

Will the Real Chief Please Stand Up

by Bhante Aggacitta

Since I became a bhikkhu more than 30 years ago, I have often been asked by local Buddhist devotees as well as foreign bhikkhus whether the “Chief High Priest of Malaysia and Singapore” was indeed the head of the whole Saṅgha in Malaysia and Singapore. Thai bhikkhus were more specific: “Is he the SaṅghaRāja of Malaysia?” they asked, according to their own understanding of the hierarchy of their national Saṅgha organisation, which is headed by a SaṅghaRāja.

Many a time have I had to explain to the laity—Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike—that bhikkhus are not priests, and that Malaysia doesn’t have a national Saṅgha organisation comprising *all* the bhikkhus from the three main cultural traditions, viz. Burmese, Sri Lankan and Thai. Although there is an officially registered “The Malaysian Siamese Saṅgha Association” for bhikkhus (mostly of Thai descent) ordained in the Thai tradition, there are no equivalents for bhikkhus ordained in the Burmese and Sri Lankan traditions. To make matters even more complicated, there are many denominations within each tradition that operate according to their own socio-cultural protocols and interpretations of the DhammaVinaya. Therefore, there has never been any consensus for a bhikkhu to be appointed or elected the “Head of the Malaysian Saṅgha”, as the title “Chief High Priest of Malaysia and Singapore” would connote.

Nowadays our local Buddhists are a bit more educated in Pāli terminology, so the title “Chief Saṅgha Nāyaka of Malaysia / Singapore” is also being used. This saves me the embarrassment and trouble of having to explain the difference between a bhikkhu and a priest, but still the title carries implications and connotations that can be both *misleading and confusing*. Frankly speaking, I was not fully aware of the import of such a title or the circumstances under which it was conferred. I certainly knew that it was confined to Sinhalese bhikkhus of the Sri Lankan tradition, but that was all—until very recently, when I received further explanations from reliable sources.¹ Let me share with you this enlightening information based on Bro Tan Ho Soon's article which was recently published by Nalanda Buddhist Society in its website.²

Sri Lankan Monastic Lineages

In Sri Lanka, there are three main Theravādin lineages, namely the majority Siyam-Upali (or Siam-Nikāya), the Rāmañña-Nikāya, and the Amarapura-Nikāya. These refer to the reintroduction of *upasampadā* (bhikkhu ordination) back to Sri Lanka after a long stretch of general decline in Buddhist fortune during the Portuguese and Dutch periods of domination. Siam-Nikāya refers to the Theravāda lineage re-introduced to Sri Lanka from

1 Such as Ananda Fong, Tan Ho Soon, Vijaya Samarawickrama.

2 <https://www.nalanda.org.my/sangha-nayaka-of-malaysia/>. The text has been slightly edited and reformatted here.

Thailand; whereas Rāmañña and Amarapura are Theravāda lineages brought over from Burma.

These three lineages are further divided into many ‘chapters’, centred around important or popular monasteries. Under the Siam-Nikāya, there are the bigger Malwatta and Asgiri Chapters based in Kandy, among others. However, there are no doctrinal differences among the three Theravādin Nikāyas in Sri Lanka. They differ only in ordination lineage.

Bestowing Titles

Titles such as “Saṅgha Nāyaka” are often bestowed upon overseas Sinhalese monks to honour their role in propagating Buddhism in distant lands. These titles, no doubt, are in recognition of their individual contribution and services to the BuddhaSāsana outside their motherland, and are understandably a matter of personal and social prestige to Sinhalese Buddhists. However, such titles are purely honorific, much like an honorary doctorate, and carry no extra ‘jurisdiction’ or ‘authority’. They are also not ‘offices’ and cannot be inherited by other monks upon the death of their title-holders.

Very often, several individual Sinhalese monks can be honoured with similar titles of “Saṅgha Nāyaka”, such as in the case of Malaysia, Singapore, the USA, the UK, Canada, etc. It must further be clarified that these titles are only bestowed upon the Sinhalese Saṅgha, and thus communal by nature, and are by no means universally ‘recognised’ by other Theravādins or Buddhists in general.

The late Venerable Kirinde Sri Dhammananda was bestowed such an honorary title by a Sri Lankan monastic chapter back in 1965. He was much respected for his vast knowledge and erudition, loved for his joviality and warmly referred to by many as “Chief”, not so much because of his ‘title’, but because of his affable character and commanding personality. Even when he was alive, there were other senior “Saṅgha Nāyakas” around, such as Venerable Pandit Sri Pematana of Penang.

Here are some recent examples in Malaysia:

- Venerable Dhammaratana Nāyaka Mahā Thera, the Chief Monk of Buddhist Mahāvihāra, Kuala Lumpur, was appointed the “Chief Saṅgha Nāyaka of Malaysia” by the Malwatta Chapter of the Siyam Mahānikāya of Sri Lanka on 12th March 2007³
- Venerable Saranankara Nāyaka Mahā Thera, the Chief Monk of Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple, Sentul, Kuala Lumpur, was appointed by the above-mentioned authority as the “Adhikaraṇa (Judiciary) Saṅgha Nāyaka of Malaysia” on 29th January 2007⁴
- Venerable Dr Sumana Siri Thera was conferred the title “Chief Saṅgha Nāyaka of Singapore and Malaysia” by the Supreme Council of Amarapura Nikāya on 1st January 2013.⁵

3 <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=22,3890,0,0,1,0>.

4 Ibid.

5 <http://www.dailynews.lk/2013/01/03/fea28.asp>.

So don't be surprised if, in response to the request: "Will the real Chief please stand up?" all of them stood up, for—going by the titles above—they are all real!

Or are they?

A closer scrutiny may cast some doubt on how real they really are. Let's begin with the titles "Chief High Priest of Malaysia / Singapore" and "Chief Saṅgha Nāyaka of Malaysia / Singapore". If both of them are translations based on the Pāli terms *Padhāna / Mahā Saṅgha Nāyaka*, the first one is certainly way out because the bhikkhus who comprise the Saṅgha are not priests, much less high priests. The word *padhāna* literally means "chief/foremost", *mahā* means "great" and *nāyaka* means "leader", so a literal translation would be "Chief / Great Saṅgha Leader".

However, whether or not the Saṅgha should have an appointed leader or chief is questionable, as we can gather from the following episode which took place shortly after the Buddha's demise (*parinibbāna*).⁶

The brahmin Vassakāra who was a Magadhan administrator met Āyasmā Ānanda at a worksite and asked him if the Buddha had appointed even one bhikkhu, saying "He will be your refuge (*paṭisaraṇa*) after I am gone," and to whom the bhikkhus now would turn. When Āyasmā Ānanda replied in the negative, he asked if the Saṅgha had agreed upon a similar appointment made by a number of elder bhikkhus (*therā*). Again Āyasmā Ānanda replied in the negative.

"Without having such a refuge," he asked, "what then is the cause for concord?"

"Brahmin, we are not without a refuge. We have a refuge, brahmin. The Dhamma is our refuge."

Pressed by the brahmin for further explanation, Āyasmā Ānanda said, "When we gather on Uposatha Day listening to the recital of the Monastic Code (*Pātimokkha*), if a bhikkhu's offence or transgression becomes apparent, we make him act in accordance with the Dhamma, in accordance with what has been instructed. Truly the worthy ones (*bhavanto*) do not make us act; the Dhamma makes us act."

"Is there, Master Ānanda, even one bhikkhu whom you now venerate, respect, esteem and honour, on whom you live in dependence, venerating and respecting him?" asked the brahmin, to whom Āyasmā Ānanda answered, "Yes."⁷

The brahmin was bewildered. "When asked if the Master Gotama had appointed even one bhikkhu to be a refuge after his passing, or if the Saṅgha had agreed on even one appointed by a number of elder bhikkhus, Master Ānanda answered, 'No.' But now Master Ānanda says that there is even one bhikkhu on whom the bhikkhus live in dependence, venerating and respecting him. So how is the meaning of what was said to be regarded?"

Āyasmā Ānanda explained, "The bhikkhu whom other bhikkhus now venerate, respect, esteem and honour, on whom they live in dependence, venerating and respecting him, is anyone who possesses the ten qualities inspiring confidence declared by the Buddha, i.e.

6 My own summarised translation from the Pāli of GopakaMoggallāna Sutta (MN 108).

7 Both the Myanmar and Sri Lankan versions of this sutta in Pāli read *Natthi* ("No"), which does not conform with the flow of the whole story; so, I translate it according to the Thai version, which reads *Atthi* ("Yes").

1. moral purity according to monastic standards,
2. being learned, well-versed and experienced in the Dhamma,
3. contentment with the four requisites,
4. skill in attaining the four jhānas,
5. psychic powers,
6. divine ear,
7. ability to read others' minds,
8. recollection of one's own past lives,
9. divine eye that sees the continual deaths and rebirths of other beings according to their kamma, and
10. arahantship.”

If we go by this very lofty standard, then due to a lack of certainty concerning any bhikkhu's attainment, it looks as though the Saṅgha these days is like a flock of lost sheep, without any real Chief or Nāyaka to look up to. But that should not be so, for before his final passing away the Buddha expressly declared in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16):

It may be, Ānanda, that to some among you the thought will come: 'Ended is the word of the Master; we have a Master no longer.' But it should not, Ānanda, be so considered. For that which I have proclaimed and made known as the Dhamma and the Discipline, that shall be your Master when I am gone.⁸

So the real Chief or Nāyaka of the Saṅgha, whether in Malaysia, Singapore, or elsewhere, is none other than the DhammaVinaya of our Blessed One, the Buddha Gotama. And of course, when asked: “Will the real Chief please stand up?” no one should be getting up from his seat, except perhaps someone holding up a hard or digital copy of the DhammaVinaya.

Nonetheless any elder or senior bhikkhu (*thera*) who may be prompted to do so (without holding up the DhammaVinaya, of course) should perhaps first reflect on the following verses found in the Dhammapada:

73. The fool seeks undeserved reputation,
precedence among monks,
authority over monasteries,
and honour among householders.
74. “Let both laymen and monks think that it was done by me.
In every work, great and small, let them follow me”—
such is the ambition of the fool;
thus his desire and pride increase.

⁸ Translated from the Pāli by Sister Vajira & Francis Story. Access to Insight, 11 October 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.16.1-6.vaji.html>.

75. One is the quest for worldly gain,
and quite another is the path to Nibbāna.
Clearly understanding this, let not the monk, the disciple of the Buddha,
be carried away by worldly acclaim,
but develop detachment instead.
260. A monk is not an Elder (*Thera*)
because his head is grey.
He is but ripe in age,
and he is called one grown old in vain.
261. One in whom there is truthfulness, virtue,
inoffensiveness, restraint and self-mastery,
who is free from defilements and is wise—
he is truly called an Elder (*Thera*).⁹

Leaving aside the idealistic standards of the ancients, we have to admit that the tradition of conferring titles on deserving Buddhists stems from the Buddha himself. There is a special chapter in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* entitled “Foremost” (*EtadaggaVagga*) in which no less than 80 bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, male lay followers and female lay followers are listed. Here are a few examples.

The foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with great wisdom is Sāriputta.¹⁰

The foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those with great wisdom is Khemā.¹¹

The foremost of my male lay followers among donors is the householder Sudatta Anāthapiṇḍika.¹²

The foremost of my female lay followers among meditators is Uttarā Nandamātā.¹³

Note that these titles are very specific, entirely honorific and do not carry any weight of seniority or administrative authority. Probably the Saṅgha authorities of the various Nikāyas in Sri Lanka drew their inspiration from this precedent set by our Blessed One. If indeed so, they should also emulate the Buddha by being discreet in the naming and issuance of their honorific titles. The prevalent, current titles of “Chief High Priest / Monk of Malaysia / Singapore” and “Chief Saṅgha Nāyaka of Malaysia / Singapore” are not only unspecific, misleading and confusing, but can also become fertile grounds for mischief, contention and dissension.

9 Translated from the Pāli by Acharya Buddharakkhita. Access to Insight, 14 October 2011, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.05.budd.html>, and 21 September 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.19.budd.html>.

10 AN 1.189.

11 AN 1.236.

12 AN 1.249.

13 AN 1.262. Translations of excerpts from this chapter are by Bhikkhu Bodhi in *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012.

In fact, the monastic titles “High Priest / Saṅgha Nāyaka” and “Chief High Priest / Mahā Saṅgha Nāyaka” were created by the British in the early 19th century *specifically* to cause mischief, contention and dissension so that they could successfully colonise the whole island of Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then called.¹⁴

Let me elaborate. Soon after the British defeated the Dutch at the end of the 18th Century, they were not content with just occupying the maritime bases of the Dutch, but conspired to colonise the whole island. While the Portuguese and Dutch had unsuccessfully tried to suppress Buddhism, the British were crafty enough to manipulate the feelings of the Saṅgha, the King of Kandy and the government officials who had been heavily influenced by the previous foreign powers, to their advantage. One of their ploys was the creation of a Saṅgha bureaucracy comprising “Mahā Saṅgha Nāyakas” and “Saṅgha Nāyakas” which they officially translated as “Chief High Priests” and “High Priests” respectively, in order to plant the seeds of dissension, jealousy and disharmony among the people of Ceylon.¹⁵ According to Venerable Walpola Rahula:

Its sole aim was to wean the loyalty of the bhikkhus from the Kandyan Kingdom to the English Government of the maritime provinces.¹⁶

[T]hose mahātheras who obtained high priesthood appointments from the Kandy Chapter [comprising the Malvatta and Asgiriya Chapters] were bound by a “Deed of Promise” to act as spies on their own nation.¹⁷

It is evident from history that these bhikkhus fell into the depths of degeneration on account of the machinations of the English Government.¹⁸

Now, about 200 years later, the same monastic title “Saṅgha Nāyaka” is still being conferred by the Saṅgha authorities of the Siyam and Amarapura Nikāyas upon Sinhalese bhikkhus. Perhaps they have forgotten or are quite oblivious of the disgraceful origins of the titles “High Priest / Saṅgha Nāyaka” and “Chief High Priest / Mahā Saṅgha Nāyaka”. Perhaps if this is brought to their attention, they might consider terminating the issuance of such titles, which are an ignoble and unsightly remnant of British colonial deviousness.

For the sake of clarity and dispelling confusion among the general public and the Theravāda Buddhist community in particular, we would like to humbly appeal to the relevant venerable Saṅgha authorities of the various Nikāyas in Sri Lanka to seriously consider revising their honorific monastic titles by using less pretentious titles so as not to give misleading impressions to the uninformed public.

Meanwhile, in order not to aggravate matters, responsible members of the Buddhist community should refrain from using such misleading honorifics, especially in the public media. If indeed circumstances require the usage of such titles, their specific connotations

14 I am grateful to Āyasmā Kumāra for pointing this out to me after he did some research in SBS Library.

15 Walpola Rahula, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (Wellampitiya, Godage International Publishers, 2003 (First published 1974)), Chapter 16.

16 Ibid, p 63.

17 Ibid, p 66.

18 Ibid, p 66.

should be clarified so that they are not misunderstood to carry more authority than they actually do.