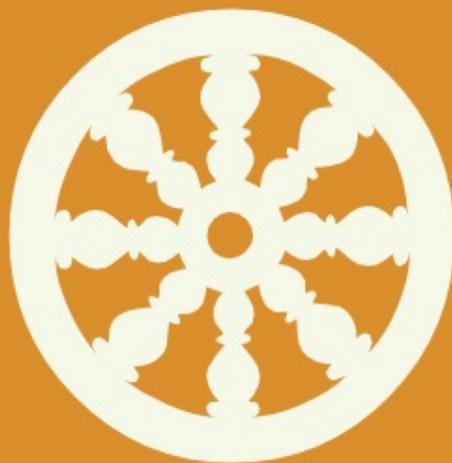


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**Ordination in  
Theravada Buddhism**  
An Early Account

*J. F. Dickson*  
(*& Piyadassi Thera, Ed.*)



# **Ordination in Theravada Buddhism**

**An Early Account**

**by**

**J. F. Dickson**

**Edited, with an Introduction and  
Notes by**

**Piyadassi Thera**

**Buddhist Publication Society**  
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# Introduction

This general introduction briefly explains the history of the Novice Ordination (*pabbajjā* or “going forth”), the Higher Ordination (*upasampadā*) and the functions of a novice (*sāmaṇera*) and a monk (*bhikkhu*), in Theravāda Buddhism.

The article that follows gives a graphic account of a Higher Ordination ceremony as witnessed by Mr. J. F. Dickson at Malwatta monastery, Kandy, Sri Lanka, in 1872. A few shortcomings and errors in the essay have been corrected.

The followers of the Buddha are four-fold: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen (*bhikkhu*, *bhikkhunī*, *upāsaka*, *upāsikā*). The Bhikkhunī Sāsana or the Order of the Nuns has ceased to exist, and in the absence of a Buddha and the bhikkhunīs the Order cannot be resuscitated. Today, however, we are left with the Bhikkhu Order and the laity.

To know the origin of the Bhikkhu Order we should go back twenty five centuries when at the Deer Park, at Isipatana (modern Sarnath), near Vārānasi in India, the Buddha Gotama on a full moon day of July,

addressed the five ascetics, his former friends, and revealed unto them the Right Way, the Noble Eightfold Path, which leads to calm, realization, enlightenment and Nibbāna. This is known as setting in motion the matchless Wheel of Truth (*Dhammacakka*).

The five ascetics were convinced and became followers of the Buddha. With the proclamation of the Dhamma, for the first time, and with the conversion of the five ascetics, the Deer Park became the birth place of the Buddha's dispensation (Buddha-sāsana) and of the Saṅgha, the community of monks, the ordained disciples.

Before long fifty-five others headed by Yasa, a young man of wealth, joined the Order of the Saṅgha. Now there were sixty disciples altogether. Their Novice Ordination and Higher Ordination were granted by the Buddha in these words: "Come monks, well proclaimed is the Dhamma. Live the noble life (*brahmacariyaṃ*) for the complete ending of suffering (*dukkha*)." When the vassa, the rainy season of three months, July-October, ended, the Master addressed his sixty disciples, the Accomplished Ones (Arahats), and said:

"Released am I, monks, from, all ties whether human or divine. You also are delivered from

fetters whether human or divine. Go now and wander for the welfare and happiness of gods and men. Let not two of you proceed in the same direction. Proclaim the Dhamma that is excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end, possessed of meaning and the letter and utterly perfect. Proclaim the life of purity. the holy life consummate and pure. There are beings who will understand the Dhamma. I shall go to Uruvelā, to Senānigama, to teach the Dhamma.

In accordance with this admonition, the disciples walked the high-ways and by-ways of India spreading the Dhamma, the new message of wisdom and compassion. Men and women from different walks of life who listened to the message of the Master manifested their willingness to follow the Buddha and his teaching. Among them there were those who wished to enter the Order of the Saṅgha; The monks brought these followers to the Master for ordination from various districts. The long journeys, however, fatigued both the monks and the seekers for ordination. To avoid this hardship and inconvenience, the Buddha allowed the monks to ordain the followers in any district. The manner of ordination was explained to the monks by the Buddha himself in this

wise:

“The hair and beard must be shaved first, and then the saffron robe put on. Adjusting his robe on one shoulder (the left), the seeker for ordination should pay homage to the monks, and squatting (if this is inconvenient one can kneel) before them with hands raised and palms together, he should say:

*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Tatīyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Tatīyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Tatīyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

I go for refuge to the Buddha (the  
Teacher)

I go for refuge to the Dhamma  
(the Teaching)

I go for refuge to the Saṅgha (the  
Taught)

For the second time, I go for  
refuge to the Buddha

For the second time, I go for  
refuge to the Dhamma  
For the second time, I go for  
refuge to the Saṅgha

For the third time, I go for refuge  
to the Buddha  
For the third time, I go for refuge  
to the Dhamma  
For the third time, I go for refuge  
to the Saṅgha

This was the manner in which a follower gained ordination in those early days. But with the passage of time this short formula had to be expanded as various unsuitable and undesirable men sought admission into the order. As it stands now, in the Novice Ordination , the follower has to recite the ten precepts in addition to the three refuges. In the case of a Higher Ordination , *upasampadā*, the novice who is to be ordained is examined and questioned by senior monks (see the essay). It may be noted that these additions were made by the Buddha himself, and they are not later arbitrary inclusions. Hence in the conducting of a novice or bhikkhu ordination every detail has to be observed.

In the Order of the Saṅgha a novice is expected to observe the ten precepts, study the Dhamma and

Vinaya (doctrine and discipline) from his elders, attend upon the senior monks, prepare himself and become eligible for the Higher Ordination. *Sāmaṇera* (*samaṇa* + *ṇera*) literally means son (*ṇera*) of the *samaṇa* or the monk, in the sense that a novice should be taught, disciplined and taken care of by a competent and understanding monk. A novice need not observe the *vassa*, the rainy season, which a bhikkhu is expected to observe. He is given the bhikkhu- or Higher Ordination when he has reached the age of twenty and not before. But age alone would not do, for it is not a sufficient qualification; if he lacks in intelligence, has not studied necessary Dhamma and Vinaya for leading the bhikkhu life, he is not a fit candidate eligible for the Higher Ordination .

A bhikkhu is expected to observe the essential (*pātimokkha*) precepts which are 220 (227) [1] in number. It is difficult to adequately translate the word bhikkhu. Monk may be considered as the best rendering. The words, Thera and Mahā Thera are only titles. A bhikkhu who has counted ten or more years of vassa may be called a Thera (literally elder or senior), and a bhikkhu who has spent twenty or more years of vassa is eligible to be called a Mahā Thera. Still he is a bhikkhu, and as the Dhammapada (260, 261) says:

“One is not a Thera merely because his head is

grey.

Ripe, he is in age, and 'a man grown old in vain' is he called."

"In whom there is truth and righteousness, harmless, restraint and control, That wise man who has thrown off impurities, is indeed; called Thera."

The word "priest" cannot, however, be used as a substitute of "bhikkhu"; for Buddhist monks are not priests who perform rites or sacrifices. They do not administer sacraments and pronounce absolution. An ideal Buddhist monk cannot, and does not, stand as an intermediary between man and "supernatural" powers, for Buddhism teaches that each individual is solely responsible for his own liberation. Hence there is no need to win the favour of a mediating priest. "You yourselves should strive on: the Buddhas show the path." (Dhammapada, 276)

The purpose of "going forth" (*pabbajjā*) is to turn away from thoughts of sensuality (*kilesa-kāmā*) and objects of sense (*vatthu-kāmā*). It is, therefore, really a self-sacrifice, and the urge to do so should be a genuine one if it is to bear pleasant fruit. This is certainly not a path that all can follow; for to leave behind the world's attractive and sensuous life is no easy a task. It is not possible for all to cut themselves off from the world

with all its attraction. And the Buddha does not expect all his followers to become monks or ascetics. Again the Dhammapada (verse 302) says: "Hard it is to go forth from home to homelessness, To take delight in it is hard."

In the Buddha's Dispensation, full liberty is granted to the disciples to leave the Order if they find it difficult to live the monk's life any more. There is no coercion or compulsion, whatsoever, and the person reverting to the lay life is not stigmatized.

Genuine renunciation, it may be borne in mind, is not escapism. Those who do not understand the real significance of renunciation, and those who judge it from bogus "recluses" who lead an indolent, worthless and parasitical life, hastily conclude that "going forth" is a sort of escapism, a selfish way of life. Nothing could be more untrue. The ideal monk, the bhikkhu, however, is an altruist of the highest type who takes least from, and gives much to society.

"As a bee without harming the flower,  
its colour and fragrance,  
takes away the honey (pollen)  
even so should the sage move in the village."  
(Dhammapada, 49).

It is true with the passage of time, many changes have

take place, yet the genuine Buddhist monk who has given up worldly pleasures, endeavours to lead a life of voluntary poverty and complete celibacy with the high aim of serving others selflessly within the bounds of his bhikkhu life, and attain the deliverance of mind.

There are two ways of leading the life of a bhikkhu: one entails continuous meditation (*vipassanā-dhura*) and the other part-time meditation, studying and teaching of the Dhamma (*gantha-dhura*). It is obligatory on every bhikkhu to take up one or other of these ways according to temperament, age and environment. [2]

The robe that a novice or a bhikkhu puts on is his dress and he is expected to wear it always and not on special occasions only.

In conclusion, it must be said that the Higher Ordination or Upasampadā ordination should be conducted in a duly consecrated “ Chapter House” (*sīmā*) and not in any place considered convenient.

—Piyadassi Thera

# **An Early Account of an Ordination Ceremony in Sri Lanka**

by

**J. F. Dickson, B.A.**

**Reprinted from a paper published in  
the  
Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,  
1874**

In May, 1872, I was invited by my learned friend, and pandit Kewiṭiyāgala Unnānse, of the Malwattā Monastery in Kandy, to be present at an ordination service, held according to custom on the full-moon

day of Wesak (May, June), being the anniversary of the day on which Gautama Buddha attained Nirvāna, B.C. 543. I gladly availed myself of this opportunity of witnessing the celebration of a rite of which Englishmen have but little knowledge, and which has rarely, if ever, been witnessed by any European in Ceylon.

Nothing could be more impressive than the order and solemnity of the proceedings. It was impossible not to feel that the ceremony was being conducted precisely as it was more than two thousand years ago. The chapter house (Sinhalese, *Poya-gā*) is an oblong hall, with rows of pillars forming an inner space and leaving broad aisles at the sides. At the top of this inner space sat the aged Abbot (Sinhalese, *Mahā Nāyaka*) as president of the chapter; on either side of him sat the elder priests, [3] and down the sides sat the other priests in number between thirty and forty. The chapter or assembly thus formed three sides of an oblong. The president sat on cushions and a carpet; the other priests sat on mats covered with white calico. They all sat cross-legged. On the fourth side at the foot, stood the candidates, behind the pillars on the right stood the deacons, [4] the left was given up to the visitors, and behind candidates at the bottom was a crowd of Buddhist laymen.

To form a chapter for this purpose not less than ten [5]

duly ordained monks are required, and the president must be of not less than ten years" standing from his Upasampadā ordination. The monks attending the chapter are required to give their undivided, unremitting and devout attention throughout the service. Every priest is instructed to join heart and mind in the exhortations, responses, formulas, etc, and to correct every error, lest the oversight of a single mistake should vitiate the efficacy of the rite. Previously to the ordination the candidates are subjected to a strict and searching examination as to their knowledge of the discourses of the Buddha, the duties of a priest etc. An examination and ordination is held on the full-moon day in Vesak, [6] and on the three succeeding Poya days, or days of quarters of the moon.

After witnessing the celebration of this rite, I read the *Upasampadā Kammavācā* or book setting forth the form and manner of ordering of priests and deacons, and I was subsequently induced to translate it. This manual was translated into Italian in 1776, by Padre Maria Percoto (missionary in Ava and Pegu), under the title of "*Kammuva, ossia trattato della ordinazio dei Talapoini del secondo ordine detti Penzi,*" and a portion of it was edited in 1841, in Pali and Latin, by Professor Spiegel. Clough translated it in 1834, and Hardy has given an interesting summary of it his *Eastern Monachism*; but

neither the text nor any complete translation is readily accessible, and I have therefore thought that this edition might possibly be acceptable to those who desire information respecting the practice of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, where, as is well pointed out by Mr. Childers, in his *Pāli Dictionary*, (s.v. *Nibbānaṃ*, p. 272, note), “Buddhism retains almost its pristine purity.”

With regard to the transliteration, I have used the system adopted (after Fausböll) by Mr. Childers in his *Dictionary*. In the translation I have placed in italics the rubrical directions in the text, and all explanations and amplifications of the text I have placed in the square brackets. I have thus endeavoured to give a translation of the text as it stands, and, at the same time, to set out the ordination service fully and completely, precisely in the form in use in Sri Lanka at the present time as I have myself witnessed it. No one who compares this form with that given in Article XV of Hodgson’s *Literature and Religion of the Buddhists in Nepaul*, can fail to be struck with the purity and simplicity of the Ceylon rite as contrasted with that in use among the Northern Buddhists.

—J.F. Dickson, B.A,  
Kandy, 9th January, 1873.

# The Ordination Service

Praise Be to the Blessed One, the Holy One, to Him who has Arrived at the Knowledge of All Truth.

The candidate, accompanied by his Tutor, in the dress of a layman, but having the yellow robes of a priest in his arms, makes the usual obeisance and offering to the President of the chapter, and standing says.

“Grant me leave to speak. Lord, [7] graciously grant me admission to deacon’s orders. [8] Kneels down. Lord, I pray for admission as a deacon. Again, lord, I pray for admission as a deacon. In compassion for me, lord, take these yellow robes, and let me be ordained, in order to the destruction of sorrow, and in order to the attainment of Nirvāna.” (To be repeated three times.)

The President takes the bundle of robes. [9]

“In compassion for me, lord, give me these yellow robes, [10] and let me be ordained in

order to the destruction of all sorrow, and in order to the attainment of Nirvāna.” (To be repeated three times.)

And the President then gives the bundle of the robes, the yellow band of which he ties round the neck of the candidate, reciting the while the *tacapañcaka*, or formula of meditation on the perishable nature of the human body, as follows:

*“Kesā lomā nakhā dantā taco—taco dantā nakhā kesā lomā.*

Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin—skin, teeth, nails, hair of the body, hair of the head.”

The candidate then rises up, and retires to throw off the dress of a laymen, and to put on his yellow robes. While changing his dress he recites the following:

“In wisdom I put on the robes, as protection against cold, as a protection against heat, as a protection against gadflies and mosquitoes, wind and sun, and touch of serpents and to cover nakedness, i.e., I wear them in all humility, for use only, and not for ornament or show.”

Having put on the yellow robes, he returns to the side of his tutor, and says:

“Grant me leave to speak. I make obeisance to my Lord. Lord, forgive me all my faults. Let the merit that I have gained be shared by my lord. It is fitting to give me to share in the merit gained by my lord. It is good, it is good. I share in it. Grant me leave to speak. Graciously give me, lord, the three refuges and the precepts.”

He kneels down:

“Lord, I pray for the refuges and the precepts.”

The tutor gives the three refuges and the ten precepts as follows, the candidate still kneeling, and repeating them after him sentence by sentence:

## **(I. The Three Refuges)**

I put my trust in Buddha.

I put my trust in the Law.

I put my trust in the Priesthood.

For the second time, I put my trust in Buddha.

For the second time, I put my trust in the Law.

For the second time, I put my trust in the Priesthood.

For the third time, I put my trust in Buddha.  
For the third time, I put my trust in the Law.  
For the third time, my trust in Priesthood.

## **(II. The Ten Precepts or Laws of the Priesthood.)**

Abstinence from destroying life;

Abstinence from theft;

Abstinence from fornication and uncleanness;

Abstinence from lying;

Abstinence from fermented liquor, spirits and strong drinks which cause intoxication and heedlessness;

Abstinence from eating at forbidden times;

Abstinence from dancing, singing, and shows;

Abstinence from adorning and beautifying the person by the use of garlands, perfumes and unguents;

Abstinence from using a high or a large couch or seat:

Abstinence from receiving gold and silver:

are the ten means (of leading a moral life).

The candidate says:

“I have received these ten precepts. Permit me.

He rises up, and makes obeisance to his tutor:

Lord, I make obeisance. Forgive me all my faults. May the merit I have gained be shared by my lord. Give me to share in the merit of my lord. It is good, it is good. I share in it.”

This completes the ordination of a deacon, and the candidate retires.

The foregoing ceremony is gone through previous to the ordination of a priest in all cases, even where the candidate has already been admitted as a deacon. If the candidate is duly qualified for the priestly office, he can proceed at once from deacon’s to priest’s orders; otherwise he must pass a term of instruction as a deacon. But a candidate who has received deacon’s orders must solicit them again, and go through the above ceremony when presented for priest’s orders.

The candidate being duly qualified, returns with his tutor, and goes up to the President of the chapter presenting an offering, and makes obeisance, saying:

“Permit me to speak. Lord, graciously grant me your sanction and support.” He kneels down, “Lord, I pray for your sanction and support; a second time. lord, I pray for your sanction and support: a third time, lord, I pray for your sanction and support. Lord, be my preceptor.”

(This is repeated three times.)

The President says:

“It is well”

and the candidate replies,

“I am content.” (This is repeated three times.)

“From this day forth lord is my charge. I am charge to my lord.” (This vow of mutual assistance is repeated three times.)

The candidate rises up, makes obeisance, and retires alone to the foot of the assembly, where his alms-bowl is strapped on his back. His tutor then goes down, takes him by the hand, and brings him back, placing him in front of the President. One of the assembled priests stands up, and places himself on the other side of the candidate, who thus stands between two tutors. **[11]** The tutors say to the assembly:

“With your permission.”

And then proceed to examine the candidate as to his fitness to be admitted to priest’s orders”:

“Your name is Nāga? —It is so, lord. Your preceptor is the Venerable Tissa? —It is so, lord.

The two tutors together say:

“Praise be to the Blessed One, the Holy one, to Him who has arrived at the knowledge of all Truth.”

They then recite the following commands [12] of Buddha:

“First it is right to appoint a preceptor. When the preceptor has been appointed, it is right to inquire whether the candidate has alms-bowl and robes” (which they do as follows). Is this your alms-bowl? It is so, lord. Is this the Double Robe? It is so, lord. Is this the single robe? It is so, lord. Is this the under robe? It is so, lord. Go and stand there.”

The candidate here retires, going backwards in a reverential posture, and stands at the lower corner of the assembly. The tutors remain in front of the President, and one of the them says:

“Priests, hear me. The candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. Now is the time of the assembly of priests I will instruct the candidate.”

The tutors make obeisance to the President, and go down to the foot of the assembly, and join the

candidate, whom they instruct and examine as follows:

“Listen, Nāga. This is the time for you to speak the truth, to state what has occurred. When asked concerning anything in the midst of the assembly if it be true, it is meet to say so; if it be not true, it is meet to say that it is not. Do not hesitate. Conceal nothing.”

They inquire of the candidates as follows:

Have you any such diseases as these? Leprosy?

—No, lord.

Boils?

—No, lord.

Itch?

—No, lord.

Asthma?

—No, lord.

Epilepsy?

—No, lord.

Are you a human being?

—Yes, lord.

Are you a male?

—Yes, lord.

Are you a freeman?

—Yes, lord.

Are you free from debt?

—Yes, lord.

Are you exempt from military service?

—Yes, lord.

Have you come with the permission of your parents?

—Yes, lord.

Are you of the full age of twenty years?

—Yes, lord.

Are your alms-bowl and robes complete?

—Yes lord.

What is your name?

—Lord, I am called Nāga.

What is the name of your preceptor?

—Lord, my preceptor is called the Venerable Tissa.”

The two tutors here go to the top of the assembly, and make obeisance to the President, and one of them says:

“Priests, hear me. The candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. He has been duly instructed by me. Now is the time of the assembly of priests. If the candidate is here, it is right to tell him to approach.”

One of the tutors says:

“Come hither.”

The candidate comes up, and stands between the tutors, makes obeisance to the assembly, and kneels down.

“Priests, I ask the assembly for ordination. Priests, have compassion on me, and lift me up. A third time, lords. I ask the assembly for ordination; lords, have compassion on me and lift me up.” (The candidate rises up, and makes obeisance. The tutors say:)

“Priests, hear me. This candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. Now is the time of the assembly of priests. I will examine the candidate respecting the disqualifications for the priestly office.”

“Listen, Nāga. This is the time for you to speak the truth, to state what has occurred. I will inquire of you concerning facts. If a thing is, it is right to say it is; if a thing is not, it is right to say it is not.

Have you any such diseases as these? Leprosy?

—No, lord.

Boils?

—No, lord.

Itch?

—No, lord.  
Asthma?  
—No, lord.  
Epilepsy?  
—No, lord.  
Are you a human being?  
—Yes, lord.  
Are you a male?  
—Yes, lord.  
Are you a free man?  
—Yes, lord.  
Are you free from debt?  
—Yes, lord.  
Are you exempt from military service?  
—Yes; lord.  
Have you come with the permission of your  
parents?  
—Yes, lord.  
Are you of the full age of twenty years?  
—Yes, lord.  
Are your alms-bowl and robes complete?  
—Yes, lord.  
What is your name?  
—Lord, I am called Nāga.  
What is the name of your preceptor?  
—My preceptor, lord, is called the Venerable  
Tissa.”

Here ends the examination in the midst of the assembly, and one of the tutors reports the result as follows:

“This candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. He is free from disqualifications. He has his alms-bowl and robes complete. The candidate asks the assembly for ordination under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. The assembly gives the candidate ordination under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. If any of the venerable assembly approves the ordination of the candidate under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa, let him be silent; if any objects, let him speak. A second time ... a third time I state this matter.

Priests, listen! This candidate desires ordination under the Venerable Tissa. He is free from disqualifications from the priestly office. His alms-bowl and robes are complete. The candidate asks the priesthood for ordination under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. The assembly gives the candidate ordination under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. If any of the venerable assembly approves the ordination of the candidate under his superior, the Venerable Tissa, let him be silent; if any objects, let him

Speak.”

The two tutors here again make obeisance to the President, and say:

“The candidate has received ordination from the priesthood under his preceptor, the Venerable Tissa. The assembly approves the resolution: therefore it keeps silence, so I understand your wish.”

# Ordination of a Bhikkhu in Kandy

By F. L. Woodward

From the *Ceylon Daily News*, Vesak Number, May 1940. [13]

At the edge of the lake at Kandy, hidden away among the trees there stands an ancient monastery, secluded and unknown to many of the visitors who throng the courts of the Temple of the Tooth on the other side. It is the Malwatte Vihāra (Flower Garden Retreat), the residence of the head of the Buddhist Order in Ceylon, the Mahānāyaka Thero, or Lord High Abbot of the Siam Sect of monks, Here is performed the ceremony of admission to the ranks of the Brethren of the Yellow Robe. An ordination may take place anywhere provided that it is conferred by a chapter of ten elders, theras, or monks of ten years standing but the seal of importance is added by the ceremony taking place at

this Kandy head-vihāra, and this is usually done on Vesak Day, the great Buddhist festival, the full moon day of the month of May.

To be ordained a monk is a solemn step, and to be ordained upon his day of days, when the heart of every Buddhist is fixed upon the Birth, the Illumination, the Preaching of the Good Law, and the Parinibbāna or final passing away of the Teacher of Gods and men, and here in this place, where for centuries the ecclesiastic succession has been preserved, confers a spiritual touch and awakens associations that are in their way unique. Youths from distant villages have come up attended by their relatives and friends to receive the robes and take the vow of *pabbajjā* renunciation of the worldly life. A boy may not do this till he is at least eight years of age. At the age of twenty he may receive full ordination (take priests orders, as Christians would say) or the *upasampadā*. Till then he is called a *sāmaṇera* or novice. All alike, whether novices or elders are termed bhikkhus begging monks and form the Sangha or Order of the Buddhist 'Church.' On this day too are present many *sāmaṇeras* attended by their tutors who have come up to Kandy from monasteries throughout the Island.

## The Scene

It is the evening of Vesak Day, and all the place is lit with lamps which cast their stars upon the still surface of the lake, and white robed forms move to and fro. The hollow booming of the big tom-toms reverberates among the huge overhanging trees. A flight of stone steps leads up from the road to the ordination-hall now crowded with monks and laymen. A solemnity pervades the atmosphere which is not dissipated by the subdued chatter of the numbers squatting at the lower end. As we enter the hall the first thing that strikes the eye is the great glass-enclosed Buddha before whose calmly-seated cross-legged form blink numberless little lights, amid the heaped up offerings of many-coloured flowers, in front of which, facing outwards, is seated the aged High Abbot, the president of this gathering. Next to him, on either side, in order of seniority of ordination are ranged the elder monks, and down the two sides of the Hall are rows of juniors, in yellow robes of various hues, orange and ochre, russet and lemon, for the hue varies according to the process and times of dyeing. At the bottom stand the candidates, along with a gorgeously dressed figure in the Kandyan national dress, a *ratemahatma*, or chief, who is the head *dāyaka* or trustee of the temple, befrilled and padded out in white muslin and linen, his fingers decked with jewelled rings; an imposing

figure of a man, in strong contrast to the meek and simply-clad close-shaven monks, as ivory-topped garden of sunflowers. The white-clad laymen squatting on the floor form an appropriate background to this scene.

## **2,500 Years Ago**

In thought one is carried back two thousand and by hundred years and pictures to oneself the first giving of the robes by the Master himself. “Come, monk! (*ehi bhikkhu*)”—this, and nothing more, marked the admission of Yasa, the eager youth, to the perpetual brotherhood of the sons of the Buddha. In after-times, when applicants were many, he gave permission for the robes to be conferred by a chapter of ten elders, with a view to a time when he should he no longer with them, and his ceremony has been performed unhandedly age after age, until the present day. One receives the impression that these yellow-robed, shaven-headed monks, with their typical cast of features, are a rock of conservatism on which the waves of centuries of thought have beaten and been rebuffed confused and ineffectual. Our western ways, our tongue and thoughts, have passed here as the footprints of the seagull on the ocean’s wave, as the gusts on a rocky promontory, tempest-buffed,

citadel-crowned.

A voice calls the gathering to order. Silence falls for a moment, soon broken by the rumble of the sonorous Pali invocation, which has resounded down the centuries.

## Youth Decked in Jewels

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā  
sambuddhassa.*

Glory to Him, the blessed Saint, the all-enlightened One.

A youth in laymen's garb comes forward. He is decked with jewels and fine clothes, lent him for the occasion by relatives and friends, the trappings of the worldly life which he has donned to enhance the effect of the sacrifice he is about to make, and which he will presently doff in exchange for the beggar's robes. He is led by a monk who has been his spiritual guide (*upajjha*) during his preparation, who has trained him in the Doctrine (Dhamma) and the discipline (Vinaya).

Standing before the president he bows low and says:

“Give me leave, Venerable Sir, in compassion confer on me the robes. (*Kneeling:*) Venerable Sir, I beg the robes of you.” (*thrice*).

He now presents to the abbot the bundle of yellow robes which he is to don, saying thrice these words:

“Venerable Sir, in compassion take these yellow robes and confer them on me for the ending of all sorrow, for the winning of the peace.”

He holds out his folded palms, on which the old monk replaces the bundle with trembling hands and fastens the band round his neck, repeating forwards and backwards:

*Kesā lomā nakhā dantā taco;  
Taco dantā nakhā lomā kesā.*

This formula sums up the transitory nature of the human form, compounded as it is of,

Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin;  
Skin, teeth and nails, hair of the body, hair of the head.

## **Mendicants Robes**

Then rising, he retires with his sponsor and another monk, who disrobe him of his finery of borrowed plumes, and while the process goes on—for, he wears a series of gaily coloured suits, one over the other—

prompted by them, he chants the stanzas as he assumes the mendicant's yellow robes.

*Paṭisaṅkhā yoniso civaraṃ paṭisevāmi  
Yāvad eva sītassa paṭighātāya uṇhassa paṭighātāya.  
Daṃsamakasa-vātatapa-siriṃsapa-samphassānaṃ  
paṭighātāya,  
Yāvad eva hirikopīna-paṭicchādanatthaṃ*

“Wisely reflecting I don the robe,  
To guard me from the heat and cold,  
From flies, and gnats, from wind and  
sun,  
From snake-bite, and to hide my shame.”

From bare necessity, not for luxury, he puts on the robes which, under the old dispensation, were made of rags picked from the dust-heap (see the sermon at the end). Bhikkhus of the present day carry umbrellas, fans, wear silken robes sometimes, and sandals; some carry purses and otherwise conform to the changing times.

Now he returns, led by his sponsor, and, again standing before the president, bows and says to his tutor:

“Give me leave, Venerable Sir, I bow before you. Have patience, Venerable Sir, with my faults.”

*President:* "I forgive what is to be forgiven."

*Candidate:* "May the merits I have won be welcomed by the Venerable Sir."

*P:* "It is well, it is well; I gladly receive."

*C:* "May the merit that my Venerable Sir has won be given to me."

*P:* "It is well, you should gladly receive."

*C:* "It is well. It is well, and gladly I receive them."

*C:* "Give me leave. Out of compassion, Venerable Sir. Give me the Three Refuge and the Precepts Ten.

*(Kneeling)* Venerable Sir, I beg the Refuges and Precepts." *(thrice.)*

## **Precepts**

The precepts are given and repeated by the candidate in faltering tones, with occasional promptings from the tutor.

"From killing to abstain—the vow I take.

From stealing to abstain—the vow I take.

From lustful deeds to abstain—the vow I take.

From lying to abstain—the vow I take.

From drink and sloth-producing drugs to abstain—the vow I take.

From food at times unseasonable to abstain—the vow I take.

From dancing, singing, music, worldly shows, from flowers scents and unguents, and from wearing adornments and from beautifying this body—from all these to abstain—the vow I take.

From the use of high or wide couches or seats to abstain—the vow I take.

From taking gold and silver to abstain—the vow I take.

These ten precepts I undertake to keep. (Rising and bowing to his sponsor).

Give me leave. Venerable Sir, I salute you and accept with thanks." (As above).

Such is the ceremony of *pabbajjā*. If duly qualified for the full order, the candidate now retires a moment and returns to make an offering to the Abbot and says:

"Give me leave. In compassion Venerable Sir, give me aid (*nissaya*).

(Kneeling) Venerable Sir, I ask your aid.

(thrice).

Be thou my spiritual guide. (thrice)."

The president: "It is well."

The candidate: "It is fitting. Friend, give me leave I accept. (thrice).

From henceforth the elder is my charge (*nissaya*) and I am his. (*thrice*)."

He rises, bows and retires alone to the end of the assembly, where his begging bowl is fastened on his back. The tutor now goes to him and leads him up to the president. Another monk stands up and the address the saṅgha (gathering of monks).

The sponsors (acting for the assembly):

"Give us leave (then to the novice). Is your name (e.g.) Nāga?"

C. "Give me leave. It is so."

S. "Your preceptor is Tissa the elder?"

C. "Give me leave. It is so."

S. *Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa.*"

"Glory to Him, the Blessed Saint, the all-enlightened One."

“First a spiritual guide is to be obtained. This done, we must inquire about the bowl and robes, thus:”

“Is this your bowl?”

C. “It is so, Venerable Sir.”

S. “And this your upper robe?”

C. It is so, Venerable Sir.”

S. “And this your under robe?”

C. “It is so.”

S. “Go and stand yonder.”

The candidate retires backwards and stands at the end of the hall. Now one of the sponsors addresses the assembly:

“Listen, reverend brotherhood. This Nāga desires ordination from the reverend Tissa. If it is seasonable to the brotherhood, I will instruct Nāga,”

## **Cross-Examination**

They bow to the Venerable Abbot and go down to the candidate and cross-examine him thus:

S. “Hear now, Nāga. It is time to tell the

truth and speak of facts. In the midst of the brotherhood of monks, when asked, 'Is it true?' It is right to make reply.' 'It is true, or as the case may be. Do not hesitate. Be not distressed in mind. I will ask you thus: Do you have diseases such as these: leprosy, or phthisis, or epilepsy?

C. No, Venerable Sir."

S. "Are you a human being, a male, a freeman, debtless, no soldier of the king? Do you have your parents consent? Are you of full age, and are your bowl and robes complete?"

C. "Yes, Venerable Sir."

S. "What is your name?"

C. "Venerable Sir, my name is Nāga."

S. "What is your preceptor's name?"

C. "Tissa the elder, Venerable Sir."

The examiners now return to the top end and bow to the Abbot. One of them says, addressing the Order:

"Listen, O monks. Nāga desires ordination from the Venerable Tissa. He has been admonished by me. If it be seasonable to the Venerables that he should approach, let him be

told to approach.” (To Nāga:) “Come hither.”

The candidate comes forward, and, between the two monks, bows, and kneels saying:

“O, Venerable Sir, I ask the brotherhood (saṅgha) for all ordination. May the reverend Order have compassion on me and lift me up!’ (*This thrice*). He rises and bows.

*The Elder to the Order:* Listen to me, O reverend Order. This Nāga is desirous of ordination from the reverend Tissa.” (*The same as the above examination.*)

He turns to the monks and says: “He is free from the hindrances. His bowl and robes are in order. He asks the ordination from the venerable Tissa.”

## **Approval**

He now thrice puts the motion to the chapter monks, saying:

“If anyone approves of the candidate, let him be silent. If anyone objects, let him speak.’

If no objection is made, both bow to the Abbot and announces the decision,

Nāga is ordained under the venerable Tissa. The brotherhood approves. This is their decision (*esa ñatti*). Thus I take your decision.”

The ordination is now over and the formula of examination is repeated with each candidate. If there be many, as on this occasion, the proceedings are very long, the patience of the audience is exhausted and the monks find it hard to fix their attention on the words, as they had been enjoined to do. A buzz of conversation arises from the lower end. Then, when all have been duly ordained, an elder rises, and exhorts the new monks, who stand before him reverently, as follows, with the time-honoured admonitions.

*The preacher:* Now should the shadow be measured. The exact time must be declared. The portion of the day must be recorded. In conjunction these things are to be told. The four supports (*nissaya*) of the monk and the four for hidden actions must be told. Food collected in a bowl is the monk’s support. Thus fed must you strive, as long as life shall last.

These are the extra allowances — Food given to the Order as a whole occasional food, invitation food, ticket food, fortnightly meals, full-moon feasts, and food of the day after the full moon.”

*The candidates, "Even so, Venerable Sir"*

P. "Robes made of rags are the monk's support. Thus clad must you strive, as long as life shall last. These are the extra allowances: robes of linen, cotton, silk, wool, hemp, or made of all these five."

C. "Even so, Venerable Sir."

P. "A seat at the foot of a tree is the monk's support. Thus seated must you strive, as long as life shall last. These are the extra allowances. A residence, a lean-to, an upstairs building, a walled house or a cave."

C. "Even so, Venerable Sir."

P. "Stale urine as medicine is a monks support. Thus remedied must you strive as long as life shall last. These are the extra allowances: butter, cream, oil, honey, and sugar."

C. "Even so, Venerable Sir."

## **The Four Forbidden Actions**

P. "The sexual act must not be practised by a fully-ordained monk, nor any act of bestial nature. The monk that follows this pursuit is no monk, no son of the Sakya clan. Just as a man whose head is severed from the trunk can live

no longer, so is a monk who follows this pursuit a monk no longer, no son of the Sakya clan. Thus restrained must you strive, as long as life shall last.”

C. “Even so, Venerable Sir.”

P. “Things not given to him a fully-ordained monk must not take with thievish intent, were it even a blade of grass. The monk that takes thus thievishly a little coin, or half a coin or anything worth as much more than that, if it be not given, is no longer a monk, no longer a son of the Sakya clan. Just as a withered leaf, once severed from the stalk, hath no longer any part in greenness, even so the monk who takes dishonestly what is not given, is a monk no more, no longer a son of the Sakya clan. Thus must you refrain, as long as life shall last.”

C. “Even so, Venerable Sir.”

P. No living thing, were it even but an ant must be deprived of life, with intent to slay (*sañcicca*), by a fully ordained monk. Moreover, if a monk slays a being of human form, even by slaying a foetus in the womb, he is a monk no more, no more a member of the Sakya clan. Just as a rock once split in twain can never be rejoined, so is a monk who takes life, with intent to slay, monk

no more, no more a member of the Sakya clan. From this act you must refrain as long as life shall last.”

C. “Even so, Venerable Sir.”

P. No superhuman powers are to be claimed, not even to the extent of saying, ‘I delight to live in a lonely hut,’ by a fully-ordained monk. If a monk deceitfully, for gain, falsely lays claim to superhuman qualities, be it the trance, the ecstasy, the absorption, the path or the path’s fruit—he is a monk no more, no more a member of the Sakya clan. Just as a tall palmyra palm, whose top has been cut off, can never put forth shoots again, so a monk, who deceitfully, for gain, falsely lays a claim to superhuman powers, is a monk no more, no more a member of the Sakya clan. These things you must avoid as long as life shall last.”

C. “Even so, Venerable Sir.”

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Our ceremony is now over and the night is far spent. The newly-robed bhikkhus go forth with eager hearts, and we, who in thought have been carried back to ages long ago, descend again to the world of

rickshaws, hotels, gas-lamps and railway trains.

# Notes

1. The last seven are not rules proper, but procedures for settling legal issues in the Saṅgha. Therefore there are only 220 rules in the Pātimokkha. (Editor) **[Back]**
2. For a detailed account of the bhikkhu life the reader is referred to *The Buddha's Ancient Path*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy. 1979. **[Back]**
3. Use the word *bhikkhus* or *monks* throughout **[Back]**
4. Use the word *novices* throughout. **[Back]**
5. Not necessarily. The minimum required is five. In Middle Country, in India, it is said, that not less than ten are required. **[Back]**
6. It need not be a full moon day or Vesak. There is no hard and fast rule regarding the days of Ordination. **[Back]**
7. The Pali word is *bhante* which may be translated as "Venerable Sir." This is the term used by a junior monk when addressing a senior. The word "Lord " is sometimes used when referring to the

Buddha. [\[Back\]](#)

8. “Admit me into the Novice's Order (*pabbājetha*),” in other words “grant me Sāmaṇera Ordination.” [\[Back\]](#)
9. Under robe and upper robe. [\[Back\]](#)
10. The Pali word *kāsāva* stained or dyed robe. It may be yellow or the colour of banyan fruit (orange colour). [\[Back\]](#)
11. Tutors may be two or even three. [\[Back\]](#)
12. They are not commands, but admonitions. [\[Back\]](#)
13. This text was not in the original Wheel Publication, but because it complements the previous description, it was considered worthwhile to add it for this digital edition. [\[Back\]](#)

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