

Sects & Sectarianism - The Origin of the three existing Vinaya lineages:

Theravāda, Dharmaguptaka, and Mūlasarvāstivāda

Bhikkhu Sujato

Performance of *upasampadā* by East Asian bhikkhunis within either the Theravāda or Tibetan traditions depends on the belief that the ordination lineages are essentially compatible. The basic reason for assuming that they are compatible is simple: we are all sons and daughters of the Sakyan Sage, and all the ordination lineages descend from the allowances granted by the Buddha himself in the Vinayas. The problem is that the Vinayas also envisage certain circumstances whereby it is not possible for formal Sangha Acts, such as ordination, to be performed by different Sangha groups together. In particular, this applies if there has been a formal schism (*saṅghabheda*), narrowly defined as the performance of separate *uposathas* within the same monastic boundary (*sīmā*). While this is the critical issue in the Vinayas themselves, other questions become relevant in considering the overall historical picture; for example the nature of the transmission in any particular lineage; or indeed the very notion of lineage itself. These questions will be considered in other papers at this congress. For now I will focus on just one question: did the existing ordination lineages arise through schism?

Theravāda vs. Mahāsaṅghika: a false lead

The traditional Theravādin answer to this question is a resounding ‘Yes!’ The Theravādin view would have it that the bhikkhunis in existence today are ‘Mahāyāna’. Mahāyāna is believed to have descended from the Mahāsaṅghikas, the root schismatics. According to the earliest Sri Lankan chronicle, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, the Mahāsaṅghikas are none other than the ‘evil’ Vajjiputtakas, who advocated the use of money by monks, and who were defeated at the Second Council, but who later reformed and held a new recitation where they invented new scriptures. In following these, the Mahāyāna is representative of a tradition whose fundamental principle was laxity in Vinaya. The *Dīpavaṃsa* explicitly states that the other 17 schools apart from the Theravāda are schismatic and ‘thorns’ in the *sāsana*. It is therefore impossible to accept them as part of the same communion or to perform any acts of *saṅghakamma* together, including ordination. The Mahāyāna are no more than disreputable distant cousins of the pristine Theravāda, which alone retains the original teachings and practice of the historical Buddha. Thus runs the thinking of conservative Theravāda. Unfortunately for the conservative position, almost none of these claims holds water. The Mahāyāna is not descended in any direct or simple way from the Mahāsaṅghika, but rather emerged as a broad-based movement drawing on the teachings of many early schools, including but not limited to Mahāsaṅghika. The *Dīpavaṃsa*’s claim that the Mahāsaṅghikas were the Vajjiputtakas of the Second Council cannot stand: it finds no support anywhere else, and crucially it contradicts the Mahāsaṅghika’s own

texts. Furthermore, there is no evidence that laxity in Vinaya was a characteristic of Indian Mahāyāna; many Mahāyāna texts strongly emphasize Vinaya, and the reports of the Chinese pilgrims show how the various sects all maintained compatible standards of Vinaya.

It must also be noted that apart from the Dīpavaṃsa, most of the historical accounts of sect formation do not refer to the Sthavira/Mahāsaṅghika split as 'schism' (*saṅghabheda*). This is true even in the case of the Mahāvibhāṣā's notorious demolition of the reviled 'Mahādeva', who according to this version founded the Mahāsaṅghika. He is accused of murdering his father, sleeping with and then murdering his mother, and murdering an arahant, which are three of the five 'deadly sins' (*ānantarika kamma*). But the accounts are unanimous that he did not commit the 'deadly sin' of causing a schism. So even this, one of the most aggressively polemical passages in all of Buddhism, does not accuse the founder of the Mahāsaṅghikas of schism.

The Dīpavaṃsa's claims regarding the Sthavira/Mahāsaṅghika split have virtually no historical credibility, and both traditional Theravādins and academics bewitched by the supposed superior historicity of the Pali texts have led us astray here. It is far more plausible to treat the Dīpavaṃsa's account as a portrayal of the situation at the time the Dīpavaṃsa or its sources was composed, when the Sri Lankan Mahāvihāra was in deep and protracted conflict with the Mahāsaṅghika schools in Andhra. This situation was backdated to the time of the root split, providing mythic authority for the Mahāvihāra.

The Three Lineages

The reality is that there has never been a distinctively 'Mahāyāna' Vinaya or ordination lineage. Rather, some bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, having ordained in one of the early schools, choose to study and practice certain texts and spiritual ideals known as 'Mahāyāna'. This was the case in ancient India, and it remains the case today. The bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of the East Asian traditions (China, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, etc.) follow the Vinaya of the Dharmaguptaka school, while the Central Asian traditions (Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia, Nepal, etc.) follow the Mūlasarvāstivāda. Both the Dharmaguptaka and the Mūlasarvāstivāda descend from the Sthavira (Skt.) or Theriya (Pali) group of schools, as does the Theravāda. There is no existing Vinaya lineage descended from the Mahāsaṅghika. If we wish to understand the relationship between the existing Sanghas, then we must start by investigating these early schools of Buddhism.

I might note that I am here representing the perspectives from inside the schools themselves. It is extremely difficult, probably impossible, to determine whether these lineage claims are in fact correct, or even if the notion has any meaning, given the frequent interchange of monks and nuns from different traditions in India and beyond. Probably the best we can do is to take the schools' own self-perception and see what this entails.

One way of doing this is to examine the origins of the schools in question. Here we enter into the swirling and uncertain world of mythology, where interpretation is all, and sectarian bias is not merely expected, but is the driving motivation. Given the contradictory, incomplete, and doubtful nature of the sources it is unclear whether we

can expect to find even a glimmer of truth. If we are to do more than merely present evidence we must make inferences, and these inferences can be questioned. But our surest conclusions derive from the happy coincidence of the historical/mythic accounts and archaeological findings, and it is here that we begin our search.

The Aśokan Missions

One of the fullest accounts of the origination of any school is found in the Sinhalese Vinaya Commentary, which exists in a Pali version the *Samantapāsādikā*, and an ancient Chinese translation the *Sudassanavinayavibhāsā* (善見律毘婆沙 *Shan-Jian-Lu-Pi-Po-Sha*, T 1462). This recounts several decisive events that took place in the time of Aśoka. Corrupt, non-Buddhist heretics entered the Sangha disrupting the *uposatha*. They were expelled by Aśoka together with the Elder Moggaliputtatissa, following which the 'Third Council' was held to reaffirm communal identity.

Subsequently Moggaliputtatissa organized the sending out of 'missionaries' to various parts of India, an event that has often been compared with Aśoka's sending out of Dhamma-ministers as recorded in his Edicts. The main purpose of this narrative is to establish the credentials of the Sinhalese school founded by Aśoka's son Mahinda and his daughter Saṅghamittā. Today we call the descendants of this school 'Theravāda'; however I will refer to the archaic school by the more historically accurate term, the *Mahāvihāravāsins* (Dwellers in the Great Monastery).

There are two major pieces of epigraphic evidence from the early period of Indian Buddhism: the reliquaries at Vedisa and the Aśokan edicts. Strikingly, both of these

confirm the evidence found in the Sinhalese Vinaya Commentary. When the Vedisa inscriptions were uncovered and deciphered, scholars were astounded to find they mentioned the names of several monks who the Sinhalese Vinaya Commentary says were sent as missionaries to the Himalaya soon after the 'Third Council'. The coincidence of these names in such widely separated sources is regarded by scholars as one of the bedrock findings of modern Buddhist studies.

Our second prime archaeological evidence is Aśoka's so-called 'schism edict' (which actually states that the Sangha is unified, not schismatic!). This mentions an expulsion of corrupt bhikkhus, which many scholars have identified with the events prior to the 'Third Council'. Unlike the Vedisa findings, the identification here is disputed among scholars; however the similarities are so far-reaching that it seems perverse to insist that they are unrelated, even if the exact nature of that relationship is not entirely clear.

I might note as an aside here that, while all other scholars I have read have assumed that the sectarian period began before Aśoka, my own review of the evidence has convinced me that the split between the Sthaviras and Mahāsaṅghikas did not take place until several generations after Aśoka. However, this does not directly affect the matter at hand.

The Sinhalese archaeological record, while not as decisive, tends to support the validity of the Sinhalese Vinaya Commentary's account of the general date and place of arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The Indian archaeological record generally, while even less specific, also tends to agree as far as we can identify the geographic spread of the schools. This broad correspondence between epigraphic and textual

evidence encourages us to take the missions account of the Sinhalese Vinaya Commentary seriously.

In the current context, it is worth recalling the mission of Soṇa and Uttara to Suvaṇṇabhūmi. This is believed by Burmese to refer to Burma, and Thais to refer to Thailand; scholarly opinion lacks such reassuring certainty. While it is doubtful whether any mission actually took place in the time of Aśoka, the story to this day forms a crucial narrative of self-identity for Buddhists in these regions. The mission was said to result in the ordination of 1500 women. Thus bhikkhuni ordination is intrinsic to South-east Asian Buddhism from the beginning.

Dharmaguptaka Origins

One of the major missionaries was Yonaka Dhammarakkhita. He was, as his name indicates, a Greek monk, native of 'Alasanda' (Alexandria). He features in the Pali tradition as a master of psychic powers as well as an expert on Abhidhamma. After inspiring King Aśoka's brother Tissa to become a monk and acting as his preceptor, he went to the Greek-occupied areas in the west of India.

Long ago Przyluski, followed by Frauwallner, suggested that Dhammarakkhita be identified with the founder of the Dharmaguptaka school, arguing that *dhammarakkhita* and *dhammagutta* have identical meaning, and synonyms can be easily substituted in Indic words, even proper names. Since that time two pieces of evidence have come to light that make this suggestion, to my mind, highly plausible. One is the positive identification of very early manuscripts belonging to the

Dharmaguptakas in the Gandhāra region, exactly where we expect to find Yonaka Dhammarakkhita, and appearing only a couple of hundred years after the initial mission. The second is that the phonetic rendering of his name in the Sudassanavinayavibhāsā employs the regular Chinese term for ‘Dharmagupta’ rather than ‘Dhammarakkhita’. We also note that several texts say that the Dharmaguptaka was founded by a certain ‘Moggallāna’. While this is traditionally identified with the great disciple of that name, I think it is more likely a reference to Moggaliputtatissa, the patriarch of the Third Council, who is also regarded by the Mahāvihāravāsins as their founder. We are thus justified as seeing the Mahāvihāravāsins and the Dharmaguptakas, not as warring schismatic parties, but as long-lost siblings parted only by the accidents of history and the tyranny of distance.

While this proposal as to the foundation of the Dharmaguptaka must remain speculative, our textual evidence attesting the close relation between these schools is quite unambiguous. Remarkably, even Buddhist scholars are in full agreement over this point: the Dharmaguptakas were very close in every respect with the Mahāvihāravāsins. Textually, we possess their Vinaya, Dīrgha Āgama, and Śāriputrābhidharma in Chinese translation, and a growing body of manuscript finds in Gandhārī. None of these show any significant doctrinal or Vinaya divergences from the corresponding Mahāvihāravāsin texts. Indeed, the Mahāvihāravāsin Kathāvatthu Commentary, although it discusses literally hundreds of heretical doctrines of the different schools, nowhere mentions the Dharmaguptakas as holding any divergent opinions.

Vasumitra's work on the doctrines of the schools, however, does mention a few minor points of divergence. The most serious is that the Dharmaguptakas regard offerings given to the Buddha as more meritorious than those given to the Sangha, while the Mahāvihāravāsins hold the opposite view. May the Dhamma experts decide this matter!

Finally, we should notice that the Sudassanavinayavibhāsā, which I have referred to above as a Chinese version of the Sinhalese Vinaya Commentary, differs from the Pali Samantapāsādikā in that it includes many features distinctive of the Dharmaguptaka, such as 26 training rules (*sekhiya*) regarding conduct around a stupa. It is unclear whether the Dharmaguptaka influence was part of the original text or was the result of the adaption of the Sinhalese text within the Chinese Dharmaguptaka tradition. In any case it is clear that the Vinaya masters of old regarded these two schools as following Vinayas so closely related they could draw upon the same commentarial traditions.

Mūlasarvāstivāda Origins

With regard to the third of our schools, the Mūlasarvāstivādins, the history is even murkier. The name Mūlasarvāstivāda is not attested until very late (about 700 C.E.). Almost everything about the early history of the school is contested among scholars: Are the Mūlasarvāstivādins identical with the Sarvāstivādins or not? Was their original home Mathura or Kaśmīr? Were they doctrinally aligned with the

Sautrāntikas? Did they really emerge so late, or did they simply change their name?

And so it goes.

In my opinion the most persuasive theory for the origin of this school was again provided by Frauwallner, who argued that the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya shows a close connection with Mathura, and the passages linking the school with Kaśmīr were a later interpolation. This aligns the Mūlasarvāstivādins closely with the famous arahants of Mathura, Śāṅkavāsin and Upagupta.

Śāṅkavāsin features in the all Vinaya accounts of the Second Council as a revered Elder and Vinaya master. He is said to have established a major forest monastery near Mathura, which is called Urumuṇḍa in the northern sources and Ahogaṅga in the Pali. Later on, it was to this very monastery, renowned as the finest place in all India for meditation, that Moggaliputtatissa resorted for retreat. The spiritual power Moggaliputtatissa derived from his time in Śāṅkavāsin's forest monastery was decisive in convincing Aśoka to entrust him with the task of purifying the Saṅgha and organizing the missions. Thus the establishment of the Mahāvihāravāsins and Dharmaguptakas is closely associated with the Śāṅkavāsin lineage.

Mathura is not mentioned in the missions account, not because it was the resort of heretics, but because it was an already long-established orthodox centre. Far from being associated with schism, it is precisely the place Moggaliputtatissa went to to avoid the politics and corruption he found in the capital.

It is even possible that Soṅaka, the preceptor of Moggaliputtatissa's preceptor, is simply a misspelling for Śāṅaka (-vāsin), in which case the Mahāvihāravāsin

ordination lineage would be directly descended from Śāṅkavāsin and the forest tradition of Mathura.

It is true that there are serious doctrinal differences between the Mahāvihāra/Dharmaguptaka and the (Mūla-) Sarvāstivādins, especially the existence of the dhammas in the three periods of time; but the accounts of how this doctrine evolved attribute its formulation to a series of Elders who lived after Aśoka. Indeed, the doctrine itself does not make much sense except in light of the later Abhidharma theory of *dhammas*. Thus the doctrinal difference was subsequent to the emergence of geographically distinct schools. Probably in the time of Aśoka these matters were debated as various perspectives were clarified, but they were fixed and formulated as definite sectarian positions some time later.

Finally, it should be noted that one of the other missionaries was Majjhantika, Mahinda's ordination teacher, who went to Kaśmīr and established the school later known as the Sarvāstivādin Vaibhāṣikas. It is a point of contention whether this school has any connection as a Vinaya lineage with the Mūlasarvāstivāda, or whether they simply share some similar doctrines. In any case, this school is also depicted as having emerged from geographical dispersion, rather than schism. The Majjhantika/Mahinda link attests to the close connections between the Kaśmīr and Sinhalese lineages.

Conclusion

Summing up, there is little to no evidence that the process of sect formation in ancient India was driven by formal schism (*saṅghabheda*). In my opinion, this was inevitable, since following Devadatta, all Buddhists have been terrified that if they caused a schism they would go to hell. The schools emerged gradually, primarily due to geographical dispersion, and over time doctrinal differences hardened into sectarian postures. The existing lineages all spring from the ancient Sthaviras, and there is no serious evidence anywhere of schism between these schools.

The Dharmaguptakas in particular are extremely close to the Theravāda, and might be regarded as virtually the North-west branch of the same school. The Mūlasarvāstivāda, while doctrinally distinct from the other two, was closely associated with them, as the seat of the Mūlasarvāstivāda in Mathura was also the meditation retreat of the Dharmaguptaka/Theravāda patriarch, Moggaliputtatissa.

We are blessed that the schools through which our ordination lineages were transmitted were so intimately linked. A closer attention to the question of bhikkhuni ordination has pressed myself, and I hope others as well, to examine and understand better our complex shared heritage. Rather than fearing this as a threat to the integrity of our own traditional school, we should embrace it as an expansion of our communion to better reflect both our shared past and also our shared future as custodians of the Dhamma in this small world.