

# **THE EARLY BUDDHIST COUNCILS AND THE PRINCIPAL SCHOOLS AND SECTS OF BUDDHISM**

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The Buddhist Order which began with five Arahants has now developed into millions scattered in almost every part of the globe. In the early days, the community of monks was united and free from dissensions. But as time passed, and the community of monks grew in number, a few differences arose among them on some points of doctrine and discipline. This resulted in the formation of various divisions among the hitherto united monks.

Although there were no sectarian divisions during the time of the Buddha yet there is evidence of a few dissensions and controversies. The first such incident recorded in the Buddhist literature was the controversy created by the bhikkhus of Kosamba. This controversy which sparked off as a result of a disagreement in a minor rule of discipline, could not be settled even by the Buddha. He, therefore, went away to the Parileyya Grove. The people then began to rebuke the dissentient monks accusing them of compelling the Buddha to desert them and depart to Parileyya Grove, by their behaviour. The repentant monks, unable to continue their dispute any further, came to a settlement. The second incident we encounter is the schism created by Devadatta. This too came to an end with the tragic death of Devadatta.

These various disputes did not last long. Yet, the seeds of discord thus sown, may have remained dormant within the community of monks. We cannot forget the six obdurate chabbaggiya monks, who were for ever attempting to break or belittle the rules of discipline. Although they were disciplined by the Buddha on every occasion, the traces of their points of discord may have remained after them.

Even among the prominent Arahants, there were conflicting views regarding certain matters. The view expressed by Elder Purana regarding the first Council bears testimony to this. Elder Mahakassapa who met Elder Purana, immediately after the conclusion of the First Council told him, "Friend Purana, we rehearsed the doctrine and the rules of discipline well and truly. Do accept them please". But Elder Purana replied "Friend Kassapa, I do believe that you did rehearse the Dhammavinaya well and truly. But I prefer to practise what I studied from the Buddha himself." (Susangita avuso Dhammo ca vinayo ca.

Apicaham tatha dharemi yatha bhagavato sammukha sutam sammukha patiggahitam).

These diverse views may have been the cause of the formation of subsequent divisions and schools among the community of monks.

### **The First Council**

The First Council of 500 monks, presided over by Elder Mahakassapa, was held at Rajagaha, immediately after the Parinibbana of the Buddha. The main business of the Council was the rehearsal of the Dhamma and Vinaya.

### **The Second Council**

The Second Council is of much importance when we think of the beginning of Schisms in the Order. This Council was held 100 years after the death of the Buddha, to condemn 10 misrepresented points of discipline. The bhikkhus of the Vajji clan were in the habit of indulging in ten practices which were unlawful and inadmissible. The 700 monks who assembled at Vesali to settle this controversy declared that the ten points in question were inadmissible. The 10,000 Vajji monks including their followers who did not agree with the participants of the orthodox Council held a separate Council of their own. This Council came to be known as Mahasangiti as its attendance was greater than that at the Council convened by the conservative monks. After this rival Council, the dissenting monks broke away to form a separate Sect known as the Mahasanghika.

The above is an account of the formation of the Mahasanghika Sect, as given in the Theravada chronicles such as Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa and Cullavagga. But the version given by Mahayanists such as Bhavya and Vasumitra varies in certain respects. They trace the cause of origin of the Mahasanghika Sect to five unorthodox points regarding the Arahants and the doctrine, raised by a monk known as Mahadeva.

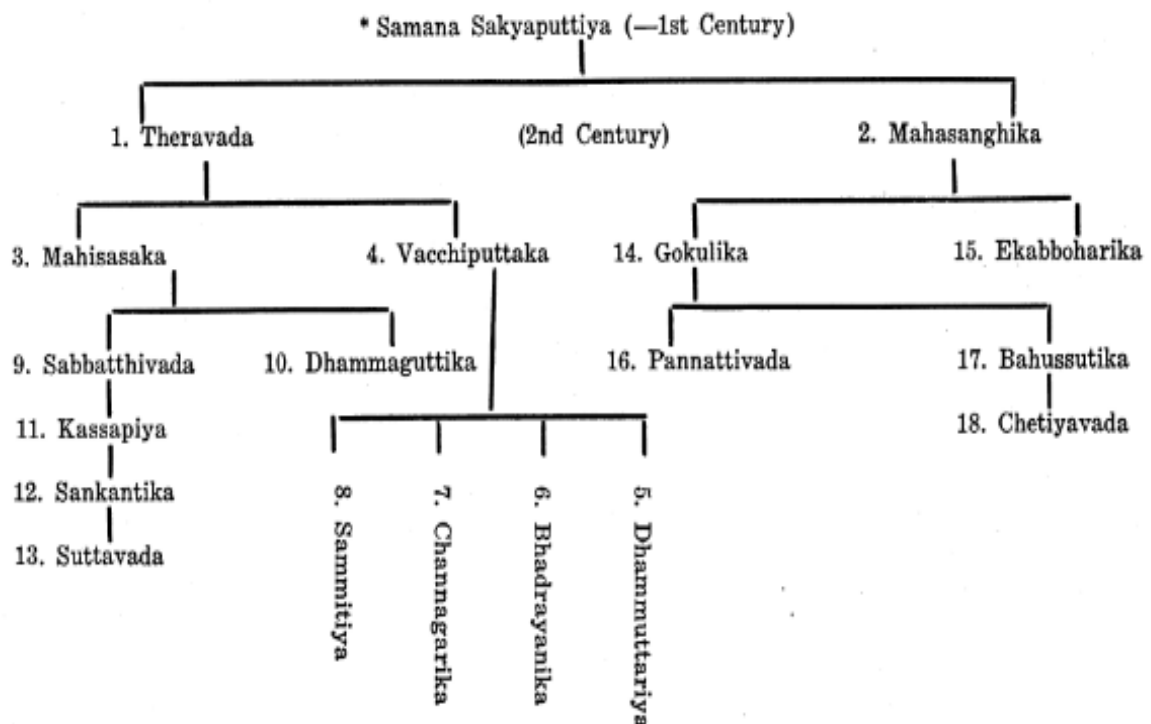
This is the first schism recorded in the history of the Order. The community of monks which was one united body till then, thus broke up into two sects, the orthodox monks calling themselves Theravadins and the Vajjis going as Mahasanghikas. The Mahasanghika Schism and its sub-divisions later came to be known as the Mahayana Sect.

By the end of the 2nd century after the death of the Buddha, there arose 18 different Sects, 11 from the Theravadins and 5 from the Mahasanghikas.

## The Third Council

The Third Council at Pataliputta was held under the patronage of Emperor Asoka, with a view of purifying the Canon which was misinterpreted and interpolated by different Sects that had arisen by this time and by the heretics who were secretly intermingled with the Buddhist monks. This Council succeeded in removing heretical interpolations and the corrupt practices followed by the Sectarians. According to modern scholars this Third Council was held only for the Theravada monks. One other important result of this Council was the dispatch of missionaries to various parts of the world to propagate the Dhamma. Emperor Asoka sent missionaries to all parts of India, to Kashmir, to Ceylon and to Burma and according to his Thirteenth Edict he sent missionaries to Antiochus ii of Syria, Ptolemy of Egypt, Antigonus Gonatos of Macedonia. Magas of Cyrenia and Alexander of Epirus. According to some Thai historians, Emperor Asoka sent missionaries to Thailand. As they were Theravada monks they established Theravada School of Buddhism in those countries. On the other hand the missionaries of the descendants of Mahasanghikas began to spread the Mahayana School of Buddhism in some other countries. This led to the formation of various other subdivisions with certain modifications to suit the needs and the local beliefs of each country.

The following is a diagrammatic representation of these Sects,



The ultimate aim of the followers of each of those schools was the attainment of the final bliss, Nibbana. The difference lies in the interpretation of the doctrinal and disciplinary points and the approach to the final goal. The Buddhist

countries of Southern Asia, except Vietnam, follow the Theravada School, and the form of Buddhism practised in those countries remains the same, except for a few minor matters. In Ceylon, there were three main schools, the Mahavihara, Abhayagiri and Jetavana. The Mahavihara School and the Abhayagiri School were constantly involved in a long struggle, and ultimately the Mahavihara School won. At present there are three main sects, the Siamese, Amarapura and Ramanna.

In Burma, there are three main sects, the Sudhamma, the Schwegin and the Dvaranikaya. These differ mainly on questions of personal behaviour and very little on essential points.

In Thailand and Cambodia, there are two sects, the Mahanikaya and the Dhammayuktika nikaya. The difference is restricted to very minor rules or conduct.

The Buddhism, practised in Tibet is a mixture of Theravada and Mahayana. Several Sects such as 'Bkah-gdams-pa', 'Sa-Skya-pa,' came to be formed from time to time.

In Nepal, the form of Buddhism practised is similar to that in Tibet.

As Buddhism spread in *China*, it came in contact with different Schools of Buddhism, and losing its orthodox character, gave rise to various Sects with indigenous characteristics. The "*Chan* School" which emphasises the importance of intuition, "*Yoga-mi-kiau*" School which advocated the Yogas or magic observances in Buddhist practices, "Pam-Jo-Tsung" (Prajna) School and "*Ssu-lun-tsung*" (Madhyamika) School are some of them. The most important that flourishes in China is the Tien-tai School which believes in a threefold system of comprehension, viz. empty, hypothetical and medial.

Most of the Buddhist Sects in Japan originally came from China. Hence, the Buddhism practised in Japan, is akin to that practised in China. Of the thirteen main Sects that exist in Japan, the more important ones are the Tendai extolling the Ekayana Theory Shingon, based on Tantric Sutras, Jodo which believes in Amitabha, Zen laying stress on Meditation and Nichiren advocating the recitation of Saddharmapundarika sutta.

