

THERAVADA AS VIBHAJJAVADA AND THE BUDDHIST CONTROVERSY ON TIME

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1. According to the post-canonical Abhidhamma commentaries and Pali Chronicles, what we call Theravāda (Doctrine of the Elders, or The Teachings of the Buddha as Transmitted by the Elders) is also known as Vibhajjavāda (Doctrine of Analysis). They are mutually convertible terms.

2. We find the two terms, Theravāda and Vibhajjavāda, in the early Buddhist Discourses of the Pali Canon itself, long before there emerged a Buddhist School known by these two expressions. Obviously, in this particular context, the term “Theravāda” cannot mean “The Doctrine of the Elders”. The Pali commentarial exegesis explains the term as “profession of certainty or self-conviction” (Theravādan ti thirabhāvavādaṃ). The term occurs together with “ñāṇavāda”, which means “profession of knowledge” (ñāṇavādan ti jānāmī ti vādaṃ). Here both terms, as the commentary explains, are used to emphasize how clearly the Bodhisatta (the Buddha-to-be) grasped what was taught to him by Alara, the Kalama, and Uddaka, the son of Rama.

3. The term “Vibhajjavāda” occurs in a more technical sense to mean “a qualified answer”, or an “analytical explanation”, or “a statement of conditional assertion”. This term is often contrasted with “Ekamsavāda”, which means “a unilateral or categorical statement, either in the affirmative or in the negative.” But as another name for Theravada, what does Vibhajjavada really mean? Under what historical circumstances, due to what doctrinal reasons, if any, and in which period in the history of Buddhist Thought, did these two terms become mutually convertible?

4. The identification of Theravāda as Vibhajjavāda can be traced to the traditional account of the Third Buddhist Council, as recorded in the Pali Chronicle, called Mahavamsa, and the two commentaries to the Vinaya and the Kathavatthu. The account, in summary form, is as follows:

King Asoka’s conversion to Buddhism; his close association with the Venerable Moggaliputtatissa Mahathera who presided at the Third Buddhist Council; King Asoka’s many acts of beneficence and generosity to the Buddhist Monastic Order; the entry into the Buddhist Monastic Order of heretics masquerading as genuine Buddhist monks; King Asoka’s decision to purify the Buddhist dispensation (sāsana) by expelling the heretical monks.

For this purpose, King Asoka assembled all the Buddhist monks at the Royal Park, and asked this question from each and every monk: “What was the Perfectly Enlightened One a Teacher of?” (Kiṃvādī Sammā-Sambuddho). Many monks gave many answers that misrepresented the Buddha’s teaching. However, some Buddhist monks said that the Buddha was “Vibhajjavādī”. Then King Asoka referred this matter to the Venerable Moggaliputtatissa Mahathera. He replied that those Buddhist monks who said that the Buddha was Vibhajjavādī were genuine Buddhist monks. Thereupon, the heretical monks were expelled from the Buddhist Monastic Order, and the Third Buddhist Council was held under the

chairmanship of the Venerable Moggaliputtatissa Mahathera. (Translation mainly based on Prof. N. A. Jayawickrema, “Inception of Discipline and the Vinaya Nidana”).

5. The most important term in this account is “Vibhajjavādī”. What it really means in this particular context will show why Theravāda came to be known as Vibhajjavada. It will also show the doctrinal reasons and the historical factors that led to the Third Buddhist Council. However, the traditional account is not clear on what the term means.

6. The first-ever translation into English of the term “Vibhajjavāda” was made by George Turnour in 1868 in his publication of the Mahāvamsa, as “the religion of investigated truth”. In his A Dictionary of the Pali Language, published in 1875, R. C. Childers translated the term “Vibhajjavada” as “Religion of Logic or Reason”. One of the earliest to endorse R. C. Childers’ interpretation was Wilhelm Geiger, who in his Mahavamsa Translation observes that it renders the sense of the term very appropriately. Since then, many other scholars accepted this translation as valid. Accordingly, now there is a widespread belief that the Buddha always followed the “analytical method” and therefore, Buddhism could rightly be called “Vibhajjavada”, “Doctrine of Analysis”.

7. There are many textual and doctrinal reasons that go against this widespread interpretation. This will become clear if we refer here to the four kinds of questions, mentioned in the early Buddhist Discourses:

(a) A question that should be answered unilaterally or categorically, either in the affirmative or in the negative (pañho ekaṃsavyākaranīyo)

(b) A question that should be answered analytically, in other words, a question to which a qualified answer should be given (pañho vibhajjavākaraniyo)

© A question that should be answered by raising a counter-question, in order to clarify what is not clear in the original question (pañho paṭipucchā vyākaranīyo)

(d) A question that should be set aside, a question to which no answer should be given (pañho ṭhapanīyo).

8. Among the four questions, one question is not considered higher or lower than another. They are all equally valid. The sequence of their enumeration does not imply any hierarchical evaluation. What determines the validity of the answer to each question is, whether it belongs to the same class to which the question belongs. Therefore, the Buddha says, “a person who does not answer unilaterally a question that ought to be answered unilaterally, who does not answer analytically a question that ought to be answered analytically, who does not answer by raising a counter-question a question that ought to be answered by raising a counter-question, and who does not set aside a question that ought to be set aside – such a person is not fit to discuss with (akaccha).” Anguttaranikaya, PTS, I, 197.

9. In the Buddhist Discourses themselves we do not find these questions illustrated with specific examples. A typical example of a unilateral question would be: “Are all constructed phenomena impermanent (sabbe sankhārā aniccā ti)?” From the Buddhist perspective, this question should be given a unilateral answer: “Yes, all constructed phenomena are impermanent”. A good example for an

analytical question can be selected from the Buddhist Discourses themselves: When Subha, the young man, asked the Buddha whether it is a house-holder, or a monk who succeeds in attaining what is right and good, the Buddha says in reply: “Here (ettha), O young man, I give an analytical explanation (vibhajjavada); I do not make here (ettha) a unilateral assertion (ekamsavada)”. For, what determines the answer is not whether the person is a layman or a monk, but the practice of good conduct. In the Buddha’s reply to Subha, the Buddha uses the adverbial form “here” (ettha). It means “in this respect”, or to be more precise, “in relation to the question raised by Subha.” The use of the adverbial form is very significant. Its significance lies in the fact that it clearly indicates the specific context, in which the Buddha gives the answer following the analytical method. (Majjhimanikaya, PTS. II 197). Many modern scholars overlooked the context-indicating adverbial form “here” (ettha) and, concluded that the Buddha always follows the analytical method, in preference to the unilateral method. This is certainly not so. It is this misunderstanding that gave rise to the widespread misconception that the Buddha always upheld the analytical method.

10. An example of a question that should be answered by raising a counter-question would be: “Is a person’s consciousness his self”. This needs a counter-question to clarify what the questioner meant by “self”, because what is called self has many interpretations. The best example for the fourth category is the setting aside of ten questions without providing answers to them. These relate to whether the world is eternal or non-eternal in terms of time, finite or infinite in terms of space, whether the life principle and the physical body are identical or not, and whether the Tathagata, exists after death, or does not exist, or both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor non-exists.

11. Another instance of the Buddha following the Vibhajjavada mode of explanation is found in the Anguttaranikaya, “The Blessed One blames what is blamable, and praises what is praiseworthy. By blaming what is blamable, and praising what is praiseworthy, the Blessed One speaks after analyzing. Here the Blessed One does not speak categorically”. (Anguttaranikaya, PTS, X 94).

12. In the above quotation, although the context-indicating term “ettha” (here) does not occur immediately before, or after the words “vibhajjavado Bhagava”, it does certainly occur in the last sentence of the quotation: “Here, the Blessed One does not speak categorically” (Na so Bhagava ettha ekamsavado.)

13. The clear implication is that the Buddha resorts to both “analytical” and “unilateral” modes of explanation. It is in consonance with this situation that when Potthapada, the itinerant ascetic, tells the Buddha, “We do not know of any categorical (unilateral) doctrines preached by the Buddha”, the Buddha in reply says, “I have taught and laid down doctrines of which it is possible to make categorical assertions, and I have taught and laid down doctrines of which it is not possible to make categorical assertions”. (Dighanikaya, PTS, I 91).

14. Accordingly, a categorical (unilateral) statement is no less valid or no less logical than an analytical statement, just because it is categorical. Likewise an analytical statement is no less valid or no less logical than a categorical statement, just because it is analytical. What matters is not whether a given statement is categorical or analytical, but the context in relation to which the statement is made. It follows,

therefore, that “vibhajjavada”, which refers to “analytical” or “qualified” explanations, has no special claim to be more logical or rational than “ekamsavada”, which refers to “categorical” or “unilateral” statements.

15. The claim made in the traditional account of the Third Buddhist Council, that the Buddha is always Vibhajjavādī, is certainly not consonant with the Four Kinds of Questions given in the early Buddhist Discourses

16. As an answer to this question, Mrs. Rhys David suggests that, although each kind of explanation is “when apposite, equally commendable, yet it is easy to discern that whether established generalizations were being arraigned by criticism or, whether as in the Asokan age errors arising from uncritical interpretations of doctrine were to be expunged, the path to purity of views and the hallmark of sagacious exposition lay chiefly in the “distinguo” or the “vibhajjavada” method of explanation”. (Points of Controversy or Subjects of Discourse, tr. Kathavattu xli n. 1). However, as Mrs. Rhys David herself observes, a universal predication (ekamsavada) is no less logical than an analytical statement (vibhajjavada). This gives rise to the question why only the vibhajjavada standpoint should have been singled out as the hallmark of sagacious exposition.

17. It is not impossible to give a broad interpretation to the term “vibhajjavada”, so as to include within it all the four modes of explanation. If, for instance, one is asked for his opinion on a proposition, the most rational position would be to make a preliminary analysis of the proposition so as to find out which of the four categories it belongs to. Since this involves the “vibhajjavada” methodology, the term “vibhajjavada” could be used as a generic term to denote all four categories. In such a situation the term would stand for the genus as well as for one of its species. Although the possibility of such an interpretation cannot be completely ruled out, its probability is very much doubtful.

18. It will be noticed that in the account of the Third Buddhist Council, the term “vibhajjavāda” is used to distinguish Buddhism from all other non-Buddhist religions. If that was the reason, as Mrs. Rhys Davids observes, the use of a term such as “anattavādī” (= one who denies the notion of the self), should have been more appropriate. However, the very use of the term “vibhajjavāda” seems to suggest that there was an important historical reason for retaining the term. Behind the use of the term there seems to be a nucleus of historical truth, which is unwittingly expressed here.

19. In the sources of other Buddhist schools, e.g. Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, we read: “Those who maintain after having analyzed that some things exist, namely, the present and the past karma, which has not borne its fruit, and the future are called Vibhajjavādins.” Here, the reference is to the well-known Buddhist Controversy on Time, “Tri-Temporality” of the dhammas. In this connection, a Buddhist Sect, called the Kasyapiyas, are identified as Vibhajjavādins. As to the names of other Buddhist Sects, that came to be known as Vibhajjavādins, are: Mahasamghikas, Ekavyavaharikas, Kaukkutikas, and Prajñaptivādins. (Louis de La Vallée Poussin, Abhidharmakośa – Bhāṣya, French Tr., Introduction IV; IV 23, n. 3; “L’origine des sectes bouddhiques d’après Paramārtha, translated by Demieville, 1: 49).

20. In this connection, Louis de La Vallee Poussin observes that in all probability the Theravadins too came to be known as Vibhajjavadins, because of the position they took in respect to this selfsame controversial issue.

21. The contentious issue of the Buddhist Controversy on Time is whether the dhammas (dharmas) exist in all the three phases of time. Those who said that the dhammas exist in all the three phases of time came to be known as Sarvastivadins. Whereas the Theravadins contended that the dhammas exist only in the present phase of time, not in the past, nor in the future phases of time. This answer is based on Vibhajjavada. It is very likely, therefore, that if the Theravadins, too, came to be known as Vibhajjavadins, it is in the context of this Controversy on Time.

22. It is also very likely that it was this controversy that led to the convening of the Third Buddhist Council. On the other hand, according to its traditional account, it was the entry of heretics into the Buddhist Monastic Order and their profession of non-Buddhist teachings that led to the Council. It was with the intervention of King Asoka that the purification of the Sasana (Buddhist Dispensation) was brought about. The discord within the Buddhist Monastic Order led to the intervention of King Asoka could be accepted as a historical fact, for the King himself alludes to it in his Minor Pillar Edicts of Sarnath, Kausambi, and Sanci. It is very unlikely, however, that it led to the Third Council.

23. The traditional account appears to be a mix of both history and legend, where we can see confusion between two events, both of which are historically true. One is the Buddhist Controversy- on- Time, the Tri-temporality of the Dhammas. The other is the disunity within the Buddhist Monastic Order that led to the intervention of King Asoka.

24. In the Kathavatthu, compiled during the Third Buddhist Council, it was not non-Buddhist, but non-Theravada Buddhist views, that were refuted. This is clear evidence to suggest that what led to the Council were disagreements within the Buddhist Schools themselves, not disagreements between Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

25. In point of fact, the Theravada refutation of the Sarvastivada Theory of Tri-temporality is clearly presented in the 5th chapter of the Kathavatthu, compiled at the Third Buddhist Council. The Theravada argument is as follows:

“The very definition of the ‘past’ as ‘something that has ceased – that is departed, changed, gone away’ and the very definition of ‘future’ as ‘something that is ‘not yet born’, ‘not yet come to be’, ‘not yet come to pass’, ‘has not happened’, ‘not be-fallen’, ‘is not manifested’ excludes every possibility of the past and the future being considered as ‘existing’. If the term ‘to exist’ is predicable of all the three divisions of time, the attributes of one become applicable to the other two as well. The past-ness of the past, the present-ness of the present, and the future-ness of the future, become equally applicable and hence mutually convertible, resulting in the complete obliteration of all distinctions between the three divisions of time.”

“It is contented by the Sarvastivadins, that when a ‘present thing’ ceases to exist, it loses its ‘present-ness’, but not its ‘thing-ness’, just as a ‘white clothe’ when dyed gives up its ‘whiteness’ but not

its 'cloth-ness'. The counter-argument of the Theravadins is that in an expression such as 'present material aggregate', in whichever order the two terms 'present' and 'material aggregate' are used, if no distinction is made between them and thus if they are considered as 'identical, then when one says that the 'present material aggregate' has ceased to exist, one must admit that the material aggregate has given up not only its 'present-ness', but also its 'materiality'. To admit the cessation of one and to deny the cessation of the other is not valid, as they are not distinct entities. If, as the Sarvastivadins assert, the material aggregate retains its materiality, then it becomes something persistent, permanent, and eternal – an idea which even the Sarvastivadins are averse to admit."

26. As the Kathavatthu shows, the Sarvastivada theory amounts to: "Having existed (in the future), it exists (in the present, and) having existed (in the present), it exists (in the past) (hutvā hoti, hutvā hoti). The transition is from future existence to present existence, and from present existence to past existence. The Theravada position amounts to: "Having not been, they come into being; after having been they cease to be" (ahutvā sambhonti, hutvā paṭiventi). Here, the transition, if it could be called so, is from non-existence to existence and from existence to non-existence.

27. On the Theory of Tri-Temporality, there are many interpretations within the Sarvastivada. However, their basic conclusion is that a dhamma has two aspects. One aspect is ideal (noumenal), and the other aspect is actual (phenomenal). The ideal aspect persists in the three phases of time, whereas the actual aspect manifests in the present.

28. As De La Vallee Poussin says, an indication of the main event that led to the Third Buddhist Council is also given in the Chinese Version of the Vijnanakaya of the Sarvastivadins' Abhidharma Pitaka, whose authorship is attributed to the Arahant Devasarman. As Poussin has shown, its first chapter is called "Maudgalyayana- Skandhaka". As he observes further, it is extremely likely the reference here is to Elder Moggaliputta Tissa Thera, who is said to have convened the Third Buddhist Council. It is a refutation of the views expressed by the Theravadin Elder, Moggaliputta Tissa, who criticized the Theory of Tri-Temporality. Thus, the Chapter on "Does All Exist" of the Kathavatthu and the Chapter on "Maudgalyayana-Skandhaka of the Vijnanakaya", represent the two opposite positions taken up by the Theravadins and the Sarvastivadins, over an issue that separated them from each other in the 3rd century BCE.

29. One question often raised by historians who do not believe in the historicity of the Third Council is why no reference is made to it in any of the edicts of King Asoka. The question does not arise. For what seems to have lead to the Council was the Buddhist Controversy on Time, an issue that did not warrant the intervention of King Asoka. What is more unlikely than the temporal head of the State intervening in the settlement of a philosophical problem, the abstruse implications of which only the erudite monks would have understood? Even according to the traditional account of the Council, it was not King Asoka, but the assembly of monks headed by the Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa Thera, who decided to convene a Council after the purification of the Buddhist Dispensation (Sasana), by the intervention of King Asoka.

30. Another question often raised is why, unlike the first two Councils, the Third Council does not find mention in the literary sources of other Buddhist Schools of Thought. One observation made in this

regard, is that it was a “party meeting” confined to the Theravadins, and therefore, it was ignored by others. If this were so, then even the first two Councils would not be different from the Third. For we do not hear of a Buddhist Council participated by more than one School of Buddhist Thought.

31. As an answer to this question, we can offer the following explanation: If a number of Buddhist Schools, or for that matter, even if all of them, refer to the First Council, it is because at the time it was held there were no Buddhist Schools. Therefore we could expect it to be recorded by the Buddhist Schools that emerged subsequently, as an event connected with their own history, without being prevented from recording it due to sectarian feelings. Similarly, all those Buddhist Schools that broke away from Theravada sometime after the Second Council could be expected to record it, because it was an event that took place before they branched off into different Schools of Thought. But in the case of the Third Council, the situation is different. For, we are not aware of Theravada undergoing a schism in India after the Third Council. In fact, its history in India after its introduction to countries in South and South-East Asia is shrouded in mystery.

32. Contrary to what has been observed in some Pali sub-commentaries, there is evidence to suggest that the Pali commentators were not unaware of the doctrinal context in which this term becomes meaningful as another expression for Theravada. In introducing the Buddhist doctrine of causality, Venerable Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga*, says that he will give a full exposition of Vibhajjavada ‘by delving into the vibhajjavada-mandala, the circle of the vibhajjavadins’. Because the rejection by the Theravadins of the Sarvastivada theory of Tri-Temporality has a direct relevance to the Buddhist Doctrine of Causality, it is proper that this fact should be taken into consideration in any exposition that brings out its implications. A similar expression is found in the colophon of the commentary to the *Patthanappakarana*, where we get the Abhidhmma doctrine of Conditional Relations.

In concluding we would like to mention here that no other event in the history of Buddhist thought seems to have exerted so much influence on its subsequent history than the Buddhist Doctrinal Controversy that we have been referring to. At its very outset, it precipitated a crisis within the Theravada fraternity that not only led to the summoning of the Third Buddhist Council, but also resulted in the emergence of a new school of Buddhist Thought called Sarvastivada. It was also this controversy that led to the emergence, from among the ranks of the Sarvastivadins themselves, of another School of Buddhist Thought called, Kasyapiyas. What is called Sarvastivada or the “All Exist” theory, which came into vogue as a result of this controversy, played a very decisive role in deciding the history of Buddhist Thought in the centuries that followed. Among the post-Asokan Buddhist Schools of Thought, it became one of the hotly debated issues, resulting in a bewildering mass of arguments and counter-arguments in the literary works belonging to a number of Buddhist Schools of Thought. An account of the theory, together with its critique by the Sautrantikas, is found in Acarya Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakosa-Bhasya*. The Vaibhasikas of Kashmir became the chief exponents of this theory, after the Buddhist Council held in Jalandhara under the patronage of King Kanishka. Its main critics were the Sautrantikas. What provoked much opposition to this theory was that it led some kind substantial-ism, radically variant with the Buddhist teachings on non-substantiality of all phenomena. A detailed account of the theory with its critique by the Sautrabntikas is found in Acarya Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakosabhasya*. Since his presentation of the subject was made against the background of its Sautratika criticism, it did not get a

sympathetic response from the Vaibhasikas. It was in order to meet Acarya Vasubandhu's criticism of this and other subjects pertaining to the Vaibhasika Abhidharma that Acarya Samghabhadra composed his well-known treatise, the Nyayanusara, a work that has come down to us only in its Chinese Translation. Among the followers of Mahayana, it was mainly the Madhymakas, who maintained a sustained criticism against the "All Exists" theory of the Sarvastivadins. This is not to suggest that the Madhyamakas were in sympathy with the position taken up by the Theravadins and the Sautrantikas. In their opinion, the so called basic factors of empirical reality (dhammas/dharmas) are not real even in the present phase of time.