

History of Buddhism and its contribution to Indian culture

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Abstract

The terms Hinayana (Theg-dman) and Mahayana (Theg-chen), meaning modest or “lesser” vehicle and vast or “greater” vehicle, first appeared in The Sutras on Far-reaching Discriminating Awareness (Sher-phyin-gyi mdo, Skt. Prajnaparamita Sutras; The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras), as a way of expressing the superiority of Mahayana. Historically, there were eighteen schools that predated Mahayana, each with its own slightly different version of the monastic rules of discipline (‘dul-ba, Skt. vinaya). Although some have suggested alternative names to refer to the eighteen as a whole, we shall use the more commonly known term Hinayana for them, but without intending any pejorative connotation.

Initially, Buddhism remained one of the many small sects in India. The main breakthrough came when King Asoka (ca. 270-232 BCE) converted to Buddhism. He did not make it a state religion, but supported all ethical religions. He organised the spreading of Buddhism throughout India, but also beyond; most importantly to Shri Lanka. This occurred after the Third Council.

According to another version (Skilton), the Second Council may have had two parts: initially in Vaisali, some 60 years after the Buddha, and 40 years after that, a meeting in Pataliputra, where Mahadeva maintained five theses on the Arhat. The actual split may have occurred at Pataliputra, not Vaisali over details of the Vinaya. In the non-Theravadin version of events, the Mahasangha followed the original vinaya and the Sthaviravada (the Elders) wanted changes. What exactly happened is unlikely to be ever revealed, but the first split in the Sangha was a fact.

Introduction

The terms Hinayana (Theg-dman) and Mahayana (Theg-chen), meaning modest or “lesser” vehicle and vast or “greater” vehicle, first appeared in The Sutras on Far-reaching Discriminating Awareness (Sher-phyin-gyi mdo, Skt. Prajnaparamita Sutras; The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras), as a way of expressing the superiority of Mahayana. Historically, there were eighteen schools that predated Mahayana, each with its own slightly different version of the monastic rules of discipline (‘dul-ba, Skt. vinaya). Although some have suggested alternative names to refer to the eighteen as a whole, we shall use the more commonly known term Hinayana for them, but without intending any pejorative connotation.

Theravada (gNas-brtan smra-ba, Skt. Sthaviravada) is the only one of the eighteen Hinayana schools that is currently extant. It flourishes in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. When Indian and Tibetan Mahayana texts present the philosophical views of the Vaibhashika (Bye-brag smra-ba) and Sautrantika (mDo-sde-pa) Schools, these two Hinayana schools are divisions of Sarvastivada (Thams-cad yod-par smra-ba), another one of the eighteen. The Tibetan monastic rules of discipline are from the Mulasarvastivada (gZhi thams-cad yod-par smra-ba) School, another division of Sarvastivada. Thus, one must not confuse the Tibetan presentation of Hinayana with Theravada. The East Asian Buddhist traditions follow the monastic rules of discipline from the Dharmagupta (Chos-srung sde) School, another of the eighteen.

INITIAL SPREAD OF BUDDHISM IN INDIA

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THE BUDDHIST COUNCILS

The First Council

Three months after the Buddha's Mahaparinirvana (passing away), his immediate disciples convened a council at Rajagaha. Maha Kassapa, the most respected and senior monk, presided at the Council. Two very important personalities who specialised in the two areas of the teachings:

The Dharma:

Ananda, the closest constant companion and disciple of the Buddha for 25 years. Endowed with a remarkable memory, Ananda was able to recite what was spoken by the Buddha.

The Vinaya: Upali remembered all the Vinaya rules.

Only these two sections - the Dharma and the Vinaya - were recited at the First Council (no mention was made of the Abhidharma yet). Though there were no differences of opinion on the Dharma there was some discussion about the Vinaya rules.

Before the Buddha's Parinirvanana, he had told Ananda that if the Sangha wished to amend or modify some minor rules, they could do so. But Ananda forgot to ask the Buddha what the minor rules were. As the members of the Council were unable to agree as to what constituted the minor rules, Maha Kassapa finally ruled that no disciplinary rule laid down by the Buddha should be changed, and no new ones should be introduced. No intrinsic reason was given. Maha Kassapa did say one thing, however: "If we changed the rules, people will say that Ven. Gautama's disciples changed the rules even before his funeral fire has ceased burning." At the Council, the Dharma was divided into various parts and each part was assigned to an Elder and his pupils to commit to memory. The Dharma was then passed on from teacher to pupil orally. The Dharma was recited daily by groups of people who regularly cross-checked with each other to ensure that no omissions or additions were made.

The Second Council

According to the Theravadin school (Rahula), about one hundred years after the Buddha's passing away, the Second Council was held to discuss some Vinaya rules, and no controversy about the Dharma was reported. The orthodox monks (Sthavarivada) said that nothing should be changed, while the others insisted on modifying some rules. Finally, a group of monks left the Council and formed the Mahasanghika - the Great Community. (The Mahasanghika should not to be confused with Mahayana.)

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The Third Council

During the reign of Emperor Asoka in the 3rd Century BCE, the Third Council was held to discuss the differences of opinion among the bhikkhus of different sects. At this Council differences of opinion were not confined to the Vinaya, but also concerned the Dharma. The President of the Council, Moggaliputta Tissa, compiled a book called the Kathavatthu which refuted the heretical, false views and theories held by some sects occurring at the time. The teaching approved and accepted by this Council became known as Sthaviras or Theravada, "Teaching of the Elders". The Abhidhamma Pitaka was included at this Council. After the Third Council, King Asoka sent missionaries to Sri Lanka, Kanara, Karnataka, Kashmir, Himalaya region, Burma, even nowadays Afghanistan. Asoka's son, Ven. Mahinda, brought the Tripitaka to Sri Lanka, along with the commentaries that were recited at the Third Council. These teachings later became known as the "Pali-canon".

The Fourth Council

The Fourth Buddhist Council was held under the auspices of King Kaniska at Jalandhar or in Kashmir around 100 CE, where 499 monks of the Sarvastivadin school compiled a new canon. This council was never recognised by the Theravada school.

The Fifth Council (Burma)

The 5th Buddhist Council was held from 1868 to 1871 in Mandalay, Burma where the text of the Pali Canon was revised and inscribed on 729 marble slabs.

The Sixth Council (Burma)

The 6th Buddhist Council was held at Rangoon, Burma in 1954-1956.

Four Noble Truths of Buddhism

- Life is suffering;
- Suffering is due to attachment;
- Attachment can be overcome
- There is a path for accomplishing this.

Eightfold Path of Buddhism

- Right view is the true understanding of the four noble truths.
- Right aspiration is the true desire to free oneself from attachment, ignorance, and hatefulness.
- Right speech involves abstaining from lying, gossiping, or hurtful talk.
- Right action involves abstaining from hurtful behaviors, such as killing, stealing, and careless sex.
- Right livelihood means making your living in such a way as to avoid dishonesty and hurting others, including animals.

- Right effort is a matter of exerting oneself in regards to the content of one's mind: Bad qualities should be abandoned and prevented from arising again; Good qualities should be enacted and nurtured.
- Right mindfulness is the focusing of one's attention on one's body, feelings, thoughts, and consciousness in such a way as to overcome craving, hatred, and ignorance.
- Right concentration is meditating in such a way as to progressively realize a true understanding of imperfection, impermanence, and non-separateness.

Contribution of Buddhism to Indian culture

Buddhism greatly influenced the Indian religion. It gave to Indian people a simple and popular religion. It rejected ritualism, sacrifices and dominance of priestly class. It has also left its permanent mark on Indian religious thought. Buddhism appealed to the masses on account of its simplicity, use of vernacular language in its scriptures and teachings and monastic order. Buddhism left deep impact on the society. It gave serious impetus to democratic spirit and social equality. It opened its doors to women and shudras. Buddhism encouraged abolition of distinctions in society and strengthened the principle of social equality.

The Buddhist viharas were used for education purposes. Nalanda, Vikramshila, Taxila, Udyantpuri, Vallabhi and others cities developed as high Buddhist learning centres. Buddhism helped in the growth of literature in the popular language of the people. The literature written both in Pali and Sanskrit were enriched by scholars of Hinyana and Mahayana sects. The Buddhist texts like Tripitakas, Jatakas, Buddha charita, Mahavibhasa, Miliand panho, Lalit Vistara are assets to Indian literature.

The main contribution of Buddhism to Indian life is in the domain of architecture, sculpture and painting. The stupas, viharas, chaityas that were built at Sanchi, Bahrut, Bodhgaya, Nalanda, Amravati, Taxila and other places are simply remarkable. The Sanchi Stupa with its beautiful ornamental torans is considered a masterpiece in architecture. The

cave temples of Ajanta, Karle, Bhaja, Ellora etc show their achievement in rock cut cave temples. The Ajanta painting depicting touching scenes of Buddha's life are world famous.

They bear a testimony to the heights reached by them in the field of painting. This Buddhist art forms a glorious chapter in the history of Indian art and architecture. They fostered a new awareness in the field of culture. Buddhism established intimate contact between India and foreign countries. Indian monks and scholars carried the gospel of Buddhism to foreign countries from the 3rd century BC onwards and made it the prominent religion of Asia. These religious movements helped in carrying the message of Indian civilization to many distant countries of Asia. It also helped in assimilating foreign influence in Indian culture.

FROM 200 BCE TO THE PRESENT

Prior to the Third Council, several schools developed from the Sthavarivadin: Vasiputriya/Pudgalavadin/Sammitiya (three names for the same school), Sarvastivadin and Vibhajyavadin. Later on, the Vibhajyavadin school was divided into the Mahisasika and the Theravada. The Sarvastivadin developed later sub-schools known as Vaibasika and Sautrantika. The Sarvastivadin school is important in that it formed the basis for the later development of Mahayana.

With the conversion of King Asoka, Buddhism suddenly became a main religion in India; it had been just one of the many sects before him.

After the death of Asoka, there followed a period of persecution under Pusyamitra Sunga (183-147 BCE). The second royal patron for Buddhism was Kaniska (1st to 2nd century). Under his auspices, the Fourth Council was held.

Legend reports that Nagarjuna (ca.150-250 CE) was the person preordained by Buddha to recover and explicate the Perfection of Wisdom texts. The first of these texts was the 'Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines'. After one of his lectures, some nagas approached him and told him of the texts hidden in their kingdom, and so Nagarjuna traveled there and

returned with the sutras to India. He is credited with founding the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) school of Buddhist philosophy, which emphasized the centrality of the doctrine of emptiness.

Nagarjuna's philosophy is usually connected to the emergence of Mahayana around this time, which meant a clear distinction into the two main schools of Buddhism. Approximately two centuries after Nagarjuna, a new Mahayana school arose in India, which is commonly known as the Yogachara (Yogic Practice School). The main scriptural source for this school is the Sutra Explaining the Thought (Samdhinirmochana-sutra), which consists of a series of questions put to the Buddha by a group of bodhisattvas. The name "Yogic Practice School" may have been derived from an important treatise by Asanga (ca. 310-390) entitled the Levels of Yogic Practice (Yogachara-bhumi). Along with his brother Vasubandhu (ca. 320-400), Asanga is credited with founding this school and developing its central doctrines. Yogachara emphasizes the importance of meditative practice, and several passages in Yogachara texts indicate that the founders of the school perceived other Mahayana Buddhists as being overly concerned with dialectical debate while neglecting meditation. The Yogachara school is commonly referred to in Tibet as "Mind Only" (sems tsam; Sanskrit: chitta-matra) because of an idea found in some Yogachara texts that all the phenomena of the world are "cognition-only" (vijñapti-matra), implying that everything we perceive is conditioned by consciousness.

From around the 4th cent CE, Vajrayana (Tantrayana) Buddhism started to develop in India as part of the Mahayana tradition. In addition to the developments in philosophy, a new trend in practice developed in India, which was written down in texts called tantras. These texts purported to have been spoken by the historical Buddha (or sometimes by other Buddhas), and while they incorporated the traditional Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva who seeks buddhahood for the benefit of all beings, they also proposed some radically new practices and paradigms. The central practices of tantra include visualizations intended to foster cognitive reorientation, the use of prayers (mantra) to Buddhas that are intended to facilitate

the transformation of the meditator into a fully enlightened Buddha, and often elaborate rituals. In the 5th cent CE, a Buddhist monastic university was founded at Nalanda, India. This university would become the largest and most influential Buddhist center for many centuries to come.

Chandrakirti (ca. 550-600) was one of the most influential commentators of Nagarjuna

In the following centuries, a number of syncretic schools developed. They tended to mingle Madhyamaka and Yogachara doctrines. The greatest examples of this syncretic period are the philosophers Shantarakshita (ca. 680-740) and Kamalashila (ca. 740-790), who are among the last significant Buddhist philosophers in India.

Following this last flowering of Buddhist thought in India, Buddhism began to decline. It became increasingly a tradition of elite scholar-monks who studied in great monastic universities like Nalanda and Vikramashila in Northern India. Buddhism failed to adapt to changing social and political circumstances, and apparently lacked a wide base of support. When a series of invasions by Turkish Muslims descended on India in the ninth through twelfth centuries, after the invaders had sacked the great north Indian monastic universities and killed many prominent monks, Buddhism was dealt a death blow from which it never recovered. In 1193 the Moslems attacked and conquered Magadha, the heartland of Buddhism in India, and with the destruction of the Buddhist Monasteries, like Nalanda (1200) in that area Buddhism was wiped out.

Only some small remnants of Buddhist communities, like in the Himalayan areas, Buddhism remained alive. Apart from the Moslims, most Indians are Hindu, and to them Buddhism is a old, dead branch of Hinduism, not a seperate, independent religion.

During the English Colonial Rule, there was a small resurgence of Buddhism in India. In the 1890's, for example, Dammapara of Sri Lanka founded the Mahabodhi Society, and Ayoti Daas founded the Buddhist Society of South India, as well as other unrelated Buddhist

activities in Bengal and other places in India. The effects of these activities were localized, never spreading widely.

In 1956 in the state of Maharashtra, in the city of Nagpur, Dr. Ambedkar held a conversion ceremony, and converted 500,000 untouchables to Buddhism. One of the underlying thoughts of this re-introduction was to reduce the influence of the Hindu caste system in India and its detrimental influence on people of the lower castes. The number of Buddhists in India in 1981 (according to India Govt. estimates) was 4.65 million people, and in 1991, became 6.32 million people. About 80% of this population live in the state of Maharashtra, and in the city of Nagpur; mainly connected to Dr. Ambedkar's efforts. In the last few years, the consciousness of human rights has increased in India, and the number of Untouchables converting to Buddhism is increasing.

Buddhism's Disappearance from India

One of the supreme ironies of the history of Buddhism in India is the question of how Buddhism came to disappear from the land of its birth. Many scholars of Buddhism, Hinduism, Indian history, and of religion more generally have been devoted to unraveling this puzzle. There is no absolute consensus on this matter, and a few scholars have even contended that Buddhism never disappeared as such from India. On this view, Buddhism simply changed form, or was absorbed into Hindu practices. Such an argument is, in fact, a variation of the view, which perhaps has more adherents than any other, that Buddhism disappeared, not on account of persecution by Hindus, but because of the ascendancy of reformed Hinduism. However, the view that Buddhists were persecuted by Brahmins, who were keen to assert their caste supremacy, still has some adherents, and in recent years has been championed not only by some Dalit writers and their sympathizers but by at least a handful of scholars of pre-modern Indian history.

Though many Dalit and other anti-Brahminical writers would like to represent Brahminism as a tyrannical faith that wrought massive destruction upon the Buddhists, the

matter is more complicated. A recent study of the Bengal Puranas indubitably shows that the Buddhists were mocked, cast as mischievous and malicious in Brahminical narratives, and subjected to immense rhetorical violence. But rhetorical violence is not necessarily to be read as physical violence perpetrated upon the Buddhists, any more than accounts of thousands of Hindu temples destroyed at the hands of Muslim invaders are to be read literally. Similarly, the absorption of the Buddha into Vishnu's pantheon may have represented something of a compromise between the Brahmins and Buddhists: since so much of what Buddhism stood for had been incorporated into certain strands of Brahminism, the Buddha was at least to be given his just dues. This anxiety of absorption continues down to the present day, and one of the more curious expressions of this anxiety must surely be a letter from the All India Bhikkhu Sangha to the-then Prime Minister of India, P. V. Narasimha Rao. In his letter of 23 February 1995, the President of the Sangha complained that the actor Arun Govil, who had played Rama in the TV serial Ramayana, had been chosen to play the Buddha in the TV serial by the same name. Could anyone really play the Buddha? "As you know," the letter reminds Rao, "the Buddha was never a mythological figure as Rama & Hanuman but very much a historical figure." If nothing else, we might at least read the disappearance of Buddhism from India as a parable about how myth always outlives history.

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