

Buddhist confession

Humility, healing and spiritual growth in the sangha

Source: Bhaddāli Sutta (M 65), SD 56.2¹

[Previously published as fb200309 Piya Tan]

3.2 BHADDĀLI'S CONFESSIONS

3.2.1 Bhaddāli's confesses thrice

3.2.1.1 As soon as Bhaddāli meets the Buddha, he confesses his offence:

“Bhante, I have lapsed [transgressed]—just as one foolish, one confused, one unskillful—when a training precept was being made known by the Blessed One, when the sangha of monks was undertaking the training, I declared my incapability of doing so. [§4.1]

Bhante, may the Blessed One **accept my lapse as such**, so that I may henceforth show restraint.” [§7.3]

Note the structure of this passage. First, the confessor [the one who confesses] (Bhaddāli) accepts his lapse as it is. Then, he clearly states what that offence is. Finally, he requests the Buddha (or a senior monk) to accept him as such, so that he is empowered to restrain himself henceforth.

3.2.1.2 The Sutta records Bhaddāli as making 3 confessions on this occasion [§§7.3, 10, 13]. Why does he confess thrice? When we carefully examine the contexts of Bhaddāli's confessions, we will notice that after his **1st confession** [§7.3], the Buddha speaks on the **moral** aspect of his lapse [§§9-12; 3.3]. After his **2nd confession** [§10], the Buddha continues with the fruits of the moral life, that is, becoming of the 7 individuals [§§11-12]. And after **the 3rd confession** [§13], the Buddha speaks of the benefits of fulfilling the training. This is when the Buddha knows that Bhaddāli is ready for the teaching on **the fruits of recluship** [§§15-21; 3.4]

3.2.2 The nature of early Buddhist confession²

3.2.2.1 A couple of technical points should be noted regarding the nature of confession and the early sangha. In the case of Bhaddāli, he confesses before the Buddha: this is what we would today call a “counselling session,” not a **legal case** (*adhikaraṇa*), which is mentioned by the Buddha 4 times [§§23.3, 24.3, 25.3, 26.3]. These statements (on the “legal case”) are significant: it means that the events of the Bhaddāli Sutta are clearly late, probably during the 2nd period of the ministry³, by which time the Buddha has conferred “legal personality”

¹ Bhaddāli Sutta (M 65), SD 56.2: <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/56.2-Bhaddali-S-m65-piya.pdf>

² On **confession**, see SD 8.10 (6): <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/8.10-Samannaphala-S-d2-piya.pdf>

³ On the 2 or 3 periods of the Buddha's ministry, see SD 1.1 (2.2): <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/1.1-Dhammacakka-Pavattana-S-s56.11->

upon the sangha so that it can, with a properly convened conclave and ecclesiastical act (*kamma, vācā*, “the words of an act”), perform a “sangha act” (or “formal act,” *saṅgha, -kamma*), such as ordaining a monastic.

3.2.2.2 The next point to note is on how the early sangha functions as a spiritual community and a legal person in that its role in a legal case (*adhikaraṇa*) is never “adversarial” but **rehabilitative**. The offender’s lapse is described or presented before the sangha of elders who deliberate on it according to the Dharma-Vinaya. The purpose behind such a “litigation” is to clarify the nature of a questionable act or error so that the person sees it so. The sangha’s role is to deliberate measures for healing the offender so that he returns to his good standing in the sangha and is able to properly continue his practice as a renunciant.

3.2.2.3 A classic example of such a litigation by the sangha is that of the arhat Ānanda’s 3 months after the Buddha’s passing during **the 1st Buddhist council** held outside Rājagaha. Near the end of the council, the elders pointed out to Ānanda that he had committed 5 offences entailing wrong-doings (*dukkata*), for which he should *confess*. The 5 offences, as recorded in the Culla, vagga (Cv 11.10), were:

- (1) that he failed to ask the Buddha for the definition of the “lesser and minor rule” (*khuddakānukhuddakāni sikkhāpadāni*) which may be abrogated should the sangha chose to (Ānanda’s reply was that he was “unmindful” then);
- (2) that he stepped on the Blessed One’s cloth for the rains while sewing it (Ānanda replied that it was not done out of disrespect);
- (3) that he had the Blessed One’s body (after the great parinirvana) first of all honoured by women (Ānanda explained that the hour was late (“the wrong time,” *vikāla*));
- (4) that despite the Blessed One giving broad hints for being able to extend his life for a full term, he failed to acquiesce the Blessed One to do so (Ānanda replied that he was distracted by Māra); and
- (5) he initiated efforts for the going-forth of women in the Dharma-Vinaya (Ānanda explained that this was out of gratitude to Mahā Pajāpati who was the Buddha’s aunt, foster mother and wet nurse).

Ānanda’s recorded responses at the end of each of these accusations are worth remembering as reflecting his faith and love for the sangha (and also the fact that he is awakened): **“I do not see it as a wrong-doing, but out of faith in the venerable ones, I confess them as a wrong-doing”** (*nāhaṃ taṃ dukkataṃ passāmi, api cāyasmantānaṃ saddhāya desemi taṃ dukkaṭaṃ*). (Cv 11.10 @ V 2:288,35-289,33)

A recent sangha act of suspension

For a modern day case of a sangha act of suspension (*ukkhepanīya, kamma*) of a monk who refuses to acknowledge his offence, see SD 1.9 (8-10).

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