

Theravada Buddhism

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Theravada is, in short, primitive Buddhism. The term Theravada could be translated as the “School of the Elders”. Venerable Theras such as Upali, Ananda, Dasaka, Sone, Siggava, Moggaliputta Tissa and Mahinda preserved in their memories the teachings of the Buddha which they had learnt as his disciples.

During the life time of the Buddha, Theravada Buddhism spread over an area from the river Kosi to Savatti and from Vindhya to the Himalayas. Nowadays, it is found over a large part of the world, principally in India, Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Chittagong in East Pakistan.

The Buddha had taught his sublime doctrine during forty-five years of wandering from place to place. He taught all classes of men and women, kings and beggars, holy men and robbers, and made not the slightest distinction between them. He recognized no difference of caste or social groupings, and the way he preached was open to all men and women who were ready to understand and to follow it.

By the Theras of the Theravada School, these teachings were known as Dhamma and Vinaya. This was during the life time of the Buddha. When he was on his death bed, he told the sad faced Ananda not to mourn over his death, as Dhamma and Vinaya would take the place of the Master.

While Buddha was alive, some of the disciples had already been against part of his teaching. Amongst these were Devadatta, Radha, Malunkeyputta and Sati. Buddha allowed them freedom of thought and gave them full tolerance. He made no attempt to hide anything as esoteric doctrine – Acariya Mutti.

The Buddha’s teachings were collected in systematic form during the first council, which was held immediately after his death in Sattapanni cave near Rajagaha by the disciples under the leadership of the Venerable Mahakassapa. There was seldom discussion over doctrinal matters among the well-known Theras, but the Council was necessitated by the pious determination of the disciples of the Buddha to preserve the purity of his teaching.

In some of the discourses of the Buddha, philosophy and philosophical terms were extensively discussed, and these terms, when they had been collected, came to be known as *matika*. Later, they were elaborated, and with their

increasing veneration they came to be accepted as part of the Buddha's teaching, and known as Abhidhamma Pitaka. This Abhidhamma Pitaka came into existence centuries after the Parinibbana of the Buddha but the kernel of it had been present in the discourses of the Buddha. As much as the first Theravada Council, there were two other Theravada Councils that held to preserve primitive Buddhism in its original form. These were in India under the presidency of the Venerable Sabbakami and the Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa. After the third Council, Emperor Asoka sent Theravada monks abroad as missionaries to nine countries, including Ceylon.

A few Theravada Councils were held in Ceylon, after the arrival in the Island of the Buddhist missionaries headed by Arahant Mahinda, the only son of the Emperor Asoka. The first of these was held in the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa of Ceylon in 247 B.C., under the Presidency of Venerable Arahant Arittha. The next important Council was held during the time of King Vattagamini Abhaya (101-77 B.C.). This Council at the Aloke Cave in Ceylon is considered to be the most important of all, as the Tripitaka and Attha-Kathas were inscribed on palm leaves, and these scriptures were checked over a hundred times. This Council was held under the Presidency of the Venerable Rakkhita Thera.

Among the Councils we should not forget the important sixth Buddhist Council held in Rangoon, Burma, from May 1954. Here Theravada monks from all the Buddhist world organized themselves into groups to re-examine the text of the Tripitaka. This great Council did not conclude its work until the full moon of Vaisakha in 1956, the 2500th Anniversary of the Buddha's parinibbana.

So, with these Councils, Theravada Buddhism preserves intact and unaltered the original teaching of the Buddha – as in the three ways (Savaka Bodhi, Pacceka Bodha and Samma Sam Bodhi) by which we can attain Nibbana, which in the Mahayana School has become altered to the one path of Bodhisatta.

Theravada Buddhism keeps to the rules of the Buddha's teaching, it accepts their binding limits, and it never tries to "modernize" them or to change them according to circumstance or country or the times. During the past 2,500 years, Theravada Buddhists have kept burning the flame of the Buddha's teaching in its original purity. It is there to be seen in the scriptures and the history of Theravada. It will be the same for the foreseeable future. The world will be kept alive for the benefit of all in all the coming ages of time.