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 (acariya parampara).

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

His prophecy came true after his Mahaparinibbana (passing away). About a hundred years after his Mahaparinibbana disension 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 popularize it in the various territories in and outside India.

The first disension was created by the monks of Vesali through the breach of the rules of discipline as laid down in the Vinaya Pitaka.

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 vathuṁ) indulged in by the Vaṭṭal monks.

The texts of Vasumitra, Bhavya and Visānṭadeva preserved in Tibetan and Chinese translations furnish us with a quite different account. 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 dogmas propounded by Mahādeva 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 occurred about a hundred years after the Mahāpajā-nibbana of Buddha due to the efforts of a few monks for the relaxation of the rigid rules of conduct current at the time when the orthodox monks were not ready to allow the orthodox views to prevail and the monks opposed to them were expelled from the Sangha. They were not, however, disappointed.

1. They are : (i) Vinjāñikaṭṭaṭṭha—the practice of carrying salt in a horn, i.e., storing articles of food; (ii) Jangūñikaṭṭaṭṭha—the practice of taking meals when the shadow is two fingers broad, i.e., taking meals after midday; (iii) Vinjāñikaṭṭaṭṭha—the practice of going to an inhabited village and taking meals there on the same day for the second time; (iv) Anuvaṭṭaṭṭha—the observance of the Upāneśa ceremonies in various places in the sanhārakāli (artist); (v) Jangūñikaṭṭaṭṭha—doing a deed and obtaining its sanction afterwards; (vi) Aññāvapuṇaṭṭha—the customary practices at incipient; (vii) Amathatikaṭṭha—drinking of buta-milk after meals; (viii) Jālojīnaṭṭha—drinking of toddy; (ix) Nukkuṭaṭṭha—use of a rug without a cover and (x) Adakakkhaṭṭha—abstinence of gold and silver.

2. They are : i) An Aśāvat may commit a sin under uncontinuous temptation. ii) One may be an Aśāvat and not know it. iii) An Aśāvat may have doubts on matters of doctrine. iv) One cannot please Aśāvatara without the aid of a teacher and v) 'The noble ways' may begin by Khouk, that is, one mediates seriously on religion may make such an extalement as 'How sad, How sad!' and by so doing attain progress towards perfection—the path is attainted by an extalement 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 Mahasanghik (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 they origin; only four schools survived.

The four schools that could outline and expand their own field of influence were the Vaibhasika, Saunartaika, 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 Sarvastivadins. 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 interchangeable, although, properly speaking, the Sarvastivadins originally formed a section of the Vaibhasikas." They became more popular since the days of Kaniska and became predominant in Kashmir and Gandhara.

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 Vibhāṣa (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 Budhha's Mahaparinibbana. It rejected the authority of the Sutras and admitted only the Abhidharma.

Vaibhasika

The seven Abhidharma treatises which formed the general foundation of its philosophy were Jnanaprasthānasutra of Arya Katyayaniputra, Sanglitaparyaya of Mahakasuktika, Prakaranapada of Sthavira Vasumitra, Vijnanakaya of Sthavira Devasarma, Shatukaya of Purna, Dharmakathudha of Arya Sariputra and Prasunapitsastra of Arya Maudgalyayana1. Of them Jnanaprasthānasutra is the principal treatise, others are pads or supplements. A huge commentary on the Jnanaprasthānasutra called the Abhidharmakosavibhāṣa or simply Vibhāṣa containing eight divisions (Khandhas) forty-three chapters (Yajgas) was compiled by five hundred Arhats (beginning with the venerable Vasumitra), four hundred years after the Mahaparinibbana of Budhha. It is not available in the original Sanskrit. But it is preserved in Chinese translation.

The Vaibhasika philosophy was based exclusively on this commentary (vibhāṣa) and hence was the name Vaibhasika. The Nyayavacchana-sastra of Sanghabhadra was another leamed work of this system of thought. Dharmaratra, Ghosika 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 Abhidhamma texts are: Dharmasaṅgīti, Vibhanga, Kathavatthu, Puggalapannatti, Dhammapada, Yamaka and Pitthana.

(4)
not inferred. Thus they held the theory of direct realism (bahya-pratyak-
savada). It further held that Nibbana is a perfect state of bliss. Like
the Sankhya it also believed in the existence of seventy-five
dharmas which are broadly divided into impure (asarava) and pure
(anasarava). The impure dharmas are called samskritas (constituted)
dharmas while pure dharmas are called asamskritas (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 pravritti (personality). Samadhas
(constituted elements) and Mahabhatas (great elements) could produce
a being.

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

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   \text{Ye dhamma hetuparthare asam hetum Tathastu aha,}
   \text{Yasam ca yo nirodho evamvedi Mahasamana.}
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   (5)