Parampara

Ordination lineages in the three traditions: A contribution towards understanding

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When we see Buddhist monks and nuns, each wearing their distinctive elegant robes, it is natural to wonder where all these different traditions came from. In this little essay, we will trace the history of the main Buddhist monastic traditions, starting from their origins in India.

PRE-SECTARIAN BUDDHISM

The Buddha taught for forty-five years, and in that time accumulated a large following. Codes of conduct governing the lifestyle of these followers developed and became formalized. This is what we call the 'Vinaya'. The central parts of the Vinaya are, firstly, the rules of conduct, the famous 'Pāṭimokkha', or 'Prātimokṣa'; and the procedures for monastic acts, especially ordination, which are called 'kammavācā', or 'karmavācanā'.

Today there are many Vinayas in many languages: Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan. Of course, we can find some differences between them. But there are outstanding similarities between all the Vinayas, especially the Pāṭimokkhas and the kammavācās. Scholars have concluded that all the existing Vinayas stem from an ancient Vinaya, started by the Buddha, and codified shortly afterwards. The various traditions have developed this in details, but the essentials remain the same. We assume that the earliest Buddhist tradition possessed such a Vinaya. This was studied and practiced by all monks and nuns from the time of the Buddha for about 100 years.

THE SECOND AND THIRD COUNCILS

Inevitably, differences in practice gradually occurred. Eventually this caused a crisis in the Sangha that was addressed at the 'Second Council', held in the Vajjian Republic in the city of Vesali. This was in the time of King Kāḷāśoka of Magadha.

The main issue was whether it was proper for Buddhist monks to use money. Other issues are mentioned in some accounts, but they were clearly of secondary importance. The monks of Vesali, known as the 'Vajjiputtakas' ('Sons of the Vajjis') took to going into the towns with their bowls to collect money. They were opposed by the monks from a western district called Pāvā; in the Vinaya accounts these are called 'Pāveyyakas' ('those from Pāvā'). There was a great debate, attended by 700 monks. The Council appointed a group of eight monks, four from each side, to compare the

practices of the Vajjiputtakas with the Buddha's words in the Suttas and Vinaya. They ultimately upheld the opinions of the Pāveyyakas. This makes it clear that, even though the monks and nuns at the time might differ in practice, they all upheld the same teachings and code of conduct, and this was a standard that was acceptable to all. Notice that the differences arose because of geographical separation, and were resolved by going back to the common source.

All the Vinayas agree that the dispute at Vesali was resolved without schism. But some years later there was another dispute, not about Vinaya, but about doctrine. Accounts are varied, since this Council is not found in the basic Vinayas, but in later histories. But it seems that a certain teacher (called Mahādeva by some) taught five ideas that were unacceptable to many monks and nuns. There is no need to go into details here about what these ideas were. It is enough to notice that the difference was largely about the nature of an arahant (enlightened disciple). Was an arahant really completely free of all worldly attachments and ignorance, or might he still be subject to some subtle imperfections? A Council was held at Pataliputra shortly before the time of King Asoka to discuss these points. This time the disputing parties could not agree, and the first schism resulted.

The group that questioned the arahant's perfection was the majority at the meeting, so they were called the 'Mahāsaṅghika'. There is no really convenient name for the other group, which upheld the arahant's absolute purity. They are sometimes called the 'Theras' ('elders'), which suggests that they are identical with the Theravādins of Sri Lanka. But the Theravādins are simply one branch of this ancient school, and many other schools may claim to stem from this school with equal justification. Since all agree that this group was the lesser number at the Third Council, I suggest we call them the 'Cūḷasaṅghikas', the 'Minority of the Sangha', as opposed to the 'Mahāsaṅghikas', the 'Majority of the Sangha'.

Some scholars try to connect the events of the Second and Third Councils, and say the Mahāsaṅghikas are the same as the Vajjiputtakas, and the Cūḷasaṅghikas are the same as the Pāveyyakas. But the evidence does not support this. The main idea proposed by the Vajjiputtakas was that it was proper for a monk or nun to use money; but the Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya has exactly the same rules as the Theravāda and all other schools regarding the use of money. Indeed, in their account of the Second Council the Mahāsaṅghikas openly criticize the Vajjiputtakas.

FURTHER SCHISMS

Be that as it may, following this first schism, both schools proceeded to splinter and fragment, resulting in 'eighteen' early schools. We won't even begin to try to trace the development of all eighteen here, but will concentrate on those that are specifically relevant for the Vinaya traditions.

Soon after the first schism, the Cūḷasaṅghikas split over a doctrinal issue. The question was a subtle philosophical point about the nature of time and impermanence. One

group maintained that 'all dhammas, past, future, and present, exist', and they called themselves the 'Sarvāstivāda' ('the doctrine that all exists'). The other group maintained that we must 'distinguish' between the past, future, and present, and they became known as the 'Vibhajjavāda' ('the doctrine of distinguishing'). The Sarvāstivāda went on to become the most influential of all the schools of Buddhism in India – we will hear more about them later on.

Now, this was around the Third Century BCE, the era of King Asoka. That great Buddhist monarch sponsored Buddhist missionaries to travel far and wide, taking with them the Dhamma of tolerance and compassion. It seems that the Vibhajjavādins were among the most successful missionaries.

One group, led by the King's son Mahinda and daughter Saṅghamittā, traveled south to the distant island of Sri Lanka, where they were received with joy. The headquarters of a vigorous new Buddhist culture were established in Anuradhapura at the Mahāvihāra. This tradition is sometimes called the 'Mahāvihāravāsins' ('dwellers at the Great Monastery'), but is usually called the 'Theravāda' ('doctrine of the elders'). They have to this day maintained their collection of Suttas, Vinaya, Abhidhamma, and commentaries in the Pali language.

As recorded in the Sri Lankan chronicles, a second group of Vibhajjavādins traveled to the north-west of India. They were led by a monk called 'Yonaka Dhammarakkhita', a most intriguing name. 'Yonaka' means literally 'Greek', and is used in Indic texts for any Westerner. Alexander the Great had led his Greek army into north-west India only shortly before Asoka. He built several cities called 'Alexandria', one of which was apparently Yonaka Dhammarakkhita's home town. Thus he may well have been of Greek or western origin. The second part of his name is just as interesting. The words 'rakkhita' and 'gupta' have exactly the same meaning: 'guarded'. Thus some modern scholars (Frauwallner, Przyluski) have seen a connection between this 'Dhammarakkhita' and the 'Dharmaguptaka' school: the Dharmaguptakas were a branch of the Vibhajjavāda that followed Yonaka Dhammarakkhita into the north-west.

So it seems that the split between the Mahāvihāravāsins and the Dharmaguptakas was due to neither Dhamma nor Vinaya, but mere geography. The Dharmaguptakas were the northwestern branch of the Vibhajjavāda, and the Mahāvihāravāsins or Theravādins were the southeastern branch. But the affinity between these schools could even overcome such vast distances, for the chronicles record that Yonaka Dhammarakkhita and many of his followers travelled to Sri Lanka for the inaugural blessing ceremony for a great Stupa.

CHINA

The Dharmaguptakas in the northwest were ideally situated to spread further along the Silk Road to China. Traffic along this central Asian trade route was brisk and diverse, and Buddhists of various types soon made their presence felt. Buddhism arrived in China about 500 years after the Buddha's passing away. It seems that the

Dharmaguptakas were among the first to become established there, and the first to set up a Vinaya lineage. The ancient Chinese imported and translated at least six Vinayas, the most popular being the Dharmaguptaka and the Sarvāstivāda.

The Chinese commentator Tao Xuan (596-667 CE) recorded that in the early days the Sangha in China had practiced according to different Vinayas, but there had been a desire to unify and standardize conduct, so just one Vinaya was chosen to be binding for the whole Sangha. There was some debate over which should be adopted. But eventually it was agreed that, since the ordination lineage stemmed from the Dharmaguptaka, all should follow the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. Until this day, the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya remains the accepted code of discipline for all Sangha in the Chinese and related traditions, such as Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan.

In the first period of Chinese Buddhism the ordination lineage was established for monks only. There were as yet no bhikkhunis, so the complete four-fold spiritual community envisaged by the Buddha had not yet taken root. The first nuns were ordained halfway through the fourth century. But this ordination was given by the monks only, and some felt that this was not strictly in line with the Vinaya. The nun Seng-kuo reports that around 433 CE a group of bhikkhunis arrived on a ship from Sri Lanka. Bhikkhuni ordinations were carried out by these Sri Lankan bhikkhunis together with the Chinese bhikkhus, guided by the monk Gunavarman. He is known to have translated a Bhikkhuni Vinaya karmavācanā text of the Dharmaguptaka school, so it seems likely that the bhikkhuni ordination was carried out in accordance with the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya.

Thus the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage of China has had historically very close links with Sri Lanka. Indeed, the Chinese canon contains a Sri Lankan Vinaya commentary (similar to the Pali Sāmantapāsādikā), and also a Vinaya of the Mahīśāsaka school that was brought from Sri Lanka. It is not sure whether the Sri Lankan nuns were from the Theravāda (Mahāvihāravāsins) or not. By that stage, two other schools had emerged in Sri Lanka: the Abhayagirivāsins and the Jetavanīyas. These had separated from the Mahāvihāravāsins, with mutual acrimony that suggests that personal politics played a role. The Sri Lankan texts existing in Chinese translation (the Vinaya commentary and the Vimuttimagga) are not exactly the same as their Theravādin counterparts, so it is possible that the Sri Lanka-China connections were from one of the other schools, probably the Abhayagirivāsins. However, this does not affect the question of ordination lineage, since the Abhayagirivāsins and the Jetavanīyas both stemmed from the Mahāvihāravāsins. In later days they were quietly re-admitted into the fold, so the existing Theravāda is in fact a re-union of the three ancient Sri Lankan schools. This is a nice example of how the Sangha can put aside ancient disputes and rivalry in the name of harmony.

TIBET

Some time around the late 780s, the first Tibetan monastery of Samye was built, but there were only Indian monks. King Trisong Detsen chose seven men for ordination as a

trial to see whether Tibetans were capable of maintaining the Vinaya tradition. The ordination and training were carried out under the great Indian pundit Śantarakṣita, who had ordained and studied at Nalanda, and whose treatise the Tattvasaṅgraha shows his fluency in the teachings of all the schools. This experiment was deemed a success and many other ordinations followed.

For their textual source, the Tibetans used the huge Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādins. We have not met them before, but as the name suggests, they were closely related to the Sarvāstivāda. In other words, they also stemmed from the ancient Cūḷasaṅghikas. Their Vinaya became very popular in the later period of Indian Buddhism, possibly because it incorporates many sutras and stories as well as the common inheritance of Vinaya material. This was the only Vinaya translated into Tibetan, which suggests that their ordination lineage also stems from the Mūlasarvāstivāda. The order of bhikkhunis, so far as we know, was never introduced into Tibet.

We have already noticed the close connections between the Sarvāstivāda and the Dharmaguptaka in China. There is also a surprising affinity between the Sarvāstivāda and the Theravāda lineages. The accounts of the Second Council refer to a number of leading monks who represented the 'Pāveyyakas'. One of these was Sambhūta Śaṇavāsi, a disciple of Venerable Ānanda. He appears as one of the eight judges of the Second Council according to the Theravāda, Dharmaguptaka, Sarvāstivāda, Mūlasarvāstivāda, and Mahīśasaka Vinayas. But while the Theravāda has little else to say about Śaṇavāsi, the Sarvāstivāda regards him as one of their great patriarchs. He features in many stories, and in his old age he ordained Upagupta, the most famous of all the early Sarvāstivādin teachers. Thus the Theravāda and the Dharmaguptaka acknowledge Śaṇavāsi as belonging to their own group at the Second Council, even though he was a leader of the Sarvāstivādins. His town, Mathura, went on to become one of the great centres of the Sarvāstivāda. The influence of this lineage is still alive today. Go to visit a Myanmar temple, and look carefully for a statue of a monk eating from his bowl, all the while looking over his shoulder. This curious image is no Theravādin monk: he is none other than Upagupta. His worship is widespread in folk Buddhism throughout northern Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, which suggests an early northern movement of Sarvāstivāda through those areas that are now Theravādin.

There has also been some direct exchange between Sri Lankan and Tibetan Buddhism. The Tibetan canon includes several translations of the Buddha's first sermon, one of which was made from a Pali original. Indeed, the oldest existing Pali manuscript stems not from Sri Lanka, but from Nepal, containing several pages of the Theravāda Vinaya dealing with settlement of disputes and other matters.

MAHĀYĀNA

Many readers may be wondering: but what about the Mahāyāna? Where were they while all this was going on? It is important to realize that there is no distinctively 'Mahāyāna' Vinaya as such. Mahāyānists have always followed the same basic Vinaya as all other monks and nuns. This was never discarded, but it was supplemented by a set

of rules or principles known as the 'Bodhisattva precepts', which are extra to the common Vinaya. I am not familiar with the Bodhisattva precepts, so I will leave it to my Mahāyāna friends to explain what these are and how they work.

Modern scholars often say that the Mahāyāna is derived from the early Mahāsaṅghikas, and the Mahāsaṅghikas are identified with the Vajjiputtakas of the Second Council; therefore the Mahāyāna, so it is said, represent a movement away from the rigidity of monastic rules. However, the evidence for this chain of reasoning is scanty. As we have seen, there is reason to believe that the Vajjiputtakas had nothing to do with the Mahāsaṅghika, and the Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya shows they had no different attitude to Vinaya than any other group. Moreover, the primary sources attribute the first schism to doctrine, not Vinaya. The sources that do connect the Vajjiputtakas with the Mahāsaṅghikas tend to be late, and we may suspect them of polemical intent.

I also think that the connections between the Mahāsaṅghika and the Mahāyāna have been overstated. Evidence from inscriptures, journals, and Mahāyāna writers shows that the Mahāsaṅghika still existed as a distinct sect until late in Indian Buddhism: they did not just melt away into Mahāyāna. While the Mahāsaṅghika's chief doctrine – the not-quite-perfection of the arahant – is echoed in many Mahāyāna works, still the Mahāyāna owes much to the Sarvāstivāda. Thus the Tibetan tradition speaks of the 'four schools' of Indian Buddhism (Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Cittamātra, Mādhyamaka), omitting the Mahāsaṅghika. The Chinese accepted the Sarvāstivādin version of the Buddha's life story, the Lalītavistara, as one of their major sutras, rather than the Mahāsaṅghika's Mahāvastu. The Abhidharma of the Sarvāstivāda was widely studied in both Tibet and China, but we hear little of Mahāsaṅghika Abhidharma. The debates of the Mahāyāna philosophers were with the Sarvāstivāda, not the Mahāsaṅghika. Perhaps, then, we should think of the Mahāyāna as emerging from certain trends found throughout the schools, rather than as deriving from any one specific school. This explains Hiuen Tsang's references to the 'Mahāyāna Theravādins', who were presumably Theravādins following the Bodhisattva path.

CONCLUSIONS

All Buddhist monastic traditions come from an ordination procedure and lifestyle that, in essentials, was laid down by the Buddha. The three Vinaya lineages existing today stem from the 'Cūḷasaṅghikas', who opposed the Mahāsaṅghikas in the doctrinal dispute at the Third Council. There is no convincing evidence that Vinaya differences caused the splits between the three lineages: the (Mūla-) Sarvāstivāda schism was over a fine point of doctrine, and the subsequent split between the Theravāda and the Dharmaguptaka was simply due to geography. There have been small but significant connections between these three Vinaya traditions through history. The differences in conduct between Buddhist monastics today are due partly to the Bodhisattva precepts, but mainly to differences of climate, culture, and custom in the period since Buddhism has been exiled from its ancient homeland of India.