The Rain Retreat: Early Monasticism as a Catalyst for Holistic Well-being and Mental Health

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Abstract: The Rain Retreat (traditionally known as *Vassa* or *Vassa-Vasa*) represents a pivotal transition in early Buddhist history from a nomadic, wandering lifestyle to a settled, communal existence during the monsoon season. This period of "structured seclusion" served as a foundational catalyst for both the institutional complexity of Buddhism and the development of sophisticated systems for mental health and holistic well-being.

Keywords: Vassa, Hinayana, Mahayana, Buddhism, *vihara*

INTRODUCTION

The Rain Retreat (known as *Vassa* in Pali) is one of the oldest traditions in Buddhist monasticism, dating back over 2,500 years. While it originated as a practical solution to the monsoon season in India, it evolved into a sophisticated psychological and communal framework for holistic well-being. In the time of the Buddha, monks were generally mendicant, travelling year-round to preach. However, during the three-month monsoon season, travel became difficult. This shift from a nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary community for three months created the first "monastic" settings, allowing for deep, uninterrupted practice.

Monsoons are the main source of water for India. The cycle of monsoon is characterised by the rainy period spanning the months of June to mid-September, and especially heavy rains around the month of July. This period of heavy rains coincides with the month of Ashadha according to the traditional Indian calendar. It is called *vassa-ritu* (Skt. *Varsha Ritu*). Although the rains are known as the life giver, they are also known to create many obstacles in the normal functioning of the daily life of the people.

It was more so in past and in the case of the wandering ascetics. Many *samnyasi* (ascetic) communities existed in ancient India; it was probably believed that one had to renounce his

home and relatives in his search for the Ultimate Truth. This act was technically called *Parivrajya* (i.e. Going forth). It was practised in India for many centuries, even before the birth of the Buddha. The cannons of those wandering communities had prescribed some regulations for the rainy season. The Buddhists called it the *vassa*, the Jainas called them the *Pajjusana* and the Brahmanical wanderers labelled it as the *Dhruvashila*, i.e. to have a fixed residence during the rainy season. (Dutt, S. 1962:53)

The wanderers of sects other than the Buddhists could stay at any place they wished. They could even live alone if they liked; there was no obligation on them to live in an ascetic community. On the contrary, Buddha had permitted *Bhikkhus* to stay only in the company of the fellow monks. Actually the period of the *vassa* began with the full moon day of Ashadha or a month later and was continued for the three following months, ending on the full-moon day of Kartika (Mahavagga, III.2.2) The keeping of the *vassa*, i.e. residing at a certain place during the rainy season, served two purposes. (1) The vegetation that grew on roads was not trodden by the feet of the wandering *Bhikkhus*, and (2) the *Bhikkhus* would be saved from the dangers and troubles, which they encountered in their journey from one place to another (Bhagwat, 1939:137). Initially, the *Bhikkhus* were not allowed to stay in the residences. They were expected to wander around and not to stay at one place for more than a night, except during the rainy season. They, therefore, used to take shelter in the woods, under the trees, on hillsides, in mountain caves, in cemeteries, in open plains, etc. However, this proved to be very inconvenient in the rainy season and, eventually, a rich merchant from Rajagriha expressed his willingness to construct residences for the monks. For the first time, then, Buddha allowed the *Bhikkhus* to use five kinds of abodes viz. *viharas*, Addhayogas, storied dwellings, attics and caves. It is believed that this merchant constructed sixty dwelling places in one day (Chullavagga – VI.1.3). Buddha asked him to donate those cells to the present and future Sangha of the four quarters. Buddha is believed to have said that he is a wise man who builds pleasant dwellings and lodges learned men there (Chullavagga VI.2.3). This speech of Gautama Buddha probably inspired many lay followers, who came forward on their own wishes and offered many *viharas* for the use of the Sangha of the four quarters.

Along with the residence came many other liberties, which the Buddha himself had not expected when he initiated this life style of a *Bhikkhu*, e.g. the begging of the food. When the *Bhikkhus* started staying at one place, the donors came forward with offers of daily meals for the Sangha. Buddha himself had accepted some such. donations in his lifetime. The earlier

ideal of a wandering ascetic, whose subsistence depended on the alms given by the laity gradually faded away.

The resting places in which the *vassa* was kept were fixed by natural boundaries like streams, lakes, hills, ridges, anthills etc. These locations were neither too near nor far removed from the habitation, so that the *Bhikkhus* would easily get alms. Mahavagga mentions that the *vassa* should not be kept at the place where a majority of people were non-believers in the religion; because there the *Bhikkhus* would not get enough support from the laity (Bhagwat 1939:137-138).

Two types of residences were constructed for the *vassa-vasa*.

(1) ***Avasa*** – These were located in the countryside, and were built and organised by the monks themselves.

(2) ***Aramas*** – These were constructed and maintained by the lay devotees (Dutt, S. 1962:54).

Initially these structures were strictly temporary in nature, only to last for the three rainy months (Chullavagga, VI.11.3). However, with this short stay of the congregations arose a sense of collective life among the resident monks. Certain institutions, customs and practices were developed, which were of a congregational character e.g. the recital of the *patimokkha*, the ceremonies like *pavarana* (Invitation) and *kathina* (distribution of robes). The earlier requisite of using robes made of rags was conveniently overlooked and a ceremony called *kathina* was promoted. In this, the *upasakas* or the lay devotees offered robes to the *Bhikkhus*, but in the name of the Sangha as the *Bhikkhus* were not allowed to keep any private and personal possessions (Mahavagga VIII.5.2).

The pious lay devotees started *giving* long-term endowments for the subsistence of the resident monks of the monasteries. Even the kings patronized these monks by donating the revenues of some villages. All these developments brought about a change in the *bhikkhus*' monastic lifestyle. The temporary residences were turned into more or less permanent abodes. The *bhikkhus*, who kept *vassa* at a particular residence, made it a point to return to the same residence next year. This made the cenobitical life of the *bhikkhus* more peaceful, as the like-minded and those who had habitually lived together gradually settled down at one place. However, the ancient ideal of the wandering ascetic was never completely given up by the

bhikkhus. The purpose of constructing monasteries was always put forward as providing residence during the rainy season.

In practice, however, it can be observed that they hardly remained the *bhikkhus* who went begging alms from door to door and surviving on these. The daily bread and butter no more remained a problem for the monks. Generous donations from the pious lay devotees fulfilled all their needs. Now the task on their part was to manage, maintain and organise all the donated money and property. In return they had to satisfy the spiritual and religious needs of the lay-people. Due to a close contact with the local laity and an introduction to their popular and folk religious notions, the monastic community developed many rituals and religions institutions.

Numerous *viharas* were constructed and donated for the use of the Sangha; the *vihara* in the Jivakamravana at Rajagriha was one of them. Along with the structural *viharas*, rock-cut caves for rain retreats were made for the sake of the monks, too. The basic needs of the Sangha, i.e. an assembly hall, and the quarters for monks were fulfilled by the earlier plain *viharas*. However, the later *viharas* came to be consisted of storehouses, kitchens, dining halls, wells, bathrooms, *cankramana* (wandering) places, etc. Initially no need was felt for having a place for the object of worship. For the monks, the Buddha *vacanas* (i.e. the sayings of the Buddha) were the sacred words. The yoga and meditations were the forms of religious practices of monks. As for the laity, the religious instructions given by the monks were sacred. The goal of developing a moral conduct was placed in front of the laity by the Buddha. For the monks, Buddha was a religious leader, a pathfinder. However, for the laity, he was the object of devout faith, a saviour and an almost superhuman being. The laity might have tried to combine the popular religious practices with their reverence for the Buddha. From this attempt, started the worship of the stupas. The already existing cult of the stupas was unconsciously applied by the lay Buddhist followers for the worship of Buddha. It is evident from the literature like the Milindapanno that monks did not initially take this practice very seriously. They believed that it was meant only for the laity and the monks should rather practice understanding and contemplation (Dutt. S. 1957:157).

As the time went on, munificent donations from the lay followers started coming in for construction, decoration and the maintenance of the stupa. Slowly and gradually, the stupas became big establishments, which needed complete attention of an organization. Even the royal personalities like king Ashoka joined hands with the laity in constructing stupas all over India.

The monks could not neglect the importance of the stupa in the religious life of the majority of the followers of their religion. At a certain point in the history of Buddhism, the monks themselves started donating for the construction and decoration of the stupas. Along with this, the organization and the management regarding the donations for the creation of the stupas were controlled by the Sangha. The earlier picture of the stupa cult, being the expression of the popular Buddhism, completely changed afterwards. It became a monastically dominated cult.

A statistical analysis of the early donative inscriptions from Bharhut and Sanchi indicates that a considerable portion of the donors comprised monks and nuns. At Bharhut 40% donors were monks and nuns. At Sanchi, out of the 437 inscriptions, 163 were monastic donors. Another interesting fact is that almost all the early stupas, both structural and rock-cut, were accompanied by huge monastic residential complexes. Thus, we can see that at a certain point in the history of Buddhist monastic architecture the monastic community really had a strong hold over the creation and maintenance of the religious structures.

This brings about another shift from the rules of the Vinaya, i.e. the right over the donations received. It is clearly mentioned is the Chullavagga that the right of property was completely vested in the hands of the Sangha. Not a single individual was allowed to possess any private property, not even any lodging and furniture (Chullavagga XI.I.14). Now the problem arises, that from which funds did the monks and nuns made such donations if they were not supposed to possess any private property. This thing has contributed a lot in increasing the complexities of the religion. One of them is the beginning of image worship. In the initial stages of the religious development, the image of the Buddha was worshipped in symbolic forms and not in his anthromorphic form. However, around first century A.D, images of Buddha start appearing in the North India and become very popular within no time. A very interesting feature of this image cult is the donative inscriptions, which the sculptures carry with them. Out of the 18 kharoshthi inscriptions edited by Konow, which record the setting up of an image and in which the name of the donor is preserved, 13 were of monks. Lüders has also noted that from Mathura such inscriptions account for almost exactly the same percentage, i.e. 18 out of 28 inscriptions were of monks and nuns. Even in the case of the Western Indian cave temples, studied by Burgess, the inscriptions connected with images are almost always associated with monks. On the basis of such statistical data, scholars like Gregory Schopen have concluded that the image cult was a monastically initiated cult (Schopen, G. 1985:27). The need of the image of the Buddha was probably felt more by the monastic community, rather than the laity. Or the monks

had developed this cult to compete with the image worship in other religious systems. This further led to the development of the Mahayana ideals, and images.

Be that as it may, in the 3rd century B.C the structure of the stupa was incorporated

in the monastic residential complexes, in case of the structural *viharas*. But in the case of the rock-out caves, we see that the stupa was placed in a big hall called as the *chaityagriha*. This made two separate structures for the worship and residence. In *c*. 1st century A.D, the stupa was placed in the *vihara* cave, parallel to the *chaityagriha*, as is evident at Nasik, caves X, III (Nagaraju, S. 1981:268). It became a regular feature of the late Hinayana period caves in Western India (Dhavalikar, M. 1984:30-37). This indicates that the monks probably wanted a separate stupa only for themselves rather than sharing it with the laity. It is quite possible that they had developed certain rituals, which they wanted to perform secretly in their own chambers.

As noted earlier, the monks were not supposed to keep any private personal possessions for them. Whatever they received belonged to the Sangha. However, this obligation was overruled for many times in the history of the religions. One such instance could be seen in the cave no. VIII at Kuda. At one end of the bench in this cave is a hollow (55 cm square, 40 cm deep) with a ledge provided at its mouth for a flat lid (Nagaraju, S. 1981: 243). Similar instance is also noted in one of the caves in the Jakhinwadi group of the Buddhist caves at Karad. Such hollows were made probably to hide certain valuable possessions of the monks living there.

It is important to note that these peculiarities in the nature of the possession and the property of the monks really began when they started accepting heavy donations from the laity. This in turn was the result of the coenobitic lifestyle of the earlier wandering ascetics. The participation of the laity in the construction or the *vassa*-residences had an important role to play in the creation of the forthcoming novel practices of the Buddhists. Although the ideal of *vassa-vasa* was not categorically practised in the later years, the theoretical ideal was always glorified by the monks. It is also possible that a part of the monastic community strictly observed this ideal, as we find donations made to the mendicant, who kept *vassa*, in a particular cave at Nasik, (Senart, 1905-06:90) in *c*. 2nd –3rd century AD. Some of these inscriptions were written in the months other than the rainy season, indicating that some monks were staying there for the whole year (Senart 1859:71,73 and 1905-06:59, 60, 67, 73, 90, 94).

In this period, i.e. in the 2nd/3rd cent AD, *akshayanivis*, the perpetual grants, were made to the Sangha (Senart 1905-06:88, 89). These became a steady source of income. Different hierarchical positions were created for monks in the Sangha according to their seniority and capability to handle various financial and organizational matters. We find separate residential single or double-celled quarters made in this period at the cave sites like Nasik, Junnar, etc. Along with the other religio-economical reasons, this hierarchy among the Sangha could be one of the reasons for such single celled units, as suggested by Dr. Dhavalikar (1984:79).

The Rain Retreat was not merely a physical necessity to avoid the rains; it was a psychological laboratory. It transformed early monasticism into a structured system that prioritized mental equilibrium, establishing a blueprint for holistic health that remains relevant in modern mindfulness-based interventions. The Rain Retreat (*Vassa*) is not merely a historical religious tradition; it is a profound archetypal framework for what modern psychology calls intensive mental hygiene. By shifting from an active, nomadic "doing" mode to a sedentary, reflective "being" mode, the retreat acts as a catalyst for holistic well-being. Just as the monsoon rain replenishes the earth, the Vassa replenishes the spirit, ensuring that the practitioner does not dry out from the heat of worldly demands, The Rain Retreat serves as an intensive period of "mental hygiene." By removing external distractions and the "noise" of constant travel, monastics engage in practices that modern psychology now recognizes as highly therapeutic. This state of the religion was perhaps achieved after assimilating different innovative ideas in the simple plain ascetic sectarian movement. This incorporation of the novel concepts began only after the adoption of a semi-settled lifestyle of the mendicant community in the rainy season. This ultimately resulted in the emergence of an advanced complete religion; witnessing three distinct phases in its development, i.e. Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

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