

# What is Theravada?

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One of the Pali words gaining popularity in our country nowadays is **Theravada**. You hear the word in Buddhist meetings and read it in Dhamma magazines. The government and the people alike use it fondly wherever and whenever occasion arises. What then is Theravada? The following is my humble attempt to explain the word grammatically, historically and doctrinally.

## 1. Grammatically:

The word Theravada is a compound of two members: **Thera** and **Vada**; **thera** means "elder", especially "an elderly Buddhist monk"; here it stands for the inflected form **Theranam**, "of the Elders"; the second member **vada** coming from the root **vad**, "to speak" signifies "speech", "talk", "word", "doctrine" or even "ism". The word Theravada is frequently translated into English "the Doctrine of the Elders"; sporadic translations are "the Way of the Elders" and "the School of the Elders"; even "old Wisdom School" is met with.

Most probably the word first appears as the name of a Buddhist school in the **Dipavamsa**, the earlier Chronicle of Sri Lanka, dating the 4th century AD. The name is echoed in the **Mahavamsa**, the later but the better known and more important Chronicle of the 5th century. But it is the Commentaries and the Sub-commentaries on the Canonical texts that the name is defined and their definitions may be summed up as follows: only the texts (**paliyeva**) that were formulated at the first two Councils are to be known as Theravada, for they were safeguarded and handed down by such Great Elders as Maha Kassapa and others. They were so named in order to distinguish them from the views of the dissident Mahasanghika school.

## 2. Historically:

The history of Theravada as a school of Buddhism should begin with a quick survey of the life of Gotama Buddha himself. He was born as a Sakyan prince at a place near the Himalayas about six hundred years BC. Grieved at the ills of life such as old age, sickness and death, he renounced the world at the age of 29 and started seeking the way to Nibbana, "Extinction" of all forms of suffering. At 35 he achieved his goal and became Buddha. He then carried out his teaching mission for 45 years. At 80 he attained Parinibbana, "Total Extinction" (which is the Buddhist way of expressing his demise). Just before that event he left a message to his cousin and attendant monk, Ananda, part of which being:

*When I am gone, the Dhamma (Doctrine) and Vinaya (Discipline) that I have taught and laid down shall be your Teacher!*

This implies that the Buddha did not want to appoint any person to succeed him on his demise. The two Great Disciples Sariputta and Moggallana had already passed away; but Maha Kassapa who enjoyed the good reputation of being the Third Disciple was alive. But even a man of his stature would not become the Buddha's successor. By this injunction the Buddha made it clear that only his Dhamma and Vinaya would adequately and effectively serve as the sole guide to his followers. Dhamma-Vinaya therefore was the designation given by the Master himself to his twofold teaching

(pavacana) about the time of his Parinibbana. There was no reason whatever to dub it Theravada.

When **the First Council** was held at Rajagaha three months after the Buddha's demise with the noble aim of consolidation the Dhamma-Vinaya "before righteousness fades away and before unrighteousness shines forth". The Council was presided over by Maha Kassapa whose questions on the Vinaya and the Dhamma were answered by Upali and Ananda respectively. The answers were confirmed by 500 monks who recited both in unison and passed on from teacher to pupil orally. The name Theravada remained unheard of, at least publicly. It that Buddhism as one whole body with its original designation of Dhamma Vinaya stood in full bloom all over India.

A century later **the Second Council** was held at Vesali under the collective leadership of Yasa, Revata and Sabbakami to discuss the "ten points" which in fact were the Buddha's certain disciplinary ruler relaxed and practised by imprudent Vajjian monks. The Council composed of 700 members decided the points unlawful and condemned the Vajjians who seceded from that Council to convene their own known as Maha sangha or Mahasangiti, the Great Council, since their number 10,000 far exceeded that of the former. It was the open and serious schism that took place in the Sangha, the Buddhist Order, for the first time. And with the schism emerged two factions of Theravadins, followers of Theravada, and Mahasanghikas or Mahasangitikas, those of the secession.

**The Third Council** in the tradition of Theravada was held in the 3rd century, according to the Chronicles and Commentaries, with Moggaliputta Tissa as its president and Asoka to the Moriyana Dynasty as its supporter. The venue of the Council was the imperial city Pataliputta. The purpose was to purify the religion and to restore peace to the Order, for many heretics who had joined the Sangha for convenient livelihood caused confusion and unfortunate incidents in the Sangha. At the conclusion of the Council, missionaries were despatched to nine countries including Sri Lanka and Suvannabhumi; to the former went Asoka's son, Mahinda, leading a group of monks and to the latter, generally taken to be Myanmar, Sona and Uttara.

Scholars are of opinion that Theravada thrived in the country of Magadha in the east and the city of Ujjeni in the west. In his rock and pillar inscriptions, Asoka speaks of compassion, charity, truthfulness, purity and other virtues to be developed which might be common to all the religions prevailing in the country: Buddhism, Brahmanism, Hinduism, Jainism, etc. From the inscriptions, we also know of his tolerance and even gifts to non-Buddhist sects. But that he was a devout Theravadin in his heart of hearts is evidenced by his famous Bhabru inscription in which he recommends for learning certain Buddhist texts which can be traced in the Pali Canon of the Theravada, the only school which employs that language for recording its scriptures. The inclusion of the Kathavatthu, a work of his time, in the Abhidhamma Pitaka is another piece of evidence, not to speak of his sending of his son Mahinda as a bhikkhu to propagate Theravada Buddhism in the Island as asserted in Buddhist works. In these works, however, the name Theravada is replaced by Vibhajjavada, the "Doctrine of Analysis" or the "Religion of Reason" though the two terms are identical.

The reign of Asoka was however marked by the split of Buddhism into 18 sects which according to one source were Theravada and Mahasanghika plus 10 branching out from the former and 6 from the latter. The misfortune caused by the split was not so great as one might guess, for it was a result of the rapid expansion of Buddhism. Just remember the Buddha's instruction given to his earliest 60 disciples when he sent them to spread the Dhamma for the welfare and happiness of many: "No two persons shall go in the same direction!" The differences between one sect and another were due to the geographical factor rather than to doctrinal except in a few cases. And many of the sects disappeared after existing for some time.

After its heyday during the time of Asoka, Theravada began to wane in northern India. When the mighty Gupta dynasty arose in AD 428, there must be a number of reasons for this sad turning point in the course of Theravada. One theory says that the decline was brought about by the lack of encouragement of the Gupta kings who as Hindu favored Sanskrit. In fact, it was a time of the revival or even the efflorescence of Sanskrit literature. Their devotion to Hinduism and love for Sanskrit did not help the existence of Theravada let alone its growth, for it is the only school of Buddhism that employs Pali as its language.

It was evident that some of the Guptas showed their interest in Buddhism by making some donations to it, but the recipients were the forms other than Theravada, such as Sarvastivada, an important offshoot of Theravada, and Mahayana, the giant incarnation, as it were, of Mahasanghika, both of which turned to Sanskrit as their sacred language. Pali Buddhism, Theravada, then moved to the south and settled itself along the east coast form which hailed later such Buddhist commentators as Dhammapala of Kancipura and Buddhadatta of Uragapura.

The establishment of Theravada after its introduction there by Mahinda from Pataliputra long before its journey to the south of India, one knows only too well. Its stronghold was the Mahavihara, "the Great Monastery" at Anuradhapura, to which Buddhaghosa, the greatest of commentators in Theravada tradition belonged. It was also a seat of learning producing a number of other writers in Pali. The existence of some antagonistic sects was not unknown but the Mahavihara was powerful enough to prevail over the opponents. In times of danger and adversity also Sri Lanka had good friends in Myanmar and Thai Buddhists who went to their rescue. Today she stands out as a land of missionary monks who are not only well versed in Buddhism but also modern educated and efficient enough to spread the Dhamma, especially in the west.

Nowadays Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand are the three stalwart Theravada states with close religious ties. Though Laos and Cambodia have lost much of their religious lustre both still deserve to be recognised as Theravada countries. In Vietnam, formerly a land of pure Mahayana, Theravada is somewhat developing. In the hill tracts of Bangladesh many of the Baruas, the Chakmas and the Maghs and their fellow countrymen in the Chittagong area still prove to be staunch Theravadins. So do the Shans in the frontier regions of South China.

As for India, the land of the birth of Buddhism as well as of its death, signs of the revival of the Theravada school have been noticed. Mass conversions of Indians to Buddhism have recently taken place. At the most recent conversion ceremony some Mahatheras from Myanmar played a leading role reciting Pali formulas.

### 3. Doctrinally:

Now to explain Theravada doctrinally, only a few similarities and differences between Theravada and the three other schools mentioned above -- Mahasanghika, Sarvastivada and Mahayana -- will be touched upon as giving details is impossible here.

**Theravada and Mahasanghika:** In regard to Vinaya, the code of discipline known as Patimokkha in Theravada contains 227 rules while its counterpart, Pratimoksa, Mahasanghika 119. The former's **Bhikkhu-vibhanga** and **Bhikkhuni-vibhanga** probably correspond to the latter's **Bhiksu-vinaya** and **Bhiksuni-vinaya**, which are now extant solely in Chinese. The only surviving work in its original language, Sanskrit, the **Mahavastu** of the Mahasanghika's Vinaya, has passages that are found parallel to those in the **Khuddakapatha**, the **Vimanavatthu**, **Buddhavamsa** and **Dhammapada** of the Pali Canon. An important doctrinal difference the two schools is that the Theravadins speak of the

human nature of the Buddha where as the Mahasanghikas believe the supramundane nature of Buddhas which is more pronounced in the sect called Lokottaravada and in Mahayana.

**Theravada and Sarvastivada:** Though the Sarvastivada scriptures are in Sanskrit, they teach the views that are closest to Theravada. Like its patriarch school Theravada, Sarvastivada denies the transcendent powers ascribed to Bodhisattvas. But unlike Theravada, it questions the perfection of Arahats, whom Theravada hold in highest esteem as winners of Nibbana. Its monks observed 155 Vinaya rules. The school has its own Abhidhamma Pitaka, but the seven books are entirely different from the Theravada's. Two commentaries on the Abhidhamma still exist: **Vibhasha** and **Mahavibhasha**, and from this the Sarvastivadins are also known as Vabhashikas, "those belonging to the Vibhashas". They believe that "all is" or "all things exist" (**Sarvam asti** in Sanskrit and **sabbam atthi** in Pali). That is to say not only the things in the present exist, but also the things in the past and future which are in continuity with the present. Hence the name of their school Sarvastivada.

**Theravada and Mahayana:** The name **Mahayana** along with the other name **Hinayana** its first appearance between the 6th century BC and the 1st century AD. Occurring in the **Saddharma Pundarika Sutra**, the "Discourse on the Lotus of the Good Law", Mahayana -- the "Greater Vehicle" -- is understood today by many as the name the school of Buddhism prevailing in Tibet, China, Korea, Japan and Mongolia, as opposed to the Hinayana until recently represented by Theravada.

Mahayana covers all forms Buddhism prevalent in those countries as it has incorporated many of the view held by the sects that had branched off from Mahasanghika and have disappeared now. The master who gave a clear definition to this school known sometimes as Northern Buddhism was Nagarjuna of the 2nd century A.D. In common with their brethren, the Theravadins, they believe the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, the Dependent Origination, the Three Characteristics of Existence and a number of other basic tenets. Above all, both the schools accept Gotama Buddha as their Teacher. Mahayana built on Compassion and Wisdom has its own divergences, of course, of which only the most important one may be stated here, which is expressed by scholars as the **Bodhisatva ideal**. Every Mahayanist is a Bodhisatva, "a being whose essence is Enlightenment" as one translation goes. As such he sets his goal not only to attain Nirvana for himself but to provide all sentient beings with the same liberation from the woes of **samsara** or "life-cycle". Hence their school is greater compared with Hinayana, the school of the "Lesser Vehicle" as its members strive only for their attainment of nirvana as Arahats.

The World Fellowship of Buddhists decided unanimously in Colombo in 1950 that the term Hinayana should be eliminated when referring to the Theravada School of Buddhism. The term Hinayana is now a thing of the past. If the term be used today it should mean any or all of the sects now sunk into oblivion. There exist at present only two schools of Buddhism: **Theravada and Mahayana**. The two must be friendlier with each other and be more united in contributing their shares to everlasting peace of the world.

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