The Schism of Buddhism and the Rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India

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1. Schism of Indian Buddhism

At the time of the Buddha, the members of the Samgha sometimes did not live in harmony. Once a conflict between the monks arose in Kosambi. Though the Buddha himself tried to resolve it, it could not be resolved, so the Buddha left and went to the forest for his rainy retreat. Devadatta, the Buddha’s cousin, did not obey his instruction for living in harmony, but tried to struggle with him and even wanted to murder him. These events can also be considered as the kind of schism of the Buddhist Samgha. Witnessing it, the Buddha felt that the Samgha would be split after his demise. So in the Mahāparinibbānasutta, the Buddha advised the bhikṣus and bhikṣunīs that as long as the members of the monastic Order followed the following four rules, it will never be split: 1. Avoid to idle talk and gossips that do not lead to the goal of homeless life; 2. Maintain meetings of the members of the Samgha in peaceful way as frequently as possible; 3. Perform ceremonial acts, particularly the Uposatha ceremony in harmony; and 4. Obey and respect the elders (senior members of the Samgha), especially the leaders of the Order.

Nevertheless, after the demise of the Buddha, the Samgha seemed to have no guidance in the questions of homeless life. So the first Council was held to confirm the teachings of the Buddha in order to demonstrate that though the Buddha passed away, his teachings were recognized by the assembly of the Samgha. However, not all members of the Samgha accepted the results of the Council: venerable Punṇa and Gavāṁpati declared that they would only follow the teachings, which they heard from very lips of the Buddha. This was the first sign of the schism of the Buddhist monastic community.

During more than 100 years of development and spreading of Buddhism, the monastic Order practiced the teachings of the Buddha as well as the rules (Vinaya) in order to attain the goal of Buddhism. However, the doctrines of the Buddha were explained in different ways and the rules were applied in accordance with local customs. This was a natural development. On this account the Buddhist sects in India appeared and increased in number. The schism of monastic Samgha began clearly at the time of the second Buddhist Council at Vesālī about one hundred years after the nirvāṇa of the Buddha. The schism happened due to the disagreement on the rules of Vinaya (disciplines) between the younger and native monks of Vesālī, and the elder and alien monks. The former wanted to change some rules (ten rules) of monastic life to adapt to the changing social realities of Vesālī, but the latter objected to these ideas and strictly upheld the Vinaya that came down from the time of the Buddha. Though the ten rules did not amount to a radical revision of Vinaya, they caused the schism of the Samgha. Those who supported the new ideas of Vinaya were called the Mahāsāṃgha (Mahāsāṅghika), the opposite side was called the Shāhiṇḍro (or Theravāda). The schism gradually led to the rise of diverse sects and movements.

Besides the controversy about the Vinaya, the doctrinal differences also caused the division among the members of the Samgha. Thirty five years after the second Council at Vesālī, Mahādeva propounded the five points concerning Arahant, which were vehemently discarded by the Shāhīṇḍrans (elders of Shāhiṇḍra Sect). So, the council was held at Pāṭaliputra under the patronage of the ruling King Nanda who was his friend. In it, the members of Mahāsāṃgha supported the viewpoints of Mahādeva. The senior bhikṣus who opposed the five dogmas were expelled from the Buddhist community of Pāṭaliputra.

The schism of the Samgha began with the difference of viewpoints concerning the interpretation and practice of moral rules (Vinaya) at Vesālī and developed into doctrinal schism between the Mahāsāṃgha or majority and Theravāda or minority on the question of five dogmas propounded by Mahādeva at Pāṭaliputra. From that time onwards, the division of monastic community gradually widened. More than eighteen sects appeared; out of which eleven sprang from the Theravāda tradition, and seven from the Mahāsāṃgha that adopted new ideas in order to adjust to the geographical, social and cultural changes. The latter sects became the fore-runners of the Mahāyāna tradition. Nalinaksha Dutt pointed out...
that the factors below were the probable reasons for the breakup of the Samgha:

1. Absence of the leader of the Samgha community.
2. Particularization in each of the different doctrines of the Buddha’s teachings.
3. Grouping around the famous teachers.
4. Large permission in Vinaya.

Besides, during his life-time, the Buddha used different ways, methods, ideas and instruction techniques depending on the ability and composition of the audience in order to make them understand his teachings. His method characterized by versatility, flexibility and affluence led to the difference of interpretation of his teachings later.

1. The Buddha himself recognized that he was not the ‘teacher’s fist’ regarding the doctrines. He stressed that he only taught the Dharma that was for the happiness of all. He also did not take charge of the Samgha of monks and nuns. He encouraged his disciples to take refuge in themselves, not in others. Let Dharma be the only island for refuge.

In addition, the Buddha said that the bhikṣus, bhikṣunīs, laymen and laywomen who respected the Dharma, respected him. The Buddha also told his disciples that after his demise, the Dharma, the doctrines and disciplines that he had taught would become their teacher.

2. During the lifetime of the Buddha, when there was no written language for recording his teachings, the only way for storing and transferring them down to the next generations was recitation and memorization. It was impossible for a single monk or nun to memorize all the discourses of the Buddha, so among the Buddha’s disciples each memorized a particular set of discourses. At the first Buddhist Council, Venerable Ānanda who for a long time was the Buddha’s personal attendant recited the doctrines (Suttas/Sūtras), while the venerable Upali was requested to recite the disciplines (Vinaya). They were preserved and handed down from generations to generations. Moreover there was a chance that someone who was interested in the doctrines would not be able to memorize the disciplines and vice versa, which fact gradually became a reason for the development of sects within Buddhism.

3. The Buddha sometimes gave prominence to some of his disciples by complimenting them for their particular abilities in certain sets of the Dharma. He also encouraged the newcomers to the Samgha to follow prominent monks in practicing the doctrines and disciplines. The Anguttara Nikāyas contains a list of the most prominent of the Buddha’s disciples: 1. Sāriputta (Skt. Sāriputra) was praised as having the highest wisdom (mahāpāññānam); 2. Mahāmoggallāna possessed the highest miracle power (iddhimantānam); 3. Mahākassapa was the greatest in austerity (dhītavādinānam), 4. Mahākaccāyana, the greatest expositor, 5. Anuruddha had excellent eyes (dībha cakkhukānām), 6. Puṇṇa, the greatest preacher of the Dhamma (dhammakathikānām), 7. Ānanda was well versed in the Suttas (bahuṣsūtānām), 8. Upāli clearly understood the Vinaya (vinayaśāstrīnām), 9. Revata Khadiravaniya, the greatest reclus in the forest (āraṇhikānām), 10. Rāhula, the greatest student (sīkkhākāmānām), etc. Each student would naturally imbibe the qualities of his teacher. Thus, the bhikṣus under the guidance of Sāriputra were the foremost in wisdom, etc. More than a thousand years after the nirvāṇa of the Buddha, Hsuan Tsang, the Chinese Buddhist monk and pilgrim, traveled to India and mentioned that the monks specializing in Abhidharma worshipped Sāriputra, Saṃādhi’s/iddhi power (miraculous power) disciples Mahāmoggallāna, Sātra learners Puṇṇa, Srāmanera (novice) students Rāhula, bhikṣunīs Ānanda, the Mahāyānists Mañjuśrī and other Boddhissattvas.

4. The Samgha disciplines were not rigid precepts, but optional moral principles that were applied flexibly and changed depending on different social conditions. Some monastic disciplines were accepted on the periphery, but were strictly prohibited to the bhikṣus who dwelled in the center. For instance, the Buddha made some exceptions for those who resided in Avanti where Mahākaccāyana was preaching and guiding the Samgha. In the Mahāparinibbānasutta, the Buddha told Ānanda that he was free to abolish some minor rules of the monastic Order after his passing away. Thus, following the rules had the purpose of creating the power of self-control in the mind of each member of the Samgha.

As seen from the above instances, the disciplinary rules in the Buddha’s view were optional. He never obligated his disciples to strictly observe them, but after his nirvāṇa his disciples made it the most important matter in the Samgha. The introduction of the ten rules of Vinaya by the bhikṣus of Vesālī did not harm the Samgha, but the senior monks (elders) made it very important because they were persistent in it. This might have caused the schism of the Samgha during the spreading and development of monastic Buddhism.

According to Dīpavamsa, there were eighteen sects of which seven were the offshoots of the Mahāsamgha and eleven of the Sthaviravāda. They are shown in the Chart I.

Another source mentions a different number and names of sects and sub-sects. The Mahāsanghikas split into seven sects including the original one: 1. Mahāsanghika, Gokulika (Kākulika), Paññattiśvāda (Prajñaptivāda), Bahusrutiya, Chettiyavāda, Ekavyavahārika and Lokottaravāda. Whereas, the Theravādins (Sthaviravādins) split into eleven sub-sects: Theravāda, Mahāsāsaka, Dharmagupta, Sarvāstivāda, Sam, Kāśyapīya, Saṅkantika, etc.
Lamotte cites the account of Vasumitra who classified the sects and sub-sects of Buddhism as seen in Chart II. Thus, notwithstanding the difference of accounts it can be asserted that in the first four centuries of the history of Indian Buddhism, a number of sects developed and spread in most regions of India. According to Taranātha, a Tibetan historian who lived in the 16th century A.D., though the monastic Buddhism was split into eighteen sects, they coexisted without a serious conflict.

2. Rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism

The schism of Buddhism started at the second Buddhist Council. In the beginning, there were the two main sects: the Mahāsaṅghika (Mahāsaṃgha) and Sthaviravāda (Theravāda). And from them eighteen sects sprang. By 150 B.C., a new set of Buddhist doctrines and practices developed. It continued for two hundred and fifty years till 100 A.D. It was known as Mahāyāna Buddhism and it was the result of development of the new Buddhist doctrines during the period of Sectarian Buddhism. It did not originate from any individual, and was not connected with any special sect in the period of early Buddhism. It was rooted in various sects of Buddhism, and it originated in various regions of ancient India, the south, north and east. This new movement could be seen as an effort to combat factionalism in Buddhism and reform its monastic tradition.

Some modern scholars propound the theory that Mahāyāna Buddhism derived from the Mahāsaṅghika Sect, since they shared a large number of doctrines. For instance, several doctrines in the Mahāprajñāpāramitā sūtra of Nāgārjuna (the 1st century A.D.) originated from the Mahāsaṅghika literature. On the other hand, various important concepts of Mahāyāna were derived and developed from the doctrines of the Sarvāstivāda Sect (a subsect of the Sthaviravāda); the Yogācāra School or Vijñānavāda that was founded by Maitreyanātha at the 3rd century A.D. and developed to its highest stage by half-brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu in the 4th century A.D., borrowed many ideas from Sarvāstivāda. Thus, various doctrines of Mahāyāna clearly had a relation to those of Mahāsaṅghika and Sarvāstivāda. Williams pointed out that the Mahāyāna Buddhism might have developed among or influenced by some monks who had left monasteries in order to practice more intensely and live a more austere life. Mahāyāna Buddhism was considered as the result of an austere revivalist movement of the Buddha’s followers who wished to return to the example of the Buddha himself who had made a long and tough journey to attain enlightenment.
Akira Hirakawa mentioned three sources that contain detailed significant accounts of the origin of Mahāyāna. The first source is Sectarian Buddhism (also called the Nikāya Buddhism). According to him, many modern Buddhist scholars believe that Mahāyāna grew out of the Mahāsāṃghika Sect due to the doctrinal similarities between the two. However, the Mahāsāṃghika Sect persisted for a long time even after the appearance of Mahāyāna. Moreover, the teachings of other Sects such as Sarvāstivāda, Theravāda, Dharmaguptaka, and Mahīśāsaka also influenced and were incorporated into Mahāyāna. Thus, the rise of Mahāyāna cannot be seen simply as a result of the transformation of Mahāsāṃghika.

The second source is the biographical literature of the Buddha compiled by the individuals who were considered as Mahāyāna teachers. This literature may have belonged to Sectarian Buddhism, but it later became the means to overcome sectarian limits and provided the accounts of the rise of the new Buddhist movement, Mahāyāna. The Mahāvastu, composed by the Lokottaravādins (the sub-Sect of the Mahāsāṃghika Sect), the Abhinirakramanāsūtra of the Dharmaguptakas, the Lalitaśīlā of the Sarvāstivādins, the two later were the sub-sects of Sthaviravāda, which were close to the biographies of the Buddhism that were developed in Mahāyāna later. Besides, some biographical compositions by Buddhist poets, such as the Buddhacarita of Aśvaghoṣa (the 2nd century A.D.) had close relations with the Sarvāstivāda Sect, but its author was closely connected with other Sects, such as Bāhūsūtra, Sautrāntika, and Yogācāra. He and other Buddhist poets like Mātṛceta (the 2nd or the 3rd century A.D.), just after Aśvaghoṣa were known to be a part of the new Buddhist movement.

The third source is the stūpa worship. After the nirvāṇa of the Buddha, his relics were divided into eight parts and distributed among the eight states of central India. These eight relics were placed in eight stūpas built for their worship. During the reign of King Asoka, these relics were re-divided into many parts and placed in stūpas built by Asoka in every place of his kingdom. The stūpa worship gradually spread wherever Buddhism spread. Stūpa worship made a significant contribution to the rise of Mahāyāna. For, the beginning of stūpa worship led to the establishment of Buddhist monasteries around the stūpas. Further, groups of followers formed Orders and started to develop the new doctrine relating to the salvation powers of the Buddha. These factors gradually contributed to the rise of Mahāyāna.

This new Buddhist movement known as Mahāyāna had three characteristic features. First, it rather involved the concept of Buddhahood. The Mahāyānists believed that the Buddha was eternal in body and life and was a supernatural individual. This concept was borrowed from the Mahāsāṃghika Sect and developed in Mahāyāna Buddhism as the idea of Sambhogakāya (body of enjoyment). Second, Mahāyānists developed the concept of Bodhisattva who is already free from the cycle of birth and death (samsāra), but desiring to help all living beings a Bodhisattva is reborn in the lower realms. This concept was developed by some sects during the period of Sectarian Buddhism. In early Buddhist literature, particularly of the Sarvāstivāda Sect, Bodhisattva referred to the previous lives of the Buddha. According to the Sarvāstivādins, Bodhisattva living in samsāra was subject to his karma, but he/she was free of the law of karma if he/she attained Arahanthood and entered the nirvāṇa. By contrast, the Mahāsāṃghikas maintained that Bodhisattva has already been freed from the effects of the law of karma, he possessed all merits in order to attain Buddhahood, but he/she is reborn in the lower realms out of his/her will and vow to save all living beings. Thirdly, the Mahāyānists developed new teachings, particularly Abhidharma, which was the result of the practice of deep meditation.

Thus, Mahāyāna appeared as a result of interaction between the members of different Sects that possessed separate doctrines and sūtras. So, those who accepted these new doctrines and sūtras as the teachings of the Buddha (Buddhavacana) might have been called the followers of Mahāyāna. But they did not necessarily have to leave their former traditions. The members of Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly the members of monastic Order were still a minority among the followers of Indian Buddhism during the first few centuries of its development. They dwelled in their own monasteries, and even lived together with other members of Sectarian Buddhism (also called the Hinayāna Buddhism). This proves that the members of new Buddhist movement retained the same disciplines (Vinaya) of monastic life as the followers of the Sectarian Buddhism; they only had different doctrines and practices. At the end of the 4th and in the beginning of the 5th century A.D. (399-414 A.D.) the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hsien who visited India mentioned three kinds of monasteries: Sectarian Buddhism monasteries in which all members followed the doctrines of Sectarian Buddhism, Mahāyāna monasteries, and mix monasteries in which both the followers of Sectarian and Mahāyāna Buddhism were resided. Hsuan Tsang who traveled in India during fourteen years starting from 629 A.D. also mentioned the same three kinds of Buddhist monasteries. He added that sixty percent of monasteries belonged to Sectarian Buddhism, twenty four percent to Mahāyāna and fifteen percent were monasteries in which the followers of both Mahāyāna and Sectarian dwelled together.

Thus, the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism demonstrated the creative and flexible nature of
Buddhism, which helped it to adapt to the changing social and cultural circumstances. Its appearance produced a significant change in both Buddhist thought and practice. It displayed unlimited compassion inviting all those who aspired after the highest goal of Buddhism, Buddhahood. It accommodated various ideas and popular religious practices. All these aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism contributed to its development and popularity.

4 Cullavagga XI, 1.3-6.
6 The ten unlawful rules in the Cullavagga XII, 1.1.
   i. Sīkhiḷona kappā: keeping salt in a horn.
   ii. Dvāngula kappā: taking food in the afternoon.
   iii. Gāmanta kappā: taking two meals on the same day.
   iv. Āvāsa kappā: taking uposathas in different places within the same sīmā (boundary).
   v. Anumati kappā: deciding an act without enough members of Saṅgha.
   vi. Ācīnṇa kappā: following the precedent custom.
   viii. Jāloṣṭhī pāṭun kappā: drinking fermented fruit juice.
   x. Jātāruṣṭrājaṁ kappā: begging and keeping gold and silver.
8 Arahant:
   i. is impure by wicked Devas (Atthi arahato rāgo ti?). Kathāvatthu II.1, p.164.
   ii. may remain ignorant (Atthi arahato ariññām ti?). Kathāvatthu II.2, p.173.
   iii. may have some doubts (Atthi arahato kaikkha ti?), Kathāvatthu II.3, p.180
   iv. attain goal (Arahant) through others (Atthi arahato paraviṁna ti?), Kathāvatthu II.4, p.187.
   v. attain goal (Arahant) by the path of an exclamation (Vacībheda). Kathāvatthu II.3, 4 and XI.4.
10 Ibid., p.41-42.
11 Dīgha Nikāyā ii.100.
12 Ibid., ii.101.
13 Ibid., ii.139.
14 Ibid., ii.156.
19 Dīgha Nikāyā ii.156.
23 E. Lamotte, op. cit., p.530.
26 Ibid., p.181.
29 Sambhogakāya, the body of enjoyment. This is the subtle body of limitless of form. It can be considered as the body or aspect through which the Buddha enjoyed Himself in the Dharma, in teaching the Dharma, in leading others to the realization of the Dharma, and in enjoying the company of Bodhisattvas.