Who Are the *Chabbaggiya* Monks and Nuns?

Ven. Pandita (Burma)

University of Kelaniya

*Copyright Notice*: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: cozort@dickinson.edu.
Who Are the *Chabbaggiya* Monks and Nuns?

Ven. Pandita (Burma)\(^1\)

**Abstract**

Modern scholarship has chosen to treat the *chabbaggiya* monks and nuns, commonly found in *Vinaya* narratives, as of fictitious nature. In this article, I argue against this modern contention.

**Introduction**

*Chabbaggiya* monks and nuns are very frequently found in *Vinaya* narratives as the first offenders of various *Vinaya* offenses. In the Pāli *Vinaya* itself, the *chabbaggiya* monks are the first offenders of the following rules:

1. Twelve rules of expiation with forfeiture (*nissaggiyapācittiya*),\(^2\)

---

\(^1\) Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Email: ashinpan@gmail.com.

2. Thirty-nine rules of expiation (pācittiya),\(^3\)

3. The second pāṭidesaniya ("matters to be confessed") rule (Vin IV 178; Horner vol. 3, 107),


5. Numerous legal issues in the khandhas.\(^4\)

On the other hand, the chabbaggiya nuns are the first offenders of the following rules:

1. The 8\(^{th}\) rule of Defeat (Pāt 120–121; Vin IV 220–221; Horner, vol. 3: 173);

---


\(^4\) Those are too many to cite here, but some instances are: (Vin I 84–85; Horner, vol. 4, 107; Vin I 91; Horner, vol. 4, 117; Vin I 104–105; Horner, vol. 4, 136; Vin I 106; Horner, vol. 4, 138; Vin I 111; Horner, vol. 4, 145–146; Vin I 112–113; Horner, vol. 4, 148–149, etc., etc.)
2. The 1st rule of expiation with forfeiture, (Pāt 144–145; Vin IV 243; Horner, vol. 3: 213);

3. Fourteen rules of expiation;

4. Two pāṭidesañiya rules (i.e., 1 and 2 (Pāt 224–225; Vin IV 346–347; Horner, vol. 3: 419, 422);

5. Two (sekkhiya) rules (Pāt 228–229; Vin IV 349–350; Horner, vol., 3: 424–425);


Despite their common presence in the Vinaya, modern scholarship has generally viewed them as fictitious, rather than historical figures. I argue against this contention in this paper.

The Word Analysis

To solve this problem, it would be helpful to analyze the term chabbaggiya itself, which follows:

1. cha (“six”) + vagga (“group”) => chas + vagga

---

2. *Cha* has the original Skt. form *ṣaṣ*, of which the initial *ṣ* changes into *ch*, and the ending *ṣ* reappears here’ as *s*.6

3. *chas* + *vagga* => *chas* + *bagga*

4. The initial *v* of *vagga* is replaced by *b*.9

5. *chas* + *bagga* => *chabbagga* (“group of six”)

6. The consonant group *sb* assimilates into *bb*.10

7. *chabbagga* + *iya* => *chabbaggiya*

The final form *chabbaggiya* can have two alternative interpretations:

1. It can mean a *member* of the group of six; in this case, there cannot be more than six *chabbaggiya* persons. This usage can be compared to that of the term *pañcavaggiya* (PED “Pañca”), which means one or more members of the group of five.

2. Or it can mean a *follower* of the group of six; in this case, there can be an indefinite number of *chabbaggiya* persons. This usage can be compared to that of the term *sakyaputtiya* (“Sa-

---

6 “A simple initial sibilant of Skt. is sometimes aspirated in Pkt. *šha, šha, sha*, then all become uniformly *cha*.” (Pischel 181).

7 “The original final consonant of the first component often reappears in composition . . .” (Geiger 59).

8 In Pali, “The sibilants *ś, ś, s* . . . have all developed > *s*.” (27).


10 Given that *s* is a sibilant whereas *b* is a mute, *s* is assimilated to *b*:

Moreover . . . the assimilation of consonants is characterized by the rule that the consonants of lesser power of resistance are assimilated to those of greater resisting power. The power of resistance diminishes in the order: mutes—sibilants—nasals—l, v, y, r. (41)
kya”), which means one or more followers of the sakyaputta (“the son of Sakyas, i.e., the Buddha”).

Horner’s Interpretation and the Resulting Issues

Owing to unknown reasons, Horner has entirely ignored the second option, and used the first one consistently to render the term chabbaggiya as the “group of six” monks, or as the “group of six” nuns, depending on the context (e.g. vol. 3, 173, 213, 216, etc.; vol. 5, 364, etc.). Her rendition has been adopted by modern scholars like Schopen (331, etc.), and Bhikkhu Sujato (Bhikkhuni 72, etc., White 229, etc.). Her interpretation, even though undisputed hitherto, has led to problems in evaluating the Vinaya narratives that involve those monks or nuns:

1. The Vinaya canon has no records regarding the identities of the “six monks” or the “six nuns.”

2. It appears odd that the groups of bad monks and nuns each had an equal number of six, no more, no less.

3. Given that there could not be more than six chabbaggiya monks, nor more than six chabbaggiya nuns, it seems implausible that monks and nuns in such a small number have been the first offenders of so many rules shown above.

Modern scholarship has attempted to solve those problems accruing from Horner’s interpretation basically by treating those monks and nuns, and the episodes in which they appear, as later fabrications:

Barua (49) comments that “many laws are made by linking them up with the Chabbagiya monks and the nuns . . . thus the historical background of some of the Vinaya episodes are doubtful.” Bhagvat (47f) notes that “whenever any
safeguard for an offence had to be laid down, the offence was often made up by linking it up with the almost imaginary figure of the Chabbagiya Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis. The authenticity of these episodes, therefore, is doubtful.” Gokhale (18) similarly sees it as “possible that the Chabbagiya episodes are manufactured after a favourite literary device.” Gräfe (x) concludes that the fabricated nature of several Vinaya tales in general is evident in the circumstance that the culprits are always the same. (Anālayo 417 fn. 35)

Regarding Vinaya narrations, Freedman (20) explains that “the Buddhist tradition does not see itself as the preserver of mere historical data . . . while likely rooted in certain historical events . . . the true aim . . . is rather a concern with preserving the soteriological and hagiographical elements of the ‘tradition.”’ (417 fn. 36)

When considered from the perspective of the function of Vinaya narrative as an integral part of the training and education of monastics, the question of historical accuracy becomes, in fact, somewhat irrelevant. / The real point of the trope of the six monks or nuns is to provide a textual signifier to the audience that a story of bad conduct is about to be delivered. Those even a little familiar with Vinaya narratives will know only too well that, when certain personalities like the group of six monks or nuns are introduced, mischief can be expected. In the actual teaching situation, then, the mere mention of the notorious six creates an anticipation of yet another caricature of monastic behavior to be avoided, which helps keeping the details of the respective rule better in mind. (417–418)
However, the solution itself has seemingly brought forth new problems. How?

1. The chabbaggiyas are not always shown as villains. For example, in the narrative to the rule of expiation 37 (Vin IV 85; Horner vol. 2, 335–336), they were the righteous critics of the sattarasavaggiya monks, who ate at the wrong time and thereby made the Buddha prescribe the aforesaid rule. Furthermore, the Mahākhandhaka (Vin I 91; Horner vol. 4, 117) shows them giving guidance to the unconscientious, and thereby leading the Buddha to prescribe a rule against doing so. This story seemingly indicates that the former, at least the ones in this story, were good conscientious monks.

2. Vinaya narratives usually lead to new rules or regulations, or emendations of old ones. Therefore, being a Vinaya narrative itself makes the reader or listener to expect one or more not so commendable acts or events. Then, why should some trope of fictitious characters be required in this regard?

3. In many narratives leading to the Pātimokkha rules for monks and nuns, the first offender of the relevant rule is not named but merely mentioned as “a certain monk” (aññataro bhikkhu) or “a certain nun” (aññatarā bhikkhunī), or if more than one, merely as “monks” (bhikkhū) or “nuns” (bhikkhuniyo).11 If

---

11 Individual anonymous monks are the first offenders of the following offenses:

- A rule of expiation with forfeiture (Vin III 233; Horner, vol. 2, 90–91);
On the other hand, individual anonymous nuns are the first offenders of the following offenses:

- Two saṅghādisesa rules, i.e., those numbered 3 (Vin IV 227–228; Horner, vol. 3, 186–187), and 6 (Vin IV 234; Horner, vol. 3, 198–199);

Moreover, groups of anonymous monks are the first offenders of the following offenses:

- Two rules of pāṭidesaniya, i.e., those numbered 3 (Vin IV 178–179; Horner, vol. 3, 110–111), and 4 (Vin IV 181–182; Horner, vol. 3, 115–116);
- Three sekhiya rules, i.e., those numbered 51 (Vin IV 197; Horner, vol. 3, 137), 55 (Vin IV 198; Horner, vol. 3, 139), and 56 (Vin IV 199; Horner, vol. 3, 139–140).

On the other hand, groups of anonymous nuns are the first offenders of the following offenses:

- The saṅghādisesa rule numbered 12 (Vin IV 239; Horner, vol. 3, 207–208);
those narratives do not need the supposedly fictitious chabbaggiya monks and nuns as their respective first offenders, I wonder why certain other narratives should do so.

4. “Vinaya texts from various Buddhist traditions hold the ādāvārgīka [i.e., chabbaggiya in Pāli] monks accountable for most of these unlawful deeds and depict them as morally corrupted monastics” (Liu 179); “With the exception of the Chinese translation of Sarvāstivādvānāya (T1435), a band of six nuns also appears in nearly all the extant Vinaya texts: the Pāli Vinaya, the Chinese translations of Dharmaguptakavinaya, Mahiśāsakavinaya, and Mahāśāṃghikavinaya. It is noteworthy that in the Tibetan and Chinese translations of Mūlasarvāstivādabhikṣuṇīvinaya, members in the band of nuns have expanded from six to twelve” (fn 1). If those monks and nuns were only fictitious characters, they must have been in-

vented at a very early stage, possibly even before the sectarian split of different schools in the Order. Yet, I cannot see any valid need for such a fabrication.

Therefore, it is high time to think seriously over the second interpretation that Horner has entirely ignored.

The Alternative Interpretation

In this interpretation, the chabbaggiya monks or chabbaggiyā nuns were the followers of the “group of six” (chabbagga, Skt. śadvārga) monks. The leaders, whoever they were, might not be very good persons, but if they had leadership qualities, they could win a large following of like-minded persons.

This interpretation is actually implied by the Vinaya commentary:

1. Assajipunabbasukā nāmā ti Assajī c’ eva punabbasuko ca . . . te hi chabbaggiyānaṃ jeṭṭhakachabbaggiyā. (Sp III 613–614 “The phrase Assajipunabbasukā nāma means: Assaji and Punabbasuka . . . They are leading chabbaggiyas of chabbaggiya monks.”).

The canon has recorded Assaji and Punabbasuka as the first offenders of the 13th Samghādisesa rule (Pāt 20–21; Vin III 179–184; Horner vol. 1, 314–325), as the first offenders of the rule that prohibits the dividing of common (samghika) property not fit to be divided (Vin II 171; Horner vol. 5, 239–240), and also as the first object of a formal act of banishment (pabbājaniyakamma) (Vin II 9–13; Horner vol. 5, 14–18), all while they were residing at Kīṭāgiri.

2. Mettiyabhmmajakā ti Mettiyo c’ eva Bhummajako ca, chabbaggiyānaṃ aggapurisā ete (Sp III 579 “The word Mettiyabhumma-
Janakā means Mettiya and Bhummajaka. They are leading men of chabbaggiyas.

The canon has recorded Mettiya and Bhummajaka as the first offenders of the 8th and 9th Sāṃghādisesa rules (Pāt 14–15, 16–17; Vin III 160–163, 166–167; Horner vol. 1, 275–281, 288–289), and the 13th Pure Expiation rule (Pāt 48–49; Vin IV 37–38; Horner vol. 2, 235), while they were residing at Rājagaha.

3. Paṇḍukalohitakā ti Paṇḍuko c’ eva Lohitako cā ’ti chabbaggiyesu dve janā. Tesam nissitakāpi Paṇḍukalohitakā tv’ eva paññāyanti (Sp VI 1155 “The word Paṇḍukalohitakā means: Paṇḍuka and Lohitaka, two people belonging to the chabbaggiya group. Those dependent upon them are also known as Paṇḍukalohitakas.”).

The canon has recorded Paṇḍuka and Lohitaka as the first object of a formal act of censure (tajjanīyakamma) (Vin II 1–2; Horner vol. 5, 1–2) while they were residing at Jetavana.

Out of the six monks mentioned above, four are specifically named as leaders of the chabbaggiya group. If we apply Horner’s interpre-

12Cf.: Horner’s renditions of their names: Assajipunabbasuka (“followers of Assaji and Punabbasu”), Paṇḍukalohitaka (“followers of Paṇḍuka and Lohitaka”), Mettiyabhummajaka (“followers of Mettiya and Bhummajaka”). If Horner is correct, these terms refer to their followers of indefinite numbers, but there is no evidence to support her interpretation. Perhaps she is only following the authority of her predecessors, who have made similar translations: “followers of Paṇḍuka and Lohitaka” (Rhys Davids and Oldenberg, Vinaya II 329), “followers of Assaji and Punabbasu” (Vinaya II 347; Vinaya III 211).

On the contrary, the Vinaya commentary itself contradicts her rendition. How? From the explanation of Assajipunabbasuka as “Assasji and Punabbasu,” we can infer that the commentator means only those two persons, not their followers who might be of an indefinite number. The same goes with Mettiyabhummajaka explained as “Mettiya and Bhummajaka.”
tation to the commentary, there would only be six chabbaggiya monks, out of which four were the leaders, but this seems absurd. Therefore, the commentator must have the second interpretation in his mind—i.e., that those six monks were the leaders of the chabbaggiya group—when he writes the texts above.

This is further corroborated by the story of those leaders, recorded by the commentator (Sp III 614) and extracted by DPPN as follows:

According to the Samantapāsādikā they were all of Sāvatthi and all originally acquainted. Finding a living hard to obtain, they entered the Order under the two Chief Disciples. They decided among themselves that it was unwise for

It is only in the case of Paṇḍuka and Lohitaka that the commentator specifically mentions “those dependent upon them” (taṃnissitakānaṃ) as also covered by the term Paṇḍukalohitaka. Why? The context is the account of how those two monks were quarrelsome themselves and also encouraged other monks to quarrel, leading the Buddha to prescribe the formal act of censure (tajjanīyakamma) and to have the Order apply this against them. In their case, the object of censure should be not only those two but also those who accepted their encouragement and got into fights, for the canon says that if a monk is “a maker of strife, a maker of quarrels, a maker of disputes, a maker of contentions, a maker of legal questions,” he can be the object of censure (Vin II 4; Horn-er vol. 5, 6). But the canonical text consistently shows the object of censure using the term paṇḍukalohitaka. If this term is interpreted as referring to these two only, it would follow that those who did as they said were not subject to censure even though they were equally guilty; this would seemingly contradict the canon itself. It is probably to solve this problem that the commentator interprets paṇḍukalohitaka as covering their followers as well.

In my opinion, however, we can still reasonably interpret paṇḍukalohitaka as those two monks only. How? We should remember that such formal acts of censure are totally optional; the Order has the right to choose to, or not to, slap such a punishment on a guilty party. This is why the canon says ākānkhāmantā (“if it so desires”) in the description of the individual types deserving censure (Vin II 4–5; Horner vol. 5, 6–7). Then, the Buddha and the Order in this story might have chosen to punish those two monks only, given that they were the root of the problem. This can be why the canonical story has consistently shown the object of censure as paṇḍukalohitaka.
them all to live in the same place, and they therefore di-
vided into three groups . . . Each group had five hundred
monks attached to it. (“Chabbaggiyā”)

Therefore, the Vinaya commentary supports the theory that the
chabbaggiya monks (and nuns) were a group founded and led by the six
monks named above. It means, according to the commentary, that even
though the compilers of the Vinaya have recorded the names of the lead-
ers in the cases where the latter themselves were the first offenders, the
former has not bothered to name their followers but just dubbed them as
“the followers of those six.” This is probably how chabbaggiya monks
have appeared in the canon, and also how chabbaggiyā nuns have also
appeared, which probably explains why there is not a single clue about
the “six nuns” in the Pāli Vinaya literature.

If we adopt this interpretation, we can at least resolve three is-

1. We can remove the oddity of bad monks and bad nuns having
an equal number of six;

2. We can also view chabbaggiya monks and nuns as of an indefi-
nite number, and thereby can explain why they are associated
with a huge number of rules;

3. We can afford to treat those monks and nuns as historical fig-
ures, and thereby can explain why they are found across vari-
ous Vinaya traditions.

However, there is still a catch. Just as the canon carries no infor-
mation on the identities of the “six monks,” or of the “six nuns,” re-
quired by the first interpretation adopted by Horner, it also does not ex-
plicitly say that the aforesaid six monks, i.e., Assaji, etc., were actually
the leaders of the chabbaggiya group. In fact, the sole source of this in-
formation is the *Vinaya* commentary. The question is: can we trust the commentary in this regard?

My answer is:

1. If we choose to trust the commentary, it means that we assume the commentary has somehow preserved the vital information—in this case, information that has gone missing from the canon. But this assumption would fully validate the second interpretation so that three issues given above can be resolved, and thereby would fulfill the requirement of Hoffman’s golden rule: “one assumption should solve at least two problems” (Karl Hoffman qtd. in Hinüber 7).

2. But if we reject the commentary in this regard, we will be left in the dark concerning the identities of those six leader monks. This lack of knowledge may throw doubt on the historicity of their followers, but it cannot conclusively prove that the latter are a mere myth.

In short, I argue that whether we accept or reject the commentarial information, the second interpretation remains simpler and more robust than Horner’s version, enough to replace the latter.

**Abbreviations**

*Pāt*  

*Sp*  

Works Cited


