

PARITTA RECITATION FOUND IN BAGAN INSCRIPTIONS AND VISUAL ART

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Abstract

The Buddha taught Dhamma for the welfare of the many not only in this life but in the next life. Since Buddhism has been introduced in Burma, Buddhist teachings the Dhamma is the guiding light in their daily life and Myanmar believe they will gain happiness in the present life as well as hereafter through Buddhist ways. Among Buddhist teachings, Paritta discourses were taught by the Buddha so that monks and nuns could live in forests and hermitages safely and peacefully. In Pyu Period, there are some manuscripts mentioning three Paritta discourses. In Pagan Period, there are murals, glazed plaques and cloth paintings in the Lokahteikpan temple, Thadhammaransi temple, Aloyi temple, Dhammarajaka pagoda, etc, which illustrate the Paritta events. There are inscriptions mentioning Paritta recitation on special occasions. There are eleven Paritta discourses. The research problem is; 'Is Paritta recitation Mahayana tradition?', as said by a renowned historian. In Theravada Buddhism also, the Buddha taught Paritta discourses and his followers recite Paritta discourses to evade danger and gain enlightenment. There are obligations which must be fulfilled by the reciter and listeners of Paritta discourses. In fact, Paritta recitation has been taught by all Buddhas and Bodhisatta also used Paritta flowers, sand and thread to protect himself. At the present time, there are some occasions of Paritta recitation done by monks and lay people. So long as Buddhism has been propagated in Burma, the tradition of Paritta recitation will last for years. Paritta thread, water, sand and flowers are used as protective and curative factors.

Keywords: Paritta, recitation, Bodhisatta, Pyu, Pagan, Dhamma

Introduction

In about 623 BC, Siddhattha was born to King Suddhodana and Queen Maya in Kapilavutthu. He enjoyed princely luxuries and when he was sixteen he was married to Yasodhaya. They had a son named Rahula. After seeing the four signs- the old man, the sick man, the dead man and a recluse, he renounced and searched for panacea. For six years he practiced severe austerities but he could not gain enlightenment. When he followed the Middle Way, he was awakened and attained enlightenment. For forty-five years the Buddha taught the Dhamma. Then at the age of eighty, the Buddha passed away. Paritta discourse is one of the teachings in Buddhist literature.

Paritta (parait) Recitation

“Monks, learn the Atanariya protection, study the Atanariya protection, hold in your hearts the Atanariya protection, monks, beneficial is the Atanariya protection for security, protection, freedom, from harm and living in ease for monks, nuns (bhikkhunis) and male and female lay followers,” (Burmese translation of Pahtika Vagga, p- 194) exhorted monks to learn the Atanariya protection.

There is a notion promulgated by the Buddha like “*Anapatti guttahtaya parittan pariyapunati anapatti guttathaya parittan vaseti*” meaning “Nuns who learn and teach Paritta for security from danger are exempted from transgression.”

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The Buddha exhorted dissemination of loving-kindness to four royal breeds of serpents for monks' security, protection and Paritta" (Culava Pali translation, p- 243, Anguttara Pali translation, p- 398).

In "The Story of Ayuvaddhanakumara", it runs: To prevent his death, the parents were told to build a pavilion at the entrance to the house, and put the child on a couch in the pavilion. Then some bhikkhus were sent there to recite the parittas for seven days. On the seventh day the Buddha himself came to that pavilion. ... That whole night recitation of paritta continued, thus protecting the child (Daw Mya Tin, The Dhammapada Verses & Stories, p- 245). The child was Ayuvaddhanakumara who evaded impending death and lived till he was 120 years old.

Conditions of Chanter and Listener

Since the Paritta discourses are meant for protection and Well-being they need to be recited and listened in a correct way. So, the reciter must be endowed with three characteristics. They are (1) Anyone must have learnt well knowing definition and grammar, (2) He must study and commit to memory without omission and (3) He must chant through loving-kindness without expecting gain. Just as the reciter fulfills such characteristics, the listener must also fulfill three conditions, to benefit from the Paritta. They are (1) he must not have committed five kinds of heinous crimes (patricide, matricide, killing Arahats, causing blood to be congealed in the body of the Buddha by wounding him and cause schism in the Sangha), (2) He must not hold "fixed wrong views" and (3) He must have confidence in the efficacy of Paritta (Ashin Vasethabhivamsa, Parit Gyi Nissara Thit, p- 230-1).

The Use of the *Parittas*

Although the Parittas are for chanting in general, some of the Parittas are to be practiced as well. Only the Ratana Sutta, Mora Sutta, Vatta Sutta, Atanatiya Sutta, Angulimala Sutta and Pubbanha Sutta are meant for chanting only; the others are for both chanting and practicing. And there are specific uses for the Parittas although generally they are meant for protection against dangers. The specific uses can be obtained from the introductory verses of each Sutta. They are, in brief, as follows:

<i>Mangala Sutta</i>	for blessing and prosperity
<i>Ratana Sutta</i>	for getting free from dangers caused by disease, evil spirits and famine
<i>Metta Sutta</i>	for suffusing all kinds of beings with loving-kindness
<i>Khandha Sutta</i>	for protecting against snakes and other creatures
<i>Mora Sutta</i>	for protection against snares, imprisonment and for safety
<i>Vatta Sutta</i>	for protection against fire
<i>Dhajagga Sutta</i>	for protection against fear, trembling and horror
<i>Atanatiya Sutta</i>	for protection against evil spirits, and gaining health and happiness
<i>Angulimala Sutta</i>	for easy delivery for expectant mothers
<i>Bojjhanga Sutta</i>	for protection against and getting free from sickness and disease
<i>Pubbanha Sutta</i>	for protection against bad omens, etc., and gaining happiness

(Silanandabhivamsa, 2000, Paritta Pali & Protective Verses, p- 4)

Pyu

In Visnu city, some types of religious or ritual structures were excavated and they seem to indicate “the presence of a form of Buddhism similar to that followed by the *Aparaseliya* and *Mahisasaka* sects of *Amaravati* and *Nagarjunakonda* who started their careers without the Buddha image and did not yield to the popular demand of image-worship” (Aung Thaw, *Historical Sites in Burma*, p- 6).

But, Pali language and Buddhism were propagated in Sriksetra. In 1910, a broken piece of inscription was found at the Twinpyae gate on the northeast of city wall of Sriksetra and some excerpts of Ratana Sutta were inscribed. Then, in 1965, Shwedagar gate on the northwest of Sriksetra, a stone slab broken at the top was also uncovered. Some excerpts from Mora Sutta and Mangala Sutta were inscribed on the slab (Aung Mon, p- 75).

Pagan

Inscriptions

In the Bagan Period, there are many inscriptions mentioning donations of Buddha images, stupas, temples, slaves, etc, and religious activities and even land issues. Inscriptions describing recitation of Paritta discourses are also found in the period.

Seventeen years after ascension, King Hti Hlaig (Kyansittha) built a new palace. It took about six months- from 4th November, 1101 BE till 9th May, 1102 BE. Detailed programme of palace construction was recorded in Kyansittha Palace Inscription. In the inscription, religious and social traditions of early years of 11th Century, Pagan, are found (Than Tun, *Sritribhuvanadhitraddhammaraja* (Kyansittha) Palace Construction Inscription in Mon, *The Earliest Scripted Burmese Records*, p- 231).

In the morning of 1st March, 1102 BE, (about 11: 16 o'clock), Maha Thera Shin Arahan and monks came to recite Paritta. After sunset, bowls of offertory including small banana combs with stick, sugar cane and banana combs are laid on mats on the ground. . . . Since three *paho* (three o'clock in the evening), drum, castanets, horn and bugle were played before the golden Buddha image, God Gavampati and 4108 monks headed by Shin Arahan. High and low officers such as Thanbyin Ze Thabin, Thanbyin Kinthathu, Thanbyin Yaza Thu and pandits take their seats in places where golden foliage and oil lamps on trays are laid, take refuge in the Triple gem and precepts and request monks to recite Paritta. Shin Arahan faces to the east from the west and repeats observance. Monks numbering four thousand, one hundred and eight recite Paritta. After recitation, it is night time (Than Tun, *ibid*, p- 235-6).

During palace construction, on every week of the waxing or waning moon, Shin Arahan and monk come and reside in Jetavun building. On such evening, Mon and Pyu chiefs in their ceremonial dress and badges go to fetch Paritta water. Then, gentlemen and pandits put Kusa grass in Kalasa pots together with conches and offer to monks. They request them to chant Paritta. There, taking conch water and Kusa grass, monks go in line around four cardinal points of the palace and sprinkle water (Than Tun, *ibid*, p- 239).

In relationships of laymen and laywomen, such activities of monks as address of Dhamma, instruction of meditation practice, etc, are dealt. On auspicious and inauspicious occasions of lay people, Paritta recitation became vogue since then. In the inscription of

Asawlat couple, it runs: On 5th waxing moon of Mwetar, 623 Myeikkatho Nhit, relics were enshrined in the temple. There, Thakhin Vinihto, Thakhin Sarapo, Thakhin Htamaungka, Thakhin Upata, Thura Bhiyitsir, Panyin Misar, Osita and Minsamisir- “*Isakhein shityaukka parityutsate*” -meaning “These eight lord monks recite Paritta discourse (Nyein Maung, Ancient Burmese Inscriptions, Vol. III, p- 62) .”

In Taungguni Phaya inscription, written by Minister Singasura of King Narapati Sithu, on Friday, 2nd waxing moon of Tazaungmon, *Aheisakkarit* 552 BE, it runs, “Parit yutsoka Thakhein Mahather Pajjhi Bhodhi, Thakhein Kunase, Thakhein Ingu, Thakhein Maha Panneit, Thakhein Et, Thakhein Dhamma Gambhi, Thakhein Dhammaguru, Thakhein Naga, Eithakhein shityaukhutta,” meaning “eight monks (in the inscription they are nine monks) recite Paritta discourse (Nyein Maung, Ancient Burmese Inscriptions, Vol. 1, p- 50). Then, the term “*Saroputsoka*” means “when Paritta water surges” (Aye Maung, p-).

There are some temples of Pagan environs in which scenes of Paritta discourses are depicted and some ink inscriptions are also documented.

Lokahteikpan Temple

The panel on the north side of the window illustrates events connected with the preaching of the *Ratana* sutta of the *Khuddakapatha*, by the Buddha. It is divided vertically into two sections. The one on the right shows a boat-raft (in the Ganges) which conveyed the Buddha to Vesali. The Buddha is shown in a pavilion of double-tiered roof on the boat-raft with attendants, monks and laymen, behind and in front. Above the pavilion are five phrase, two on the right and three on the left. A Naga king in human form, emerges from the river with his attendants in the left bottom corner of the section. The boat-raft is shown with its prow to the left, heading for Vesali. . . . At the tail ends of these rows of kings and men (who presumably represent the *Lacchavi* princes and the people of *Vesali*), are shown four fierce-looking figures, with unkempt hair, wrinkled faces and rashes, in the act of running away. These probably represent the evil spirits running away from the city when the *Ratana Sutta* was recited. This panel on the north of the window also has a faint and fragmentary line of Archaic Burmese below. The panels on this wall are the largest in the temple (Ba Shin, *Lokahteikpan*, The Burma Historical Commission, Ministry of Union Culture, Burma, 1962, p- 15-6).

Dhammarajaka Stupa

There are glazed plaques depicting 550 Jataka tales at each terrace of Dhammarajaka Stupa. Among them, there is a plaque illustrating *Telapatta Jataka*. Maung Kyi Pan (Myingaba) mentions that in a house with two roofs the king sits and before him are a woman and a man standing and holding something round in his hands (Maung Kyi Pan, *Dhammarajaka Stupa*, Sittthetaw Press, Rangoon, 2006, p- 96). Here, the author of the history of Dhammarajaka Stupa misunderstands the writing style on the glazed plaque and translates the Jataka tale to be *Ngatalapatta Jataka* tale.

Alopyi Temple

Around the central pillar and inner walls of Alopyi temple, names of over one hundred Buddhist texts are written in ink inscription. Among them, some popular texts are (1) Mangala Sutta, (2) Ratana Sutta, (3) Metta Sutta, (4) Khandha Sutta, (5) Mora Sutta, (6), Vatta Sutta, (7) Dhajagga Sutta, (8) Atanatiya Sutta, (9) Angulimala Sutta, (10) Bojjhanga Sutta, (11) Pubbana Sutta, etc (Ashin Vamsapala, History of Alopyi Temple, 1994, First Published, p- 51-2).

Telapatta Jataka

In fact, Paritta discourses have been taught by all Enlightened Buddhas. In one of his former lives for the quest of Buddhahood, when Bodhisatta, who would become Gotama Buddha, used Paritta sand, thread, water etc, and overcame danger and strife. It is Telapatta Jataka.

During the reign of King Brahmadat in Benares, Bodhisatta was the youngest of one thousand princes. In that time, Paccekka Buddhas came to the palace for daily meals. One day, Bodhisatta asked them whether he had any chance to be crowned in the kingdom. The Lords said, “No chance to be crowned in the kingdom. If you could go to Taxila which is one hundred and eighty yojana away from here in a week from this day, you would be a king there. But, there is peril on the way because ogresses in the forests capture all wayfarers with five kinds of senses and devour them.

Then, Bodhisatta replied, “My Lords, I’d go without looking at the ogresses.” And he took Paritta thread, sand and water from the Paccekka Buddhas and left for Taxila. His five men accompanied (Aung Nyunt Win, Summary of 550 Jataka Tales, p- 144-5). Being enticed by ogresses, his five companions were devoured by ogresses but Bodhisatta could pass the forest safely. Then, they got to a rest-house outside the gate of Tekkatho city. Because of the power and efficacy of Bodhisatta and Paritta thread, sand and water, the ogress could not enter into the rest-house. The king was infatuated with the ogress and made her queen. At night, the king and courtiers in the palace and even animals were devoured by ogres and ogresses. As Bodhisatta guarded his senses steadfastly, he became king in Taxila.

What is striking is that the Jataka tale was Portrayed as a cloth painting by the townsfolk of Pagan. On 31st March, 1984, was found a Buddha statue in temple no. 315, known as Taungbon Lokanahta temple, and the hand was broken. One labourer found a piece of cloth. It was a cloth painting of the Pagan Period.

Then the restoration was begun by expert art restorers at the specially equipped laboratory of ICCROM at No. 13, San Miche Street, Rome. It took a year and two months (October 1986 to December 1987) to complete the restoration. ... The painting was executed on a piece of fine cotton cloth with “a fairly tight perpendicular weave”. The cloth measures about 81.5 cm wide from selvage to selvage, and about 138 cm long. Two larger folded bands were sewn to the upper and lower borders of the cloth with cotton thread.

The area of the cloth painted was prepared front and back with a thin layer of probably gypsum or light clay, whitish in colour. On closer examination, traces of a preparatory drawing are seen. They are the outlines of the buildings and forms. They are not details but only sketches. A black pigment was used in sketching. The pigments used were natural products from orpiment, realgar, cinnabar, vegetable lacquer, carbon black, yellow ochre, red ochre, copper green and

blue (Dr Khin Maung Nyunt, A 12th Century Cloth Painting from Ancient Bagan, Myanmar Perspective, Vol. III, 4/98, p- 29). The theme of the painting is Telapatta Jataka tale.

There are glazed plaques around three terraces of Dhammarajaka stupa. According to Maung Kyi Pann (Myingaba), no. 161 mentions Nga-ta-la-patt Jataka tale. He writes about a woman and a human figure holding a round thing in the hand sitting before the king in a house with two roofs (Maung Kyi Pann (Myingaba), Dhammarajaka Stupa, 2006, p- 96). He misconstrues the archaic spelling on the glazed plaque but in fact it is Telapatta.

Research Problem

It is known that the Paritta recitation had its origin in the life-time of the Buddha. In Buddhist literature there was a tradition of Paritta recitation when Bodhisatta fulfilled his Parima (perfection) for Buddhahood. Till the present time, Paritta recitation is found in some countries such as Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, etc.

But, a historian said that Paritta recitation is a Mahayanic tradition. His followers hold the assumption posed by their master. Is Paritta recitation a tradition of Mahayana Buddhism?

Parit Recitation in Sri Lanka

In Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma, there are traditions of Paritta recitation on special occasions and in daily life. In Sri Lanka, there are two kinds of Paritta recitation. In the simplest form, the ceremony is called varu-paritta or vel-paritta (varu or vel in Sinhala meaning half-day session), as the ceremony is confined only to a portion of the day and only the mahaparitta is chanted. A water pot and three-stranded thread are prepared for the recitation. The water in the pot, designated parit-water (parit-pan), and the sacred thread (parit-nula) become sanctified through the chanting and are used thereafter as a protection against evil. The thread is used by tying a piece around the arm or the waist, and the water by drinking it or sprinkling it, according to requirements (Kariyawasam, Buddhist Ceremonies and Rituals of Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1995, p- 32). But the full-fledged paritta ceremony is a much more elaborate ritual. It takes about one whole night as well as one week. A special pavilion or parit mandapaya is set up for chanting. There are many procedures for the rite.

Discussion

It is known that Paritta recitation had its origin in Theravada Buddhism. According to Telapatta Jataka, Bodhisatta used Paritta thread, sand, etc, to evade danger. After enlightenment Gotama Buddha also taught Paritta discourses for his Sangha and lay people. He laid out some rules for Paritta reciter and listener. By abiding by some Paritta discourses, anyone can gain enlightenment.

In fact, there is no such complete Paritta teaching in Mahayana Buddhism. It is universally believed that the Mahasanghikas were the earliest seceders, and the forerunners of the Mahayana. They took up the cause of their new sect with zeal and enthusiasm and in a few decades grew remarkably in power and popularity. They adapted existing rules of the Vinaya to their doctrine and introduced new ones, thus revolutionizing the Buddhist Sangha. Moreover they made alterations in the arrangement and interpretation of the Sutra and the Vinaya texts. They also canonized a good number of sutras, which they claimed to be the sayings of the Buddha. They rejected certain portions of the canon which had been accepted in the First Council, and did

not recognize as Buddha's sayings in the parivara, the Abhidhamma, the Patisambhida, the Niddesa and parts of the Jataka (2500 Years of Buddhism, Edited by Prof. PV Bapat, 1987, p- 96-7).

In other words, Mahayana Buddhism was propagated after Emperor Asoka. Those of Mahayana Buddhism adulterated and amended Theravada Buddhism. So, the ways of the Buddha are different from those of leaders of Mahayana Buddhism.

It is believed that Burmese have followed Theravada Buddhism since Pyu Period till the present time. There are some evidences of Paritta in Pyu Period. There are records of inscriptions and visual arts in Pagan Period of recitation of Paritta discourses on religious and secular occasions in the period.

Conclusion

In Burma, Paritta recitation is chanted by monks and lay people as well on special occasions and in daily life. On the New Year Day Paritta recitation is chanted by monks on platforms at the corners of streets. Water pot, flowers, thread and sand are placed before monks. The flowers are stuck on matted walls around the house, sand is sprinkled in the compound and on fence and water is used to drink or rub on head or body of child or people when some evil forces possess him or her. Water is placed on the shrine for curing for possession by spirits or fright.

It is believed that Paritta discourses could protect anyone from danger whether they are chanted by monks or lay persons. When a child falls ill at home, grandparents recite Bojjhanga Sutta and the child recovers soon. When an expectant mother is frightened at night, she drinks the Paritta water and rubs her head with the water. Her fright is alleviated. Some children wear Paritta threads as amulets around their neck or wrist.

On New Year Day in Pagan, one or two or three monks are invited to recite Paritta discourses in the house and inmates listen to the discourses. They prepare a bowl of offertory including coconut, bananas, bunch of betel nuts and tobacco fish, a water pot with some flowers, sand, clods, a ball of thread, etc, before monks. They are used as protective and curative rites for members of the house and neighbours.

In fact, Paritta recitation is the essential teachings of all Buddhas. It is not a kind of Mahayanic tradition. It is purely Theravadin tradition. In Burma, monks play an essential role for recitation of Paritta discourses on special occasions. But, lay people recite Paritta discourses early in the morning or at night. Some people play cassette or turn on television for Paritta discourses in the morning. So, Paritta recitation will last as long as Buddhism is propagated in Burma.

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