

Breathing new life into the Buddhist order



The procession of monks bearing new alms bowls from Thailand

The collection of food for alms, known as the *pindapata*, has been a mainstay of Buddhism in Sri Lanka over the centuries. Each year the Gangaramaya Temple allocates new alms bowls to thousands of clergy from across the country. It's an event that honours Buddhism's past and strengthens its future.

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Devotees offerings alms to the clergy with new alms bowls

Buddhist doctrine relies on the Buddhist order. Recognising this, the Buddha laid down a set of monastic rules contained in 'The Basket of the Discipline', or *Vinaya Pitaka*. This disciplinary code for monastic conduct is the lifeblood of the Buddhist order, and upholding its tenets is a fundamental element of Buddhist religious life. The practice of *pindapata*, the collection of food in an alms bowl, is regarded as an important practice in monastic conduct.

The Buddha likened the Buddhist order to bees collecting nectar from flowers without inflicting any harm. In the same way the monk, or *bhikkhu*, must go about his parish on foot collecting alms without becoming a burden to the devotees. In fact, the opposite should be the case: his presence in the community must spread happiness and harmony.

The alms bowl has a long history and was in existence even before the Buddha reached enlightenment. One of the earliest mentions of the bowl is when Sujata, a daughter of a wealthy family, offers the hermit Siddhartha (prior to becoming a Buddha) a bowl of milk rice.

The Buddha realised that the alms bowl would be a useful item for the *bhikkhus* when he put forth the rules of conduct, engaging in *pindapata* himself. He was collecting alms one day when his father, King Suddhodana, interrogated him about it, as he viewed the practice as an embarrassment to the royal family. The Buddha explained that collecting alms is a traditional practice, carried out by all other Buddhas before him.

The Buddha believed that *pindapata* serves two purposes. The first being that as the number of *bhikkus* grew into the thousands, it had become a greater burden for lay people to provide alms. Going from door to door with an alms bowl meant that each household could offer a portion of food set aside for the *bhikku*. The monks would visit every home in their path, without avoiding or favouring a particular household, so that both the rich and the poor could make offerings within their means. When the *bhikku* had collected enough food for a meal, the collection would cease. This way the lay people could collectively sustain the Buddhist order with ease.



Offering alms bowls to rural temples at an event in Anuradhapura in 2011

Secondly, the practice cultivates humility. Having shed their attachments, *bhikkus* are independent and free of all ties to family or loved ones. They no longer feel that their lives belong to or depend on another person. But through the practice of collecting alms the *bhikkus* gain a sense that their existence relies on the community. While lay people feel entitled to material comforts, privileges and the right to do as they please, as they earn their own livelihood, the *bikkhu* sense that their lives exist for others. The Buddhist order must therefore nurture the community that is responsible for its upkeep.

The collection of food for alms in this way strengthens the bond between the clergy and lay people. The alms bowl is a symbol of the clergy today. Among the alms that are offered by the devotees, the set of eight monastic requisites known as the *ata pirikara* takes pride of place. And among those eight items – three robes, belt, razor, needle, water strainer and alms bowl – the alms bowl is the most significant.

Over time, however, the *ata pirikara* became merely symbolic, its items unfit for

actual use. The alms bowl, for instance, was made of iron that would rust due to contact with acidic food. The *bhikkus* who consumed food from rusty iron bowls would fall ill and so their use, and the practice of *pindapata*, was gradually phased out.

It also declined as a result of colonization, which diluted the influence of the temple and its clergy. The bond between the community and the clergy weakened too, as *pindapata* occurred less and less.

Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, the chief incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple, is well known for his philanthropic efforts, often concerning himself with matters of societal, cultural and religious importance. He is at the helm of many projects for the advancement of the Buddhist order, including offering scholarships for novice monks, providing sanitary facilities to monastic colleges, and working towards tax exemptions for imported educational books.

The Thero was therefore quick to recognise the benefit of re-establishing the practice of collecting alms for food. He reached out to benevolent devotees in Thailand, where *pindapata* still takes place, to bring large numbers of good quality alms bowls to Sri Lanka. To date the Gangaramaya Temple has offered alms bowls to 25,000 members of the clergy, with 3,400 offered at the event held last year.

This year, in commemoration of the Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero's birthday on December 14, representatives of rural temples from across the Island will come to Gangaramaya Temple to receive 5,000 alms bowls. Considering that Sri Lanka's Buddhist clergy comprises 35,000 people, this year's event hopes to draw closer to completing the task of providing an alms bowl to every member of the clergy.

