

## Where Would we be Without Ananda?

Although he is not the most talked about disciple of the Buddha, the Venerable Ananda has made many contributions to Buddhism. This is especially true in the Theravada tradition, as he has given us our stories and suttas. Tonight, we will explore some of the Venerable Ananda's contributions in more detail as well as get an idea of the Venerable Ananda's relationship to the Dhamma.

First, I wanted to start out with some biographical information. Ananda was the son of Amitodana, who was the younger brother of the Buddha's father King Suddhodana. Ananda brought happiness to his kinsfolk, so that is how he got the name Ananda which means "joy."

Ananda joined the Sangha in the second year of the Buddha's ministry and was considered a diligent student. It took him one year to attain the first higher achievement of Stream-winner. In general, Ananda was quiet, happy, and unassuming which meant that he was relatively unnoticed until he was named the Buddha's personal attendant (more on that later). He developed the qualities for Enlightenment through love and concern for others more than through meditation and study. As a result, Ananda could get along with pretty much anyone and everyone liked him. He would come to be called "the Keeper of the Dhamma Store" for his seemingly unlimited capacity to remember the Buddha's discourses. According to tradition, the Venerable Ananda lived to be a ripe old age of 120 years old. Fa Hien in the fifth century of the current era reported seeing a stupa containing Ananda's ashes and nuns had a particularly high regard for his memory.

The first contributions of Ananda come with his service to the Buddha as his personal attendant. There were several attendants before Ananda. These include Nagasamala, Upavana,

Nagita, Cunda, Radha, and others who were not proven to be suitable. As a result, the Buddha looked for his permanent personal attendant. All the monks, including the chief disciples Ven. Mahagollana and Sariputta, volunteered enthusiastically except for Ananda, who sat in silence. When asked why Ananda said that the Buddha best knew who to pick. The Buddha chose the Venerable Ananda, but Ananda would only accept if eight conditions were met:

- 1) The Buddha should not give him robes which were given for the Buddha
- 2) The Buddha should not give food which was given to the Buddha
- 3) The Buddha should not allow him to dwell in the same Fragrant Chamber
- 4) The Buddha should not take him wherever the Buddha was invited
- 5) Ananda could transfer his invitations to meals to the Buddha
- 6) The Buddha should kindly give him permission to introduce visitors from afar
- 7) The Buddha should kindly grant him permission to approach Him whenever a doubt arises
- 8) The Buddha should kindly repeat discourses that were declared in Ananda's absence

These were accepted and Ananda became the Buddha's personal assistant. The first four conditions were meant to prevent people from thinking Ananda took the job for worldly gain.

The last four are meant to help promote the Dhamma.

Being the personal attendant meant using his time to do mundane tasks so the Buddha could focus on teaching or resting. Ananda also took time to visit the sick, give talks (such as one to Brahmin Unnabha, SN 51:15), finish talks, and he even got permission to ordain two poor boys to give them a chance in life. There is also the story that the Venerable Ananda stepped in front of the Buddha when Devadatta released the crazed elephant Nalagiri in an attempt to kill the Buddha. This was not necessary, as the Buddha tamed the elephant with lovingkindness. Thanks though!

A second achievement came in helping Maha Pajapati Gotami get permission to create an order of nuns for women who wished to enter homelessness. She asked the Buddha three times and was rejected all three times. One time she walked 150 miles with some of her followers. Ananda saw her with her feet swollen up and sadness in her eyes. He then asked the Buddha to allow women to enter homelessness and become nuns three times. Each time the Buddha rejected the request. So Ananda took a different approach. He asked if women were capable of attaining the four stages of stream-winner, once returner, non-returner, and Arahantship if they entered homelessness. The Buddha answered in the positive. Ananda then used this, along with Maha Pajapati Gotami's services as adoptive mother, to convince the Buddha to establish an order of nuns. The Buddha accepted, but only if Maha Pajapati Gotami would accept the eight chief rules. These were accepted and women were then allowed to become nuns.

Ananda is also credited with planting the Ananda Bodhi Tree. The people of Savatthi were putting offerings of flowers and garlands in the Fragrant Chamber and then leaving with joy. However, there was concern about people doing this while the Buddha was gone on teaching tours. As a result, the Venerable Ananda thought it might be proper to put a tree at the entrance of the Jetavana (Jeta Grove, Anathapindika) so that the people could place their offerings there when the Buddha was gone instead of in the fragrant chamber. The Buddha agreed and the Ananda Bodhi Tree was planted.

After the Buddha's passing, the Venerable Ananda was able to use his time to achieve Arahantship before the First Buddhist Council. This, I believe, is where the Venerable Ananda's contributions affect Theravada followers the most. At the council, Ananda would repeat the discourses ("thus have I heard") he heard from the Buddha. It was not the exact words of the Buddha, but it has the elements required such as the story of what was taught and to whom.

These discourses numbered in the thousands and were passed on by oral tradition until the Fourth Buddhist Council (or was it?) in the first century B.C.E. when the discourses were written down.

The question then becomes where would Buddhism be without the Venerable Ananda? Would the Theravada school exist at all? How many schools of Buddhism would there be? Would Buddhism have survived to the present? Just like the question “how many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop?” “The world may never know.”

Any questions, comments, stories, or concerns?

Sources:

The Buddha and His Disciples by Venerable S. Dhammika

The Buddha and His Teachings by Venerable Narada Mahathera