

## VENERABLE MAHĀKASSAPA : THE FATHER OF THE SANGHA

### Nandamala

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### Abstract

*The one who had discovered the way leading to realization of the Truth was the Buddha in the six century B.C, and he imparted his doctrines and disciplines called Dhamma and Vinaya for the welfare and happiness of the world. Soon after his demise, his disciples tried to preserve his teachings by gathering at Rājagaha and it is called Great Council, Sangāti or Sangāyana. Due to the effort of his senior great disciples, his doctrines and teachings are practicing in every corner of the world even today. In the history of Buddhism, Ven.Mahākassapa played the most important role leading the Order of the Sangha. Therefore, we shed light on the father of the Sangha.*



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### Introduction

In the history of Buddhism, the one who leads the Order of the *Sangha*, was Ven. *Mahākassapa*. He was called the father of the *Sangha*, *Sanghapitā* for he was entrusted the duties to serve the *Sangha* by the Buddha himself. By exchanging the robes when the two met, it was indirectly entrusted him the responsibility when the Buddha has gone. Due to his dutiful noble task the Teaching and disciplines of the Master have been preserving for 2600 years even today. Everyone either Buddhist or non-Buddhist alike can enjoy the essence of Buddhism due to the great effort of Ven.*Mahākassapa* and elderly monks. So, we can trace how he performed to develop the *Buddhasāna*.

The Buddha had refused to name a personal successor till a few months before his *Parinibbāna*. Instead, he advised the monks to focus on the Dhamma and Vinaya. - the Doctrine and the discipline- as their Master, for they could find all the directions they required to treat the way to deliverance inside the teachings taught during his forty-five-year ministry. Despite the fact that the monks did not nominate a successor, the community grew to respect one lone senior whose person exuded a natural air of strength and authority in the

years following the Buddha's death. The Venerable *Mahākassapa* was the disciple who was the Buddha's counterpart (*buddhapatibhagasāvaka*), according to the *Pālī* commentaries.

Many circumstances contributed to Ven. *Mahākassapa*'s ascension to prominence within the newly orphaned Sangha, the Buddha's disciples. He had been praised by the Master for his meditative attainments and realizations. He was the only one monk with whom the Buddha had exchanged robes, a special honor. Ven. *Mahākassapa* possessed all ten attributes that inspire confidence to the fullest degree.

Like the two chief disciples, Ven. *Sāriputta* and *Moggalāna*, Ven. *Mahākassapa* was of Brahmin descent. He was born in the *Magadha* Kingdom, in the village *Mahatittha*, as the son of the Brahmin *Kapila* and his wife *Sumanadevī*. He was named *Pippali* and grew up in the midst of wealth and luxury, but he had a desire to forsake worldly life when he was young.

Dedicating his life to the Buddha, he renounced and on the way between *Rājagaha* and *Nālanada*, the Buddha sat down under a banyan tree waiting for *Pippali* who will become his future disciple to arrive. He did not sit like a common ascetic, but rather exuded all the majestic splendour of a Buddha. "This must be my master, for whom I have traveled!" *Pippali* thought when he arrived at the spot and saw the Buddha sitting there in all his Enlightened glory, "My instructor, Lord, is the Blessed One, and I am his pupil!" he screamed as he approached the Buddha and fell at his feet. Lord, the Blessed One is my instructor, and I am his disciple." The Buddha gave him three exhortations as his first formal introduction to the *Dhamma*.

The triple exhortations constituted Ven. *Kassapa*'s going forth and higher ordination. *Rājagaha* was approached by both Master and disciple. The Buddha stopped along the journey to relax and walked to the base of a tree. Then *Mahākassapa* folded his double-robe in four and asked the Master to sit on it, explaining that it would be "for my benefit for a long time." "Soft is your patched cloth robe, *Kassapa*," the Buddha murmured as he sat on *Kassapa*'s garment. "May the Greatest One, O Lord, accept this garment of patched fabric out of sympathy for me!" *Kassapa* answered. The Buddha said to him, "But, *Kassapa*, can you wear these hempen, worn-out rag robes of mine?"

The Venerable *Mahākassapa* received a high honour as a result of this robe exchange, which no other disciple had received. The Buddha's aim in switching robes with *Kassapa*, according to the commentary, was to inspire him to follow the *dhutaṅga*, or austere practises, from the moment he was admitted to the *bhikkhu Sangha*. Several austere practices:

using only the triples set of robes; wearing only rag robes; subsisting only on food collected on alms round; living only in the forest were commended in the discourses. On a later occasion the Buddha declared Ven. *Mahākassapa* was the most observant of the austerity disciplines. *Kassapa* reached the goal he was searching for, *Arahantship*, the mind's full emancipation from defilements, only seven days after his ordination and the change of robes.

We have already seen that the Ven. *Mahākassapa* and the Buddha had a close inner relationship. According to traditional sources, this relationship had its root in their past lives. Many conversations between the Buddha and his great pupils are documented from *Kassapa's* late life. It happened three occasions that the Buddha spoke to him: "Exhort the monks, *Kassapa*. *Kassapa*, give them a speech on the Dhamma. Either *Kassapa* or you should exhort the monks. Either I or you should offer them a Dhamma discourse. These comments suggest a great regard for *Kassapa's* abilities, as not every *arahant* is capable of successfully expounding the Teaching.

On three occasions when the Buddha requested Ven. *Kassapa* to admonish the monks, he refused to comply. *Kassapa* stated on the first of these occasions that conversing with some of the monks had become difficult because they were not susceptible to advice, were stubborn, and did not respect admonitions. He'd also heard two monks brag about their preaching abilities, saying, "Come, let us see who can preach more profusely, more brilliantly, and for longer!" When *Kassapa* notified the Buddha of this, he called these monks and gave them a severe lecture, forcing them to abandon their foolish arrogance. As a result, *Kassapa's* negative assessment turned out to be beneficial to those monks. It was not carried out solely to criticise others.

On the second occasion, Ven. *Kassapa* refused to train the monks because they were unresponsive to admonition, lacking faith in the good, a sense of guilt, and a dread of wrongdoing and were sluggish and lacking in insight. Ven. *Kassapa* compared such monks in decline to the waning moon, which everyday loses beauty (confidence), roundness (shame), splendour (fear of wrongdoing), height (energy), and width (fear of being wronged) (wisdom).

On the third occasion, when the Buddha invited Ven. *Kassapa* to teach the monks, *Kassapa* expressed his reluctance for the same reason he had previously. The Buddha did not appear to persuade Ven. *Kassapa* modified his views this time, but he did speak about the reasons for their actions.

On another occasion, “What is the reason that there used to be fewer rules but more monks established in *arahantship* knowledge, but currently there are more regulations but fewer monks established in *arahantship* knowledge?” Ven. *Kassapa* inquired of the Buddha. The Buddha replied to him:

*Kassapa*, there are more regulations and fewer arhants when creatures degenerate and the genuine *Dhamma* fades. Until a false *Dhamma* emerges in the world, the actual *Dhamma* will not perish. When a false *Dhamma* appears in the world, however, the true *Dhamma* fades away. But, *Kassapa*, the genuine *Dhamma* does not vanish because of a disaster of the four elements—earth, water, fire, and air. The obscuration and loss of the real *Dhamma* is caused by the existence of five harmful attitudes.

These are the five: monks and nuns, as well as male and female lay devotees, a lack of respect for the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, the *Sangha*, the training, and meditation focus. However, as long as those five elements are respected and valued, the actual *Dhamma* will not be obscured and will not vanish. Other lectures about *Mahākassapa* focus mostly on his austere way of living, which the Buddha appreciated and commended. *Mahākassapa* was informed by the Buddha late in his ministry that because he had become elderly, he must find his coarse, worn-out clothes irritating to wear. As a result, he should now wear robes given to him by householders, accept invitations for alms offerings, and dwell near him, according to the Buddha. But “I have been a forest dweller, for a long time, going on alms rounds and wearing rag robes; and I have commended such a life to others; and that, too, I have commended to others,” Ven. *Mahākassapa* replied.

“But for what cause do you live your life in this way?” the Buddha inquired. “For two reasons,” Ven. *Kassapa* answered, “for my own pleasant staying here and now, and out of compassion for future generations of monks who, hearing of such a life, might desire to copy it.” “Nicely spoken, *Kassapa*, well spoken!” said the Buddha. You live for the happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the good of gods and people alike. Then you can wear your coarse rag robes, go out for alms, and live in the woods.

According to tradition, Ven. *Mahākassapa*’s relation to Ven. *Ānandā* is closely connected with his leading role in the *Sangha* after the passing away of the Buddha. At the demise of the Buddha only the two of the five most prominent disciples were present, *Ananda* and *Anurudha*. Ven. *Sāriputta* and Ven. *Mahāmoggalāna* had expired earlier that year, and Ven. *Mahākassapa* led a big group of monks on a path from *Pāvāto Kusināra* at the time. During that walk, he took a detour off the road and sat down to rest under a tree. A nude

ascetic went that path at the time, bearing a coral-tree flower (*mandāra*), which is thought to only grow in the domain of gods. When Ven. *Mahākassapa* saw this, he realised that something exceptional had happened to cause the flower to appear on Earth. “The hermit Gotama departed into *Nibbāna* week ago,” the austere told him when he asked whether he had learnt anything about his teacher, the Buddha. I picked up this coral-tree bloom from the spot where he died.”

Only the arahants among the monks in Ven. *Mahākassapa*’s company remained calm and relaxed; others who had not yet been released from their passions wept and lamented, “Too quickly has the Blessed One passed into *Nibbāna*!” The Eye of the World has faded from our view far too quickly! There was one monk in the group named *Subhadda*, ordained in his old age, who addressed his comrades: “Enough, friends! Do not be sad. The Great Ascetic is no longer with us. His frequent lecturing us, ‘This is proper for you, that is improper,’ bothered us. Now we can do what we want and avoid doing what we don’t want.”

At the moment, Ven. *Mahākassapa* did not respond to those cruel statements. He may have intended to avoid causing a stir at the time by not censuring or disrobing the monk as he merited. But, as we shall see later, Ven. *Mahākassapa* mentioned this episode shortly after the Buddha’s cremation when he spoke of the need for a council of elders to maintain the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* for future generations. Now, he merely admonished his group of monks not to lament but to remember that all conditioned things are impermanent. He then continued his journey to *Kusināra* together with his company.

Ven. *Mahākassapa* came to pay his final respects to the Master’s remains, and when he arrived, he went three times around the pyre, reverently, with joined hands, and then bowed his head at the feet of the *Tathāgata*. When his monks followed suit, the pyre spontaneously erupted in flames. After the Master’s cremation, he focused his attention on the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, the Master’s spiritual legacy. *Subhadda*’s challenge to monastic discipline and support of moral laxity clearly established the need for this to him.

Ven. *Mahākassapa* interpreted this as a warning of what lay ahead unless clear guidelines were established now. If *Subhadda*’s attitude spread—and there were groups of monks who shared it even while the Buddha was alive—both the *Sangha* and the Teaching would quickly collapse and be destroyed. To avoid this from the outset, Ven. *Mahākassapa* advocated convening a council of elders to rehearse and preserve the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* for posterity.

He turned to the monks gathering at *Rājagaha* with that suggestion. The monks agreed, and Ven. *Mahākassapa* selected five hundred elders, all of whom were *Arahants* save one. Only Ven. *Ānandā*, whose location was ambiguous, was an exception. He could not be accepted to the council since he had not yet achieved the ultimate goal, but his presence was necessary because he excelled at remembering all of the Buddha's talks.

The only option was to issue an ultimatum to him: he had to reach arahatship before the council started, which he did the night before it started. Thus Ven. *Ānandā* was admitted to complete the five hundred members of the First Council. All other monks were to leave *Rājagaha* for the duration of the meeting.

Ven. *Upāli*, the preeminent *Vinaya* scholar, recited the *Vinaya*, the code of monastic discipline, for the first time during the council's deliberations. The formulation of the *Suttas'* teachings was the second item on the agenda. Ven. *Ānandā* was the one who, when questioned by Ven. *Mahākassapa*, recited all the texts that were ultimately compiled into the five *SuttaPiṭ* aka collections (*nikāya*).

After holding the First Council, the high regard in which the veneration for Ven. *Mahākassapa* grew even stronger, and he became the de facto head of the *Sangha*. His seniority would have helped, as he was one of the oldest living disciples at the time. Later on, as a symbol of the Dhamma's loyal preservation, Ven. *Mahākassapa* presented Ven. *Ānandā* with the Buddha's alms bowl. Thus, Ven. *Mahākassapa*, who was widely regarded in the Order as the worthiest in succession, picked Ven. *Ānandā* to succeed him as the worthiest.

### **Conclusion**

Ven. *Mahākassapa* had performed his duties as entrusted him by the Buddha. He had carried out his noble task successfully for preserving the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* by collecting them systematically. The task performed by Ven. *Mahākassapa* and elderly monks is termed as '*sangīti*' or '*sangāyanā*' and later it came to be known as the Great Council. Due to the noble task, the essence of Buddhism and the message of the Buddha have been exercising even today. Therefore, he was called the father of the *Sangha*, *Sanghapitā* in the history of Buddhism.

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