

Justification of the Assertion that Theravada Buddhism Differs from the Teachings of the Buddha

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The word “Theravāda Buddhism” was popularised by western scholars because they did not believe Theravāda Buddhism is entirely compatible with the teachings of the Buddha. Therefore, they inquired into the question as to what the pure teaching of the Buddha was. Then, the western scholars interpreted the teaching of the Buddha as Original Buddhism, Primitive Buddhism and Pre canonical Buddhism etc. But when we talk about Theravāda Buddhism, many people who are interested in Buddhism, believe that it is the tradition which included Buddha’s own words.

In the 3 rd century B.C. Venerable Arahant Mahinda brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka. That was the closest time to Buddha’s period. There was no other Buddhist tradition that had been so well systematized so far. Accordingly it is reasonable to assume that the Teaching of the Buddha is contained in Theravāda Buddhism. The monks who had enough knowledge about the teachings of the Buddha held the 1st council after three months of the Buddha’s passing away, under Venerable Arahant Mahākassapa’s guidance. At that time they categorized all teachings of the Buddha as *Vinaya* and *Dhamma*. Thereafter, the monks who were accepted as knowledgeable, added some books and interpreted some

sutras. But the people who were respectfully devoted to Buddhism appreciated all those doctrines as the teachings of the Buddha because of their pious minds. When we pay our attention to the canonical texts, first of all we can examine the books which are included in the *Vinaya Pitaka*. In *Cullavaggapāli*, there are two chapters about the 1st council and 2nd council respectively, called *Pañcasatikakkhandhaka* and *Sattasatikakkhandhaka*. Obviously, these two chapters had been added later. Clearly, these two chapters are not the teachings of the Buddha. Likewise, the book called *Parivāra Pāli* is also a later addition. *Parivāra Pāli* describes about the other four *Vinaya* books. Those are *Mahāvagga Pāli*, *Cullavagga Pāli*, *Pārājikā Pāli* and *Pācittiya Pāli*. Then we can see a later addition in *Bhikkhuni Khandhaka* too. The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* was also a very popular *Sutta* in the *Sutta Pitaka* because in that *Sutta* there are many details about the *Mahāparinibbāna*. But in this *Sutta* also there are many descriptions about subsequent events such as the sharing of the relics of the Buddha and many other things. The early part of this *Sutta* can be considered to have contained what the Buddha actually taught. But later many facts had been added into the *Sutta* by the monks. So, according to these facts we can say that the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* had been expanded to the present proportion at a later time. Likewise, we cannot see any evidence in the canonical texts about *Dhajagga Sutta*, *Mahāsamaya Sutta*, *Atānātiya Sutta*, *Canda Paritta*, *Suriya Paritta* and *Mettānisamsa Sutta* etc. Many scholars shared the idea that these are legendary.

Abhidhamma Pitaka is also largely a later production. Buddhists believe that the Buddha had taught *Abhidhamma* in *Tusita* heaven to the Mother God called “*Mātr Divya Putra*.” But there is no evidence about the existence of an

Abhidhamma Pitaka at the 1st or 2nd councils. *Abhidhamma* had been developed later in to a separate pitaka and one of them called *Kathāvatthu* was written by Venerable Arahant Moggaliputtatissa. The meaning of the *Abhidhamma* is special Dhamma or developed Dhamma.

Subsequently a large number of books were composed to give explanations about the teachings of the Buddha. They are called commentaries, sub commentaries, “*Tippaṇī*,” “*Prakarana*,” “*Sanna*,” “*Getapada*” etc. This is a very vast literature, specially *Sumangala Vilāsinī* for *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Papañcasūdanī* for *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sāratthappakāsaṇi* for *Samyutta Nikāya* and *Manorathapurani* for *Anguttara Nikāya*. Likewise, there are 15 books in *Khuddaka Nikāya*. Among them there are a few books considered as later additions. There is a commentary called *Samantapāsādikā* for all the *Vinaya* books and there are three commentaries for *Abhidhamma Pitaka*. There are commentaries called, *Atthasālini* for the *Dhammasaṅgani*, *Sammohavinodani* for the *Vibhanga* and *Pañcappakaranatthakathā* for the *Kathāvatthu*. Apart from all these books there are sub commentaries also like *Vajirabuddhi Tikā*. When we examine these we can come to the conclusion that all those are not the direct teachings of the Buddha. But we cannot think that there was a distortion of the teachings of the Buddha in these later additions. Instead, Buddhism became very popular around the world. But if one wants to determine what the pure teaching of the Buddha was, there would be obstacles. Anyway, the basic doctrines were not damaged due to those additions. As impartial critics we can say, even 2550 years later, there is only one tradition which has the complete Tripitaka that does not seem to deviate much from the original teachings of the Buddha. There is no other Buddhist tradition which had

preserved the Tripitaka completely. Finally, we can say that Theravāda Buddhism is moving forward closer to the teachings of the Buddha than any other Buddhist tradition. Let us now consider the justification for the assertion that Theravāda Buddhism differs from the teaching of the Buddha. When we examine the usage “Theravāda Buddhism,” we can analyze its meaning as follows: “*Thera*” means the monks who know the teachings of the Buddha very well and “*Vāda*” means the theory. According to this, we can think *Theravāda* means the Theory of Theras or the Theory of elders. Mr. Charls S. Perish gives this definition for the term Theravāda.

“Theravāda, sole surviving sect of Hinayāna Buddhism, is prevalent in South and South east Asia today. The title of the group literally means “Those who hold the doctrine of the Elders.” It emerged out of Mahinda mission to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Asoka, apparently very closely related as orthodox.”¹

Likewise a very popular scholar, Venerable Nyanatiloka’s Buddhist dictionary gives an idea like this about the word Theravāda.

“Theravāda: ‘Doctrine of the Elders,’ is a name of the oldest form of the Buddha’s teachings, handed down to us in the Pali language. According to tradition, its name is derived from the fact of having been fixed by 500 holy Elders of the, soon after the death of the Master.”²

And also Mr. T.O. Ling gives the definition as “Theravāda - Nāme of one principal school of Buddhism, now represented mainly in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. The first major division of *Buddha Sangha* was between the

Mahāsaṅghikas, or Great *Saṅgha* party, and those who upheld stricter observance of monastic code of discipline, who claimed to be in true trad.”³

We can see Venerable Hegoda Khemānanda’s description about the word Theravāda, which Buddha used for a separate meaning.

“*So kho aham bhikkhave tāvatakeneva ottapahata mattena lapitalāpana mattena ñānavādan ca vadāmi theravādan ca, janami passamiti ca patijānāmi, ahanceva anne ca.*”⁴

Venerable Khemānanda says this means, “Once The Buddha told to his disciples that, prior to his Enlightenment, while he was a trainee under Alāra Kālāma and Uddakarāma putra, he would claim knowledge as ‘ñānavāda and Theravāda “by mere touch with lips and by single reading of their teaching.”⁵ In the same book we can see another meaning for this word; that is,

‘Thera’ here means the stability (*sthira*) of knowledge. This is confirmed by the exegetical explanation: “*theravādanti thirabhāva vādam*”.⁶

There is no evidence of the term Theravāda in the first Buddhist council and the second. After the second Buddhist council monks were introduced as two groups. They were called *Pāceenakā* and *Pāveyyakā*. Among them *Pāveyyaka* are known as *Vinayavādins* and the others are introduced as *Dhammavādins*. According to the commentator Buddhaghosa Theravāda means opinion of some particular monks. Further he mentioned Theravāda means personal and individual views. He had written that as, “*Api ca suttanta-abhidhamma-vinayatthakathā āgato sabbopi Theravādo attano mati nāma.*” Infact, Theravāda means not the teachings of the

Buddha. And also there is another annotation in a sub commentary of *vinaya* called *Sāratthadīpani*, about the term Theravāda. “*Theravādo nāma mahāsummattherādihi therādinam attho.*” Mahasumma was a monk with a very profound knowledge of Buddhism. His ideas and opinions are also included as Theravāda Buddhism. There is a meaning as monks, for the term Thera in *Dīpavamsa*, which was written as a Buddhist Chronicle. “*Therehi kata sangaho theravādo.*” This was the place which explained Theravāda as monks.

When we talk about Theravāda we immediately get the impression that the doctrine was not the teachings of the Exalted One. In fact this term “Theravāda” is used mostly by western scholars. Those scholars had an idea that Theravāda Buddhism stands not for the real teachings of the Buddha but the words of the Theras. Therefore, they considered Theravāda Buddhism does not represent the actual teaching of the Buddha, but an elaboration of the Buddha’s teaching.

In the 3rd century B.C. Venerable Arahant Mahinda brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Reginald S. Copleston also mentions this in his book called Theravada Buddhism.

“Mahinda, whoever he was, or in whatever sense he was Asoka’s son, introduced the *Pitaka* texts in Ceylon.”⁷

This was considered as the more authentic teachings of the Buddha than any other Buddhist tradition because it was accepted by all, as the closest to the time period of the Buddha. When we consider about historical information about Theravāda Buddhism, we can see the beginning of it with the first Buddhist council after the Buddha’s passing away. The Awakened One had given the miscellaneous teachings in different places amongst different kinds of audience. During the time of the first Buddhist council Theravāda monks

organized all the doctrines of the Buddha's systematically. Theravāda Buddhism means Buddha's teachings, sayings of Theras or sayings of the elders, later additions, commentaries, sub commentaries etc. We can explain Theravāda Buddhism as also the result of literary work. This is a very vast literature. We can recognize the teachings and other literary works in Theravāda Buddhism as a part of the teachings of the Buddha.

Vinaya Pitaka

In *Cullavaggapāli*, two chapters about 1st council and 2nd council, called *Pañcasatikakkandhaka* and *Sattasatikakkandhaka*, *Parivārapāli*.

Commentaries

Samantapāsādikā, *Kankhāvitarani*.

Sutta Pitaka

In *Digha Nikāya*, *Mahāsihanāda Sutta*, *Lakkhana Sutta*, *Mahāpadāna Sutta*, and *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*.

In *Khuddaka Nikāya*, *Buddhavamsa*, *Cariyāpitaka* and *Apadāna*.

Dhajagga Sutta, *Mahāsamaya Sutta*, *Atānātiya Sutta*, *Mettānisamsa Sutta*, *Canda Paritta* and *Suriya paritta*.

Commentaries

Sumangalavilāsini, *Papañcasudani*, *Sāratthappakāsini*, *Manorathapūrani*, *Paramatthajotikā* for *Khuddakapātha*, *Dhammapadatthakathā*. *Paramatthadīpanī* for *Udāna*, *Paramatthadīpanī* for *Itivuttaka*, *Paramatthajotikā* for *Suttanipāta*, *Paramatthadīpanī* for *Vimānavatthu*, *Paramatthadīpanī* for *Petavatthu*, *Paramatthadīpanī* for *Theragāthā*, *Paramatthadīpanī* for

Therigāthā, *Jātakatthakathā*, *Saddhammapajjotikā*, *Saddhammapakāsini*, *Visuddhajanavilāsini*, *Madhuratthavilāsini*, *Paramatthadīpanī* for *Cariyāpitaka*.

Abhidhamma Pitaka

Dhammasangani, *Vibhanga*, *Kathāvatthu*, *Puggalapaññatti*, *Dhātukathā*, *Yamaka*, *Patthāna*.

Commentaries

Atthasālinī, *Sammohavinodanī*, *Pancappakaranatthakathā*.

Extra Canonical works

Nettipakarana, *Petakopadesa*, *Milindapañha*.

These are the few books within Theravāda Buddhist treatises. There are more sub commentaries and annotation texts. It is obvious that the first Buddhist council was held after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*. But there are details in *Vinaya* texts about 1st council.

“*Imāya kho pana vinayasamgītiyā pañca bhikkhasatāni anūnāni anadhikāni ahesum, tasmā ayam vinayasamgīti pañcasatikāti vuccati ti.*”⁸

This statement is included at the end of the first council description in *Cullavaggapāli*. Then 100 years after the Buddha's passing away the second Buddhist council was held at *Vesāli*.

“*Tena kho pana samayena vassasataparibbute bhagavati Vesālikā Vajjiputtakā bhikkhu Vesaliyam dasavattuni dīpentī*”... “*imāya kho pana vinayasamgītiyā satta bhikkhusatāni anūnāni anadhikāni ahesum, tasmāyam vinayasamgīti sattasatīti vuccatīti*”.⁹

According to the Canonical treatises the 5th book of Vinaya Pitaka called Parivāra Pāli was a later production. That gives a summary of the first four books. Kanai Lal Hazra also mentions that in his treatise.

“The *Parivāra*, the last and the third section of *Vinaya* is simply a compendium of the *Sūtravibhanga* and *Skandhas*. It includes mnemonic summaries of the various *Vinaya* rules as well as additional commentarial material.”¹⁰

Kankhāvitarani is the commentary for *Pātimokkha*. It was written by the great commentator Buddhaghosa. Then we pay our attention towards the *Sutta Pitaka*, In *Dīgha Nikāya Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*, *Lakkhana* and *Mahāpadāna Suttas* that appear to have later detail added. Hazra’s book also has mentioned about this fact. The use of the word “*Apadāna*” in the title of this sutta indicates legend or the life –story of a Buddha... It mentions elaborately the life of *Vipassi* who is regarded as a replica of Sakyamuni. The 16th *Sutta* in *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna*, which is one of the most significant ones in the canonical texts, has included about the Awakened One’s last year of mortal existence. This *sutta*’s early part contains teachings of the Buddha and the ending had been composed by Theravāda monks. According to the details given we can clearly come to the judgement that the information that had been included after the Buddha’s passing away was later additions.

“Leaving the first *jhāna*, he entered the second, the third, and the fourth *jhāna*. And, leaving the fourth *jhāna*, the Lord finally passed away.”¹¹

In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* there are details about dividing the Lord Buddha’s relics and pagodas. Likewise there

is no evidence of *Dhajagga*, *Mahasamaya*, *Atānātiya*, *Mettānisamsa Suttas*, *Canda Paritta* and *Suriya Paritta* etc. The *Khuddaka Nikāya* is the last division in the *Sutta Pitaka*.

“Its contents are of different times. Some of its parts belong to the earliest period while the others belong to the latest stratum of the Pali canon.”¹²

It is obvious that many books in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* are latter products. *Cariyāpitaka*, *Buddhavamsa* and *Apadāna* are mainly mentioned as later additions by Buddhist scholars. The *Niddesa* has two divisions called *Mahā Niddesa* and *Culla Niddesa*.

“The *Niddesa* is a commentarial work and is ascribed to *Sariputta*. It has a detailed explanation by *Sāriputta* of the thirty-two suttas of *Atthaka* and *Pārāyana vaggas* of the *Sutta Nipāta*.”¹³

Patisambhidāmagga is also a later addition and it has the characteristic of *Abhidhamma* treatises. *Abhidhamma Pitaka* is a complete annotation about Dhamma. It was not the original teachings of the Buddha. Neither the first Buddhist council nor the second Buddhist council account in the *vinaya pitaka* mentions about the *Abhidhamma*. After the third Buddhist council *Abhidhamma Pitaka* was completed. Ven. Buddhaghosa also has mentioned that in his commentary of *Dhammasangani*.

“*Tattha kenatthena abhidhammo? Dhammātireka - dhamma - visesatthena. Atirekavisesatthadipako hettha ‘abhi’ saddo.*”¹⁴

According to this explanation, it reveals what the *Abhidhamma* is. But Ven. Buddhaghosa had wanted to show

that *Abhidhamma pitaka* is also the Teachings of the Buddha. He wrote about that in his *Atthasālini* as Buddha's words.

“*Mama parinibbānato atthārasavassādhikanam dvinnam vassasatānam matthake moggaliputtatissatthero nāma bhikkhu bhikkhu sahasamajjhe nisinno sakavāde pañca suttasatāni paravāde pañcāti sutta sahasam samodhānetvā digghanikāyappamānam kathāvattthuppa-karanam bhājessati ti*” Afterwards, he writes again,

“*moggaliputtatissatthero imam pakaranam desento na attano nānena desesi, satthāra dinna nayena thapitamātikāya desesi.*”

There are seven treatises in it. They are; 1.*Dhammasangani* 2.*Vibhanga* 3.*Kathāvattu* 4. *Puggalapaññatti* 5.*Dhātukathā* 6.*Yamaka* 7.*Patthāna*. There are three other special books in Theravāda Buddhism. They are 1.*Nettipakarana* 2.*Petakopadesa* 3.*Milindapanha* *Nettipakarana* was written by commentator Ven. Dhammapāla.

“The *Netti* shows the methodical way of attaining textual knowledge. It contains much of materials which are so grouped as to form a book by itself”¹⁵

The *Petakopadesa* does not have any alternative description which was not in *Nettipakarana*.

“It can be mentioned as a continuation of the *Nettipakarana*. It is nothing but a different manipulation of the subject- matter discussed in the *Nettipakarana*.”¹⁶

Milindapañha was a greater literary source than the other two. It was a book, written in the form of questions and answers that took place between the King Milinda and great

Venerable Nāgasena. This treatise represents the Buddhist methods of logical reasoning and argumentation. From these instances we can get a rough idea about Theravāda Buddhism.

Western scholars explained the teachings of the Buddha as Early Buddhism, Primitive Buddhism, Pre canonical Buddhism and Original Buddhism etc. Western scholars could not get a real understanding about the teachings of the Buddha, because in their early studies they did not have a profound knowledge of the exact meaning of Pāli terms. A large number of Pali words were misunderstood by the western scholars. For instance a few names of western scholars who had a wrong view of early Buddhism could be mentioned. They were H.G. Genic (*ponobhavikā*), Mrs. Rhys Davids (*atta, attano*) and Paul Dalke as well as George Grim.

It is very difficult to find out what the real teachings of the Buddha were. As an answer to this question, Ven. Buddhaghosa has mentioned in his *Samantapāsādikā*, about four ways that are conducive to understand the teachings of the Buddha. Those are named as “*Cattāro mahāpadesā*”, discourses (*sutta*), and relevant teachings of the discourses (*suttanuloma*), teachers' opinion (*ācariyavāda*), and personal view (*attanomati*). One can then apprehend what the teachings of the Buddha are. He can reject the teachings in accordance with the above four criteria.

The Exalted One Himself taught a very important criterion to search the teachings of the Buddha.

“Even in the past as well as now I preach only two things. They are the emergence of suffering (*dukkha samudaya*) and the cessation of suffering (*dukkha nirodha*). If something is

not leading to the cessation of suffering that is not my teaching” In fact, any one would understand that the teachings of the Buddha deals with the cessation of suffering. The Language of the Buddha is also a very important reference to find what the real Teachings of the Buddha are. People believe that the Buddha taught Dhamma by using the language of Pāli. But commentator Buddhaghosa says that the Buddha’s language was, “*sā māgadi mula bhāsā narāyāyādi kappikā ... Sambuddhā cāpi bhātaro*”. Not only is that “*Sammā sambuddhena vuttappakārako māgadhako vohāro*” also a Buddhaghosa’s statement. According to that Buddha’s language was the usage of *Magada*. It was not Pali. There is no assertion that Buddha taught Dhamma in the Pali language. All Theravāda canons were written in Pali.

Only Theravāda tradition has protected the complete Tripitaka so far. They did not try to go beyond the Buddha’s words. Many other Buddhist traditions had already gone far beyond the Teachings of the Buddha. It is very clear that Theravāda Buddhism truly wants to protect the teachings of the Buddha as well as practice them. Finally, I can say without hesitation that Theravāda Buddhism is the only one tradition which has evolved in close association with the teachings of the Buddha.

Conclusion

Theravāda Buddhism in it’s entirely is not the Teaching of the Buddha. It includes canonical texts, commentaries, sub commentaries and many other exegetical works. Theravāda Buddhism consists of a vast literature. The main aim of exegetical works is to describe the teachings of the Buddha. Accordingly, there are a lot of new additions, when the

teachings of the Buddha were written very piously, over a 2550 year period of time. Theravāda monks preserved many important teachings of the Buddha. No other Buddhist tradition appears to have achieved it to a comparable extent. They had faced many difficult periods when they were protecting the teachings of the Buddha. So, when we discuss about Theravāda Buddhism, we have to draw attention to the real teachings of the Buddha too keeping in mind the relation of Theravada to very close the teachings of the Buddha. Any way, they did not do any misinterpretation of the main doctrine of the Buddha such as the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, Karmic theory of Buddhism, etc. Theravāda Buddhism contains new explanations of the Theras too. But they did not want to distort the teachings of the Buddha. They had paid their highest attention to preserve purity of the teachings of the Buddha. Theravāda Buddhism is the tradition which seems to have maintained throughout the close affinity to the teachings of the Buddha. That is the final conclusion of this investigation.

End Notes

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3. T.O. Ling, *A Dictionary of Buddhism, A guide to Thought and Tradition*, Printed in the U.S.A. Copright-1972 by Charles Scriber’s Sons. page 244.

4. Ven.Hegoda Khemananda, *Logic and Epistemology in Theravada*, Translated from Sinhala by Asanga Tilakaratne, Printed in Sri Lanka, 1993, page 1.
5. Ibid, page 1.
6. Ibid, page 2.
7. Reginald S. Copleston, *Theravada Buddhism*, Edited by Harcharan Singh Sobti, Published in Delhi, Revised Edition 1993, page 8.
8. Hermann Oldenberg, Edited/ *Vinaya Pitaka Vol. 2*, Published by The Pali Text Society Oxford, Reprinted 1995, page 292.
9. Ibid... page 294.
10. Kanai Lal Hazra, *Pali Language and Literature*, a systematic survey and historical study, Vol. 1, Published in India, Second impression, 1998, page 137.
11. Bimal Charan Law, "*A History of Pali Literature*," Foreword by Wilhelm Geiger, Published in India, This Edition 2000, page 204.
12. Bimal Charan Law... Ibid, page 204.
13. Kani Lal Hazra... Ibid, page 313.
14. Chattha Sangayana Tipitaka 4.0. (CD) "Atthasalini".
15. Ibid. Pages 351-352.
16. Kanai Lal Hazra... Vol 2, page 468.

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