

Sīmā – what’s that?

A place for sangha kamma

One of the main principles of sangha life is to make decisions and perform formal acts together in harmony. These official transactions are called sangha kamma. They include for instance ordinations, recitation of the monastic code (pāṭimokkha), assigning kaṭhina cloth, distributing responsibilities and duties (e.g. building projects), settling disputes and many more. All the monks have to meet and decide together.

But what does “all the monks” mean? All the monks in the world? Impossible! All the monks in each country? No. It refers to all the monks who are present at the time of the respective transaction within a previously determined area. Such an area is called “sīmā”.

Various types of sīmā

The monastic discipline (vinaya) allows various types of sīmā, according to the circumstances given. If for example, a group of monks is staying out in the wilderness and gathers to recite the pāṭimokkha, an area of approximately 100 meters around the group automatically becomes a sīmā. Any monk who happens to enter this circle has the right and the duty to join the communal transaction. Otherwise it would become invalid.

In civilised areas one can use administrative boundaries as a sīmā, e.g. the area of Stambach community or the village of Gundlitz. At Muttodaya we are presently using such a sīmā.

Signs

The types of sīmā mentioned above are called “not tied off” (abaddhasīmā), because there is no action required on the side of the monks in order to mark the area. But there is still another type, the so called “tied off” sīmā (baddhasīmā). Here an area is designated especially and exclusively for the performance of sangha kammās using boundary markers that have been agreed upon beforehand. One can use trees, rocks, pathways, rivers and even ant hills as a boundary marker. In many monasteries one can see Dhamma wheels carved in stone. Buried underneath them are stone balls which are the actual markers (in Pāli: nimitta). A tied off area has the advantage that one can design it after the needs of the sangha and local conditions.

In Thailand the placing of such boundary markers and the determination of the sīmā (a sangha kamma in itself) is an auspicious event in which all supporters of the monastery participate. Usually it is understood that it happens with this celebration that a sangha abode turns into a fully fledged monastery.

Muttodaya sīmā

In order to tie off a valid sīmā the rules and regulations of the vinaya have to be followed meticulously. In Buddhist countries there is an additional hurdle of administrative paperwork which can take years to complete – longer than an application for a permission to build kuṭīs in Germany!

In Germany there are no such administrative requirements for the establishing of a sangha kamma area so that we could determine our own sīmā just only two years after the foundation of the monastery.