

BUDDHA-FIELD AND TRANSFER OF MERIT IN A
THERAVĀDA SOURCE

Though Sri Lanka has been considered the homeland of the most orthodox and conservative form of Buddhism and has played an important part in the preservation and spread of Theravāda throughout history, Buddhism in Ceylon was not exempt from the general trend towards innovation, and there were periods when orthodoxy had a rather difficult time with the dynamics of Mahāyāna and Tantric forms of Buddhism. Both from the chronicles and from a considerable number of architectural and inscrip-tional remains we can imagine the impact of Mahāyāna on the mediaeval culture of Ceylon.¹ Influences from Mahāyāna were also absorbed in the popular religion of the Sinhalese.²

In Pāli literature, Mahāyāna is called Vetullavāda.³ In the historical literature of Ceylon, the earliest reference to Vetullavāda is found in the *Mahāvamsa*. There it is said about King Vohārikatissa (215—237 A.D.) that, “suppressing the Vetulla doctrine and keeping heretics in check by his minister Kapila, he made the true doctrine to shine forth in glory” (*Mahāvamsa* 36.41). Since there is no information on the type of this Vetulla heresy in the commentary of the *Mahāvamsa* (*Vamsatthappakāsinī*, ed. G. P. Malalasekera, p. 662), we depend for additional information on much later sources which seem to be of a rather suspicious nature. Thus we must confess that we do not have any reliable historical information on the exact nature of the Vetulla doctrines suppressed by this king, nor do we know how much earlier, from which part of India and by whom these doctrines were brought to the island, and which communities in Ceylon were subscribers to Vetulla, or Mahāyāna doctrines. More than 60 years later, King Goṭhābhaya again suppressed the Vetullavāda. In the passage recording this event (*Mahāvamsa* 36.111 f.) we also find the first explicit statement that the monks who had turned to the Vetulla doctrine belonged to the Abhayagirivāsins. This nikāya, or sect, which is also named the Dhammaruci (Dharmaruci) sect, had originated as a result of the first split of the Buddhist Sangha of Ceylon during the period of King Vattagāmani Abhaya (1st century B.C.).

It is widely believed “that the use of Sanskrit rather than Pāli by the monks of the Abhayagiri fixed yet another distinction between them and their rivals of the Mahāvihāra”, and this is reproduced even in some rather

recent publications on the subject.⁴ However, we have ample evidence for the fact that the Abhayagirivāsins used the same collection of sacred scriptures in Pāli which has been handed down to us by the orthodox Theravāda tradition of the Mahāvihāravāsins and which formed the common heritage of all of the three nikāyas, or sects of Buddhism, in mediaeval Ceylon.

Another wide-spread misunderstanding is the belief that the monks of the Abhayagirivāsa and the Jetavanavāsa sects were mostly followers of Mahāyāna, whereas the monks of the Mahāvihāra sect are believed to have based their interpretation of the doctrine on the Theravāda tradition as introduced from India exclusively, without being much influenced by the further development of doctrine and literature in India. It has been long known, however, that late canonical and post-canonical Pāli literature was heavily influenced by Indian Buddhist literature and philosophy of other schools.⁵ On the other hand, the available evidence clearly gives proof that, though Mahāyānist tendencies were at times tolerated in the Abhayagiri and Jetavana communities, Mahāyāna was never made the official creed of these two nikāyas.

There is, unfortunately, still much confusion about the nature of Buddhist "sects" (nikāya) or "schools" (vāda) in spite of the enormous amount of writing that has been done on Buddhist sects. This confusion is caused by confounding different types of sect. We should differentiate three main types of sect: the so-called vinaya sects, the doctrinal sects, and the philosophical schools. A "vinaya sect", or nikāya is characterized as a community of monks who mutually acknowledge the validity of their ordination and make use of the same particular redaction of the vinaya texts, i.e. the texts of Buddhist ecclesiastical law.

The second type of "sect" came into existence during the period of doctrinal dissensions and controversies, when particular notions of the issues under discussion were accepted in the different nikāyas, which had only now turned into communities which were distinguished, not only as different "vinaya sects", but also as upholders of certain doctrines. Only very few of the sects mentioned in the context of the early doctrinal controversies succeeded, however, in developing a consistent system of philosophy which had an impact on the progress of philosophical thought in India. These were the philosophical schools. There should be no confusion of these philosophical schools with the earlier doctrinal and the early vinaya sects. A Sarvāstivādin, in the sense of a follower of the Sarvāstivāda philosophy, could well have been a member of a rather different vinaya sect, particularly of a sect which had no philosophical tradition of its own.

The formation of Mahāyāna Buddhism took place in a way which was