



BUDDHIST MONASTERIES IN NORTH INDIA: THEIR ECONOMIC FUNCTIONS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL TIMES

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As clearly defined in the oldest of Buddhist scriptures, the Buddhist *bhikkhu-saṅgha* were an order of monks who had committed themselves to a state of homelessness in the practice of the higher ideals of the religion. The Vinaya rules are very specific about the necessity for the monks to refrain from mundane activities such as the possession of material wealth, and thus the rejection of wealth was the very basis of the monk's life. These early monks had no permanent living quarters and the peripatetic character was considered the ideal.¹ However, in time to come, many monasteries came to be established and some of them gradually developed into institutions not only providing shelter to large groups of monks and catering to their needs, but also into organizations owning various types of property of economic value. It is necessary, therefore, before proceeding to the main discussion of the economic life of the Buddhist monasteries in the early medieval period, to trace the developments that led the *saṅgha*, which was originally a group of wandering ascetics observing very strict rules of non-attachment to temporal wealth, to accept various kinds of gifts of economic value, a practice that ultimately led to the transformation of the monastic establishments into property-owning organizations.

As long as the *saṅgha* continued to consist only of wandering ascetics, the question of any property other than their few personal movable belongings, did not arise. Hence the acceptance of property of economic value by the *saṅgha* was closely connected with the changes in the life style of the community which gradually lost its original peripatetic character. How and why this change took place is not very clear. Sukumar Dutt² on certain internal evidence of the *Vinayapitaka*, has arrived at the conclusion that, having lived together as a community during the *vassa-āvāsa* or the monsoon rain-retreat, at least some monks may have continued to live in the same *āvāsa* (cloister) during the non-*vassa* period as well. Further, he draws attention to the term *āvāsika* (which means monks belonging to an *āvāsa*) in the *Vinayapitaka* and argues that alongside the old idea of the *saṅgha* of the Four Quarters (i. e. the universal *saṅgha*), a new concept of the *saṅgha* belonging to separate *āvāsas* also came into existence.³ The *Vinayapitaka* is believed to be one of the

1. S. Dutt, *Early Buddhist Monachism*, London, 1924, pp. 75 ff.

2. S. Dutt, *Buddhist monks and Monasteries in India*, 1902, p. 55 ff.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 57.