

ONE VEHICLE FOR PEACE

By Ven. Professor Dr. Walpola Sri Rahula

Buddhists should be able to distinguish these three terms – Theravada, Hinayana and Mahayana. According to the Ven. Rahula, the first of these terms to come into usage is Theravada, first introduced into Buddhist history after the First Council held at Rajagaha. This Council, attended by 500 Arahants, who were also the immediate disciples of the Buddha, was held three months after the Buddha's Parinibbana. Mahayana came centuries later. Scholars accept the fact that the terms Hinayana and Mahayana were 'invented' by the Mahayanists.

There is some confusion over the usage of the terms Theravada and Hinayana; one is wrongly used for the other. "In fact," says the Ven. Rahula, "no Hinayana sect as a distinct community is known to be existing today anywhere in the world". One should therefore use the term Theravada and not the term Hinayana when referring to the school of Buddhism practised in South-East Asian countries – Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia.

Whatever the form of Buddhism practised, whether Theravada or Mahayana, the common factor remains that the Buddha is their Master and the Dhamma, Truth is one and the same. The Buddhist Sangha, whether Theravada or Mahayana, is a potent force for world peace. It is one vehicle for peace. The Rev. Rahula says that in the world of today which is threatened with nuclear warfare and by nuclear weapons that could inflict untold human suffering and wipe out the whole of humanity itself, the greatest religious service that both the Theravada and Mahayana Sangha can do and is bound to do is to promote understanding, harmony, peace and happiness among the people. It is not to fix labels of religion on one another's back.

The Ven. Professor Dr. Rahula is too well-known a figure in the Buddhist world to require any introduction in these pages. Suffice it to say that, inter alia, he is the Chancellor of the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka and the following article is the gist of his talk given at the Third International Congress of the World Buddhist Sangha Council held in Taipei, Taiwan in December 1981.

Ed.

During the life time of the Buddha, His teaching was known variously as **Buddhavacana**¹ “Word of the Buddha”, **Buddhasāsana**² “Message of the Buddha” or “Teaching of the Buddha”, **Satthu-sāsana** “Master’s Message” or “Master’s Teaching”, **Sāsana**³ “Message” or “Teaching”, or **Dhamma**⁴ “Teaching” or “Truth”. At that time there was nothing called Theravāda or Mahāyāna. According to the ancient chronicles of Sri Lanka: **Dipavamsa** (Chronicle of the Island, 4th century A.C.), **Mahāvamsa** (Great Chronicle, 5th century A.C.) and the **Samantapāsādikā** (Commentary on the **Vinaya**), the terms **Theravāda**, **Theriya** or **Therika** were first introduced into the history of Buddhism after the first Council (Synod), held at Rajagaha (Rajagriha) three months after the Buddha’s **Parinirvāna**. At this Council, attended by five hundred **Arahants** who were immediate disciples of the Buddha and presided over by Mahakassapa Thera, all the teachings of the Buddha, both the **Dhamma** and the **Vinaya**, were recited during seven months and unanimously accepted as the genuine teaching of the Master. What was approved and agreed upon at this Council was designated as **Theravāda** “Orthodoxy of the Elders”, or **Theriya** or **Therika** “Tradition of the Elders”⁵.

Mahāyāna came into being several centuries later, about the beginning of the Christian era, and most of the early **Mahāyāna** Scriptures were composed during the following few centuries. But **Mahāyāna** was elaborated and formulated as a system of Buddhist philosophy by two great Masters who might be considered as the founders of the two principal **Mahāyāna** schools – Nagarjuna (second century A.C.) who established the **Mādhyamika system** with his famous **Mūlamādhyamaka-kārikā** in which **śūnyatā** (Voidness) philosophy is discussed and his enormous Commentary on the **Prajñāpāramita**, and Asanga (fourth century A.C.) who established the **Yogācāra-vijñāyavāda** system with his monumental work **Yogācārabhūmiśāstra**, consisting of seventeen books.

Here a clarification of the terms **Theravāda** (Orthodoxy of the Elders), **Hinayāna** (Small Vehicle) and **Mahāyāna** (Great Vehicle) may be desirable and helpful. **Hinayāna** and **Mahāyāna** are not known in the **Theravāda** Pali literature. They are not found in the Pali Canon (**Tipitaka**) nor in the Commentaries on the **Tipitaka**, not even in the Pali Chronicles of Sri Lanka, the **Dipavamsa** and the **Mahāvamsa**.

It is universally accepted by scholars that the terms **Hinayāna** and **Mahāyāna** are later inventions by **Mahāyānists**. **Theravāda** cannot be included in either of these divisions. Historically speaking, **Theravāda** already existed long before these two terms came into being. This same **Theravāda**, considered to be the original teaching of the Buddha, was introduced to Sri Lanka and firmly established there in the third century B.C. during the time of Emperor Asoka of

India. At that time there was nothing called **Mahāyāna**. This appeared several centuries later. Without **Mahāyāna** there could be no **Hinayāna**. The Buddhism that went to Sri Lanka, with its **Tipitaka** and Commentaries approved and accepted by the Third Council in the third century B.C., remained there intact as **Theravāda**, and did not enter the scene of the **Hinayāna-Mahāyāna** dispute that developed later in India. It seems therefore illegitimate to include **Theravāda** in either of these two categories. However, after the inauguration of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Sri Lanka in 1950, well-informed people, both in the East and in the West, use the term **Theravāda**, and not the term **Hinayāna**, with reference to the form of Buddhism prevalent in South-east Asian countries like Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. There are still some outmoded people who use the term **Hinayāna**. In fact, no **Hinayāna** sect as a distinct community is known to be existing today anywhere in the world.

At the First International Congress of the World Buddhist Sangha Council held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in January 1967, at the request of the founder Secretary-General, the late Ven. Pandita Pimburē Sorata Thera, I presented a concise formula for the unification of **Theravāda** and **Mahāyāna**, which was unanimously accepted. (This formula is now printed as Appendix IV in my **Heritage of the Bhikkhu**, Grove Press, New York, 1974).

This formula may be restated as follows:

1. Whatever our sects, denominations or systems, as Buddhists we all accept the Buddha as our Master who gave us the Teaching.
2. We all take refuge in the Triple Jewel: the Buddha, our Teacher; the **Dhamma**, His teaching; and the **Sangha**, the Community of holy ones. In other words, we take refuge in the Teacher, the Teaching and the Taught.
3. Whether **Theravāda** or **Mahāyāna**, we do not believe that this world is created and ruled by a god at his will.
4. Following the example of the Buddha, our Teacher, who is the embodiment of Great compassion (**mahā-karunā**) and Great Wisdom (**mahā-prajñā**), we consider that the purpose of life is to develop compassion for all living beings without discrimination and to work for their good, happiness and peace; and to develop wisdom leading to the realization of Ultimate Truth.

5. We accept the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha, namely, **Dukkha**, the fact that our existence in this world is in predicament, is impermanent, imperfect, unsatisfactory, full of conflict; **Samudaya**, the fact that this state of affairs is due to our egoistic selfishness based on the false idea of self; **Nirodha**, the fact that there is definitely the possibility of deliverance, liberation, freedom from this predicament by the total eradication of the egoistic selfishness; and **Magga**, the fact that this liberation can be achieved through the Middle Path which is eight-fold, leading to the perfection of ethical conduct (**sila**), mental discipline (**samādhi**) and wisdom (**paññā**).
6. We accept the universal law of cause and effect taught in the **patīccasamuppāda** (Skt. **pratītyasamutpāda**) (Conditioned Genesis or Dependent Origination), and accordingly we accept that everything is relative, interdependent and interrelated and nothing is absolute, permanent and everlasting in this universe.
7. We understand, according to the teaching of the Buddha, that all conditioned things (**sankhāra**) are impermanent (**anicca**) and imperfect and unsatisfactory (**dukkha**), and all conditioned and unconditioned things (**dhamma**) are without self (**anatta**).
8. We accept the Thirty-seven Qualities conducive to Enlightenment (**bodhipakkhiyadhamma**) as different aspects of the Path taught by the Buddha leading to Enlightenment, namely,

Four forms of Presence of Mindfulness (Pali: **satīpatthāna** , Skt: **smṛtyupasthāna**);

Four Right Efforts (Pali: **sammāpādhāna**, Skt: **samyakpradhāna**);

Four Bases of Supernatural Powers (Pali: **iddhipāda**, Skt: **rddhipāda**);

Five Faculties (Pali: **indriya: saddhā, viriya, sati, samādhi, paññā**, Skt: **śraddhā, virya, smṛti, samādhi, prajñā**);

Five Powers (**bala**, same five qualities as above);

Seven Factors of Enlightenment (Pali: **bojjhaṅga**, Skt: **bodhyaṅga**);

Eight-fold Noble Path (Pali: **ariyamagga**, Skt: **āryamārga**).

9. There are three ways of attaining **Bodhi** or Enlightenment according to the ability and capacity of each individual: namely, as a **Brāvaka** (disciple), as a **Pratyekabuddha** (Individual Buddha) and as a **Samyaksambuddha** (Perfectly and Fully Enlightened Buddha). We accept it as the highest, noblest and most heroic to follow the career of a **Bodhisattva** and to become a **Samyaksambuddha** in order to save others. But these three states are on the same Path, not on different paths.

In fact, the **Sandhinirmocana-sūtra**, a well-known, important **Mahāyāna sūtra**, clearly and emphatically says that those who follow the line of **Śrāvaka-yāna** (Vehicle of Disciples) or the line of **Pratyekabuddha-yāna** (Vehicle of Individual Buddhas) or the line of **Tathāgatas (Mahāyāna)** attain the supreme **Nirvāna** by the same Path, and that for all of them there is only one Path of Purification (**viśuddhi-mārga**) and only one Purification (**viśuddhi**) and no second one, and that they are not different paths and different purifications, and that **Śrāvakayāna** and **Mahāyāna** constitute One Vehicle, One Yana (**ekayāna**) and not distinct and different vehicles or **yānas**.⁶

10. We admit that in different countries there are differences with regard to the ways of life of Buddhist monks, popular Buddhist beliefs and practices, rites and rituals, ceremonies, customs and habits. These external forms and expressions should not be confused with the essential teachings of the Buddha.

But to the masses of less instructed and less advanced people, superficial beliefs, external forms, practices and observances are part of their religion. Those beliefs and practices should be appreciated sympathetically according to their relative value. Attachment to external observances and rituals (**silabbata-parāmāsa**) is a weakness, a bondage, a fetter (**samyojana**) from which one frees oneself as one progresses along the Path leading to the realization of Ultimate Truth, **Nirvana**. Not only attachment to observances, rites and rituals, but also attachment to ideas, ideals, concepts, beliefs, theories (**dhamma-tanhā**) obstructs one's mind from seeing things as they are (**yathābhūta**). This is a hindrance not only to the realization of Truth, but also to achieving harmony and peace among peoples.

Buddhism is not an ethnocentric religion. It transcends all ethnic, tribal or national boundaries and limits. It does not carry with it any ethnic customs, habits or practices from one country or one nation to another. Buddhism, while exercising a profound influence over those countries throughout Asia where it spread and was established, naturally and graciously adapted itself to the cultures of those countries and nations. Hence the varieties of Buddhist culture – varieties of art and architecture, varieties of the statue of the Buddha, varieties of the garb of the members of the Sangha, varieties of observances and ceremonies – from Tibet in the North to Sri Lanka in the South, from India in the West to Japan in the East. Yet the unity of these external **Dharma** runs through all these external varieties linking them together like a silk thread running through the beads of different colours of a necklace. The **Dharma**, Truth, is one and the same. External forms are many and different.

The members of the Buddhist **Sangha** should not be influenced by aggressive, fanatical tendencies prevailing in some parts of the world today. The **Sangha** should preserve with dignity and courage the long-established glorious tradition of Buddhist understanding and tolerance. In the long history of 2500 years of Buddhism there has never been any war or persecution to convert people. Buddhist monks propagated the teaching of the Buddha throughout Asia, and now they do it in other parts of the world as well, always peacefully, through the force of their teaching, tolerance, and an inoffensive, benevolent and gentle attitude. The members of the **Sangha** can set an example to the world in this respect.

Today humanity is threatened with the possibility of a nuclear war that means unimaginable and unprecedented destruction and suffering throughout the world. Two super-powers are threatening each other and are brandishing the latest weapons of annihilation. Those who wield power in the world seem to be devoid of mental health. Only the voice of the well-organized masses of people across the world may bring them back to sanity. There are more than one million members of the Buddhist **Sangha** in the world today, both **Theravāda** and **Mahāyāna**. They have a tremendous influence over the masses. It is the bounden duty of the Buddhist **Sangha** to spread the message of compassion and wisdom among all people in order to achieve world peace. The greatest religious service is to promote understanding, harmony, peace and happiness among people, and not to fix labels of religion on one another's back.

Notes

- 1 *Vinaya* (PTS) II (*Cullavagga*), p. 139.
- 2 *Dhammapada*, verses 381, 382; *Anguttara-nikaya* (PTS) I, p. 294.
- 3 *Vinaya* (PTS) I, p. 12; *Digha-nikaya* (PTS) I, p. 110; II, p. 206; *Suttanipata*, verse 482.
- 4 *Majjhima-nikaya* (PTS) I, pp. 133, 141, etc.
- 5 *Therehi katasamgaho theravado'ti vuccati* "The Collection (of Scriptures) done by the Elders is called the Orthodoxy of the Elders".
Dipavamsa, Ch. IV, verse II.
Thereh'eva katatta ca thereya'yam parampara "As this was done by the Elders, this is (called) Elders' tradition". *Mahavamsa*, Ch. III, verse 40.
Thereh'eva katatta ca therika'ti pavuccati "As this was done by the Elders, this is called (regarded as) belonging to the Elders".
Samantapasadika (PTS) I, p. 30. The *Samantapasadika* is a translation into Pali by Buddhaghosa in the 5th century A.C. from the original Sinhala Commentaries which go back at least to the 3rd century B.C.

6 *Sandhinirmocana-sutra*, edite et traduit par Etienne Lamotte, Louvain et Paris (1935), pp. 73, 147, 198, 255.