

When did the Buddha go to *Uruvela* Grove?

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Abstract

In this paper I show that: (a) The timing of the Buddha's journey to *Uruvela* forest is important to find a solution to the controversy surrounding his usage of *ehibhikkhu* ordination formula. (b) In Pali sources, that timing is open to two interpretations, none of which is convincing enough, but non-Pali Vinaya sources may be able to give the correct answer.

1 Introduction

Mahāvagga (Mv) is where the earliest events happening just after the enlightenment of the Buddha are described. Among these events, one is especially interesting: the journey of the Buddha to *Uruvela* grove after sending off his arahant followers for missionary work. Why? Because the timing of that journey is an important factor to resolve a controversy as regards the *ehibhikkhu* formula the Buddha used to give ordination. How?

Ehibhikkhu ordination was “the oldest form of admission and ordination as a monk by pronouncing the formula beginning with the words *ehi bhikkhu* (Skt. *ehi bhikṣu*, come monk)” (Nanayakkara 44). And it was “used only by the Buddha” (44) according to Pali records.

One interesting question would be this: if the Buddha alone had the power to ordain by *ehibhikkhu* formula, did he still continue to exercise it after other ordination forms had been established? Juo-Hsüeh thinks so:

[Even after other ordination forms had been established] the Buddha himself still used the formula “Come, monk”. This is confirmed by the story of *Uruvela* Kassapa

and the thousand matted-haired ascetics. Also Sāriputta, Moggallāna and their two hundred and fifty disciples received their going forth and ordination through the same formula. (351–352)

Juo-Hsüeh's claim is based on the fact that Mv mentions the permission of ordination by Refuge in the Triple Gem (*tisaraṇagamanaupasampadā*) (*Vin* I 21–22; Horner 4: 29–30) before it speaks of the Buddha's journey to the Uruvela grove where he met Uruvela Kassapa and other ascetics (*Vin* I 24–25; Horner 4: 32–35), or of his arrival at Rājagaha where he met Sāriputta and Moggallāna (*Vin* I 42–43; Horner 4: 55–56). In short, she is interpreting the relevant Mv text chronologically.

However, I will argue in this paper that:

- a. The timing of the Buddha's journey to Uruvela grove is open to two alternative interpretations, none of which is convincing enough.
- b. A research into parallel sources is necessary to get to know the real picture, and until then Juo-Hsüeh's claim is open to question.

2 Textual Evidences in Vinaya

Firstly, we need to see the sequence of particular events in Mv that have led to Juo-Hsüeh's opinion.

1. **First Talk on Māra** (*Vin* I 20–21; Horner 4: 28–29), in which the Buddha, while staying at Bārāṇasi, taught fifty friends of Yasa, gave them *ehibhikkhu* ordination, and finally enlightened them (thereby increasing the number of living arahants to sixty-one). He also told the monks to go and teach people while he himself would go to *Senānigama, Uruvela* for the sake of teaching Dhamma.
2. **Permission to ordain by *tisaraṇagamana*** (*Vin* I 21–22; Horner 4: 29–30), in which the Buddha permitted the monks to give ordination by *tisaraṇagamana* when it had become too tiring for monks and would-be renouncers to come back to the Buddha for ordination.

Here we can infer that a considerable period of time must have elapsed between (1) and (2) since:

- a. Out of those who chose to listen to those monks' teaching, not all would be converted.
- b. Out of the converts won thus, not all would be willing to renounce and gain ordination.

- c. Any aspirant to monkhood must have preferred the personal ordination direct from the Master as long as it was not too inconvenient for himself or for his teacher monk.

Accordingly an extended period must have elapsed before the new ordination form was justified.

3. **Second Talk on Māra** (*Vin* I 22; Horner 4: 30–31), in which the Buddha, after spending the rainy retreat (*vassaṃ vuṭṭho*), urged monks to strive for liberation from Māra’s bonds.
4. **Case of Bhaddavaggiya Friends** (*Vin* I 23–24; Horner 4: 31–32), in which the Buddha, while travelling from Bārāṇasī to Uruvela, met 30 young men collectively known as *Bhaddavaggiya* in a forest and enlightened them. He ordained them by *ehibhikkhu* formula.
5. **Wonders at Uruvela, etc.** (*Vin* I 24–35; Horner 4: 32–46), in which the Buddha taught and enlightened one thousand ascetics led by Uruvela Kassapa. He ordained them by *ehibhikkhu* formula.
6. **Meeting the king Bimbisāra** (*Vin* I 35–39; Horner 4: 46–52), in which the Buddha, together with the one thousand ex-ascetic monks headed by Uruvela Kassapa, came to Rājagaha, met and taught the king Bimbisāra, and received the *veḷuvana* park from the king as a temple for monks.
7. **Arrival of Sāriputta and Moggallāna** (*Vin* I 39–43; Horner 4: 52–56), in which Sāriputta and Moggallāna, the former followers of the ascetic Sañjaya, came to the Buddha to beg for discipleship. They also got *ehibhikkhu* ordination.

The events above can be interpreted in two ways—chronologically or contextually—which we will see as follows.

2.1 Chronological interpretation

The chronological interpretation is nothing but the treatment of the events above as chronologically ordered. With this approach, we can say that the *tisarāṇa-gamana* ordination form had already been established when *Bhaddavaggiya* friends, one thousand ascetics headed by Uruvela Kassapa, Sāriputta and Moggallāna got their respective ordinations by *ehibhikkhu* formula. Evidently this is the methodology Juo-Hsüeh has used.

However, this approach has some problems. If we maintain that these events recorded in *Mv* are chronologically ordered, it would imply that the Buddha set off for Uruvela from Bārāṇasī (4) only after establishing the *tisarāṇagamana* ordination form

(2). However, as shown above, the text itself indicates that a considerable period of time must have elapsed between the events (1) and (2); it means that even though he had told his followers about his intention to leave for Uruvela (1), he continued to stay at Bārāṇasī long after his follower monks had left for missionary work. What was he doing at Bārāṇasī? We have no answer.

The next problem is the *Second Talk on Māra* (3). In this section, the Buddha urged certain monks to strive for liberation; so obviously they were not arahants yet. Who were they? We do not know. The Buddha appeared to be alone while on the way to Uruvela (4), so those monks must have gone a different way. Where did they go? We do not know. From whom did they continue to receive instructions for their spiritual progress not yet completed? Again we do not know.

All these unknowns become really odd when we remember that ancient redactors carefully recorded whom the Buddha met, what he said and what he did in all other events (1) to (7). Therefore I believe that the picture of those events chronologically interpreted would remain unclear until we can solve those issues using further evidence.

2.2 Contextual Interpretation

In the contextual approach, we assume that those events are ordered based on the contextual congruity of each section to the preceding and following ones. This approach, based on the *Samyutta Nikāya* and its commentary, offers us a very different picture.

In *Samyutta Nikāya*, the *Second Talk on Māra* becomes the *Pāra* (1) sutta (*S I 105*), which is followed by the *First Talk on Māra* entitled *Pāra* (2) sutta (*I 105–106*); in other words, SN shows them in reversed order. And its commentary says:

purimaṃ suttaṃ anto vasse vuttaṃ, idaṃ pana pavāretvā vuttha-vassa-kāle (*Spk I 171*)

The previous sutta [i. e., *Pāra* (1)] was delivered during the *vassa* (“rainy retreat”) but this sutta [i. e., *Pāra* (2)] was delivered after *pavāraṇā* had been done and *vassa* had been spent.

If Spk is correct, the audience of these two suttas were the same group of monks, who were according to Mv none other than Yasa’s 50 friends. They had become monks but not yet achieved arahantship when the *Pāra* (1) sutta (*Second Talk on Māra*) was delivered but they had already attained arahantship when they received their mission from the Buddha in the *Pāra* (2) sutta (*First Talk on Māra*) at the end of that *vassa*.

Did Spk have any grounds for such a contention? We do not know whether there existed such a record in the *Samyuttabhāṇaka* tradition but when we compare these two suttas, we must admit that it is really tempting to view these two respective groups of monks as one and the same:

- a. In the *Pāra* (1) sutta, the Buddha set himself up as an example of a person liberated from Māra's bonds and exhorted the monks to do likewise. In the other, the Buddha praised the monks as having been liberated, like him, from Māra's bonds and urged them to do missionary work.
- b. In both suttas, Māra tried to disturb the monks led by the Buddha and was chased off.
- c. Both suttas are given consecutive positions in SN.

Moreover, we cannot say that Spk contradicts Mv because, even though those events as accounted in Mv appear to be in chronological order, there is in fact no positive evidence to show that they are really so.

Then how can we explain the existing order of those events in Mv? One alternative would be that they are ordered by virtue of the contextual congruity of each section to the respective preceding and following sections. If we adopt this contextual approach:

- a. The chronological order should be revised as: (1) *First Talk on Māra* (4) *Case of Bhaddavaggiya Friends* (5) *Wonders at Uruvela, etc.* (6) *Meeting the king Bimbisāra* (7) *Arrival of Sāriputta and Moggallāna*
- b. *Permission to ordain by tisaraṇagamana* (2) is a temporally indeterminate event.
- c. *Second Talk on Māra* (3) overlaps with the *First Talk on Māra* (1).

a. Revised chronological order The Buddha himself said in (1), when he urged the monks to travel for missionary work, that he would also go to Uruvela. As already stated in the section 2.1, there is no clear reason why the Buddha would have continued to stay in Bārāṇasī long enough to establish the *tisaraṇagamana* ordination form; so chronologically (1) must be followed by (4), which describes his journey to Uruvela. Afterwards (5), (6) and (7) follow in an order both contextual and chronological.

Then why is (2) placed after the (1) if these events are chronologically not consecutive? My answer is: it is because (2) is contextually a direct consequence of (1), which mentions the dispatch of enlightened disciples to all directions for the sake of teaching people, not because (2) really followed (1) chronologically. The purpose would be to facilitate memorization; we should not forget that canonical texts like Mv were formed in an oral tradition.

b. Temporal indeterminacy of the permission of ordination by *tisaraṇagamana*. As we have seen above, the *tisaraṇagamana* ordination form was established after the

missionary monks had undergone too much trouble of having to bring back the would-be renouncers to the Buddha. Mv does not explicitly mention the location so we must try to infer from the circumstantial evidences.

There is no record of the Buddha meeting any monk on his journey to Uruvela or during his stay there, so it must be at least only after his arrival at Rājagaha that he could meet his followers again and could establish the new ordination form, for Mv itself shows that it was the place where Sāriputta met Ven. Assaji, one of the Pañcavaggiya monks (*Vin* I 39; Horner 4: 52). Interestingly, this theory is consistent with Mahā-saṅghika Vinaya, which states that “when the Buddha was staying at Rājagaha, he entrusted monks with the authority to ordain” (Juo-Hsüeh 350).¹ However, it cannot be determined which happened first—the establishment of the *tisaraṇagamana* ordination form (2) or the *ehibhikkhu* ordination of Sāriputta and Moggallāna (7).

c. *Second Talk on Māra* (3) overlapping with the *First Talk on Māra* (1) Mv describes in (1) what happened after Yasa’s 50 friends had got *ehibhikkhu* ordination:

atha kho bhagavā te bhikkhū dhammiyā kathāya ovadi anusāsi. tesam bhagavatā dhammiyā kathāya ovadiyamānānaṃ anusāsiyamānānaṃ anupādāya āsavehi cittāni vimuccimsu. (Vin I 20)

The Buddha taught and instructed those monks with Dhamma talk. As the Buddha taught and instructed them by Dhamma talk, their minds went free from cankers without grasping (anything).

Mv does not say anything about the extent of time those monks took to achieve arahantship, so we can maintain that the quotation above covers an indeterminate period. Then the *Second Talk on Māra* (3) must be viewed as describing an event that occurred within that period.

However, it does not make sense to devote one whole section to a particular event after summing up in two sentences the whole period in which it occurred. Accordingly we can infer that, if Spk is really correct:

- a. The *Second Talk on Māra* must have been interpolated, probably from SN at a time after the whole Pāli Piṭaka had been written down and consequently collation among different *bhāṇaka* traditions had been made easier.
- b. Or if the *Second Talk on Māra* in Mv is an authentic part of Mv, it must have originally been in the place of the quotation above, probably in a slightly different form so as to facilitate the consistency of the text flow.

¹But Mahā-saṅghika Vinaya maintains that what the Buddha conferred was the authority to give *ehibhikkhu* ordination, not the *tisaraṇagamana* type (Juo-Hsüeh 350).

We think that the former is much more probable. However, this is only guesswork, and we have no evidence in Pali sources to confirm or deny it.

3 Conclusion

As seen above, both chronological and contextual interpretations of the earliest events depicted in Mv are not clear enough. It is in such a case that parallel Vinaya sources will become important to get the real picture.

One source that I have tried to access is the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya (T22, 793a),² which states that the Buddha permitted monks to give ordination on their own using the Triple Refuge formula because some new converts lost their faith while on the way to the Buddha for their ordination. If this record is really correct, we need not assume that the Buddha continued to stay at Bārāṇasī long after sending off his followers to teach people since such an instance of losing faith among the new converts could happen any time after the start of monks' missionary activities (and subsequently the Buddha's permission of ordination by *tisaraṇagamana*). Then the chronological interpretation is much probable than the contextual one.

However, if a person's faith could not survive even a journey to the Buddha, could he be a person worthy of ordination in the Order? Was the Buddha really on a recruiting spree at the time and ready to welcome anyone even if the new convert was not really sure of his own mind yet? So the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya record is still open to question. But at least we can be certain of one thing—the importance of parallel sources. Therefore I hope scholars having access to non-Pali Vinaya sources will take up the matter and solve it for us.

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(The Pali text titles are abbreviated per the system of *A New Dictionary of Pāli*.)

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