

PASANNA / PASĀDA IN THE PĀLI VAMSA LITERATURE

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The term *pasanna*, an adjectival form of the verb *pasīdati* (Skt.: *pra + √sad*), and its related nominal form *pasāda*, figure prominently in the religious vocabulary of the Pāli *vamsa* literature. The terms are used not only to describe the condition of individuals when they witness marvels performed by the Buddha's relics; they also serve a prescriptive function for those who later hear or read the chronicles.¹ As the opening verses of the *Dīpavamsa* make clear, the experience of hearing the text is intended to evoke a particular set of mental and emotional responses in the hearer, responses that are directly tied to the Buddhist ideal of transforming consciousness through the production of positive mental states. The *Dīpavamsa* proclaims:

Hear me; I shall proclaim the chronicle of the coming of the Buddha to the island, of the arrival of the relic and of the Bodhi-(tree branch), of the doctrine of the teachers who collected (the canon of scripture), of the arrival of the *sāsana* on the island and of the coming of the lord of men (Vijaya); hear attentively (what is proclaimed) by me, which engenders joy and happiness, produces serene joy, delights the mind, and abounds in diverse forms; respectfully receive the auspicious discourse with elated mind, gladdened, joyful and mentally delighted.²

A similar exhortation to attentive hearing occurs in the opening verses of the *Mahāvamsa*, as well, where the composition's capacity to evoke the state of *pasāda* is linked with a rather different emotion: *saṃvega*. According to the *Vamsatthappakāsinī*, the Pali commentary to the *Mahāvamsa*, the chronicle is said to give rise to both of these states "in the heart of the hearers" (*sotūnaṃ hadaye*). The commentary goes on to relate *pasāda* to the experience of *saddhā*, "confidence, trust, faith," which "arises on account of trusting in the components of the Triple Gem" (*ratanattayaguṇānaṃ saddhahanākārena uppannā*). *Samvega* refers to the powerful emotion that arises when one contemplates the arising and dissolution of the constituents of experience.³ Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* enumerates eight things giving rise to this emotion: birth, aging, sickness, death, suffering of the states of woe after death, suffering in the past rooted in the cycle of rebirth, suffering in the future rooted in the cycle of rebirth, and suffering in the present rooted in the search for food. Buddhaghosa goes on to comment that "serene joy" (*pasāda*) is in turn produced by recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.⁴

These two emotions taken together represent two significant aspects of the Theravāda Tradition's understanding of what it means to "take refuge" in the Triple Gem. It is the experience of fear and agitation (*samvega*) that arises when one recognizes the contingent and transient nature of all phenomena, as manifested in sickness, old age, death, etc., that provides the impetus for the taking of refuge in the path that leads to complete liberation from these ills. It is, in turn, contemplation on the nature of the Buddha, Dhammas and Sangha that gives rise to the feeling of serene joy (*pasāda*) as one take refuge in them and sets out on the path that leads to *nibbāna*.

The power of the Triple Gem as a means of transforming the consciousness of the one who goes for refuge is suggested in a passage in the *Mahāvamsa* commentary. The passage comments on *Mahāvamsa* 11.33, where the emperor Aśoka, having received emissaries from the Sri Lankan king Devānampiyatissa, sends them back with the insignia of royal consecration, accompanied by a "gift of the true Dhamma" (*saddhamma-paṇṇākāraṃ*). Aśoka proclaims that he has become a lay-disciple of the Buddha by taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and he exhorts Devānampiyatissa likewise to seek refuge "with a serene joyful and trusting heart" (*cittaṃ pasādayitvāna saddhāya*). Explaining the meaning of "refuge" (*saraṇa*), the commentary states:

..... the meaning (of *saraṇa*) is "it destroys," it slays the fear, the trembling, the *dukkha*, the misery of unhappy (future) abodes of those going for refuge..... This (term *saraṇa*) is a designation for the Triple Gem; thus the Buddha, by moving (one) toward the beneficial, and moving (one) away from what is not beneficial, slays the fear of living beings; therefore he is called "refuge"; and Dhamma, by causing one to cross the wilderness of becoming, and by giving one confidence, slays the fear of living beings; therefore it is called "refuge"; the Sangha, by causing the acquisition of great fruit (of merit) by even those who do only a little, slays the fear of living beings; therefore it is called "refuge."⁵

The commentarial gloss points to the existential significance that each component of the Triple Gem has for the Buddhist who sincerely seeks refuge from the ills of *samsāra*.

The composer of the *Mahāvamsa*, through the opening verses of the text, and through the concluding verses of each chapter which refer to the "*Mahāvamsa* which was composed for the serene joy and powerful emotion of good people,"⁶ has thus provided the text's audience with a framework for interpreting the various events chronicled in the text. The text's hearers, who are exhorted to "listen, bringing forth (the emotions of) *pasāda* and *samvega* in those passages that bring forth *pasāda* and *samvega*" (*pasādajanake thāne tathā samvegakāraṇe/ janayantā pasādaṃ ca samvegaṃ ca suṃātha taṃ*) are thus prepared to understand the history recounted therein in a particular light. The chronicle's narration serves alternately to demonstrate the unsatisfactory and

transient nature of worldly pomp and fame, and to reassure the listener by recounting the progress of the Buddha's *sāsana* in Sri Lanka, "the place where the Conqueror assuredly knew (his) *sāsana* would shine forth."⁷

We find the terms *pasanna/pasāda* linked with another kind of reassurance in the chronicle literature. Later chronicles such as the *Thūpavaṃsa* and the *Dhātuvāṃsa* (*Nalāṭadhātuvāṃsa*) trace the history of corporeal relics from the time of the Buddha's final passing away up to the time that they are enshrined in particular *thūpas* in Sri Lanka. Both the *Thūpavaṃsa*, focussed on the relics enshrined by Duṭṭhagāmini in the Mahāthūpa (Ruvanvālisaya) in Anurādhapura, and the *Dhātuvāṃsa*, centred on the forehead-bone relic enshrined by Kākaṇṇatissa at Sēruvila, testify to the authenticity and religious importance of particular relics and their places of enshrinement. The composition of these chronicles suggests that the Theravada Buddhist community has been concerned of trace an unbroken line of historical continuity, between a given relic and the person of the Buddha. Moreover, the accounts of the marvels associated with these relics preserved in the chronicles point to a belief that authentic relics possess an objective power to produce confidence in the minds and hearts⁸ of those who encounter them, in the same way that the Buddha inspired confidence in those whom he encountered during his lifetime. Just as the Buddha is reported to have flown through the air and to have given off a marvelous effulgence, so too the relics display these wonders.

The chronicles often draw upon the terms *pasanna/pasāda* to characterize the responses of those who witness the marvels performed by the Buddha's relics. Those who see them have their doubt dispelled and they gain confidence in the Buddha, in the Dhamma that he taught, and in his Sangha.

The broad semantic range of the verb *pasīdati*, defined in the *Pali Text Society Dictionary* as: 1) "to become bright, to brighten up." 2) "to be purified, reconciled or pleased; to be clear and calm, to become of peaceful heart; to find one's satisfaction in (loc.); to have faith,"⁹ is significant for understanding its meaning in the chronicles. The mental state of one who is *pasanna* cannot be reduced to either a quality of emotion or an intellectual state; it embraces both cognitive and affective dimensions of consciousness. As the above definition suggests, the word connotes both a calming and clearing of consciousness, combined with a quality of joy or elation. Edith Ludowyk-Gyömrői, who to my knowledge has written the only extended consideration of the term, concludes: "we can render *pasīdati* most appropriately as a mental attitude which unites deep feeling, intellectual appreciation and satisfaction, clarification of thought and attraction toward the teacher."¹⁰ I would suggest that the term's polysemic character is related to the fact that it is used in Pali texts to characterize the mental states of a wide range of individuals representing a continuum of relative degrees of progress along the path. Thus one at the very beginning stages of progress might be characterized by a more pronounced element of strong emotion, while the consciousness of a more advanced individual might be characterized by more clarity and calming. I have rendered *pasanna* as "serenely joyful," though this translation perhaps fails to

communicate the powerful reaction of some who witness a marvel performed by a relic of the Buddha, and it does not make explicit the attitude of confidence or trust in the Buddha that accompanies it.¹¹ Let us turn briefly to some examples of the term's use in the *Dhātuvamsa* in connection with relic veneration.

The fifth chapter of the *Dhātuvamsa* gives an extended account of the enshrinement of the forehead-bone relic that parallels, in many respects, the narrative of Duṭṭhagāmaṇi's enshrinement of relics in the Mahāthūpa. The chapter opens with King Kākavaṇṇatissa conducting a series of three tests involving bullocks, horses and elephants that are chained up in locations widely separated from each other. The three sets of animals break free of their chains and walk to the same point, the site of the future *thūpā*. The king performs the tests in connection with a truth-rite (*sacca-kiriya*) based on the affirmation that the enshrinement of the forehead-bone relic will benefit the world and establish the *sāsana* for five thousand years.¹² When the animals all arrive at the same spot, the king's anxieties about the relic and the proper place to enshrine it are overcome, and he becomes *pasannāmano*, "serenely joyful in mind."¹³

The actual enshrinement of the forehead-bone relic also provides the setting for a series of marvels. As in the case of the relics enshrined in the Mahāthūpa, the forehead-bone relic rises up into the air to the height of seven palm trees, emits six-coloured rays, and performs the twin marvel of simultaneously emitting fire and water. The text describes the people's reactions as follows:

The people, having seen the preciously unseen marvel of the Teacher
(and)
become joyful, gained serene joy in the Conqueror.

They offered scents and garlands and each their own ornaments;
All venerated with (the lowering of) the head—
such an excellent *cetiya*.¹⁴

The forehead-bone relic then miraculously establishes itself in the forehead of the Buddha image placed within the relic chamber, and several hair relics, "emitting rays with the colour of a peacock's neck," are likewise established through their own power on tip of the head of the image. The king, realizing that the relics will no longer be visible after the relic chamber has been closed, falls down on the floor of the relic chamber and proclaims: "I shall not go; if I abandon the Noble One, I shall perish right here./ The seeing of it (the relic) is difficult for me, one coursing through *samsara*, to gain."¹⁵ The king is induced to leave the relic chamber only after an elder, through the use of his *iddhi*-power, creates a moving image (of the Buddha?) before the eyes of the king.¹⁶

We see here several significant themes central to the Theravāda tradition of relic veneration. The relics perform marvels that recall those performed by the Buddha before his passing away, and the effect of these marvels on the audience is the mental state of *pasāda*. It is this state of *pasāda* that in turn forms

the point of continuity between these marvelous occurrences and the practice of ritually venerating the Buddha's relics, including both material offerings and gestures of obeisance. Relics function as one of the principal means through which Buddhists call to mind the qualities of the Buddha and express their devotion through rituals of worship. The rituals of relic veneration engage the human senses, including the mind, the sixth sense in the Buddhist analysis of the person, in such a way that the Buddha is experienced by the worshiper as present. Thus, for Theravāda Buddhists, access to the Dhamma, to the path of liberation that the Buddha discovered and taught, has been inextricably linked with the person who is the preeminent embodiment of that liberation. Theravāda Buddhists continue to orient themselves to the Buddha's body of Dhamma by means of the ritualized veneration of his corporeal body,¹⁷ and the terms *pasanna/pasāda* point to a central aspect of what Buddhists have understood to be the role that veneration of the Buddha plays in the path leading to liberation.

References

1. There is evidence that the chronicles were recited in the context of public festivals. *Cūlavamsa* 28.58-59 refers to the expounding of the *Dīpavamsa* on the occasion of a festival in honour of Mahinda during the reign of Dhātusena (459-477). C. E. Godakumbura cites an inscription dating from the early thirteenth century located in the pavement near the Mahāthūpa as evidence that the *Thūpavamsa* was recited in the context of relic festivals; see his *Sinhalese Literatur* 1966, Colombo: Colpmbo Apothecaries Co., pp. 107-108.
2. *Dīpavamsa*: 1982 *An Ancient Historical Record*, ed. and tr. by Hermann Oldenberg New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, p. 13: *Dīpāgamanam buddhassa dhātu ca bodhiyāgamam samgahacariyavadañ ca dipamhi sāsanaḡamam narindagamanam vamsam kittayissam, sunātha me./ pītipāmojjajanam pasādeyyam manoramam anekākārasampannam cittikatva sunātha me.*
3. *Vamsatthapakāsini*, 1935-35 ed. by G. P. Malalasekera, 2 vols. London: Pali Text Society v. 1, p. 49.
4. *Visuddhimagga*, 1950 ed. by Henry Clarke Warren Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 109 (ch. 4, sec. 63).
5. *Vamsatthapakāsini*, v. 1, p. 308: *Atha vā himsati ti saraṇam; . . . saraṇam gatānam ten' eva saraṇāgamanena bhayam santāsam dukkham duggatiparikkilesam hanti vināsati ti attho. . . . Ratanattayass' etam adhvācanam; tathā hi buddho hite pavattanena ahitā ca nivattanena sattānam bhayam himsati ti saraṇaṇ ti vuccati; dhammo pi bhavakantāram uttaraṇena assasākaraṇena ca sattānam bhayam himsati ti saraṇan ti vuccati; sangho pi appakānam pi kāranam vipulaphalanaṭilābhakāraṇena sattānam bhayam himsati ti saraṇam ti vuccati.* John Ross Carter discusses this passage and the complex meaning of going for refuge in *The Threefold Refuge in the Theravāda Buddhist Tradition* 1982, ed. by John Ross Carter Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, pp. 1-15.
6. *Mahāvamsa*, 1908 ed. by Wilhelm Geiger London: Pali Text Society, concluding verse of each chapter: *sujanappasāda-samvegatthāya kate Mahāvamse.*
7. *Ibid.*, 5.20: *sāsanujjotanaṭṭhānam Lankā ñātā jinena hi.*

8. The psychological faculty called *citta* includes within its domain both cognitive and affective functions, though it is the latter function that comes to the fore, particularly when *citta* is contrasted with *mano*, which is identified with rationality the *Pali Text Society Dictionary* defines *citta* as the centre and focus of man's emotional nature as well as that intellectual element which inheres in and accompanies its manifestations; i.e. "thought" (p. 266). Thus it is sometimes translated as "heart," and sometimes as "thought" *Citta* is often linked with forms of the verb *pasidati* to describe the effects that an encounter with the Buddha has on an individual.
9. *Pali Text Society Dictionary*, p. 447.
10. Ludowyk-Gyömrői, Edith, 1943, "Note on the Interpretation of 'Pasidati,'" *University of Ceylon Review* 1 p. 82. See also her article, "The Valuation of Saddha in Early Buddhist Texts," *University of Ceylon Review* 5; pp. 32-49.
11. John Ross Carter, in his study of Dhamma in the Theravāda tradition, discusses the term *pasāda* in relation to *saddhā*, and renders it as a "sense of being taken up" in some contexts, and as "clearness" in others. The former translation communicates the quality of elation or joy, but it fails to capture the basic sense of the root *sad* which means "to subside, to sink." Regarding the rendering "clearness," he cites the commentary on the *Sutta-nipāta* which illustrates the meaning of the term by comparing it to the mirror-like surface of calm water. Carter concludes: "The imagery in the above passage depicts water being at rest, having silt settled, becoming still and clear; the surface becoming a mirror, smooth as glass. So is to be understood the mind, when, as I have tried to communicate in this translation, it becomes composed, calm, free from agitation, clear. This, too, is a quality of *saddhā*, faitn." See his *Dhamma: Western Academic and Sinhalese Buddhist Interpretations, A Study of a Religious Concept* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1978), p. 105, note 173.
12. *Dhātuvāṃsa*, 1984 ed. by Rev. Kamburupitiye Nandarātana Thera Colombo: Cultural Publications Co., Ltd., pp. 45f.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 60: *adiṭṭhapubbam satthussa pāṭihiram mahājanā|disvā pītiparā jātā pasādama-jjhagam jine.| pūjesum gandhamālañca alankāram sakam sakam| sabbe vandimsu sirasā-cetiyam īdisam varam.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 62: *marissāmi no gamissam ayyam hitvā idheva'ham| dullabham dassanam tassa samsāre carato mamā'ti.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. For an extended analysis of Buddhist relic veneration, see Trainor, Kevin M. "The Relics of the Buddha: A Study of the Cult of Relic Veneration in the Theravāda Buddhist Tradition of Sri Lanka," Ph.D. diss. New York: Columbia University, 1990.