had to take the role of a member of *Osana* responsible for the vetting of the Commentaries and Sub-commentaries, and therefore it behaved him to carry out his duties. Realizing that he had been so much relied upon in carrying out his task, he never avoided the responsibility given to him so the entrustment of the work of vetting and rewriting of *Visuddhimagga* Commentary was assigned to him. Knowing fully well that Mahasi Sayadaw was an adept in *Visuddhi Magga* text with his background experience as a meditation instructor, *Kammatthanacariya*, the two text books on *Visuddhimagga* Commentary were given to Mahasi Sayadaw alone for the purpose of vetting and editing them. As had been entrusted, Mahasi Sayadaw also examined, vetted and amended, putting his all-out individual also examined, vetted and amended, putting his all-out individual effort without any one's aid. In the history of the Synod, '*Sangayana*', Mahasi Sayadaw stands prominent as the only person who has ever been entrusted with the work of vetting, sifting, amending and editing single-handed for a single Text Dhamma.

Mahasi Sayadaw had amended the scriptural texts connected with the Synod with his extraordinary ability, talent and supreme efforts. The number of Dhamma texts which had been so vetted and mended were not ten, fifteen, twenty-five, or thirty in number but came to 117 in all, including all *Pali* Texts, Commentaries and Sub-commentaries. Each text book having contained about 350 pages, the total number of pages involved had reached an aggregate of over forth thousand. These achievements would surely bestow immeasurable benefits upon posterity. This account of Mahasi Sayadaw's performance and activities in connection with the affairs of the Sixth Buddhist Council was know only to a few.

Pucchaka Sayadaw, the interrogator:

While performing the task of cleansing and amending the Pitaka Scripture on the one hand, Mahasi Sayadaw had to shoulder another responsibility relating to the affairs of the Buddhist Council. The assumption of this responsibility by Mahasi Sayadaw was generally known by the people since it was related to his performance in the capacity of a *Pucchaka*, the Interrogator. *Sangayana* had been already explained as relating to the group recitation or rehearing of the scriptures. As is usually the custom, each and every one of the *Pali* scriptural text had to be examined. And to prove to the hilt that the teaching was actually made by the Buddha,

preliminary questions had to be put in the following manner;

1. At which place (or Where) was this *Sutta* (Discourse) delivered by the Buddha?
2. For whose sake (or To Whom) was this discourse delivered?
3. Why was it delivered, and so on?

These were repeatedly asked and put to scrutiny. Only after being fully satisfied with the result of this scrutinization, the discourse was accepted and confirmed; and then, to make it more evident that it has been accepted and confirmed, all *Sanghas* had to recite simultaneously. Such a process and mode of performance is called the convening of the Buddhist Council or *Sangayana*.

Both the Interrogator and the person giving the answer would have to declaim from memory. Then, the most difficult aspect is to speak both in *Pali* and Burmese when interrogating and answering. Such being the case, the two responsible Sayadaws must be well-versed and competent in *Pali* language and should also be able to speak *Pali* eloquently.

Of the two persons who were to be assigned with the duties of an interrogator and of a Recite, respectively, luckily the quest for a Sayadaw who was to do the recitation had become easy. It was because of the availability of a *Tipitakadhara* Sayadaw, Ven. *Vicittasarabhivamsa* who could memorize and recite all the contents of the three *Pitakas*. This Sayadaw had passed with distinction in all subject both in written and oral examinations of the *Tipitaka* primarily held by the Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization.

Mahasi Sayadaw had to perform the duties of *Cattha Sangiti pucchaka*. These two personalities were so compatible with one another that everything went off smoothly without a slightest hitch. They had discharged their duties ably befitting the glory of *Sangayana* which was made possible by their attributes to be celebrated with great success on a magnificent scale.

Conclusion:

As mentioned earlier, the Great Buddhist Council called Sangiti or Sagayana was held for six times in the history of Theravada Buddhism. Successive Great Councils have been held up to the present age. All Great Buddhist Councils from the very first were held when there was some special need to preserve the pristine teaching against materialist threats from within or without. Among the six, the Burmese Sangha could perform the

great task for two times to preserve and propagate the teaching of the Buddha in the Fifth and the Sixth times. All Theravada Buddhist countries as well as Mahayana Buddhist countries and organizations attended the Great Council unanimously in the Sixth time which was held in 1952 in Rangoon (now Yangon) soon after regaining independence from British. Among five Theravada Buddhist countries, Burmese monks played the most important role to perform the great task successfully. Therefore, we recorded in this article for the marvelous task performed by the Burmese monks for the perpetuation, promotion and propagation of Buddhasana in the history of Buddhism.

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