

Early Buddhism and *Theravāda* Buddhism: A Comparative Study

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Introduction

In the history of Buddhism, we notice several stages of development. Among these, “Early Buddhism” has been regarded as the most important starting point of Buddhism and also for the later development of Buddhism. It is accepted that Early Buddhism began with the Buddha and gradually developed not only with the community of monks and nuns but also laymen and laywomen. It is also accepted that the original core of early Buddhist teachings are preserved in the *Pāli Nikāyas* which belongs to the *Theravādins*. *Theravāda* Buddhism and its literature are a part of the vast body of doctrines and literary output inspired by the Buddha’s teachings through the centuries. But the controversies as to the origin and meaning of the term *Theravāda* are not yet over, since Buddhist scholars still debate on the issue. Some have identified *Theravāda* with Early Buddhism while others are inclined to think that it is one of the Schools that seceded from Early Buddhism.

However, in this short paper, I do not wish to reiterate the points that have already been highlighted in researches by different scholars, especially *Pāli* scholars, and published in their works. I wish here to confine myself only to certain points about the Early Buddhist teachings which are recorded in the *Pāli* canon and its connection with the language and literature used by *Theravādins*. And also to highlight the general opinion as to the identification of *Theravāda* that has come down through generations up to present day in the *Theravāda* Buddhist countries. The main controversy among the scholars was regarding the form of Buddhism Venerable Mahāmahinda Thera brought to Sri-Lanka: was it *Theravāda* or *Vibhajjavāda*? Even though we may not be able to come to any solid conclusion as to say that *Vibhajjavāda* or *Theravāda* form of Buddhism was brought to Sri-Lanka but when we define and examine the identification of the *Theravāda* with *Vibhajjavāda* it can be traced to the traditional accounts of the Third Buddhist Council where in the *Mahāvamsa*, *Kathāvatthu* and the commentaries on the *Vinaya* are found some evidences. At first, Dr. Oldenberg was uncertain as to the identity of the two names and the classes they denote. But after a comparison of the list of schools supplied by the Northern and Southern Buddhist sources, he concluded that *Vibhajjavāda* was another name for *Theravāda*.

Early Buddhist Teachings

To define Early Buddhism, we need to first define what are the early Buddhist teachings. In the normal sense, the forty-five years of the Buddha's teachings can be considered as Early Buddhism. Whatever the Buddha taught to the people since enlightenment until his passing away those teachings can be considered as Early Buddhism. The understanding of the essential Early Buddhist doctrines and teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination and the Middle Way transcending existence and non-existence - is absolutely essential for the understanding of Buddhist thought. These doctrines are the heart of Buddhist thought and build the basis for all Buddhist schools and traditions.

However, at present, our knowledge of Early Buddhism depends entirely upon the canonical texts which are recited in the First Buddhist Council, the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*. These *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* were again divided into different categories selecting long *Suttas* into *Dīgha Nikāya*, medium ones into *Majjhima Nikāya*, short *suttas* into *Saṃyutta Nikāya* and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* consisting of numbered *suttas*. Those *suttas* which do not come under any of these four categories were separately organised as *Khuddaka Nikāya*. In the same way the whole *Vinaya* also has been separated into different categories like *Pārājika Pāli*, *Pācittiya Pāli*, *Mahāvagga Pāli*, *Cullavagga Pāli*, *Parivāra Pāli*. Let us now examine the core teachings of the Buddhism as found in these *suttas* and discourses of the *Pāli* canon.

Bodhipakkhiya Dhamma (The Thirty Seven Factors of Enlightenment)

There are a few discourses as found in the *Pāli* canon which the Buddha himself mentioned as the most important teachings that monks should practice and develop in order to be free from suffering. A set of three important discourses - *Pāsādika-suttanta*, *Sangīti-suttanta* and *Sāmagāma-sutta* refers to the death of the Jain leader Nigantha Nātaputta which brought up conflict in the Jain Order after his death. When the Buddha was informed of this he declared these *suttas* at different occasions in anticipation of conflict among monks. Doing this certainly would have induced the monks to collect all the discourses preached by the Buddha even during his lifetime. But the necessity for doing this was felt even more strongly after the Buddha's death.

In the *Pāsādika-sutta*¹ and *Bhāvanānuyutta sutta*;² the Buddha presented these seven sets of qualities. The Buddha taught Cunda, “What are the teaching that you should recite together in order that this holy life may continue and be established for a long time, for the profit and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world and for the benefit, profit and happiness of devas and humans?”

“They are: the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four roads to power, the five spiritual faculties, the five mental powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, the Noble Eightfold Path. These are the things you should recite together.”

The Buddha mentioned that the most essential elements of the his teachings are the thirty seven factors of enlightenment (*Bodhipakkhiya Dhamma*) which are the truths realized through super knowledge as enumerated in the discourse. However, in these *Suttas*, especially the *Pāsādika-sutta*, the Buddha not only described the main teachings of Buddhism but he also preached on how to protect them in order to avoid dispute among his disciples. In the *Sangiti Sutta* of *Digha Nikaya* which is attributed to *Sāriputta*, is said that it should be recited in unison (*samaggehi*), with one voice (*ekavacanehi*), with non-discordant words (*aviruddha-vacanehi*).³ That *Sutta* shows that what is relevant in a *sangiti* is not so much the reciting of the text together but the absence of any discordance with regard to the letter and the meaning of the text recited. This is the way the monks recited the *dhamma* during the Buddha’s time. This is one way of analysis of the early teachings of the Buddha as written down in the canonical texts.

In the *Pāli* commentaries, the term *bodhipakkhiyā dhamma* is used to refer to seven sets of qualities regularly mentioned by the Buddha. Within these seven sets of Enlightenment qualities, there are a total of thirty-seven individual qualities (*sattatiṃsa bodhipakkhiyā dhamma*). These seven sets of qualities are recognized by both *Theravāda* and *Mahāyana* Schools of Buddhism as complementary facets of the Buddhist Path to Enlightenment. Charles Willemsen in his *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist Scholasticism* mentioned that these thirty-seven items became known as the thirty-seven members of enlightenment (*bodhyaṅga*). Practicing these

¹ D.III.127

² An. IV.125.

³ C.Witanachchi. Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Vol.vii. Sangīti.P.721

items is stated to be a precondition for liberation from the impure influences (*āsrava*) as the list is said to constitute the “cultivation of the path” (*mārgabhāvanā*). This list, often presented as the teaching of the Buddha in a nutshell and as His central teaching about which no disagreement exists, is an early, perhaps the earliest list (matrix) that came to be called *mātrka* (*Pāli mātikā*) and that formed the basis for the later *Abhidharma* works.⁴

***Navanga-satthusāsana* or *Navanga-Buddhasāsana* (Nine-fold teaching of the Buddha)**

It is to be noted that before the compilation of the *Tipitaka* i.e., the division of the whole of the Buddhist canonical literature into three *Pitakas*, Buddhist literature was divided into nine *aṅgas* or parts which became known as *Navanga-satthu-sāsana*. This is also called the *Navanga-buddha-sāsana*, the nine-fold teaching of the Buddha or Nava *Dhamma*.⁵ These nine divisions of the Buddhist scriptures took place according to their form and style. In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya* is mentioned these nine-fold teachings of the Buddha, namely *suttam* (discourses), *geyyam* (stanzas), *veyyākaranam* (expositions), *gātham* (verses), *udānam* (exclamations), *itivuttakam* (sayings), *jātakam* (birth stories), *abbhutadhammam* (marvels), *vedallam* (and answer to questions).⁶ (A.III.86). The *Pāli* canon did not mention the term *Navanga-satthu-sāsana* or *Navanga-buddha-sāsana*. The term for these nine limbs of teachings is mentioned in the post canonical *Pāli* commentaries and other works have designated them variously as *Navanga-satthu-sāsana* or *Navanga-buddha-sāsana* (A.225).⁷

These are the *Dhamma* expounded by the Buddha thus no other label has been given to them in the canonical texts. D.J Kalupahana gives an account of *Navanga-satthu-sāsana*. He says, ‘The division of the teachings of the Buddha into nine *aṅgas* or limbs dates back to very early times. *Navanga-satthu-sāsana* is a term used synonymously with the term *Buddha-vacana*, *pāvācana* or *dhammavinaya* to denote the teachings of the Buddha collectively.’⁸ These nine limbs do not refer to nine different groups of literature but to nine types of composition to be

⁴ Charles Willeman, Bart Dessein, Collett Cox. *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist Scholasticism*. Brill: New York, 1998. P. 11-12.

⁵ Kanai Lal Hazra. *Pāli Language and Literature. A systematic survey and historical study*. Vol. I. D.K. Printword (P) Ltd: India, 1994. P. 141.

⁶ Bhikkhu ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Trans. The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of Majjhima Nikāya*. Wisdom Publicatio: Boston, 2009. P. 227.

⁷ C.Witanachchi. *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. Vol.vii. *Sāsana*..P.791.

⁸ Kanai Lal Hazra. *Pāli Language and Literature. A systematic survey and historical study*. Vol. I. D.K. Printword (P) Ltd: India, 1994. P. 142

found in the collections of the ancient texts. Hirakawa Akira also says that it was very difficult to ascertain the contents of the early canons but there was probably division of the dharma into these nine categories.⁹

However, according to the records of northern Buddhism there are twelve Angas.¹⁰ It is noted here that the *Sarvāstivāda*, the *Mahāsāśaka* and the *Dharmaguptaka* introduced in their canons three more categories of literature namely stories of edification (*avadāna*), tales about the causes of events (*nidāna*) and commentaries (*upadesa*). It becomes known as *dvādasānaga-dharma-pravacana* or the twelve-fold system. Probably, this twelve-fold system took their origin later than the nine-fold system as when we look at the *Mahāsaṅghika* and the *Theravāda Vinayas* is mentioned only the nine-fold classification.¹¹

First Buddhist Council

With regards to the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, sometimes the Buddha himself used the term *satthusāsana* to describe his teachings comprising of the doctrines (*dhamma*) and the disciplinary rules (*vinaya*). Thus he says, you should definitely recognize: this is the doctrine, these is the rules of discipline, this is the dispensation of the Master (*eso dhammo eso vinayo etam satthusāsanam*)” (A.IV.143).¹² In addition to this, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* of *Dīgha Nikāya* Buddha, shortly before he passed away, in his advice to Ananda regarding the future of the Order. The Buddha is represented as saying:

“Ananda, Whatever doctrine I have taught and discipline I have instituted, that will be your teacher after my death.”

The *Dīpavamsa* says that all the five hundred *Theras*, those who participated in the First Buddhist Council, born in their minds the nine-fold doctrine of the Jina. Hence this whole doctrine of the *Theras* is also called the first (or primitive) doctrine. These five hundred *Theras*, the teachers, arranged the nine-fold doctrine of the Teacher.¹³ In this case, the nine-fold

⁹ Ibid. P. 149

¹⁰ Hendrik Kern. Manual of Indian Buddhism. Motilal Banarsidass: Delhi, 1989.P. 7.

¹¹ Kanai Lal Hazra. Pāli Language and Literature. A systematic survey and historical study. Vol. I. D.K. Printword (P) Ltd: India, 1994. P. 149-150.

¹² Bhikkhu Bodhi. Trans. The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha, a translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya. Wisdom Publicatio: Boston, 2012. P. 1100.

¹³ H. Oldenberg. Trans. and Ed. The Dipavamsa. P. 29-40

teachings of the Buddha can be categorized under the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* though it seems this nine-fold division is much older than the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*.

That these two branches, the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, comprised the whole of the Buddha's teachings is seen in the account of the First Buddhist Council (Vin.II.285). According to this account, the council was convened to agree upon the teachings of the Buddha (*dharmāṇca vinayaṇca sangāyāma*). In this case, according to the recitation of the First Buddhist Council, the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* are the earliest teachings of the Buddha. Even though the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* were taught during the early period but all the teachings of the Buddha were recited in the First Buddhist Council and these teachings were written down in texts.

Therefore, Early Buddhism relies mainly on the *Pāli* canonical texts but these texts are questionable because all of the texts contained primarily in the *Sutta* and *Vinaya* are collections of the various sects of that period.¹⁴ Also all of these texts cannot be traced back to the Buddha's time as most events relevant to early Buddhism in the canonical texts are extremely difficult to date with precision. For example, Trevor Ling in his "*History of Religion East & West*" says teachings belonging to the period 500 B.C. to 70 C.E. can be taken as Early Buddhism.¹⁵ K.N. Jayatilleke in his "*Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*" takes *Pali Tipiṭaka* as Early Buddhism.¹⁶ Sue Hamilton in her "*Early Buddhism: A New Approach*" takes the whole *Pali Sutta Piṭaka* as Early Buddhism.¹⁷ If we accept these periods as the period of Early Buddhism we have to accept the period of the development of *Abhidhamma*, and not only the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* but also the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* which is historically a later volume. Certain Buddhist sects such as Personality viewers (*Puggalavāda*) and the *Sarvāstivādins* and Asoka's period also have to be accepted as the period of Early Buddhism. Now it is clear that the teachings contained in four major *Nikāya* can be accepted as Early Buddhism without dispute.

Oral Transmission Tradition (*Bhānaka*)

¹⁴ The Oral Transmission of Early Buddhist literature by Alexander Wynne. Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies. Vol. 27 No. 1. 2004

¹⁵ Ling, Trevor. A History of Religion East and West: an introduction and interpretation. Macmillan and co Ltd. London, 1968. P. Viii.

¹⁶ Jayatilleke, K. N. Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge. George Allen & Unwin Ltd: London, 1963. P...??

¹⁷ Hamilton, Sue. Early Buddhism: A New Approach The I of the Beholder. Curzon: UK, 2000. P. 1.

Bhānaka, derived from root *bhan*, ‘to speak’ signifies a reciter and in the commentaries has acquired the specific meaning of a reciter of a section of the Canon, such as *Dīghabhānaka*, reciter of *Dīgha Nikāya*.¹⁸ Although this term was first mentioned only in the post canonical literature, the origin of the *bhānakas* can be traced to the earlier times. The *Jataka* which were very popular past life stories of the Buddha was considered as one part of the ninefold division. The term *Jataka bhānaka* is found in some stories and commentaries, the real origin of *bhānaka* can be found at the time of the First Buddhist Council. There are also some references to the terms *Dhammadhara* and *Vinayadhara* referring to monks who were well versed in the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* but these terms do not refer to the existence of *Bhānaka* at the time of the Buddha.

However, at the time of First Buddhist Council, the monks wanted to preserve the teachings of the Buddha for the benefit of future generations. Therefore, they selected some groups of monks as the guardians of the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, and entrusted them with parts of the teachings of the Buddha. The monks who were entrusted to protect the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* are called *bhānaka*. The *Vinaya* was entrusted to the care of Upāli, the *Dīgha Nikāya* to Ananda, the *Majjhima Nikāya* to the disciples of *Sāriputta*, the *Samyutta Nikāya* to *Mahākassapa* and the *Anguttara Nikāya* to *Anuruddha*.¹⁹

They preserved the complete set of the teachings of the Buddha through the oral tradition. If the First Council did not appoint those *bhānakas*, then we might have lost such valuable teachings. Therefore, they have contributed immensely to the world by preserving the teachings of the Buddha. Not only for the protection of the teachings of the Buddha, but also with regards to some views regarding the teachings of the Buddha, were also presented by the *bhānakas*. The activities of the *bhānakas* were thus not limited to protection but they were also good reference sources for the later *Attakatha* as they held some important views regarding the Buddha’s teachings.

It is strange enough that the different *bhānakas* sometimes held different views in the same matter as found in the different sources of the commentaries. For example, the *Dīghabhānakas* and the *Majjhimbhānakas* held different views regarding the composition of the *Khuddhaka Nikāya*. They also held differences in opinion in the detailed description of the

¹⁸ Encyclopaedia of Buddhism. Bhānaka. By L. R. G.

¹⁹ Ibid.

First Council. Sometimes regarding doctrinal matters, the *Dīghabhānakas* and the *Samyuttabhānakas* held one opinion while the *Majjhimbhānakas* held another. The *Anguttarabhānakas* had their own views about details in the practice of *dhutaṅga*.²⁰ Probably, this is the beginning of schism in the history of Buddhism.

However, here the important thing about the *bhānakas* is that they do not present different views among themselves about *Dhammic* points, i.e. regarding real *Dhamma*. Those different points presented are mainly with reference to incidents and experiences with regards to meditation. The *bhānakas* had made a great contribution in remembering the words of the Buddha.

Controversies on the Origin of the *Vibhajjavāda*:

The third list of *Bhavya*, which is said to constitute the *Sammatiya* tradition, agrees fully with the *Dipavamsa* with regards to the *Mahāsamghika* sect. So far as the *Theravāda* or *Sthaviravāda* sect is concerned, it was divided, according to the *Sammatiya* tradition, into two sects, *Mūlasthavira* and *Haimavata*. The *Mūlasthavira* gave rise to the *Sarvāstivāda* and the *Vatsīputriya*. From the *Sarvāstivāda* emerged the *Vibhajjavāda* and *Dharmaguptaka*, the *Tamrasatiya* and *Kasyapiya*.²¹

According to the second list of *Bhavya*, the original Order became divided into three schools; the *Sthaviravāda*, the *Mahāsamghika* and the *Vibhajjavāda*. *Sthaviravāda* gave rise to the *Sautrantika* while the *Vatsīputriya* divided into four sects. From the *Vibhajjavāda* originated the *Mahisāsaka*, the *Kasyapiya*, the *Dharmaguptaka* and *Tamrasatiya* (*Theravāda*).²² Charles Willemsen, also agrees that these four schools succeeded from the *Vibhajjavāda* but he listed out slightly different names, and said that the *Vibhajjavāda* gave rise to the *Mahisāsaka*, the *Dharmaguptaka*, the *Kasyapiya* (*Haimavata*?) and *Tamraparniya* (*Theravāda*).²³ Nalinaksha Dutt said that *Bhavya* and *Vinītadeva* treated the *Vibhajjavāda* as an offshoot of the *Sarvāstivāda* sect. And he quoted that Prof. La Vallée Poussin has traced in the Chinese commentary of the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bibhuti Baruah. Buddhist Sects and Sectarianism. Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2000.P. 43

²² Ibid. P. 44

²³ Class notes by Prof. Charles Willemsen. 02-09-2015.

Vijñaptimātratisiddhi a passage in which *Vibhajjavāda* is identified with *Prajñaptīvāda*.²⁴ As Vasumitra did not count the *Vibhajjavādins* as one of the sects, he had not mentioned any special doctrines of theirs. It is only in the *Abhidharmakosa* that we come across certain doctrines attributed to this sect.²⁵

André Bareau said that in the beginning of the second century, the remaining *Staviravādins*, who appeared to have taken the name *Vibhajjavādins*, "those who teach discrimination," to distinguish themselves from the *Sarvāstivādins*, found themselves divided once again. Out of this dispute were born the *Mahīśāsakas* and the *Dharmaguptakas*, who opposed each other over whether the Buddha belonged to the monastic community and the relative value of offerings made to the Blessed One and those made to the community.²⁶

About the *Vibhajjavāda*, it is noteworthy that they are not uniformly recorded by the traditions as a distinct sect for any considerable period of time. According to the *Sammatiya* tradition, *Vibhajjavāda* like *Sankrantivāda*, developed from the *Sarvāstivāda* sect, the *Mahasamghika* tradition (second list of *Bhavya*) would truncate early Buddhism into three schools; the *Stavira*, the *Mahasamghika* and *Vibhajjavāda* and would trace the origins of the *Mahisasaka*, the *Kasyapiya*, the *Dharmaguptaka* and the *Tamrasatiya* from the last school. It is well-known that at the time of the Third Buddhist Council, all true Buddhists are described as *Vibhajjavādins*. On the contrary, the *Vibhasa* of the *Sarvāstivādins* informs us that the *Vibhajjavādins* were heretics opposed to the *Sarvāstivāda Vaibhasikas*.²⁷ The *Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra* describes the *Vibhajjavādins* as being the type of heretics who "make objections, who uphold harmful doctrines and attack those who follow the authentic Dharma."²⁸ However, the *Vibhajjavādins* rejected the *Sarvam asti* doctrine. It was possibly due to their analytical attitude within the general framework of the *Sarvāstivāda* doctrine that they got the name *Vibhajjavādins*.

However, Oldenberg was convinced that the orthodox sect in the possession of the *Theravāda* most likely bore the name *Vibhajjavādī* (*Vibhajjavādinās*). He draws this conclusion

²⁴ Nalinaksha Dutt. *Buddhist Sects In India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978. P. 208.

²⁵ Ibid. 209.

²⁶ André Bareau. "Schools of Buddhism: Early Doctrinal Schools of Buddhism". In *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2 edn., ed. Lindsay Jones, pp. 444-457. Detroit: Thomas/Gale, 2005.

²⁷ Bibhuti Baruah. *Buddhist Sects and Sectarianism*. Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2000. P. 51

²⁸ <http://www.liquisearch.com/vibhajjavada/history>

from a passage in the *Mahāvamsa* concerning the Third Buddhist Council called by King Asoka, who asked the orthodox *Bhikkhus*:

Which doctrine did Buddha himself proclaim? They replied: “He was *Vibhajjavādī*.” Whereupon the King turned to the Thera Moggalīputta: *Vibhajjavādī sambuddho hoti bhante “thi āha so, Thero āmā ti etc.*²⁹

The Meaning of the Term *Theravāda*

Though the word *Theravāda* is very popular, it is very difficult to trace its history. Scholars said that there were no Buddhist School called *Theravāda* in the early period. But in the later period after the Third Buddhist Council, this school emerged from the *Vibhajjavāda*, and established itself in Sri-Lanka. But the fact is that this word appeared only twice in the entire *Pāli* canon. That is in the context of the life story of Siddhārtha Bodhisattva. This is found in two discourses: *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* (M.I) and in the *Sangārava sutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya* (M.II).

After the first Buddhist Council, a schism happened within the Buddhist Order for many reasons. However, it seems from the traditional list that one of the two earliest schools of Buddhism was known by the name of Thera or *Sthaviravāda* from which succeeded the various sects. The *Pāli* tradition would go as far as to assert that *Theravāda* was not schismatic but the alternative name given to *Theravāda* was *Vibhajjavāda*. Moggaliputta Tissa seemed to have been instrumental in the development of this school. His compilation of the *Kathavatthu* represented the *Theravāda* point of view wherein it sought to refute the tenets of the other schools.³⁰

However, when examined we find that there are three meanings assigned to the term *Theravāda* in the *Pāli* literary sources. They are “certainty”, “opinion of the elders” and “the original doctrines of Buddhism”. The first meaning “certainty” is found in the discourses where the story of Prince Siddhārtha’s renunciation is accepted. It is well known that Siddhārtha met two ascetics, Ālārakālāma and Uddaka, during his search for truth. He learned many things from them and later on recalled by the Buddha as follows;

²⁹ Perreira, Leroy Todd. Whence Theravāda?. *How Theravāda is Theravāda?* Exploring Buddhist Identities (2012): P.463.Print.

³⁰ Bibhuti Baruah. *Buddhist Sects and Sectarianism*. Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2000. P. 53

So kho aham bhikkhave tāvatakeneva aṭṭhapahaṭamattena lapitalāpanamettena nānāvādañca vadāmi theravādañca jānāmi passāmi (with that much striking of lips and reaping what is said, I speak of knowledge and certainty).³¹

Here Siddhārtha gained solid and firm knowledge of what they taught. This is also mentioned in the Commentary on the *Majjhimanikāya* by saying *Theravādanti thirabhāvavādāni*.

The second meaning is shown in the *Samantapāsādikā*, the Commentary of the *Vinayapiṭaka* compiled by Venerable Buddhaghosa. He pointed out the distinction between *Ācariyavāda*³² and *Theravāda*. He said that the term *attanomati* equates to *Theravāda*. The opinion of the elders (*Theravāda*) scattered in the Commentaries on the *Sutta*, *Abhidhamma* and *Vinaya* are identified here with *Attanoimati* (independent views of the individuals). The *Sāratthadīpanī* also confirms the authoritative weakness of *attanomati*, since it depends on the penetrative knowledge of the individuals.³³ Thus *attanomati* is the personal views of the elders in Sri Lanka, India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. They had their own views on certain issues of Buddhism.³⁴ The *Vimativinodanī*, another sub-Commentary on *Vinaya*, points out that *Theravāda* is nothing but the opinions of the elders like *Mahāsumma*.

The third meaning is employed in the commentaries, chronicles and the sub-commentaries. The *Samantapāsādikā* states that the Arahant Mahinda learnt all the commentaries of the *Theravāda* from the Arahant Moggaliputta Tissa and Buddhaghosa compiled his commentary inclusive of the *Theravāda*. Not only that, we find in the *Dīpavamsa* that the collections of the First Council are called *Theravāda* because they were carried out by the elders. In the *Mahāvamsa* is also mentioned that the First Council is called the *Therīya* because it was conducted by the elders.³⁵

However, in the above sources the term *Theravāda* is used in the sense of ‘the original doctrine of the Buddhism’ in its wider connotation as the original doctrine of Buddhism was

³¹ Oliver Abeynayake. “The Theravāda Tradition: Its identity.” *Journal of Buddhist Studies VII* (2009): P.90. Print.

³² The *Ācariyavāda* is defined as the Commentarial tradition (*aṭṭhakathā tanti*) kept and decided by the five hundred Arahants who participated in the First Buddhist Council over and above the *Pāli* Canon.

³³ Oliver Abeynayake. “The Theravāda Tradition: Its identity.” *Journal of Buddhist Studies VII* (2009): P.91. Print.

³⁴ Class notes by Prof. Tilak

³⁵ Oliver Abeynayake. “The Theravāda Tradition: Its identity.” *Journal of Buddhist Studies VII* (2009): P.91-92. Print

codified and arranged in the form of sacred texts in the First Buddhist Council. Then a sudden calamity arose in the history of Buddhism due to the ten disciplinary points raised by the Vajjipīuttaka monks as documented in the eleventh chapter of the *Cullavagga* or due to five doctrinal points raised by the Venerable Mahādeva as documented in the Tibetan tradition. As a result the first schism arose which separated the community of monks into two groups where a large number of the monks came to be known as *Mahāsaṅghika* while the traditional lineage of the elders like Mahākassapa preserved the doctrine within the elders. The original doctrine of Buddhism became known as *Theravāda* because it was preserved and protected by the Elders. The preserving tradition was established within the elders and continued until the Third Buddhist Council. Therefore, we can say that, the original doctrine of Buddhism was nourished and safeguarded by the succession of Elders, designated as *Theravāda*, and was introduced to Sri-Lanka.

Identification of *Theravāda* with *Vibhajjavāda*:

To identify *Theravāda* with *Vibhajjavāda* at first we need to know the meaning of the *Vibhajjavāda*. In the early Buddhist discourses, the term *Vibhajjavāda* can be found in the *Subha Sutta* (M.II, 197). In this discourse the Buddha replied that he was one who would make a pronouncement only after having carried out an analysis, *vibhajjavāda kho aham ettha*.³⁶

The *Samyutta Nikaya* records the Buddha as having said that in the course of time his followers would fail to understand the subtle points of his teaching such as Void and would rather take as authoritative the simplified version of his followers and thus his own utterances would disappear. With his keen insight, he could foresee the specific realms where two monks might differ and give rise to a controversy. He had the apprehension that there might arise some differences of opinion on *Abhidhamma*, *ajjhajiva* and *adhi-patimokkha*. However, these would not be very significant but in case there arose any dispute over the fruits (*magga*), path (*patipada*) or the congregation (*Samgha*) it would be a matter of regret and harm. Should there arise such an occasion, he recommended the guidance of senior monks. Similarly, he once explained to Ananda that he taught *Dhamma* according to classification, which obviously, points to his analytical (*Vibhajjavāda*) method of approach. He added in the same context that those of

³⁶ Bhikkhu Anālayo. *Vibhajjavada*. Encyclopedia of Buddhism VI (1997).

his followers who would not approve and agree with this would ultimately indulge in controversies and disputations.³⁷ From the above discussion we understand that the Buddha was a *Vibhajjavādin* for he followed the analytical method in teaching.

The word *Vibhajjavāda* (*Pāli*, *Vibhajjavāda*) may be parsed into *vibhajya*, loosely meaning "dividing", "analyzing" and *vāda* holding the semantic field: "doctrine", "teachings". According to Andrew Skilton, the analysis of phenomena (Skt. *dharmas*) was the doctrinal emphasis and preoccupation of the *Vibhajjavādins*.³⁸

According to both *Pāli* and Sanskrit traditions, the original school, which the Ceylonese chronicles do not count as schismatic, was called Theravada or *Sthaviravada*. An alternative name of the *Sthaviravadins* is given as *Vibhajjavādins*. It is doubtful whether there was any independent school having the name of *Vibhajjavāda*. The *Vibhajjavāda* was sometimes affixed to the name of a school on account of certain adherents differing in minor points from the principal doctrines of a particular school and preferring to distinguish themselves as *Vibhajjavādins* of that particular school. In this way, we may explain the *Vibhajjavāda* of the Ceylonese tradition did not accept the doctrines of *Theravāda* and preferred to distinguish themselves as *Sthavira-vibhajjavādi* or simply as *Vibhajjavādi*. In the *Kathāvatthu*, the term *Sakavāda* is used instead of *Sthaviravāda* or *Vibhajjavāda*.³⁹ The *Theravādins*, preferred to call themselves *Vibhajjavādins*. This anomalous position of the *Vibhajjavādins*, it seems, may be explained by regarding them not as an independent school, but as a term denoting those who did not accept the doctrines of a particular school. It may be shown that those *Sarvāstivādins*, who did not accept the *sarvam asti* doctrine but held instead the opinion that the past, which has not yet produced its fruits, and the future do not exist were known as *Vibhajjavādin*.⁴⁰

On this analogy we may say that among the *Theravādins* there were perhaps some dissenting groups, who were distinguished as *Theravāda-Vibhajjavādins*. And the Sri-Lankan monks of *Mahāvihāra* probably preferred to call themselves *Vibhajjavādin* as we find it clearly

³⁷ Bibhuti Baruah. *Buddhist Sects and Sectarianism*. Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2000. P. 35.

³⁸ http://www.liquisearch.com/vibhajjavada/nomenclature_and_etymology

³⁹ Nalinaksha Dutt. *Buddhist Sects In India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978.

⁴⁰ Ibid. P. 208

expressed in the versified table of contents of Chapter III of the *Cullavagga* and in the colophon of the commentary on the *Tikapaṭṭhāna* as well as in the *Dīpavamsa*.⁴¹

But we still cannot come to the conclusion that *Vibhajjavāda* is *Theravāda* because some of the *Vibhajjavādins* settled in southern India and Lanka in the mid-third century BCE. Charles William mentioned that the *Mahāsāsakas Vinaya* was found in the Anuradhapura and that probably the *Mahāsāsakas* also have been in Sri-Lanka. In this case, *Vibhajjavāda* is not the pure orthodox doctrine carried to Sri-Lanka but it is a mixed doctrine that went to Sri-Lanka. It is a mixed doctrine because Mahinda went through Avanti, which is mainly *Mahāsāsaka* area, to Sri-Lanka. But we still have very strong evidence to say that, the *Vibhajjavada* name has been used to identify with *Theravāda*. Identification of *Theravāda* with *Vibhajjavada* can be traced to the traditional accounts of the Third Buddhist Council as presented in the *Mahāvamsa* and the commentary to the *Vinaya* and the *Kathāvatthu*.

Development Aspect of Theravāda Buddhism

When we examine the teaching of the Buddha available in the canon, it is necessary to have some kind of exposition, elucidation and interpretation. It is true that there are some teaching which have clear meaning but there are those obscure teachings which requires some definition and interpretation or clarification. There are no evidences to prove that at the very beginning of the canon there exist a commentarial tradition. But upon examination, the earliest beginnings of the exegetical literature can be traced to the canon itself. Kanai Lal Hazra says that there are numerous instances in the *Nikāyas* where the Buddha (and in his absence his leading disciples) are approached for clarification of various doctrinal point. The result is detailed exposition of the point raised. Examples of such exposition given by the Buddha are to be found in the *Mahākammavibhanga Sutta*, *Kathika Sutta*, *Sivaka Sutta*, *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* and *Sallekha Sutta*. The Buddha himself had recognized the ability of some of his disciples to explain in detail what he preached in brief.⁴²

Development of the *Theravādin* tradition is not only a philosophical or doctrinal tradition but it is also a religious tradition. Religious tradition almost always depends on its master. When

⁴¹ Ibid. P.209.

⁴² Kanai Lal Hazra. Pāli Language and Literature. A systematic survey and historical study. Vol. II. D.K. Printword (P) Ltd: India, 1994. P. 491.

we go to the *Pāli* canon, we can see the Buddha as a real human. From the commentaries, scholars, especially *Buddhaghosa*,⁴³ established the biography of the Buddha as the religious master of the *Theravāda* tradition. When we take the *Theravāda* tradition as a religious tradition, it has a master accepted by the *Theravādins* which is quite different from the Mahayana tradition and also different from the Canonical Tradition. The *Theravāda* tradition, basing on Early Buddhism, reveals many religious activities, which are necessary for the common people. For example, the systematic way of practice of meditation is only given in the *Visuddhimagga*. Taking all the forty objects, *Buddhaghosa* explained how a practitioner can develop his meditational capacity. There is no other book in the *Theravāda* other than the *Visuddhimagga* which describes the meditational tradition. *Buddhaghosa* presented a systematic way of religion, which is linked to Early Buddhism but there is no orderly systematic presentation of *bhāvanā* in Early Buddhism. Therefore, in all the *Theravāda* countries, they follow *Dasapuñṇakriyā*, which was introduced by *Buddhaghosa* in his commentary.

What establishes a tradition is the canonical literature e.g. the *Bharahara Sutta* was used to establish *Puggalavāda*. Today we have the *Theravāda* tradition founded on the *Pāli* canon, but *Pāli* canon itself does not say anything about the characteristics of *Theravāda*. The special characteristics of a Buddhist school is defined by the commentaries.

Conclusion

The Buddha preached the *Dhamma* for forty-five years around north-western India to all levels of people. After the passing away of the Buddha, the teachings were redacted at the First Buddhist Council. In the council the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* were recited and the four *Nikāyas* were entrusted to different disciples to preserve. The reciters (*bhānakas*), not only protected the teachings of the Buddha, but they also recorded their view points on particular teachings which probably spearheaded the schism. During King Asoka's time, there were eighteen schools existing, and one of the schools is *Vibhajjavāda* which preserves the original teachings of the Buddha. The missionaries sent out by Asoka made a great contribution for the Buddha *sasana*.

⁴³ Was a 5th-century Indian Theravāda Buddhist commentator and scholar. His best-known work is the *Visuddhimagga* "Path of Purification", a comprehensive summary and analysis of the Theravāda understanding of the Buddha's path to liberation. The interpretations provided by Buddhaghosa have generally constituted the orthodox understanding of Theravāda scriptures since at least the 12th century CE. He is generally recognized by both Western scholars and Theravādins as the most important commentator of the Theravāda. (see Encyclopedia of Buddhism)

One of the missionaries that went to Sri-Lanka reaped great results within a few years on the Island. Though the term *Theravāda* came only after a few centuries, but it kept to its origin with *Vibhajjavāda* and developed in Sri-Lanka.

In the 5th century, one of the most noteworthy services by Buddhaghosha is that he has done the great job of making the *Theravāda* Tradition a developed institution in Sri-Lanka. When we see the canonical aspect of the *Theravāda*, the religious aspect is revealed. So the canonical literature represents only a way of life through its doctrine but because of Buddhaghosha's commentarial work, the *Theravāda* tradition becomes a more religious institution instead of mere way of life. Through the *Visuddhimagga* and commentaries, he made prominent the religious aspects. The religion for the common people must have an object for worship. This object was none other than the Buddha who was represented as a teacher of men and divine beings. A religious master must also have some transcendental or super human characteristics. Therefore, Buddhaghosa in his commentaries had tried his best to make prominent the supernatural characteristics of the Buddha.