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## Note about Early Buddhist Schools

Charles Willemen \*

In the *Journal of Buddhist Studies* 13 (2016) : 141 – 153 “What happened to the Majority? Observations about Early Buddhist Schools”, and 14 (2017) : 227 – 233 “Mahāsāṅghika and Mahāyāna : Further Notes”, I published the results of the study of the development of schools, *nikāyas*. In the Indian cultural area a school is not doctrinal, but defined by its *vinaya*, the rules for monks and nuns. There may be different doctrinal views, but as long as the *vinaya* does not change, there is no schism, *saṅghabheda*.

The material for the study of early Buddhist schools has been thoroughly investigated by such scholars as A. Bareau, P. Demiéville, A. Hirakawa, É. Lamotte, J. Masuda, K. Tsukamoto, and others. I just analyse and combine the information, drawing some conclusions. The veracity of these conclusions and suppositions is obvious when one sees that they ‘work’, explain what so far has been obscure. Very recently Zhang Juyan, in an article in the *Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 19 of 2018, convincingly shows that the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī is the venerable Visākha Pañcālīputta of Pali sources. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that even in the time of the Buddha his disciples may have had different opinions. Even from the very beginning opinions, which we now call Mahāsāṅghika, seem to have existed among Buddha’s immediate disciples. Mañjuśrī is to Mahāsāṅghika schools what Avalokiteśvara sometimes means to Sthaviravāda schools.

A schism only happened when there was a disagreement

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about the *vinaya*. A Chinese source, the *She Lifu wen jing* 舍利弗问经 *Śāriputrapariṣcchā Sūtra*, T. XXIV 1465 *Questions of Śāriputra*, only existing in an anonymous translation made between 317 AD and 420 AD, informs us that the first schism was the result of the majority, the *mahāsaṅgha*, not wanting to hear about any addition of minor rules to the *vinaya*. The *sthaviras*, seeing the discussions among the members of the *saṅgha*, wanted to bring a bit more discipline to the *saṅgha*, but the majority did not agree. So, one may say that a *vinaya* dispute, which actually was the result of doctrinal disputes, caused the first schism. This must have happened in Pāṭaliputra shortly after the synod, *saṅgīti*, in Vaiśālī, ca. 380 BC. When Śāriputra, who is the wisest of the traditional *saṅgha* schools, asks the questions, one may conclude that the text belongs to the Mahāsāṅghikas.

The Buddhist community these days has two very influential *vinaya* traditions. I mean the Sarvāstivāda one, also known as Mūlasarvāstivāda since the end of the seventh century, and the Theravāda one since ca. 35 BC.

### **(Mūla)sarvāstivāda**

The history and development of this school have often been explained in recent scientific publications.

During the reign of king Aśoka (264 – 227 BC) the *saṅgha* experienced new developments. The traditional *saṅgha*, minus the *puṅgalavāda* (personalist) Vātsīputrīyas, who had left the traditional order ca. 280 BC, held a synod in Pāṭaliputra. The meeting resulted in a win for the traditional order, now calling itself *Vibhajyavāda* (distinctionist, analyst), and in a loss for the new Sarvāstivādins. After that the traditional *Vibhajyavāda* order spread all over the Indian cultural area. They became known as Mahīśāsakas, teachers of *mahī*, i.e. India. In ca. 35 BC a conservative ‘orthodoxy’ with an *abhidhamma* of seven texts spoken by the Buddha in heaven, was written down, reacting against *Vibhajyavāda* developments after Aśoka. Besides a doctrinal reaction, the political situation and the Tamils also played a role. The conservative ‘orthodoxy’ became known as Theravāda. The language of their sacred texts, *Pāli*, became known as *Pāḷi*. Sarvāstivādins also spread out. They became numerous in the

Gandhāran cultural area, especially in Bactria. In the time of king Kaniṣka (reign 155 – 179 AD) a Sarvāstivāda synod started in Kaśmīra. It probably ended early in the third century, after the king had passed away. A new Sarvāstivāda ‘orthodoxy’ was established, with an *abhidharma* of seven texts, said to have been proclaimed by the Buddha in heaven, and with an abbreviated *vinaya* in ten recitations, the *Daśabhāṇavāra*, *Shi song lü* 十诵律 T. XXIII 1435, leaving out most of the illustrating stories, *dṛṣṭāntas*. The rules did not change, but the resulting *vinaya* was a much shorter, ‘modern’ text in only ten recitations. This second century then saw the beginning of independent *avadāna*, storytelling, literature. The central text of the seven *abhidharma* texts was a rewritten *Aṣṭagranthasāstra*, *Treatise of eight Compositions*, now called *Jñānaprasthānasāstra*, *Treatise: Course of Knowledge*. Ignorance or delusion had always been the main problem for the traditional schools, especially for the Sarvāstivādins. They used the term *śāstra*, teaching, treatise, not *upadeśa*, explanatory discourse, as their opponents, the Prajñaptivādins did. There were many commentaries, *Vibhāṣās*, on the old *Aṣṭagrantha*. So, a new commentary was needed for the new *Jñānaprasthāna*. This was the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, *Da piposha lun* 大毗婆沙论, *Great Commentary*. Because of this commentary the new ‘orthodox’ Sarvāstivādins in Kaśmīra were known as *Vaibhāṣikas*. The traditional Sarvāstivādins did not believe that the *abhidharmaśāstras* were spoken by the Buddha. Only the *dharma*, the *sūtras*, and the *vinaya* were spoken by the Buddha. They had *śāstras* too, outlining practical ways to arhatship, but those were not spoken by the Buddha in heaven. Traditional Sarvāstivādins could now be called Sautrāntikas, because they believed that the *sūtras*, not the *śāstras* were spoken by the Buddha.

The traditional ones also became known as Dārṣṭāntikas, because they kept the traditional, long *vinaya* with all its stories to the rules. It is quite likely that some Sautrāntikas used the ‘modern’, abbreviated *vinaya*, in which case they were not Dārṣṭāntikas. The terms Sautrāntika and Dārṣṭāntika go together, just like the compound *dharmavinaya*. Because in China the long, traditional Sarvāstivāda *vinaya* was not well known, the term Dārṣṭāntika, *Piyuzhe* 譬喻者, is not well known. The term Sautrāntika, *Jingliang bu* 经量部, is well known. *Bu* means *nikāya*, *vinaya* school. A group

within a school is referred to as *pai* 派. The Chinese term *zong* 宗 refers to a doctrinal school.

Traditional Sarvāstivādins were doctrinally quite heterogeneous. Over time and in different areas views changed, but they all believed that ‘everything exists’, *sarvam asti*, whatever ‘everything’ and even ‘exists’ may mean. In China *abhidharma* was practical, traditional, non-*Vaibhāṣika*. When the *Aṣṭaśāstrā* was translated in 383 AD, a doctrinal *abhidharma* school, *Pitan zong* 毗曇宗, came into existence. When Vasubandhu’s (ca. 370 – 450 AD?) *Kośabhāṣya* appeared in Chinese translation by Paramārtha in 567 AD, this school was replaced by a *Kośa* school, *Jushe zong* 俱舍宗, and later by a new *Kośa* school, when Xuanzang’s 玄奘 new translation of 654 AD appeared. The *Kośa* is an elaborate *Miśrakābhidharmahṛdayaśāstra*, a commentary on the *Abhidharmahṛdayaśāstra* of the Bactrian Dharmasreṣṭhin (first century BC), a Sautrāntika, even though that term did not exist in the first century BC. *Abhidharma* in China was traditional, non-*Vaibhāṣika*, Sautrāntika. Xuanzang, seventh century, translated the ‘orthodox’ *Vaibhāṣika abhidharma*, established end second century AD, just before it was disappearing in India itself. This theoretical *abhidharma* never became popular in China.

By the way, Nāgārjuna established his Madhyamaka in Mahāsāṅghika territory in South India, while to the North, in Kaśmīra, Sarvāstivādins were establishing their new ‘orthodoxy’.

At the end of the seventh century the term Mūlasarvāstivāda appears in India. They followed the old, long *vinaya*. This school went to China. Yijing 义净 (635 – 713 AD) translated part of their *vinaya*. One may see Mūlasarvāstivādins as a continuation of traditional, heterogeneous Sautrāntika - Dārṣṭāntika Sarvāstivādins. *Vaibhāṣikas* were now seen as one more sub-group of heterogeneous Sarvāstivādins. Mahīśāsakas in the Gandhāran area, such as Asaṅga, end fourth century, were seen as very close to, maybe even as a group of traditional Sarvāstivādins too. This was quite different from southern Mahīśāsakas, who eventually lost to Theravāda in Śrī Laṅkā.

Sarvāstivādins had continually changing yogic practices, *yogācāra*. They constantly took in or developed new forms of yogic practice. They continually reacted to their opponents, the

Mahāsāṅghikas, who saw their own form of Buddhism as *mahāyāna*, a great vehicle. Traditional Sarvāstivādins, using a Mahāsāṅghika practice, called themselves *mahāyāna* too. Literature about the perfection of wisdom is Mahāsāṅghika, but Sarvāstivādins also used the idea of emptiness in their yogic practice. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*, translated with the explanatory title *Daoxing (Yogācāra) bore (prajñā) jing* 道行般若经, introduced emptiness – literature to China.

By the way, 般若 was pronounced *banre* in China before ca. 400 AD, the time of ancient translations. When after that Sanskrit became the main Indian Buddhist language, the same Chinese characters were pronounced *bore*, rendering *pra (jñā)*. Asaṅga's Yogācāra took in Prajñaptivāda Mahāsāṅghika Madhyamaka. Sarvāstivāda and Prajñaptivāda had been opposites ever since Aśoka's days.

In China there were more famous instances of Sarvāstivāda *mahāyāna*. E.g. *Pure Land, Jingtu* 净土, Buddhism, and *Chan/ Zen* 禅. These were originally Sautrāntika based schools. *Jing* 净, pure, of course means *śuddha*, but before ca. 400 AD it often translated a Gāndhārī form of *śubha*, clean, pleasant. See e.g. the *Abhidharmahrdaya* T. 1550, translated by Saṅghadeva and Huiyuan 慧远 in 391 AD on Mount Lu 庐山. This text is the work of Dharmaśreṣṭhin, Fasheng 法胜, of Bactrian origin, probably in the first century BC. The *Pure Land* may be understood as an intermediate existence, *antarābhava*, after death and before rebirth, eventually in *nirvāṇa*. Sarvāstivādins believed in an intermediate existence. The *Pure Land* trinity may have started with a Gāndhārī form of Ava (*ābhā*) lokiteśvara, in the western part of the Gandhāran area, in Bactria. Amitābha may instruct you while in the *Pure Land*. Daoist influence explains the appearance of the name Amitāyus, Immeasurable Life, in the early fifth century in South China. At the same time and in the same area Guanyin 观音, Avalokiteśvara, became female. The importance of Daoism in South China explains these developments.

*Chan* uses an *abhidharmic* path of preparatory application, *prayogamārga*. Bodhidharma's practice, as recorded in Tanlin's 昙林 *Er ru si xing lun* 二入四行论, *Treatise about two Accesses and four Practices* does not mention a path of insight, *darśanamārga*,

nor a path of development, *bhāvanāmārga*, which actually eliminate affliction, *kleśa*.

When Mahāsāṅghikas take over an originally Sarvāstivāda text, they call the result *ekayāna*, translated as ‘unique vehicle’ in Chinese. E.g. the *Lotus Sūtra*.

As the *yoga* of Sarvāstivādins continually developed, they finally also took in traditional Hindu yogic practices (Durgā and Bhairava). This kind of Buddhism, depending on initiation, *abhiṣeka*, *guānding* 灌頂, initiation, or consecration, is esoteric Buddhism, known as *mantrayāna*, etc ... They use the Mūlasarvāstivāda *vinaya*. So, they are Sarvāstivāda monks and nuns, even though their *yoga* is different.

Those who did not take part in the action and reaction process were called *hīnayāna*, lesser vehicle. Meant are the schools which have a *Buddhabhāṣita abhidharma*, an ‘orthodoxy’, scholasticism spoken by the Buddha himself. Meant are mainly the Vaibhāṣika Sarvāstivādins and the Theravādins. Southern Mahīśāsakas, who stayed very close to their co-*Vibhajyavādins*, may also be called *hīnayāna*.

### **Theravāda:**

Immediately after the Buddha’s life (ca. 563 – 483 BC ?) had ended, at the age of approximately eighty years of age, the *saṅgha* held a synod, laying down the law, doctrine, *dharma* (*sūtras*) and the *vinaya*. They did not have a special name for themselves. When the first schism occurred, ca. 340 BC, shortly after the Vaiśālī synod (ca. 380 BC ?), they still did not have a special name for themselves. They were just the *saṅgha* as opposed to the majority, the *mahāsaṅgha*. After that the Vātsīputrīyas left, ca. 280 BC. In the time of King Aśoka (264 – 227 BC) a synod was held and a group branched off, namely the new Sarvāstivādins. The traditional order now used the term *Vibhajyavāda*, analyst, distinctionist, for themselves. This was an excellent term, used by the Buddha for himself. He had said that one should understand, and only then believe. Ignorance, *avidyā*, or delusion, *moha*, was the worst of the three fundamental afflictions. Because of it there were the two opposites of anger, *dveṣa*, and desire, *rāga*, too. The

Buddha had used the term *Vibhajyavāda* for himself in *Aṅguttaranikāya* (*Numerical Discourses*), *Dasakanipāta* (*Book of Tens*), *Sutta* 94. So, the traditional order had an excellent name for themselves. *Vibhajyavādins* then spread out all over the Indian cultural area, *mahī*, from Gandhāra to Śrī Laṅkā. In Gandhāra Dharmaguptakas split off. They said that offerings, *dāna*, should be offered to the *stūpa*. They were still *Vibhajyavāda*, but they had Mahāsāṅghika influence. Their *vinaya*, in four parts, finally became the only one followed by Han Chinese. Traditional *Vibhajyavādins*, called Mahīśāsakas when they were all over the Indian cultural area, said that offerings should continue to be offered to the *saṅgha*. In the Himalayan region another group separated from the traditional *Vibhajyavādins*, namely the Kāśyapīyas. Not much is known about them. In ca. 35 BC a new, conservative *Vibhajyavāda* ‘orthodoxy’ was written down. It had seven *abhidhamma* texts, spoken by the Buddha in heaven, not on earth. The text which shows this ‘orthodoxy’ best is the *Kathāvatthu*, *Points of Controversy*. Between king Aśoka and ca. 35 BC developments had taken place among traditional *Vibhajyavādins*. The ‘orthodoxy’ returned to Aśoka’s *Vibhajyavāda*. We know them as Theravāda now. After Aśoka’s synod the traditional *saṅgha* for the first time had a special name for themselves, namely *Vibhajyavāda*. In ca. 35 BC a traditional part of that *saṅgha* returned to that Aśokan *Vibhajyavāda*. Their *abhidhamma* was written down as having been spoken by the Buddha. Such *abhidhamma* clearly establishes a new ‘orthodoxy’. Pali, its language, may have started in the Avanti area, but in the immediate post – Aśokan period it developed into what we now know as Pali.

Finally, I just offer some remarks about Mahāsāṅghikas, those who originally did not want to have a stricter *vinaya*, not changing anything. The Lokottaravāda Mahāsāṅghikas, being quite far from Magadha, in Gandhāra, developed their separate *vinaya*. They are the proverbial exception. In the time of King Aśoka traditional Mahāsāṅghikas could be called Bahuśrutīyas, learned ones. Both terms, Bahuśrutīya and *Vibhajyavāda*, are equally intellectual sounding. Prajñaptivādins, who separated from those traditional Bahuśrutīya Mahāsāṅghikas, seem to have kept the same *vinaya*, but they were intellectually the opposites of Sarvāstivādins.



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