



## **Bangladesh – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 30 January 2015**

### **General information on Buddhism in Bangladesh, how to be initiated, practice, schools, monks. Can somebody, in Bangladesh, become a monk without any theological training? Do Buddhist monks in Bangladesh necessarily belong to either the Theravada school or the Mahayana school?**

The most recent US Department of State report on religious freedom in Bangladesh, in “Section I. Religious Demography”, states:

“The U.S. government estimates the total population at 163.7 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2011 census, Sunni Muslims constitute 90 percent and Hindus make up 9.5 percent of the total population. The remainder of the population is predominantly Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist.” (US Department of State (28 July 2014) *2013 Report on International Religious Freedom – Bangladesh*, p.1)

A document published on the Life & Work in Dhaka website refers to Buddhism in Bangladesh as follows:

“Theravada is the oldest surviving Buddhist school, with over 100 million followers worldwide. In the hill tracts these predominantly consist of Chakma, Chak, Marma, Tanchungya and Khyang people. There are several monasteries in the Chittagong Hills, and a beautiful Golden Temple right here in Bandarban, which houses one of the largest statues of Buddha in the entire country. To be precise it is actually a pagoda, as the building itself consists of many tiered towers. Local Buddhist shrines also form an important centre for village life, with major festivals commemorating the important events in the life of the Buddha. Most Buddhist villages have a boarding school known as the ‘kyong,’ where boys learn to read Burmese and a little Pali, an ancient Buddhist scriptural language. It’s fairly common for men who have finished their education to return at regular intervals for periods of residence at their school.” (Life & Work in Dhaka (17 February 2010) *Buddhism in Bangladesh*)

This document also states:

“Although the European term ‘monk’ is also often applied to Buddhism, the Theravada term is ‘bhikkhu’, whose disciplinary code is known as the ‘patimokkha’, consisting of no less than 227 rules when fully ordained. There is often a trial period prior to ordination, to see if a candidate still wishes to become a Buddhist monk. If he does, he will remain living in the monastery, otherwise, he is free to leave. If he stays he will lead a life of mendicancy, with a daily morning alms walk around his village, where he will receive food from the locals, although he is not permitted to positively ask for anything. Young boys can be ordained as ‘samaneras’, literally meaning small, in

essence as a novice or apprentice monk. Both bhikkhus and samaneras eat only in the morning, and are not allowed to lead a luxurious life. Their rules forbid the use of money, although this is not always followed by every modern day monk. The bhikkhus are also only allowed to own four items other than their robes: a razor, a needle, an alms bowl and a water strainer.” (ibid)

An article published on the Buddhistdoor International website states:

“At present, the Buddhist population in Bangladesh is less than 1% of the total 155 million people in the country. Even so, with this percentage, Buddhism is the third largest religion in the country (4), and its approximately 1 million followers uphold the Theravāda tradition.” (Buddhistdoor International (16 December 2013) *Thriving Buddhist Communities in Bangladesh: Part One*)

This article also states:

“Most Buddhists in Bangladesh live in the Chittagong division, which is divided into two administrative areas: Chittagong (plain) and Chittagong Hill Tracts in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh. In these two divisions, Buddhists are again divided into two major communities, namely, the Barua-s, living mostly in the Chittagong (plain) and Sinha-s in Comilla, and the indigenous Buddhists of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.” (ibid)

See also second part of article which states:

“Buddhist culture in Bangladesh, as in other Theravada Buddhist countries, reflects the daily life of Buddhists and their relationship with Buddhism. Throughout the year, the Buddhists in Bangladesh observe 12 Full Moon Days (called Purnima in Bengali), the most important ones being Vesak (Buddha Purnima or Baishakhi Purnima in Bengali), Ashari Purnima, Madhu Purnima, Pavarana Purnima, Maghi Purnima and Palghuni Purnima. (Dilip Kumar Barua: ‘Buddhist Ceremonies in Bangladesh’). During the 12 Full Moon Days, many lay followers undertake the Eight Precepts for either a day or one week, during which they receive spiritual guidance from the monastics.” (Buddhistdoor International (24 December 2013) *Thriving Buddhist Communities in Bangladesh: Part Two - Buddhist Culture and Practices in Bangladesh*)

This part of the article also states:

“Another vital feature of Buddhist culture in Bangladesh is the ordination ceremony, which is common in the Buddhist regions of the country. According to the Buddhist tradition of Bangladesh, males should be ordained once in a lifetime for at least one week. This feature is shared by the Buddhist traditions of Myanmar and Thailand, where it is encouraged that males take ordination vows once in a lifetime. Spending some time learning the Dhamma and living a spiritual life for a few days helps to remind the newly ordained monk to be moral during his life. Indeed, there is a high degree of respect from society towards ordained monks for this achievement. Some believe that it also helps in finding a better life partner for marriage. Sometimes, this short spiritual process leads some monks to take higher vows in life. Being convinced by the spiritual practices, some take the vow of accepting the monkhood forever. Such committed novice monks go through spiritual guidance under the supervision of their seniors and later proceed to obtain *upasampada* (higher

ordination), which promotes them to become fully-fledged monks in the Buddhist Sangha.” (ibid)

An undated document published on the website of the Buddha Dharma Education Association & Buddhnet states:

“The ordination procedure for Buddhist monks, known as the 'Going forth', begins with the applicant's formal request (Pabbajja) to a senior monk or bhikkhu for the novice (samanera) ordination. On receiving permission, the applicant prepares for the ceremony by acquiring a complete set of robes and getting the help of the monks in the monastery to shave his head. Then he approaches the senior monk and pays his respects by bowing three times and hands over the robes saying a passage prescribed for the purpose. Then he formally asks the senior monk to give him the robes, and having received them he is helped by the monks to put them on. The applicant then makes a formal request for the novice ordination. The senior monk acquiescing administers the Three Refuges and the Ten Precepts or training rules.” (Buddha Dharma Education Association & Buddhnet (undated) *Ordination Procedure in the Theravada Tradition*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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