

Monastic Life in Bangladesh

—A Case Study—

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Nowadays, Bangladesh is one of the most significant grounds for Theravāda Buddhism. Like other Theravāda Buddhist countries, the monastic life of Bangladesh is organized and regulated by the principles laid down in the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka. Though the Buddhists of Bangladesh are the followers of Theravāda Buddhism, they are a small minority of about 0.62% of the total populations.¹⁾ At present there are more than one thousand monasteries in Bangladesh. The total member of Bhikkhus-Sāmaṇeras living in these monasteries is above 3500.²⁾ All of them are followers of Theravāda Buddhism. Below I present a picture of the monastic life in Bangladesh at present based on the findings of a field-work conducted in about 60 monasteries in Chittagong, Comilla, Patuakhali, Noakhali and Greater Chittagong Hill Tracts. In fact, the activities undertaken in all these monasteries of Bangladesh have the same pattern.

1. Vihāra or Monastery

Though the vihāra is built by the devotees in Bangladesh, it is not a private property at all. It is considered as a public property and the Saṅgha is the soul owner of the vihāra. As a matter of fact, all the vihāras in Bangladesh are regarded as the property of Saṅgha. So, after the construction of the vihāra, it is gifted to the Saṅgha in a ceremonious way or function. In Bangladesh a vihāra generally consists of: 1) entrance gate, 2) boundary wall, 3) prayer hall, 4) monastic abodes, 5) bhikkhu simā, 6) stūpa⁷⁾ toilet, 8) pond or tube well, 9) Bo-tree, 10) garden, 11) kitchen, 12) donation box, 13) shrine altar, 14) courtyard or lawn and, 15) a ring. But in many vihāras there is no bhikkhu simā due to want of land.

2. Administration of the Vihāra

In general, the administration of a vihāra in Bangladesh rest upon a management com-

mittee constituted by the *dāyakas* (lay devotees). But there is no hard and fast rule about the formation of the committee. All the same, a common criterion on the basis of democracy is followed. The opinion of all the *dāyakas* is taken into consideration in a general meeting of *dāyakas* and in that meeting they constitute one body or committee to execute the affairs of the *vihāra*. Ordinarily, potential persons or weighty persons are selected as members. The number of member may be 10 to 15. It depends upon the number of *dayākas* or the followers of the *vihāra*. The period of tenure is not always the same. In some *vihāras* it last one or two years. But in some *vihāras* the tenure of a committee last according to regulation framed for that *vihāra*. There may be some life members from the founders or donors family. When the tenure is over, the committee is reconstituted in the same way.

3. Admission into the monastic life

In Bangladesh, the first and most important qualification for candidacy is that one be of the male sex. Being a male, however, does not suffice for admission to the order. In addition, the candidate must be free from communicable diseases and from debt, he is not a convict of serious social crime, and he must have the consent of his parents and (if he has one) his wife.³⁾ In the case of a *sāmaṇera*, the age limit is only seven and above, and in the case of a *bhikkhu*, the age is twenty and above (sometimes even taking into consideration the period passed in the mother's womb since, inception). In principle, a man who possesses the above qualification can be entered into the order of monastic life.

Ordination as a novice (*sāmaṇera*) — the lower ordination (*pabbajjā*) — is necessary before the candidate can receive the higher ordination (*upasampadā*) for *bhikkhuhood*. In *Vinaya Mahāvagga*⁴⁾ prescribes elaborate rules for the *Pabbajjā*⁵⁾ and *Upasampadā* Ceremony.

4. Essential Requisites

The essential requisites in a monastic life are four : food, dress, dwelling place and medicine. For all the requisites the *bhikkhus-sāmaṇeras* have to depend completely on the *dāyakas* as they are forbidden to work for any earning. In the case of food, *vihāra* committee makes a list of householders who supplied food and drinks to the *bhikkhus* and *sāmaṇeras* according to a routine made by the said committee. This food is called 'pālārchoiyāṅg' or food by turn. The poor people are exempted from the list or the schedule. The *bhikkhus*

and sāmaṇeras are given food and drink by the householders two times a day — one in the morning and the other before mid-day by turns. In some cases, the householders who does not give food on a particular day because of the bhikkhus-sāmaṇeras absence, the householder has to give some rice or donation as price of the food and it is deposited in a general fund of the vihāra committee. The householder tries to offer a more standard food to the bhikkhus-sāmaṇeras than his ordinary menu of each day. The food may be carried by the householders to the vihāra, or sāmaṇera or temple boy may be fetched it. Sometimes, they (bhikkhus-sāmaṇeras) go to the *dāyaka's* house to take meal, if they are invited in connection with some memorial or other services.

5. Precepts to be observed

In the monastic life of Bangladesh, a sāmaṇera has to observe ten precepts (*śīlas*). They are : To abstain from taking life (*pāṇātipātā*), stealing (*adinnadānā*), immorality (*abrahma-cariyā*), falsehood (*musāvādā*), consumption of intoxicants (*surā-meraya-majja-pamādatṭhānā*), taking food after mid-day (*vikālabhojanā*), dancing, singing, playing instruments and witnessing unseemly shows (*nacca-gīta-vādita-visūkādassanā*), adorning the body with flower-garlands, perfume, and ointments (*mālā-gandha-vilepana-dhāraṇa-maṇḍana-vibhūsanatṭhānā*), using high or gorgeous seats and beds (*uccasāyana-mahāsayanā*), and receiving money in the form of gold and silver or paper currency or precious stones (*jātarūpa-rajata-paṭigghanā*).⁶⁾

Besides, a bhikkhu has to observe 227 precepts including the above ten.⁷⁾ However, in the monastic life of Bangladesh, the observance of the ten precepts is the most vital factor.

6. Suttas to be learnt

The bhikkhus-sāmaṇeras of Bangladesh have to learn by heart many suttas in Pāli as well as in Bengali translation ; these especially applies to the suttas in the Paritta. For example, *ratana sutta*, *kaṇṇiya-mettā sutta*, *bhojhaṅga sutta*, *maṅgala sutta*, *supubbaṅga sutta*, *mettā sutta*, *aṅgulīmāla sutta*, *mora paritta*, *āṭṭhāṇāṭṭhā paritta*, *khandha paritta*, *vaṭṭaka paritta* etc. Moreover, many offering verses or *mantras* have also to be learnt. The most note-worthy of them are the verses of offering of flowers, garlands, foods, water, lighted candles and incenses and perfumes.⁸⁾

7. Day-to day life

The bhikkhus-samaneras of Bangladesh have to follow a daily schedule as part of monastic life. Below I discuss this in brief in the table.

Time	Daily schedule		
4 : 00 to 5 : 00A. M	Wake up and get ready for the first worship.		
5 : 30 to 6 : 30	First worship, collective prayer and meditation.		
6 : 30 to 7 : 30	Morning meal		
7 : 30 to 10 : 00	Different activities according to one's own duty.		
10 : 00 to 11 : 00	Bath		
11 : 00 to 12 : 00	Mid-day meal or lunch		
12 : 00 to 6 : 00P. M.	Rest and different activities according to one's own duty.		
6 : 00 to 7 : 00	Evening worship and meditation		
7 : 00 to 7 : 30	Light drinks		
7 : 30 to 10 : 00	Different activities according to one's own duty.		
10 : 00 to-	Sleep		

8. Seniority in the Sangha

Seniority in the Sangha is counted in Bangladesh according to the number of *vassāvāsa* or rain retreat a bhikkhu has passed after his higher ordination or *upasampadā*. Other factors such as age, learning and heraldry are not counted at all in determining seniority among the bhikkhus. When two or more bhikkhus come in contact and if they do not know each other's seniority, they ask each other about the date of *upasampadā* and period of *vassāvāsa* at his credit. Knowing the particular, the junior one bows down his head on the feet of senior one — even the margin of a single day. In the case of *sāmaṇera* no seniority is counted. However, those who are newly ordained in *sāmaṇera*-hood pay respect to their seniors and obey them.

9. System of selection of High Priest in a vihāra

A High Priest is selected in a vihāra of Bangladesh by virtue of his seniority, which is counted by spending of rain retreat. If there are more than one bhikkhus in a vihāra, the most elderly one by virtue of rain retreat will occupy the position of High Priest. Generally,

he occupies the position until his death.

10. The Hierarchy of the Bhikkhus

There are three stages of bhikkhus in Bangladesh who received higher ordination. When a bhikkhu has not spent ten vassāvāsas after his higher ordination, he is simply called a bhikkhu. Again, when a bhikkhu has spent ten vassāvāsas but few are than twenty vassāvāsas after his higher ordination, he is called a Sthavira or Thera. Finally, when a particular bhikkhu has passed twenty vassāvāsas or more of his bhikkhu life, he is called Mahāsthavira or Mahāthera. Thus a bhikkhu has three stages of life in the monastic life of Bangladesh. When a bhikkhu is conferred upon the title of Thera or Mahāthera, a function is held by the Saṅgha and lay devotees in cooperation. The title is conferred by the Saṅgha. The devotees of Bangladesh take pride if the Thera or Mahāthera lives in their monastery and they treat with him more respectfully.

11. Administration in the Bhikkhu Saṅgha

The Bhikkhu Saṅgha of Bangladesh is divided into four Nikāyas or groups. They are : Saṅgharāja Nikāya, Mahāsthavira Nikāya, Dvārā Nikāya and Sudharma Nikāya. Every Nikāya or group has a similar Governing Body, which directs the bhikkhus of respective Nikāya or group. It is headed by a high priest called Saṅgharāja or Mahāsaṅghanāyaka or Nākaya-Thera and some Deputy High Priests or Anunāyakas. These dignitaries are elected by a General Assembly of the bhikkhus of the Nikāya. Besides, the Nākaya-Theras, each Nikāya has a Secretary. A Kāraka-saṅghasabhā, i. e. an acting ecclesiastical council under the presidency of the Nāyaka-Theras, exercises ecclesiastical jurisdiction and decides over important matters. The members of the Kāraka-saṅghasabhā are elected for a period of three years by allbhikkhus of the respective Nikāya in the general ecclesiastical councilor Mahāsaṅghasabhā, whereas the Nākaya-Theras are elected for lifetime by virtue of their seniority which is counted by spending rain-retreat. The Kāraka-saṅghasabhā comprises about 11 to 30 bhikkhus. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is in the authority of the Kāraka-saṅghasabhā. If a bhikkhu violates basic rules of conduct he can be expelled from the Saṅgha by this assembly. In such a case, no layman will present anything to this bhikkhu so that he is forced to give up the robes. The Governing Body is responsible for the regulation of all activities of the

bhikkhus. Every Nikāya has some regional committees that control the bhikkhus at the regional level.

Conclusion

The Buddhism flourishing in Bangladesh now is similar to that practiced in Burma. However, there are influences of the Buddhism of Sri Lanka and Thailand on it. But monastic life of this country is not as pompous as that of those countries. The most important causes of this are lack of support from the Government and lack of support of any substantial materials from the lay devotees, most of whom are in abject poverty. This resulted in the smaller number of Bhikkhus and Sāmaṇeras in Buddhist community of Bangladesh. Though there is great similarity between the monastic life in Bangladesh and that in Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, the former has its own characteristic features that result from the ethnic and local influences. For example, the temporary ordination ceremony and pabbajjā ceremony are observed in ways different from those followed by other Buddhist countries.

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- 1) Bangladesh Population Census 1991. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistic, 1994.
 - 2) Information collected from Buddhist Well Fare Trust set up by Bangladesh Government.
 - 3) Vinaya Piṭakaṃ, P.T.S. London 1969, vol. 1, pp. 90-100.
 - 4) *ibid.*
 - 5) Dr. Sukomal Chaudhuri: Contemporary Buddhism in Bangladesh. Atisha Memorial Publishing Society, Calcutta 1982, pp. 66. See for elaborate rules in this connection.
 - 6) Bhadanta Dharmatilak and Birendra Mudsuddhi : Saddharma Ratnakar. Bauddha Mission Press, Rangoon 1936, p. 81.
 - 7) Charles S. Prebish : Buddhist Monastic Discipline. The Pennsylvania State Press, New York 1975, pp. 11-17.
 - 8) Prayer, meditation, preaching, and study and research are also important tasks of monastic life.

(key words) Pāritta, Bangladesh, pabbajjā, uḥsāmpadā, sutta dāyaba, Monastic life, viḥāra
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