

The Vaibhasika School of Buddhist Thought

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In the sixth century B. C. writing was hardly used when Buddhism originated. Recitation and memorization were the means for the preservation of records. Such practice had been in vogue in India since the earliest Vedic period. Gautama Buddha's speeches, sayings, discourses and conversations were accordingly handed down orally through succession of teachers (acariyaparampara).

Serious attention was not given for the proper preservation of his actual words, not to speak of their interpretations. The Mahaparinibbana Suttanta¹ records that Buddha anticipated that his sayings might be misrepresented and so he advised his disciples to verify his words in four ways (cattaro mahapadesa).

Verification of
Buddha's words
in four ways.

His prophecy came true after his Mahaparinibbana (passing away). About a hundred years after his Mahaparinibbana dissension arose among the monks in regard to the actual words of the Great Master and their interpretations which ultimately led to the origin of different sects in Buddhism, all claiming to have preserved his original teachings. And within a few hundred years of his Mahaparinibbana eighteen or more sects came into existence. They took up the cause of Buddhism with great zeal and tried to popularise it in the various territories in and outside India.

Origin of different
schools of Buddhist
thought

The first dissension was created by the monks of Vesali through the breach of the rules of discipline as laid down in the Vinayapitaka.

1. *Dighanikaya, Vol. II (Nalanda Devnagri ed.) pp. 96-98.*

First dissension in
the Sangha

The Cullavagga and the Ceylonese chronicles record that the Second Buddhist Council was held at Vesali just a century after the passing away of Buddha to examine the validity of the ten practices (dasa vatthuni)¹ indulged in by the Vajjian monks

The works of Vasumitra, Bhavya and Vinitadeva preserved in Tibetan and Chinese translations furnish us with a quite different account.

Differences on
five issues

According to them the Council is said to have been convened because of the differences of opinions among the monks in regard to the five dogmas² propounded by Mahadeva who was 'a man of great learning and wisdom'.

Traditions differ in regard to the cause of the session of the Second Council But all the accounts record unanimously that a schism

Second Buddhist
Council

occurred about a hundred years after the Mahaparinibbana of Buddha due to the efforts of a few monks for the relaxation of the rigid rules of conduct current at the time which the orthodox monks were not ready to allow. The orthodox views prevailed and the monks opposed to them were expelled from the Sangha. They were not, however, disappointed.

1. They are : (i) Singilonakappa—the practice of carrying salt in a horn, i. e., storing articles of food ; (ii) Dvangulakappa—the practice of taking meals when the shadow is two fingers broad, i. e., taking meals after midday ; (iii) Gamantarakappa—the practice of going to an adjacent village and taking meals there the same day for the second time, (iv) Avasakappa—the observance of the Uposatha ceremonies in various places in the same parish (sima) ; (v) Anumatikappa—doing a deed and obtaining its sanction afterwards ; (vi) Acinnakappa—the customary practices as precedent ; (vii) Amathitakappa—drinking of butter-milk after meals ; (viii) Jalogimpatum—drinking of toddy ; (ix) Adasakam nisidanam—use of a rug without a fringe and (x) Jataruparajatam—acceptance of gold and silver.

2. They are :-

- i) An Arhat may commit a sin under unconscious temptation.
- ii) One may be an Arhat and not know it.
- iii) An Arhat may have doubts on matters of doctrine.
- iv) One cannot attain Arhatship without the aid of a teacher and
- v) 'The noble ways' may begin by shout, that is, one meditating seriously on religion may make such an exclamation as 'How sad !' 'How sad !' and by so doing attain progress towards perfection—the path is attained by an exclamation of astonishment.

They gained strength gradually and convened another Council shortly in which ten thousand monks participated. It was, indeed, a great Council! In the history of Buddhism it is known as Mahasangiti (Great Council). The monks who joined the Council here later on called the Mahasanghikas, while the orthodox monks were distinguished as the Theravadins. Thus occurred the first schism which divided the early Buddhist Sangha into two primitive schools—the Theravada and the Mahasanghika.

We are told that this schism was followed by a series of schisms, and in course of time, several sub-sects branched off from these two sects. The Theravada was split up into twelve sub-sects and the Mahasanghika into six. But these different sects could not maintain their individual existences for long. Most of them either disappeared or merged with other sects shortly after their origin; only four schools survived.

The four schools that could outlive and expand their own field of influence were the Vaibhasika, Sautrantika, Madhyamika and Yogacara. These four schools only are referred to in the Hindu and Jaina philosophical works. In his Sarvadarsana-samgraha Madhavacarya has discussed briefly the views of these four schools.

It should be mentioned here that the Vaibhasikas are identified with the Sarvastivadins¹. In the words of Yamakami Sogen, "In later times, the so-called Vaibhasikas came to be identified with the Sarvastivadins, and the two names became mutually inter-changeable, although, properly speaking, the Sarvastivadins originally formed a section of the Vaibhasikas"². They became more popular since the days of Kaniska and became predominant in Kashmir and Gandhara.

1. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, XI, p. 198.

2. *Systems of Buddhist Thought*, p. 102.

Let us now discuss the views of the Vaibhasika school with which we are concerned here.

The Vaibhasika is so called on account of its dependence on Vibhasa (commentary) which signifies a detailed explanation in accordance with the text as delivered by the Master Himself. It came into prominence in the third century after Buddha's Mahaparinibbana. It rejected the authority of the Sutras and admitted only the Abhidharma.

Vaibhasika-its
connotation

The seven Abhidharma treatises which formed the general foundation of its philosophy were Jnanaprasthanasutra of Arya Katyayaniputra, Sangitiparyaya of Mahakausthila, Prakaranapada of Sthavira Vasumitra, Vijnanakaya of Sthavira Devasarma, Dhatukaya of Purna, Dharmaskandha of Arya Sariputra and Prajnaptisastra of Arya Maudgalyayana¹. Of them Jnanaprasthanasutra is the principal treatise, others are padas or supplements. A huge commentary on the Jnanaprasthanasutra called the Abhidharmamahavibhasa or simply Vibhasa containing eight divisions (Khandhas) forty-three chapters (Vaggas) was compiled by five hundred Arhats (beginning with the venerable Vasumitra), four hundred years after the Mahaparinirvana of Buddha. It is not available to us in original Sanskrit. But it is preserved in Chinese translation.

The Vaibhasika philosophy was based exclusively on this commentary (vibhasa) and hence was the name Vaibhasika. The Nyayanusarsa-

Vaibhasika
Philosophy

sastra of Sanghabhadra was another learned work of this system of thought. Dharmatrata, Ghosaka and Buddhadeva were other prominent exponents of this philosophy. The Vaibhasikas were realists. Their doctrines were in direct opposition to those of the Sautrantikas who denied the existence of the past and future elements, but admitted the existence of the present only. They admitted the reality of both mind and external objects. They also held that external objects were directly known and

1. The seven Theravada Adhidhamma texts are : *Dhammasangani, Vibhanga, Kathavatthu, Puggalapannatti, Dhatukatha, Yamaka and Patthana.*

not inferred. Thus they held the theory of direct realism (bahyapratyak-savada). It further held that Nirvana is a perfect state of bliss. Like the Sarvastivadins it also believed in the existence of seventy-five dharmas which are broadly divided into impure (sasrava) and pure (anasrava). The impure dharmas are called samskrta (constituted) dharmas while pure dharmas are called asamskrta (unconstituted) dharmas. Constituted dharmas could originate from hetus (causes)¹ while unconstituted dharmas are ahetus (causeless). It also denied the existence of soul (atma) and pudgala (personality). Skandhas (constituted elements) and Mahabhutas (great elements) could produce a being.

1. This reminds us of the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism :

*Ye dhamma hetuppabhava tesam hetum Tathagato aha.,
Tesam ca yo nirodho evamvadi Mahasamano.*