

Validity of natural territories for saṃghakarmas

Introduction

According to the Nanshan Vinaya school of Master Dao Xuan, all saṃghakarmas to be valid need to be performed on an authorized territory.

At the beginning, the Buddha prescribed that on the poṣadha day all monastics had to gather in the same place. Nevertheless, as the community grew in number and started to occupy far-distant places, this became an increasing difficult task to accomplish. The Buddha therefore allowed the authorization of a territory within which only the monastics who were present had the duty to gather in order to perform the poṣadha.

The tenet is that the institution of authorized territories implicitly revoked the validity of natural territories.

Nevertheless, a close examination of the Vinayas leads to a different conclusion, namely saṃghakarmas may be validly performed on both authorized and natural territories.

I will start by examining the natural territories as they are described in the extant Vinayas.

Natural territories

When monastics gather in a place in which a territory has not been authorized by a *jñaptidvīṭya karma*, a naturally created territory becomes established.

There are basically three types of natural territories, namely village, *Araṇya* (wilderness), and water.

Description

1- Village. According to the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, there are four types of villages:

- 1) Completely surrounded by a wall (without a roof);
- 2) Surrounded by a palisade;
- 3) Not completely surrounded by a wall or a palisade;
- 4) With walls on the four sides (roofed).

For deciding the range in which the saṃgha should gather, we further distinguish two types of villages:

- 1) Villages with a recognizable boundary. The four categories listed above from the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* have a recognizable boundary. Inside this boundary it is easy to know who is present and who is not and the structure of the territory is well defined. All the monastics who are inside this boundary have to gather for performing a valid transaction. If somebody who is present in the gathering area willingly does not participate, the transaction is invalid and one transgresses a *duṣkṛta*.

Sarvāstivāda Vinaya: If the bhikṣus are in a village where there are no *saṃghārāmas*, or in a *saṃghārāma* just established where a territory has not yet being authorized, in this case, how much is the allowed range for a territory? The Buddha said, “The territory of the *saṃghārāma* is as big as the village”.¹

Mūla Sarvāstivāda Vinaya: Venerable Upāli asked the World Honoured One, “Badhanta, if there is no authorized territory, what is defined as territory?” The Buddha answered, “If bhikṣus live in a village, they should gather in one place (in the area)

¹ T23, 159 a17.

included inside the wall or palisade plus an external buffer zone to perform the transactions of the saṃgha. The *pravāraṇā jñapti karma*, the *jñaptidvīṭya karmas*, up to the *jñapticaturtha karmas*: all these can be performed. If they do not gather together the transaction is invalid and one commits an offence for staying separate.”²

Pāli Vinaya: Monks, when a boundary is not agreed upon, not established, whatever village or little town (a monk) lives depending on, whatever is the village boundary of that village or the little town boundary of that little town, this in that case is (the boundary) for the same communion, for one Observance.³

- 2) Villages with an unrecognizable boundary. The definition is self-explanatory. The range for a gathering to be held in such an area is given in the *Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya*:

At that time Upāli, knowing the correct time, asked the Buddha, “World Honoured One, I have just heard the distance at which mango trees (should be planted). I now further ask: if there is in a place a city or a village territory which is hardly recognizable, within which range should (the saṃgha) gather for performing a *karma*, so that this can be called a valid performance of a *karma*, and in a way in which different saṃghas can see each other and perform valid *karmas*, without committing the offence for being a factional group?” The Buddha informed Upāli, “Five cubits are the length of a bow. Every seven bows one can plant a mango tree. Performing a *karma* in the range of seven mango trees is called a valid performance of a *karma*. Although different saṃghas can see each other, there is no offence for being a factional group. This is called the territory of seven mango trees.”⁴

- 2- Wilderness (*āraniya*). A wilderness is a place where there are no villages or temples, for example a jungle, a forest or an open field. According to the *Pāli Vinaya* and its commentary, the *Sudassana Vinaya Vibhāṣā*, a gathering of monastics should happen in the radius of seven *abbhantarās* all around from the body of the persons who are gathered. The *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* does not give any specific measure for this kind of territory. The *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* and the *Mūla Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* establish the radius of a wilderness territory in one *krośa*. The *Mahīśāsaka Vinaya* speaks about two *krośas*.

Mahīśāsaka Vinaya: Bhikṣus who lived in a wilderness did not know how much was allowed as their territory. They asked the Buddha about this matter. The Buddha said, “The natural territory extends for two *krośas* from the body. If one authorizes a territory it may be as wide as one wishes”.⁵

Sarvāstivāda Vinaya: If the bhikṣus are in a wilderness where there are no villages, or in a *saṃghārāma* just established where a territory has not yet being authorized, in this case, how much is the allowed range for a territory? The Buddha said, “(The territory) is one *krośa*. Inside this range (the bhikṣus) cannot perform a factional *poṣadha* or a factional *karma*. If they perform a factional *poṣadha* or a factional *karma* the bhikṣus commit an offence.”⁶

Mūla Sarvāstivāda Vinaya: Bhadanta, in an area without villages, a wilderness or an empty field, what is defined as territory? The Buddha answered, “One *krośa* around in

² T24, 467 b29.

³ *Mahāvagga* II, 12.7. Translation by I.B. Horner.

⁴ T22, 298 b12.

⁵ T22, 123 c24. From this passage it seems that authorizing or not authorizing a territory in a wilderness is a matter of choice.

⁶ T23, 159 a18. Although the real length of 1 *krośa* is difficult to reckon, for this Vinaya it is equivalent to 500 bows, and 1 bow equivalent to 4 cubits. Assuming that the cubit has the dimension of 50 cm, we obtain a figure of 1 km.

all directions. In this territory the bhikṣus should gather in the same place to perform the transactions of the saṃgha; up to the *jñāpticaturtha karma*, (all transactions) can be performed. If they do not gather together the transaction is invalid and one transgresses a *duṣkṛta*.⁷

Pāli Vinaya: If, monks, he (a monk) is in what is not a village, in a jungle, in this case the same communion, one Observance, is seven *abbhantarā* all round.⁸

Sudassana Vinaya Vibhāṣā: *Āraṇiya* territory. The least range all around is seven *abbhantarā*. One *abbhantarā* is equivalent to 28 cubits. If someone does not agree, (the others) can perform a saṃgha transaction outside the range of 28 cubits.⁹

3- Water territory. A water territory becomes established when bhikṣus or bhikṣuṇīs are on something floating on water, like a boat, or on a platform erected in water.

Exposition on karmas: (The water territory), as the *Mahāsāsaka Vinaya* explains, is up to the limit reached by water or sand thrown in the four directions by a strong man of the group who is on a boat.¹⁰

Pāli Vinaya: No river, monks, is a boundary, no sea is a boundary, no natural lake is a boundary. When there is a river, monks, or a sea or a natural lake, that which in this case is (the boundary) for the same communion, one Observance, is the distance that a man of average (height) can throw water all round.”¹¹

Is a karma valid on a natural territory?

As explained above, Master Dao Xuan affirms that no saṃghakarma can be validly performed on a natural territory.

The main sources to support this is the following passage from the *Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya*:

If a bhikṣus keeps an extra cloth for more than ten days, if he wants to relinquish this cloth he has to look for a bhikṣu who knows the Vinaya and can perform a *saṃghakarma*. This one asks some wise bhikṣus to go outside the (great) territory. If there is no subsidiary territory they should authorize a little territory¹². The *karmaācārya* should say...¹³If it is not a territory authorized by a *saṃghakarma*, one cannot perform the transaction of the saṃgha. Doing so entails a *duṣkṛta*.¹⁴

The underlined sentence affirms that the *saṃghakarma* can be performed only on a territory properly authorized. It should nevertheless be noted that the *saṃghakarma* to which the text refers is that concerning the confession and amend for a *niḥsargika pācittiya* offence. This karma has to be performed on a valid territory. The reason for authorizing a little territory and having the

⁷ T24, 467 c5.

⁸ *Mahāvagga* II, 12.7. Translation by I.B. Horner.

⁹ *Sudassana Vinaya Vibhāṣā*, T24, 793 b4. One cubit is the distance between the elbow and the tip of the middle finger, approximately 50 cm. 7 *abbhantarā* would be therefore equivalent to 98 m. *If someone does not agree ...*: it means that two different groups that do not agree with each other should leave a distant of seven *abbhantarā* among their territories to perform validly the transactions. See also, Thānissaro Bhikkhu, BMC II, p. 205. The *Vibhāṣā* says “the least range”, which could suggest that this territory may be larger. Nevertheless, the Vinaya text on which the *Vibhāṣā* is commenting, namely the *Pāli Vinaya*, unmistakably speaks about seven *abbhantarā*, which should therefore be taken as the definitive measure.

¹⁰ Book 1, p. 4a.

¹¹ *Mahāvagga* II, 12.7. Translation by I.B. Horner.

¹² Here “little” refers to the dimension of the territory. It is not a case of controversy.

¹³ The *karmavācānā* follows, which I omit.

¹⁴ T22, p. 293, b2

saṃghakarma performed on it is that this Vinaya allows this proceeding to be performed by a group of chosen bhikṣus only, not necessarily by the community as a whole. Hence, the separation between those who participate in the *saṃghakarma* and those who need not must be clearly defined, to avoid the problem of a factional proceeding.

Another argument for supporting this tenet is that the institution of authorized territories by the Buddha automatically revoked what was established before, namely the natural territories. Nevertheless, it seems clear from the account we find in the Vinayas that it is the other way round, namely the Buddha first explained the authorized territories and, afterwards, when the occasion came, he added an explanation on natural territories as alternative to be used under certain circumstances. This is also clear by the texts quoted above, as for example when it is asked what should one do if a territory has not yet been authorized (see above), question that presupposes the existence of the procedures for authorizing the territories. The following passage found in the *Mahīśāsaka Vinaya*, already quoted above, seems to suggest the possibility of choosing between the two:

Bhikṣus who lived in a wilderness did not know how much was allowed as their territory. They asked the Buddha about this matter. The Buddha said, “The natural territory extends for two *krośa* from the body. If one authorizes a territory, it may be as wide as one wishes”.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, we could affirm that in a village, in a wilderness or in water (that is on a boat or on something floating on water) it is possible to have valid *saṃghakarmas* within the range established for the natural territory. This may happen for example if a group of monastics are traveling and they come across the day of *poṣadha*.

Nevertheless, in a monastery authorizing a territory should instead be the praxis, because a monastery is neither a village, nor a wilderness. The natural territory to be used is the *saṃghārāma*. The two passages from the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* quoted above seem to suggest that one can use the natural territory to perform the *saṃghakarmas* in the *saṃghārāma* only temporarily, up to the point in which the duty of properly authorizing a territory is accomplished.

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