

TRADITIONAL BASIS FOR THE EFFICACY OF PARITTA

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Abstract: The main points discussed in this paper are:- a brief account on the term *paritta*, objectives of the *paritta* ceremony, and the efficacy derived from *paritta*. The efficacy will be discussed under the following aspects: (i) intrinsic value underlying *paritta* discourses, (ii) spiritual forces generated through the recitation of *paritta*, (iii) role of the reciter, (iv) form in which the desired objectives are channelled, (v) ceremonial and ritual practices and (vi) freedom from obstacles.

Paritta is a prophylactic ceremony prevalent among Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka. According to the ancient commentarial tradition, history of this ceremony goes back to the age of the Buddha and even to pre-Buddhistic times. However, the ceremony as practised today is a fairly elaborate one which has evolved into its present form through the centuries. There was, and as indeed still is, a strong belief in the efficacy of *paritta* among Buddhists in Sri Lanka. This may apply even to other Theravāda countries such as Burma and Thailand as well. That there was a belief in the efficacy of *paritta* among Sri Lankan Buddhists from early times is borne out by numerous references made to ancient and medieval rulers who resorted to the ceremonial recitation of *paritta* to achieve various objectives.¹ It is interesting to observe the historical continuity of this practice right down to our own times. The *paritta* recitation is widely practised by all Buddhists irrespective of their social and economic standing. Therefore, the subject of *paritta* deserves detailed investigation. The scope of the present paper, however, would be limited to an examination of the traditions pertaining to its efficacy.

Some idea about the word *paritta* (Sin. *Pirit* or *pirita*) seems relevant to our discussion dealing with its efficacy. The popular meaning of the word *paritta* is 'protection'. The extended meaning of the word signifies the 'ceremony of protection'. The word *paritta* (Skt. *pari+trā* to protect) corresponds to the Sanskrit term *paritrāna* (*pari+trā+ana*) in meaning. Some commentarial explanations of *paritta* are attributed to ancients as follows.

- (1) *Paritta* is so called because it protects beings by warding off dangers (*antarāyam pariharantam tāyati'ti parittam*)
- (2) *Paritta* is so called because it ensures protection on all sides or from all calamities (*parito vā sabbūpaddavato tāyati'ti parittam*)

1. For historical development of *paritta* see Dhammavisuddhi, Y. 'A Historical Survey of the *Paritta* Recitation' *Vijjalankara*, 1987, pp. 47-64; Silva, Lillie de, *Paritta* (*Spolia Zeylanica*, vol. 36, part I), 1981, pp. 11-22 (de Silva, 1981).