

THE CONTROVERSIAL VIEWS ON THE LIFE-SPAN OF THE BUDDHA-SĀSANA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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This paper engages with the controversial views on the duration of the Buddha's Dispensation in the context of the Theravāda tradition. In Theravāda Buddhism, there is an idea that the *Buddha-sāsana* is destined to gradually decline and disappear. The Pāli canonical texts, particularly the *Cūlavagga* of *Vinaya* and *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, have predicted that the duration of Buddhism will be one thousand years (Vin.II pp.253-256; A.IV pp.274-279.). However, the subsequent commentarial literature mentions that the *Buddha-sāsana* will last five thousand years (Vin.A.VI p.1291; A.A.IV p.137.). In fact, the commentator Buddhaghosa's reference to the one-thousand-year life-span of the *Sāsana* refers to the period of time within which, according to the Buddha himself, Arahants who attain analytical knowledge (*Paṭisambhidā*) could be found. According to him, the *Sāsana* will last for five millennia: (a) the first millennium for Arahants who attain analytical insights (*Paṭisambhidā*), the second millennium for the Arahants who are supported by bare insight (*Sukkhavipassaka*), the third, fourth, and fifth millennia for those who have attained the *Anāgāmi*, the *Sakadāgāmi*, and the *Sotāpanna* status respectively (Vin.A.VI p.1291; A.A.IV p.137.). This poses several questions: Will Buddhism last only five-thousand years? Can it not exceed the five-thousand-year limit? Or, could Buddhism not disappear before the expiration of the five-thousand-year period as it has in India? If the Dispensation exists for five millennia, does it imply that no one can destroy it before the five-thousand-year period comes to an end, or that no one can make Buddhism continue beyond that point? This study addresses these questions. No detailed study has been done on these issues yet. In this study is based on an examination of certain key Pāli texts and their commentaries as primary sources and books, monographs and other texts by modern Buddhist scholars as secondary sources. The findings in this study suggest that the disappearance and perpetuation of the *Sāsana* wholly depend on the Buddhists. If Buddhists follow and practice what the *Buddha* has taught their religion will stand firm even for ten thousand years. If they act otherwise it will cease to exist within a very short period of time. It is also found that the *Buddha-sāsana* will definitely be extinct one day however much effort the Buddhist disciples make to strengthen it, because every conditioned phenomenon is impermanent (*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*). The *Buddha-sāsana* is no exception to this principle.

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