

Monastic Life and Education according to I-tsing's Records

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The noble example of Xuan-zang induced the Chinese monks to visit India in large numbers, Chinese texts have preserved the biographies of sixty monks who visited India during the later half of the seventh century A.D. The greatest among these later pilgrims was I-tsing who was gifted with a real aptitude for this kind of investigation, the most learned and illustrious geographer and traveller. He left by sea-route in A.D. 671 and having passed several years at Sri Vijaya, an important center of learning in Sumatra, arrived in A.D. 673 at the port of Tamralipti in Bengal. He stayed at Nalanda for ten years (A.D. 675-685) studying and copying Buddhist texts. He returned to China with a collection of 400 Sanskrit manuscripts containing more than 50,000 *ślokas*. He translated a number of texts and compiled a Sanskrit - Chinese dictionary. Fortunately we still preserve his book entitle "*A Record of the Buddhist Religion as practised in India and Malay Archipelago*". In this he has noted in detail the rules of monastic life as practised in India, a subject in which he took special interest. He also wrote a biography of about 60 Buddhist monks who visited India. Almost all of them were associated with China, though many of them were natives of other lands such as Korea, Summarkand and Turk. This biography shows the international position of Buddhism in Asia and its influence in outlying countries like Korea. The fact that about sixty monks came to India from China in one generation shows the frequency of such pilgrimages in those days, though most of them have not been probably recorded.

At the time of I-tsing's travels in India Buddhism had already existed for twelve hundred years and during that long period the *paribbājākas* (wanderers) of Buddha's time had got *Bhikṣu-saṃgha* an order of the Homeless ones, which has been an essential member of Buddhist Trinity. This grave historian and devout pilgrim thought it necessary to devote all importance to the description of Monastic life, praising monks for their most strict discipline, engagement in the exercise of meritorious works on the backdrop of superstitious society.

Everything about monastic life is noted by I-tsing and all is classed in proper order. This in itself is great deal and the peculiar talent of exposition possessed by this Chinese author is a very curious phenomenon in the seventh century. At this epoch perhaps no one in Europe would have been capable of writing such book and it deserves attention again to this singular quality of all the Chinese travellers and their writing, which has hitherto been ignored. Like Xuan-Zang, the details given by I-tsing are so

precise and comprehensive that have proved extremely useful for future exploration of the history of Buddhism and India.

Buddhist monasteries came into existence as a result of the donations made by the kings, officials of the state and merchant prices. The kings who made endowments and land-grants for the convent of Buddhist monks also took care to upkeep them. In the time of I-tsing, the endowment bestowed on Nalanda had doubled. There were two hundred villages in its possession. They had been bestowed by kings of many generations.¹ The clepsydrae which were regularly used in the Indian monasteries during the period, were also supplied by the kings, together with some boy-servants to watch and announce the hours. I-tsing found it a universal custom in India that gifts of images, garments, incense, utensil, eatables and articles of daily use were received from the house-holders- the lay Buddhists and were distributed among the monks. Apart from the gifts, the monasteries seem to have earned some income from their corn-fields and fruit gardens. The monasteries received 1/6th of the produce of the land belonging to them and cultivated by hired labour. When any resident monk died his belongings became the property of the *Samgha*.

I-tsing lends us the glimpse of the material possession of some Buddhist monks who were distinguished and received special favors. Thus, among the articles of possessions of such Buddhist monks we find lands, houses, shops, iron or copper implements which became the *samgha* property. But small iron and copper bowls, door keys, razors, knives, axes, chisels, earthen pots and water basins etc., were distributed among the monks.

Animals including elephants, horses, mules, were to be offered to the royal house bulls and sheep were to be made *samgha* property. Paints of good quality were sent to the monasteries and sanctuaries for coloring images and decorations. All medical substances were to be kept in the monastic hospitals for the use of the sick monks. Valuables, precious stones and the likes were to be divided into two portions. The portion used for copying scriptures was called *Dhāmmika*. The other portion called *Sāṃghika* was to be divided among those who were present there. Scriptural texts and commentaries were to be deposited in the library of *Samgha*. Gold, Silver-raw or worked, cowries and coins were to be divided equally into three parts, each went to each member of Holy Trinity.²

In their internal management, the monasteries enjoyed full freedom. A regulated papal hierarchy seems to have been evolved by the monastics. Character, learning, seniority and general ability were the qualifications of a monk who could rise upto the position of the chief. At the head of the monastery was a chief priest or Head Abbot (*Kulapati*)

1. Takakusu, I-tsing p.65

2. I-tsing Chapter 36

sthavira. I-tsing tells us that in Tamralipti monastery, Rāhulamitra was the *sthavira* and all monasteries of Bengal were under his supervision.³

At the Tiladhā monastery near Nalanda, Jñānacandra was the *sthavira*. Jñānacandra is mentioned by Xuān-zang in Nalanda as a man of exceptional virtue and learning; the same scholar seems to have become the head of Tiladhā-vihāra, in the time of I-tsing. At that time, the exalted position of *Kulapati* of Nalanda seems to be occupied by Ratnasimha who is mentioned as the most distinguished personality at Nalanda. I-tsing also mentions Divākarmitra as the head of the forest monastery of Vindhya hills and under him lived ascetics of various faiths and philosophies. If *Kulapati* can be described as Director of the convent, then the *Karmadāna* or *Vihārasvāmī* or *Vihārapāla* can be called as Deputy Director, next in position and authority, and conducted the whole affairs thereof.

Monastic servants are referred to in Chinese records as 'pure-men'. I-tsing gives more information about their work. These servants take out the remnant of the meals eaten by priests who order their servants to carry it to monastery. These servants were also employed to cultivate the gardens, they also beat the time-drum, but they were not entitled to sound the gong (*ghaṇṭā*) announcing the hour of religious service. But all other unimportant affairs were done by the servants or 'pure-men'.

Resident monks in the monastery were divided into classes according to their seniority, learning and spiritual excellence. There were according to I-tsing⁴, three grades of monks-superiors, inferiors and mediocres. The respectable and learned monks were allotted some of the best rooms and servants and cells. The senior monks and venerable used small chairs to sit at dinner, while for junior members of the order, blocks of wood were used instead. Seniority was counted from the date and actual time of ordination (*upasampadā*); those who had spent ten rain retreats (*vassāvāsa*) were designated *sthaviras* (of settled position) ordinary monks were called *śramaneras*. A *sthavira* could live without living under a teacher's care, but *śrāmaṇera* had to live at least five summers, under the tutelage of some teacher.⁵

I-tsing also gives entire account of ordination.⁶ Any one wishing to embrace the monkhood had to approach a teacher of his own choice; there was no caste barrier. The selected teacher had to get permission of the *Samgha*. Only a *sthavira* could act as an *Upādhyāya*. The ordination ceremony was conducted by a priest called *Karmācārya*. The early morning hours were preferred for the ceremony of ordination. I-tsing testifies

3. *Ibid* p. 63-64

4. I-tsing *op cit*: p 56,57

5. I-tsing *op cit*: p. 103, 104

6. I-tsing, *Ibid* : p 195

to the fact that the monasteries maintained a register in which stranger monks visiting the monastery were noted and another register wherein the name etc., of a newly ordained monk were registered. It is needless to mention that, throughout India, Buddhist monks shaved their heads and faces and wear *kāṣāya* garment.

Pilgrimage to the holy Buddhist places sanctified by Lord Buddha's association seems to have been made in vogue during this period. Caitya of Rājgrha, Bodhi Tree (Buddha-Gayā), Gṛdhra-kūṭa - hill, Deer-park and the holy place of the śāla trees (Kusinagar) are especially mentioned by I-tsing as the places of Buddhist pilgrimage.⁷

I-tsing was profoundly impressed by the purity and cleanliness maintained by the Indian monks, with regard to body, clothes, utensils, water, sleeping and dining rooms. 'The Indian monks, he says, were proud of their own purity and cleanliness', they did not eat their daily food without having first washed; after meals they washed their tongues and teeth with a tooth-wood and hands with a powder made for that purpose. Not only the chewing of betel-leaf but also the taking of tea or 'hot drink' was current among the laity and monks of the time. Throughout India, says I-tsing, monks as well as the lay-men did not take onions and flesh, in exceptional cases, however, these could be used.⁸ However, he does not seem to have appreciated the style of garment. 'The ecclesiastic garments used in the five parts of India are stitched and sewn at random, with not regard to the threads of cloth being length way or cross way' he has recorded.⁹

Evidently, there is a reference to religious suicide prevalent among the Buddhist monks during the seventh century A.D. I-tsing alludes to the prevalence of other mortifying practices such as burning the body and cutting one's flesh. In his opinion, extreme sacrifices were meant either for laymen or for the Bodhisattvas who sacrifice themselves for the good of other without receiving *vinaya* laws at all. It seems that some Mahayanists were inspired by the ideals of the Bodhisattvas and imitated the incidents narrated in the Jātaka stories. I-tsing critically remarks 'It is but in vain to give up our insignificant body after having studied but a few *ślokas* of the *sūtras*.'¹⁰

Monastic Education

It is in the monkish training of nearly ordained disciple that the actual beginnings of the Buddhist type of education are to be seen. In early day, the community of monks that formed the core of Buddhist movement, was almost entirely devoted to a course of ethical excellence and intuitional gnosis leading to spiritual awakening.

7. I-tsing *op cit* p. 29-30

8. *Ibid*, pp 137-138

9. I-tsing, p. 6-7, 57-58

10. I-tsing, pp. 196-197

I-tsing comments that the monastic community had to tread along the rule and regulations laid down in Vinaya. This meant a rigorous ethical and moral course of training as also the general code of conduct among the monks and nuns. Gradually, not only the monks but also the lay followers seem to have frequented the residence of such *sthaviras*, in order to receive instruction on the subject of their choice. I-tsing clearly refers to this feature, when he says that students (*brahmacārin*) and children (*māṇavakas*) came to study under the *bhikṣus* and studied either Buddhist literature or secular sciences.¹¹

Monastic education and general literacy had progressed considerable during I-tsing's period. Reading and writing, study of Vinaya books and general knowledge of Tripiṭaka and Sanskrit grammar seemed to be the compulsory elements of a monk's preliminary education. I-tsing says throughout the five parts of India, ordinary students and Buddhist monks had to study Śabdavidyā or grammar and elements of language.¹²

The favourite texts studied during this period are also mentioned by I-tsing. Rāhulamitra studied the **Ratnakūṭasūtra** daily. I-tsing's teacher, Hui-hsi is said¹³ to have studied the **Saddharmapuṇḍarika** daily for the more than 60 years. Even Bāṇa makes a casual reference to the popularity of the **Abhidhamma** of Vasubandhu in the forest Academy of Divākaramitra, where even parrots recited its *kārikā-s*.¹⁴

A live picture of the deep and intimate relationship between teacher and his pupil, is drawn by I-tsing. Early in the morning everyday a pupil went to his teacher and supplied him with water, tooth-wood, water basin and a towel. After salutation, holding up his cloak and with clasped hands, touching the ground with his head three times, he would enquire of his teacher, in gentle words thus, 'whether my *upādhyāya* has been well through the night, whether his body has been in perfect health" and so forth. Afterwards, he read a portion of the scriptures and reflected on what he learnt.¹⁵

The pupil went to the teacher at the first and the last watch of the night. The teacher having given a comfortable seat to the student, selected some passages from the Tripiṭaka and gave a lesson suitable to the circumstances and left no fact or text unexplained. Whenever the pupil was found guilty the teacher made him to seek remedies and repent. If there be anything to be done, he does all on behalf of his teacher. This is the manner in which one pays respect to one's superior.

11. I-tsing ch. 19 pp. 105-106

12. I-tsing Introduction

13. *Ibid.*, - pp. 14-15, 64, 205

14. *Harṣacarita eka adhyayana* pp 122, 237

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117

The teacher also on his part, lent a ready helping hand and cherished fatherly affection for his pupil. In case of a pupil's illness, his teacher himself nurses him, supplies all medicine needed and pays attention to him as if he were his own child.¹⁶

I-tsing throws a welcome light on the content of elementary and general education prior to specialization and higher studies in the monastic colleges of the time.

A candidate after receiving '*upasampadā*' ordination, had to pay some 'fees' to his two teachers *upādhyāya* or *Karmācārya*. The *Upādhyāya* then delivered an elementary lesson on the precepts and contents of *pāṭimokkha*. The monk who had completed *Pratimokṣa*, the Vinaya and some Sūtras and Śāstras, had to study *Aśvagoṣa's* "**Service in three parts**", Mātr̥ceṭa's famous **Sārdhaśataka-buddha - praśamsā-gāthā** and his another charming work consisting four hundred *ślokas*. These two texts were taught compulsorily says I-tsing, this course is adopted by both the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna schools.¹⁷

Besides these book, I-tsing mentions many books like Bhartr̥hari's **Vākyapadiya**, Nāgārjuna's **Nyāyadvāra-tāraka-śāstra**, & **Suhr̥lekhā**, **Mahābhāṣya** of Patañjali etc.¹⁸

Great was respect the Buddhist sages received in society. The foremost Emperor did not hesitate to describe His Majesty as the servant of the sages of Nalanda. When a junior *bhikṣu* saw his senior he would say "*vande*" and the senior acknowledged it with the word '*ārogya*' holding his hand right in front. If they do not say these words both parties are faulty says I-tsing.¹⁹ In spite of having high regards from the society these monks did not exercise any official power. They were neither organized nor united under the common direction. Each *vihāra* seems to keep apart and had its own administration, just as provinces retained their own government. Religion had not overcome spirit of division and I-tsing leads to conclude in a sad note that "The teaching of the Buddha is becoming less prevalent in the world from day to day". He asks people to be more alert in future, but in vain; the conditions had deteriorated in his time. He records this deterioration in a language full of sincerity and pathos; "When I compare what I have witnessed in my younger days with what I see today in my old age, the state is altogether different, and it is to be hoped that we shall be more attentive in future."²⁰

But the history reveals that the Buddhists never became more attentive and the hopes of I-tsing were never fulfilled as the Doctrine of Śākyamuni went on

16. *Ibid.*, - p. 120

17. I-tsing, 157-160

18. *Ibid.*, p 116

19. *Ibid.*, p. 175-180

20. I-tsing, p.52

declining until it finally disappeared from India. The altogether different state which has been mentioned by I-tsing was nothing but the decadent state of Buddhism in the seventh century.

History does not precisely state when Buddhism began but thanks to the evidence of the Chinese pilgrims for had it not been for the records which they so diligently maintained of their visit to India a good part of our past, that too one of the golden periods of this land, would have been lost in the limbo of oblivion. We are indebted to I-tsing for this very reason.

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