

# THE FORMATION OF THE BUDDHIST CANON

## THE FIRST COUNCIL



Immediately after Shakyamuni Buddha's death, his followers gathered with the purpose of putting his teachings and sermons into definitive order. Since we are dealing with events that transpired well over two thousand years ago, we cannot hope to learn of them in detail. Our only recourse is to examine the fragmentary bits of information recorded in the Buddhist scriptures, piece them together through conjecture, and in this manner attempt to reconstruct the way in which the Buddhist canon came into being.

The First Council is said to have taken place in the year of Shakyamuni's death at a place called the Cave of the Seven Leaves (Skt *Saptaparna-guha*) in a mountainside near Rajagriha, the capital of the state of Magadha.

Attended by some five hundred monks, it was said to have centered around Mahakashyapa, Ananda, Upali, and the others among Shakyamuni's ten major disciples who were still alive at the time. We are told that Ajatashatru, the king of Magadha, also lent his assistance to the council. The site remains in existence today, and photographs of it show a gently sloping hill with a cave in the side, approached by a flight of some ten stone steps. One can make out a broad open area within, where the members of the council must have gathered in order to be protected from the rain.

Some Western scholars have questioned whether the First Council ever took place. Since the scriptures of both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism mention “the rules formulated at the gathering of the five hundred” and “the five hundred who compiled the precepts,” it seems that such a gathering did in fact occur. We could, of course, deny the validity of the scriptures themselves on this point and others like it, but to do so would be to reduce ourselves to silence, since they are our only source. Most Buddhist scholars, at least in Japan, regard the First Council as a matter of historical fact.

With the death of such an extraordinary leader as Shakyamuni, it is only natural to suppose that his disciples should want to gather immediately and put into order their recollections of his teachings so that the dharma, or Law, could be handed down to later generations without error.

The scriptures record an interesting episode concerning the particular circumstances that impelled Mahakashyapa to call the members of the Order together in council. According to this account, Mahakashyapa, accompanied by a large group of monks, was on his way from Pava to Kushinagara at the time when Shakyamuni passed away. Along the road, Mahakashyapa and his group met a Brahman who was holding in his hand a *mandara* flower. Mahakashyapa asked him if he had any news of Shakyamuni, whereupon the man replied that Shakyamuni was no longer of this world. Hearing this, some of the monks began to weep and wail aloud, while others grieved in silence. To everyone’s astonishment, however, one old monk burst into the following embittered harangue. “Friends, cease your sorrow, cease your grieving! Now we are free at last from that Great Monk. ‘This you may do,’ he would say to us, or ‘This is not proper for you,’ making life miserable for us and oppressing us. But now we may do whatever we like and need never do anything that goes against our wishes!”

Mahakashyapa, who was known in the Order as “foremost in the ascetic practices,” naturally listened to these rantings with grave dis-

pleasure. As soon as Shakyamuni's funeral had taken place and his remains had been taken care of, he addressed the other monks in these words: "Friends, we must make certain that the teachings and ordinances are put into proper form, rendering it impossible for false doctrines to flourish while true ones decline, for false ordinances to be set up while true ones are discarded, for expounders of false teachings to grow strong while expounders of the truth grow weak, for expounders of false ordinances to seize power while expounders of true ones lose it."

Mahakashyapa then selected five hundred monks to undertake the task of putting Shakyamuni's sermons and teachings in order and shaping them into the canon of the Buddhist religion.

While convenient, the account seems plausible enough and serves to point up an important motive that must surely have lain behind the compilation of the canon. I am referring, of course, to the notoriously unpredictable nature of the human heart. Among Shakyamuni's followers were those who ordinarily evinced the greatest respect for him and were diligent and strict in their practice of the dharma, or Law. And yet in certain cases, they retained in their hearts a fundamental egoism and narrowness of vision. Faced with the fact of Shakyamuni's death, the true nature of their hearts was suddenly and almost unconsciously revealed. That, I believe, is what the story of the old monk and his shocking outburst is intended to convey.

To his disciples, Shakyamuni was a teacher who bestowed on them the deep compassion and love of a father. At the same time, he was the leader of their religious organization. The large majority of his disciples regarded him with awe and respect, but there must have been others who could not live up to the severe discipline demanded of them, the ordinances that made their lives so different from those of ordinary laymen, and who were therefore still prey to the temptations and delusions of the mundane world. It was only natural for such persons to feel, however mistakenly, that they had been liberated from an oppressive

spiritual burden. The rantings of the old monk served as a warning to Mahakashyapa that a certain laxness was likely to invade the Order.

The death of its foremost leader meant that the Order faced a time of grave peril. In the Indian society of the period, still overwhelmingly dominated by the various schools of Brahmanism, Buddhism was as yet a very new religion and one with a relatively small following. The death of the founder naturally deprived the organization of its prime source of leadership and inspiration and plunged many of the disciples into deepest despair. Undoubtedly they felt a sudden emptiness in their hearts, a sense of fathomless bewilderment and loss.

Shakyamuni's passing probably occasioned varied reactions among persons and groups outside the Buddhist Order as well. Those who looked upon the new religion with ill will in all likelihood predicted that Shakyamuni's death signaled its gradual disintegration, for no matter how outstanding a personality the founder of a new religious order may be, if he or she can find no suitable successor to carry on the work, the order is likely to be troubled by internal dissension and fall into decline. The various Brahmanical schools in particular, we may surmise, hoped and believed that this would be the case.

This is not surprising, since it appears to have been the general belief that, apart from Shakyamuni, there was no one in the Buddhist Order who was of truly exceptional stature. The scriptures record the following exchange when the disciple Ananda chanced to meet an old friend who was a Brahman. "Ananda," the Brahman inquired, "now that the Buddha has passed away, is there anyone of equal stature to carry on in his place?"

Ananda replied: "Friend, how could there possibly be anyone of equal greatness? The Buddha through his own efforts attained an understanding of the truth and set about putting it into practice. All that we, his disciples, can do is to follow the teachings that he handed down and the example that he set for us."

Just as the earlier anecdote concerning Mahakashyapa indicated that

a definitive Buddhist canon was necessary for the solidarity and maintenance of the religious order, so this one concerning Ananda illustrates the necessity for such a canon as an authoritative foundation in matters of faith. “Rely on the Law and not upon persons,” says a popular Buddhist teaching (cf. WND-1, 102). But to do so, that Law must become a matter of public record.

We are told in the Nirvana Sutra that, just before his death, Shakyamuni addressed the disciples gathered about him with the following words: “Although I may die, you must not for that reason think that you are left without a leader. The teachings and precepts I have expounded to you shall be your leader. Therefore if any of you have any doubts, now is the time to question me about them. You must not lay yourself open to regret later on, when you may say, ‘Why didn’t we ask him while he was still alive!’” Shortly after, he said: “Decay is inherent in all composite things. Work out your own salvation with diligence.” These famous words were his final pronouncement as he passed into nirvana.

It is from this passage that the precept “Rely on the Law and not upon persons” derives. Shakyamuni no doubt intended his words to be a warning against the self-appointed teachers who would come forward after his death and attempt to confound the doctrine with their own private interpretations and theories. Some Buddhist scholars believe that work had already begun on the compilation of a definitive canon during Shakyamuni’s lifetime, though the more common view is that he merely charged his disciples to keep a careful record in their minds of his words and actions. This is probably why, during his later years, Shakyamuni kept Ananda constantly by his side as his personal attendant. In their Chinese versions, nearly all the sutras begin with the phrase “This is what I heard.” In nearly all cases the “I,” we are told, represents Ananda, who, famed for his remarkable powers of memory, recited the exact words that he had heard the Buddha preach.

Jainism, another new religion that arose in India at about the same

time as Buddhism, split into two divisions after the death of its founder because there was no definitive canon to appeal to in cases of doctrinal dispute. Some scholars have suggested that it was this example that led Shakyamuni to charge Shariputra, another of his principal disciples, with the task of codifying his teachings.

There can be no doubt that Shakyamuni, particularly in his later years, gave intense thought to the question of how best to ensure the continued existence of the dharma. Any religious leader of outstanding ability and foresight can be expected to give serious and constant consideration to the future of the organization after his or her death. The proof that Shakyamuni did so is to be found in the fact that, immediately after his departure from the world, his followers came together in conclave and put his teachings in order. This act, together with the immense amount of effort expended by members of the Buddhist faith over the following thousand years or more in preserving and enlarging the body of sacred scriptures, is surely a reflection of the intense concern that Shakyamuni evinced during his lifetime for the continued existence of the dharma.



## THE RECITATION OF THE WORDS OF THE BUDDHA

From the scriptures, we learn that Mahakashyapa, eldest of the surviving major disciples, acted as the chair of the First Council, “the assembly of five hundred monks,” while the disciples Ananda and Upali were chosen to recite the words of the Buddha as they had memorized them. Ananda, having been for a long time Shakyamuni’s personal attendant, constantly at his side, was in a position to remember just what teachings the Buddha had expounded, where, and to whom, while Upali, who was noted among the ten major disciples as “foremost in observing the precepts,” possessed the most thorough knowledge of the rules of discipline the Buddha had laid down for the Order. Thus Ananda

recited before the assembly the words pertaining to the dharma, which came to be referred to as sutras, while Upali dictated the rules and regulations that are known collectively as the *vinaya*.

It was not simply their powers of memory and recall, however, that qualified Ananda and Upali for the task assigned them. They were living embodiments of the Buddha's teachings. Anyone who works with one's whole being to absorb and retain every word and phrase that is taught will find it impossible ever after to divorce oneself from such teachings, even if he or she wishes to do so. Thus, although the teacher may die, the teacher's voice does not. The term *voice-hearer* (Skt *śhrāvaka*) is used to describe those disciples who were able to listen to Shakyamuni's preaching. Such individuals, when they could no longer listen to Shakyamuni's actual voice, no doubt kept his words continually in remembrance and pursued the religious life in light of them.

Needless to say, there were in those days no mechanical means of recording or any methods of taking shorthand. It is even doubtful that scripts existed for the writing of Indian languages.<sup>1</sup> Shakyamuni's disciples, if they were to retain his teachings, had no recourse but to make those teachings an integral part of their own being by committing them to memory as a community.

It is important to note that these teachings are not in any sense a system of intellectual knowledge or a body of facts. Rather they are an expression of wisdom addressing questions such as how human beings ought to live or what is the cause of human suffering. As the disciples received the teachings of the Buddha, they proceeded to put them into practice in their own lives and in this way, one by one, verified the truth and validity of Shakyamuni's words.

The teachings of Buddhism, we must remember, are to be mastered subjectively, through actual practice. One can never understand them by sitting at a desk and reading a book. Only through the exchange that takes place between one person and another, one life force and another, can their truths be grasped. This point should also be kept in

mind when approaching the Buddhist scriptures, which represent the embodiment of the teachings and wisdom.

We may suppose that Upali in his daily attitudes and activities exemplified the rules of conduct and discipline laid down for the Buddhist Order. It was not that he went about recalling to mind one by one the ordinances that Shakyamuni had formulated, but rather that all of his actions had unconsciously come to be a living expression of the discipline, or *vinaya*, and of the spirit that underlay it. Had he not mastered it so thoroughly, it is unlikely that he would have been singled out among all the disciples for the epithet “foremost in observing the precepts.” Something similar can probably be said of Ananda. Had he not mastered the teachings, he would not have been able to recite from memory such a vast number of sermons, a feat that is indeed one of the wonders of the history of Buddhism. As we shall see later, the Tripiṭaka, or three parts of the Buddhist canon, consists of the sutras, or teachings, of the Buddha; the *vinaya*, or rules of discipline; and the *śāstra*, or commentaries. Of these, the sutras, which were recited by Ananda, run to more than six thousand works.

The scriptures describe the circumstances under which the canon was compiled in the following manner. Mahakashyapa addressed the two disciples who were to be the reciters, saying: “Monks, listen to my words. I believe the time has come for us to question the elder monk Ananda concerning the doctrines of the faith.”

To this Ananda replied, “Monks, listen to my words. I believe the time has come for me to reply to the questions of the elder monk Mahakashyapa concerning the doctrines of the faith.”

Mahakashyapa then asked, “My friend Ananda, where did the Buddha preach his first sermon?”

Ananda once more replied, saying, “My friend Mahakashyapa, thus have I heard. The Buddha was once at the Deer Park in Varanasi. . . .”

When Ananda then went on to describe how Shakyamuni delivered his famous first sermon at the Deer Park at present-day Sarnath near

Varanasi, the older monks all wept and sank to the ground in grief. So deep was their sorrow over the death of Shakyamuni that, when Ananda recreated the words of the sermon and the noble figure of Shakyamuni appeared once more in memory as he had been in life, they were overcome with emotion.

After Ananda had completed his recitation, the members of the gathering examined it to make certain that it contained no errors, and then all recited it together in unison, each monk in this way engraving the words in his or her mind.

This group recitation is of particular importance, for it was in this way that members of the council committed the words of the sermon to memory, enabling them to hand them on to others. According to scholars, the various hymns and other rhymed portions of the sutras were worked out by the members of the council in order to make the words of the Buddha easier to memorize. Also, since paper did not exist at this time and it was therefore impossible to write down the texts of the sermons, it was necessary that each recitation should be submitted to the careful scrutiny of the assembly. Only when a version to which all could consent had been reached would the joint recitation take place. Because of this process, the work of the First Council is sometimes described as “the first group recitation” as well as “the first compilation” of the scriptures.

Here we must note that Buddhism stresses the necessity of reading or reciting the sutras with the three faculties of “body, mouth, and mind.” In other words, the important thing is not to approach them like a body of intellectual knowledge but to discover how one can make the Buddha’s teachings a part of oneself and put them into actual practice.

It is natural to suppose that in any group of persons listening to the teachings of the Buddha, such as the five hundred monks at the First Council, there are bound to be differences in how individuals comprehend these teachings. Some of the monks had perhaps heretofore

interpreted certain of the teachings in an arbitrary manner so as to accord with their own predilections. The coming together of the five hundred, the examination of each point in the teachings with the utmost care, and the establishment of a definitive version of the Buddha's words to which all the members of the assembly could give their assent and which in the future would be the common property of the Order as a whole, are of enormous significance in the history of Buddhism.

Through this first codification of the teachings, it was hoped that a unity of doctrine and opinion might be quickly established within the Order at a time when death had deprived it of its founder and leader. On the basis of the extant sources, it is possible to surmise that the aim was not necessarily to collect all of the various teachings expounded by Shakyamuni during the course of his life but to give precedence to those that seemed of greatest importance and usefulness in the immediate preservation and continuance of the Order.

Earlier I related an anecdote from the scriptures telling how Ananda was asked by a Brahman friend if there was someone worthy to succeed Shakyamuni, and how he replied in the negative. We find a very similar anecdote concerning Ananda and a high minister of the state of Magadha. "Ananda," asked the minister, "has someone been designated by the Buddha to be the leader of the monks in the period after his departure?"

"No, Your Lordship, there is no such person."

"Then is there someone whom the elder monks have agreed to recognize and support as an authority for the monks to rely upon in the period after the Buddha's departure?"

"No, Your Lordship, there is no such person."

"Then, Ananda, what will the monks rely upon, and how will they maintain concord within the Order?"

To this Ananda replied with firmness and confidence: "Your Lordship, we are by no means without anything to rely upon. Your Lord-

ship, we have something to rely upon. The Law is what we rely upon!”

From this we may see that the canon compiled at the First Council served as a basis of absolute authority. The monks referred to the teachings of the Buddha thus preserved by the term *Agama*, which means “teachings handed down by tradition,” and cherished them as something to be relied upon without question.

These earliest sacred scriptures devote a great deal of attention to precepts and rules of discipline. Some scholars even go so far as to suggest that the Agama were in fact compiled principally to serve as a book of rules for the Buddhist monasteries.

Why these early scriptures should be of this nature can be partly explained by the circumstances surrounding their compilation—the general feeling, as we have seen, that there was no person worthy to act as Shakyamuni’s successor in leading the new religious organization and that therefore reliance was to be placed upon the teachings and precepts handed down by Shakyamuni. In addition, the scriptures may well reflect the temperament of the particular monks who assembled at the conclave, especially those of Mahakashyapa and the other elders who acted as leaders of the council.

Mahakashyapa was singled out among the ten major disciples as “foremost in ascetic practices,” an indication that, though surely not fanatical, he was very strict in his observance of the various austerities enjoined by Shakyamuni. But although he was capable of surpassing the other disciples in his devotion to ascetic practice, he does not otherwise seem to have been a very colorful personality. Surely he never enjoyed the kind of infectious popularity that monks such as Shariputra and Maudgalyayana aroused among the members of the Order, and he may even have been somewhat deficient in his understanding of the deeper philosophical principles of Shakyamuni’s teachings. As long as Shariputra and Maudgalyayana remained alive, it appears to have been a common assumption that they would be Shakyamuni’s successors, though, as it happened, both men preceded Shakyamuni in

death. Mahakashyapa, however, was apparently never considered to be of the stature worthy to qualify as Shakyamuni's heir. Even his friend Ananda, as we have seen earlier, had to admit that there was in fact no one among the remaining disciples distinguished enough for that role.

This is not to deny that Mahakashyapa played a crucial and praiseworthy part in the convening and proceedings of the First Council. Yet the fact that such a person was chosen to head the council suggests that the process of selecting representatives may have been far more complicated than it seems.

For example, Purna, another major disciple, was not among those selected. He is said to have remarked that he intended to carry out the teachings of the Buddha in accordance with the way he himself had heard them expounded by Shakyamuni. That statement, although it does not directly challenge the authority of the First Council, suggests that he, and perhaps others like him, had reservations about the way in which Mahakashyapa and his fellow council members were codifying the teachings. It would also appear that there were a considerable number of Shakyamuni's followers who were unable to attend the First Council but who carried on their religious activities independently in various outlying regions. Later we will have occasion to discuss the Mahayana sutras that took shape in the following centuries. It is quite possible that they were put together by these smaller religious groups that did not choose to be limited by the canon as it was formulated by the majority of the Order at the First Council.

Reviewing the events of this period, one may see what a severe blow it was to the Order that both Shariputra and Maudgalyayana died before Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni himself was reported to have said, "Since Shariputra and Maudgalyayana died, this gathering seems empty to me!" Their loss no doubt inflicted upon him incalculable sorrow. If these two remarkable men had taken part in the First Council, it is quite possible that the early Buddhist canon would have assumed

a somewhat different form. While it is perhaps idle to speculate, we should recall that, in Shakyamuni's closing years, both men were permitted to preach the dharma in his stead, so well versed were they in the theory as well as the practice of the new religion. They were in fact the two great pillars of the Order, and if they had survived to become the leaders after Shakyamuni's death, Buddhism might have developed in quite a different manner.

However that may be, in the historical growth of Buddhism in this early period, it was the canon fixed by the First Council, regarded with the utmost reverence and gravity, that served as the core of the faith. And, although that canon may have had its imperfections and deficiencies, the determination of the people who compiled it to ensure the continuance of the dharma was the factor that led in time to the birth of the whole great corpus of Buddhist teachings.

That we can read the sutras and discover in them the doctrines derived from the wisdom of the Buddha is due to the action and precedent set by these early disciples in gathering immediately after Shakyamuni's death to put the canon in order. The intense concern that Mahakashyapa, Ananda, and the others showed over the preservation and continuance of the dharma is what made it possible for Buddhism to survive and to be handed down over twenty-some centuries until today.<sup>1</sup>



## THE TEACHINGS OF GREAT RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The great people of history generally leave behind them a record in some form or other of their actions and words. Some of them, particularly politicians, take the precaution of compiling their own memoirs and biographies so as to show themselves to posterity in the best possible light. These last works, smacking as they do of self-justification, are seldom read for long, whatever attention they may attract when they first appear. Yet four of the greatest men in all history, Shakyamuni,

Socrates, Confucius, and Jesus of Nazareth, left no writings whatsoever from their own hand. In their case, the records of their words and deeds were compiled by their disciples, and these records have served as an unending source of inspiration for more than two thousand years of human civilization.

In the case of Socrates and Jesus, because both met with tragic deaths, it is likely that their biographies have been considerably dramatized at the hands of their disciples. Thus, as scholars have long pointed out, the picture of Socrates facing death that is built up by Plato in the *Crito*, *Phaedo*, and the *Apology*, and the account of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as it is recorded in the Gospels, contain elements at variance with historical fact.

By comparison, the portrayal of Shakyamuni in the early Buddhist scriptures conveys a striking sense of realism and simple humanity. In the Mahayana scriptures, however, the account of the Buddha becomes highly elaborated and overlaid with literary embellishments. Western scholars may find such elaborations difficult to comprehend and may well prefer the earlier accounts. I, however, like most other Eastern Buddhists, am overwhelmingly drawn to the Buddha of the Mahayana scriptures.

Buddhologists both in Asia and the West, reflecting the positivism and critical approach of modern Western scholarship, have in recent years devoted great effort to discovering the historical facts underlying traditional accounts. Needless to say, I applaud such efforts and hope to see them carried forward with all possible diligence.

Still I would like to express a word of caution and reservation concerning the methodology employed by some of these modern researchers. In what they claim to be an objective search for historical fact, they seem intent upon employing the standards and viewpoints of modern society to lay bare the true personalities of great historical personages. If their methods do in fact succeed in constructing a clearer and more truthful portrait of the great person, one that can be more deeply appre-

ciated and understood by those of us living today, then their efforts are all to the good. But too often the opposite seems to be true. The scholars appear deliberately to ignore aspects of greatness and to focus all attention upon failings, as though they were determined to drag the subject of their inquiry down to the level of the ordinary human being. I sense behind their endeavors a kind of arrogance toward the past that is characteristic of modern society.

The traditional accounts of Shakyamuni, as well as those of Socrates, Confucius, and Jesus, quite probably contain a certain element of fiction. But this element, if present, is designed to illustrate the ideal in human beings and to inspire in people the courage and wisdom to attempt, insofar as they are able, to attain that ideal. In fact, even if all elements of the fictional were to be carefully winnowed from the biographies of these men, they would still remain without doubt among the greatest figures to appear in the history of human society over the past three thousand years.

The Buddhist scriptures, the Bible, even the dialogues of Plato, are not to be judged in the same category as ordinary works of literature. They contain detailed accounts of the wisdom won through great effort and struggle by the great religious leaders of humankind and of philosophies of life that are inexhaustible in depth and inspiration. If these works had confined themselves to a dry recital of the historical facts concerning the lives of the men whose teachings they record, one wonders if they would ever have been as widely, as fervently, and as continuously read over the centuries as they have.

In the case of Buddhism, there is one more point that must be kept in mind. As the scriptures continually remind us, the teachings of the Buddha are intended to bring salvation to all sentient beings. Thus, the early disciples, in compiling the canon, were not simply putting together a record of Shakyamuni's words and actions; they were speaking and acting in his stead. If they themselves had not been able to enter into the same lofty state of mind as the Buddha, they could not have

understood Shakyamuni's teachings nor could they have handed them down to later ages. This is why we say that each word and phrase of the sutras represents the golden sayings of the Buddha. And when we, as followers of Buddhism, stand with the scriptures in hand and challenge the society of our time, we too, like the disciples some two thousand years ago, must enter into the same state of mind as the Buddha himself. We must give ourselves wholly to the task of bringing light to the masses of men and women who are lost in suffering and teaching them the true way of life.

#### NOTE

1. The oldest examples of Indian writing (excepting the ancient Harappa inscriptions) date from the third century BCE. In the preceding centuries, literature was handed down orally, as seems to have been the case with the early Buddhists, and people of the time were no doubt capable of feats of memory that would seem incredible to us today.

# THE THERAVADA AND THE MAHASAMGHIKA



## THE BACKGROUND OF THE SECOND COUNCIL

Around a hundred years after the First Council, a second great Buddhist conclave took place, known as the Second Council. It is from around this time that the Buddhist Order appears to have split into two major divisions, one known as the Theravada, or “Teaching of the Elders,” the other as the Mahasamghika, or “Members of the Great Order.” The Buddhism of the former was in later times transmitted to the countries south and east of India and constituted the origin of the type of Buddhism that prevails today in such countries as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, and Laos.

The motives that led to the calling of the Second Council must have been very different from those behind the First Council, when Shakyamuni’s disciples gathered to honor him and perpetuate his memory. Upali, the monk who had played such an important role at the First Council, died thirty years after the Buddha, and we may suppose that most of Shakyamuni’s other direct disciples died around the same time. Surely it is difficult to imagine that anyone who had known the Buddha in person could still have been living a hundred years after his death. Thus by the time of the Second Council, the Buddhist Order was headed by men who belonged to the fourth or fifth generation after that of its founder.

In those hundred years, times undoubtedly changed, and it was

probably inevitable that differences should have arisen in how Shakyamuni's doctrines and the rules governing the Order should be interpreted.

We know that Buddhism was gradually gaining a place of importance in Indian society and was acquiring many followers among the common people. One proof of this is the fact that the Mahasamghika was said to have drawn its support largely from lay believers, an indication of the degree to which the new religion had spread among the common people. At the same time, the number of Buddhists among the rulers and nobles of the cities, as well as the merchants and artisans, had also increased. Monasteries were founded in many regions, and the religion, from its base in eastern India around the kingdom of Magadha, was gradually disseminated in all directions.

It was a difference of opinion concerning the precepts, however, that led to the convening of the Second Council. A group of monks of the Vriji tribe from the city of Vaishali had come forward with a new interpretation of the ten precepts, the basic rules of discipline for the monks of the Order, and the Council was convened to consider the validity of their interpretation.

The monks of Vaishali drew up a list of ten actions, heretofore prohibited to members of the Order, and proposed that they be declared permissible. The first item proposed that monks be allowed to store away salt; previously, the storing of any kind of foodstuff had been prohibited. Others would have permitted the monks to eat after the noon hour, an action normally forbidden, and, under certain circumstances, to use bedding, mats, and robes that departed from the prescribed size. They would also be allowed to drink certain beverages ordinarily forbidden. Finally, it was proposed that monks be allowed to accept gifts of gold and silver. This was apparently the most controversial of all, since accepting any kind of monetary alms had been strictly forbidden in the past.

At the time of the Second Council, Shakyamuni's disciples lived a

highly circumscribed life, one that it is difficult to imagine the Buddhist clergy of modern times being willing to tolerate, at least in Japan. Of course, if a man made up his mind to leave ordinary life and become a monk, he must have been fully prepared to abide by the strict discipline of the Order. But one cannot help feeling that the kind of stern asceticism that forbids the members of the Order even to lay aside a small store of salt or demands that they receive its sanction before presuming to regulate the smallest details of their life must in the end diminish and impair the basic humanity of the persons subjected to it. In effect, it must have inhibited the spirit of enterprise and activism needed to carry out the main objective of the Order, that of spreading abroad the teachings of Buddhism.

One reason the Order had fallen into this highly regulated asceticism was that the monks had come to have a strong consciousness of themselves as a special class in society. They saw themselves as a group set apart from the common run of people for the purpose of carrying out special religious practices, and this consciousness, we may surmise, led them to make the rules governing their lives ever more detailed and exacting. One might suppose that true discipline would spring up instinctively from within and form the basis for one's dealings with the external world, but this does not seem to have been the case with these fourth- and fifth-generation Buddhist monks. Rather it was their impulse to shut themselves off from the outside world that inspired their rules of discipline, and these rules in turn further isolated them from society as a whole.

It is important to note that the stirrings of opposition should have appeared in the city of Vaishali, the home of the famous lay believer Vimalakirti, of whom we shall have more to say later. A flourishing center of free commerce, that city also served as the capital of the Vriji, a confederation of five tribal groups having a republican form of government headed by representatives of the tribes. In view of the relatively progressive and cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city, it is easy

to imagine a new movement arising among the members of the Buddhist community there that sought to break out of the shell of discipline-oriented isolation.

The leaders of this new movement believed that Buddhism had originally been intended for all men and women in society and should therefore never have been allowed to become the possession of one special class. Thus, they called for a return to what they considered the original spirit of Buddhism as it had been propounded by Shakyamuni.

The ten precepts of the Vriji monks would have allowed monks to perform certain actions hitherto prohibited to members of the Order. It was not long, however, before word of their innovations reached the more conservative elders, who greeted them with alarm. In the eyes of these elder monks, themselves strict observers of the rules of discipline laid down by the First Council, the appearance of monks who willfully broke the rules constituted a threat to the Order of the utmost gravity.

Before long, a number of elder monks from all over India had assembled in a garden in the city of Vaishali to consider the problem. Five monks each were chosen as representatives of those coming from eastern and western India respectively and were charged with the task of examining the ten precepts of the Vaishali monks in the light of the teachings on discipline handed down from the First Council. After branding them as the “ten unlawful things,” they submitted their condemnation to the members of the gathering as a whole for formal confirmation.

When this had been done, the leader of the meeting selected seven hundred monks and had them perform a group recitation of the sutras and rules of discipline, just as Mahakashyapa had done at the time of the First Council. Thus ended the Second Council, or the “Gathering of the Seven Hundred Monks,” as it is sometimes called.

By placing all emphasis upon the omnipotence and unassailability of the rules of discipline, it might be argued that the Elders had departed

rather far in spirit from the breadth and tolerance of Shakyamuni himself, who indicated that the rules governing the Order could be somewhat modified or in some cases abandoned, provided the members of the Order were in full agreement on the matter. Shakyamuni's attitude toward the rules of discipline is further indicated by the fact that (as related in my earlier volume) when the disciple Devadatta proposed the so-called five practices, a set of precepts that would have imposed a life of severe asceticism upon the monks, Shakyamuni rejected them outright. He was a man of great human breadth and profundity who, far from attempting to impose a fixed set of tenets or rules of discipline upon others, had a genius for adapting himself to the specific individual character of whomever he was addressing and expounding the truths of the dharma to the person in a way that made them genuinely meaningful. He was not a disciplinarian but a true man of freedom, an extoller of the marvelous power and vitality of life force.

Perhaps understandably, then, at the time of the First Council, there was considerable difference of opinion as to just how much emphasis should be placed upon the rules of discipline, and the participants could not arrive at any decision on the matter. Finally, Mahakashyapa decreed that the precepts Shakyamuni had laid down for the Order should be abided by without the slightest deviation. As a result, the monks became absorbed in the observance of the rules of discipline, and at the same time the doctrines of the new religion became fixed to the extent that freedom of interpretation was no longer permissible. This, then, was the rigid state in which we find the Buddhist Order some hundred years after Shakyamuni's death



## THE ORIGINS OF THE SCHISM

In the century following Shakyamuni's death, Buddhism in India seems to have existed in the form of a number of fairly autonomous groups

situated throughout the country. Partly this was the result of difficulties in communication; it would have been all but impossible to coordinate the activities of all these far-flung groups under a single central authority. Moreover, the Nirvana Sutra tells us that Shakyamuni himself had no intention of directing a large religious organization, and presumably from the first there was no attempt to keep the Order functioning as a single unified body. After Shakyamuni's death, therefore, we may suppose that a number of separate organizations were formed in various localities, each centered around one of the important disciples of the founder. It is not surprising, then, that a hundred years later there should have appeared subtle doctrinal and ritual differences among these various groups. Such is the way that most scholars of Buddhism describe the early situation of the Order.

Even as late as the seventh century CE, when the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang visited India, he found various groups devoted to the teachings of one or another of the Buddha's major disciples, such as Shariputra or Maudgalyayana. That Indian Buddhism was characterized by a number of regional organizations, each having its own particular characteristics, would thus appear to be a matter of historical fact. Given that Shakyamuni himself made a practice of preaching the dharma in different ways depending upon the capacity of the person or groups he was addressing, this is hardly surprising. The question of greatest concern to the student of Buddhism is whether these groups preserved the true spirit of Shakyamuni's teachings. If they remained faithful to the overall principles of his doctrine, then minor local variations in the observance of the rules of discipline could be overlooked. The dharma clearly teaches that one must devote oneself to three concerns: the observation of the precepts, the practice of meditation, and the cultivation of *prajna*, or wisdom. The group that in time came to be known as the Theravada, or "Teaching of the Elders," however, laid stress almost entirely upon the rules of discipline. By contrast, the group known as the Mahasanghika, or "Members of

the Great Order,” believed that they were carrying out the true teachings of Shakyamuni by mingling with the common mass of people, talking with them, sharing their sufferings, and encouraging them in the practice of the Buddhist faith.

We mentioned earlier the spirit of freedom and independence that characterized the city of Vaishali, as represented by the lay believer Vimalakirti, who in the sutra that bears his name is depicted as criticizing even the ten major disciples of Shakyamuni when he felt they were too stubborn or fixed in their ideas and practices. It is easy to imagine, therefore, that the monks of Vaishali should have differed from those of other regions in the manner in which they ate their meals, their attitude toward gifts of money, and other points of discipline.

In any event, after the Second Council flatly rejected their proposals, the Vaishali monks gathered a group of ten thousand monks and held a council of their own, referred to as the Great Group Recitation.

In time, this fellowship came to be known as the Mahasamghika to distinguish them from the Theravada group, and the Buddhist Order divided into two factions. Thus began a hundred-year period of schism following the Second Council, resulting in seventeen different schools of interpretation.

The fact that so many different schools could have been formed in the second hundred years of Buddhism must have been a serious blow to the Theravada elders, who looked upon themselves as the leaders of the Order as a whole. In the end, there were as many as eighteen different schools, twelve of them belonging to the Theravada line and six to the Mahasamghika. Chinese translations of the scriptures record an even higher number, claiming that there were twenty schools in all. Whatever the exact figures may have been, there is no doubt that Buddhism had entered a period of pronounced sectarianism.

I cannot help thinking that the responsibility for this rests largely with the party of the Elders. At a later period, the followers of Mahayana Buddhism referred to the Theravada group disparagingly as the

Hinayana, or “Lesser Vehicle,” and although it is no more than personal conjecture, I wonder if the Theravadins had not perhaps earned the epithet by forgetting the vigorously active spirit characteristic of Buddhism during the lifetime of Shakyamuni, isolating themselves from the general populace and sinking into petty authoritarianism. Had they not lost sight of the inherent flexibility and adaptability of Shakyamuni’s teachings, it seems unlikely that Buddhism would have been troubled by schism to the degree that it was.

Looking at this period of transition from another point of view, however, it is possible to see it as a process that Buddhism was destined to go through, as the dharma, originally the possession of a single man, Shakyamuni, became the possession of millions. We may look upon this period as one of troubled and painful growth, when all manner of competing interpretations were put forward, only to be followed by a brighter one when, like a great river, the teachings flowed forth again with new power and confidence.

If we examine the accounts of the Second Council, we see that the Vriji monks in proposing their reinterpretation of the ten precepts did not, at least at the outset, intend to bring about a schism. The trouble began when a monk belonging to what later became the party of the Elders happened to be traveling through Vaishali and saw the Vriji monks accepting monetary gifts from the laity. Startled and outraged, he decided to make an issue of it.

The acceptance of gifts of money from lay believers does not by any means indicate that the Vriji monks had sunk into moral depravity. After the Second Council, some ten thousand of them held a meeting of their own, surely an indication that they were a large and flourishing group who enjoyed wide support, and therefore presumably also commanded respect, among the general population. Possibly this very fact aroused feelings of envy among the party of the Elders.

Vaishali was a thriving center of commerce, situated as it was at a midpoint along the trade route between the city of Shravasti in the

north and Rajagriha to the south, and we may suppose that the monks living there had no choice but to accept alms in the form of money. In comparison with the time of Shakyamuni, this was a period when a monetary economy was developing very rapidly in India. It was perfectly natural for the citizens of Vaishali to present alms to the monks in the form of money rather than food. From this point of view, the reinterpretation of the ten precepts may be seen as an attempt to adjust the rules of the Order to the new conditions prevailing in the society of the time.

The manner in which the party of the Elders dealt with the matter was, as we have seen, authoritarian and harsh in the extreme. They deliberately called together as many of the older monks as possible, set them the task of proving the illegality of the proposed changes, and branded their rivals as “unlawful.” Not content with that, they went a step further, declaring that the Vriji monks who had put them forward were “not true monks or followers of Shakyamuni!”

In the view of the Elders, the Vriji monks were troublemakers intent upon disrupting the peace of the Order. They may even have been tempted to compare them to Devadatta, the disciple who brought about a temporary schism in the Order during the time of Shakyamuni.

In reality, however, the two cases are quite different. Devadatta had ambitions to replace Shakyamuni as leader of the Order, and the five practices he proposed would have imposed a more severe asceticism upon the monks, his aim being to impress the younger monks with his piety and gain their support so that he could set himself up as a new Buddha at the head of an organization of his own. He deliberately sought to create a schism and was indeed a disrupter of the peace.

The Vriji monks, on the other hand, had no intention of creating division in the Order. Rather they were attempting to adjust the rules to local customs and the changed conditions of society, as Shakyamuni had indicated should be done, pursuing their own particular religious practices in the spirit of the Buddhism originally taught by

Shakyamuni. The Elders, in choosing to make an issue of the matter, magnified the significance of the proposed changes to the point where they precipitated a split in the Order.

This dogmatic attitude is reflected in the later writings of the Theravada school, where the Mahasamghika monks are described in the following words: “The monks of the Great Group Recitation settled upon doctrines that are at variance with the true Dharma. They destroyed the original records and made up records of their own. They took sutras that were recorded in one place in the canon and moved them to another place . . . they discarded a portion of the most profound sutras and precepts and made up sutras and precepts that resembled them or in some cases were entirely different . . . They discarded the rules that govern nouns, gender, phraseology, and stylistic embellishment and substituted different ones.”

In spite of these drastic charges, an examination of the extant texts, as pointed out by the Buddhist scholar Fumio Masutani, suggests that there was no basic difference in the writings and doctrines of the two groups. That is to say, the scriptures of both the Theravada and Mahasamghika schools follow the same four-part arrangement found in the older Agama sutras. Certainly there was no such major difference as was later to characterize the Mahayana and Theravada divisions of Buddhism.

There is one further point to note regarding this first major schism in early Buddhism. The accounts of the break, particularly the one quoted above, suggest a comparison to the confrontation between dogmatism and revisionism, or between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, so often described in Western religious history. Such terminology, however, is not necessarily apt. In Western Christianity, with its heresy trials and witch hunts, once a schism had developed, the two sides not infrequently fell upon one another in violence and bloodshed, using every means available to wipe out the opponent. But in the case of Buddhism, although the Theravada and Mahasamghika groups parted

company after the Second Council, neither made any attempt to harass the other, much less did they resort to violence. This is indicative of the essential spirit of tolerance and respect for human life that characterizes Buddhism.

On the surface, the Theravada monks would appear to be the upholders of orthodoxy and the Mahasamghika monks the heretics. And yet if we are to employ terms like these, we must consider which group was in fact abiding more faithfully by the original spirit of Buddhism. Not those who held themselves aloof from society but those who plunged in among the mass of men and women, enduring their hardships in an effort to save as many as possible, are surely the ones who deserve to be called the true defenders of orthodoxy.

In ordinary terms, the Theravada monks would seem to be the dogmatists and the Mahasamghika monks the revisionists. But again we must ask which group was acting more nearly in the spirit of Shakyamuni. Was he in fact a dogmatist? Or was he the kind of revisionist who is willing to sacrifice any principle for the sake of compromise? Was he not in fact a proponent of the Middle Way, transcending the kind of dualism represented by such terms as *dogmatist* and *revisionist*? This Middle Way constituted the essence of the truth that he preached. From this point of view, it is apparent that to quibble over minor details concerning the rules of discipline or to engage with others in an argument over who is the true upholder of orthodoxy is an act far removed from the original spirit of Buddhism.



## THE MOVEMENT TO RESTORE THE ORIGINAL MEANING OF BUDDHISM

As we have seen, the break between the Theravada and the Mahasamghika groups came about not only because of differences over the rules of discipline, but also because the former had become an isolated body

that placed all emphasis upon the monastic life. As Teruhiro Watanabe and other scholars have pointed out, religious groups associated with the Theravada lineage stressed monasticism and withdrawal from ordinary life and therefore became increasingly tradition bound and elitist in outlook. The monks of the Mahasanghika lineage, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of work among the masses, even though it might mean sacrificing one's own chances for achieving enlightenment. The latter outlook in time led to the great movement known as Mahayana Buddhism. Thus, it was a basic difference in outlook that led to the rift between the two groups rather than a superficial dispute over the interpretation of the ten precepts.

The Mahayana scriptures thoroughly condemn the so-called voice-hearers (Skt *shravaka*), persons who exert themselves to attain the stage of arhat, and the cause-awakened ones (Skt *pratyekabuddha*), persons who strive only for their own enlightenment; these censures presumably aimed at the isolation and withdrawal from the world that marked the Theravada monks. Among such monastic groups, it was the length of time one had been a monk or the number of sutras and precepts one could recite from memory that determined whether one merited the title of arhat, or one worthy of respect.

In contrast with this kind of monasticism, the Mahayana scriptures, prefigured here in the teachings of the Mahasanghika, stressed the concept of the bodhisattva, the believer who works not only for "self profit," that is, for the attainment of his or her enlightenment, but for the "profit of others," actively seeking to spread the teachings of faith among the populace at large.

Although one might attempt to conserve the teachings of Shakyamuni by withdrawing from society, a religion that isolates itself in this fashion soon finds itself at an impasse, for the dharma itself can no longer continue among those who attempt to remove themselves from or persistently ignore the pains, sufferings, and mortal limitations of their fellow human beings. Therefore it is only natural that the monks of

the Mahasamghika, who enjoyed wide popular support, should have appeared with their new proposals in an effort to break through the impasse.

It is well to remember that Shakyamuni himself did not spend all his time preaching to the monks alone. Though obliged each year to go into retirement during the rainy season, he spent the greater part of his lifetime working to spread his teachings among the general population so that all might gain enlightenment. If Shakyamuni's teachings had been intended only for the members of the monastic Order, then Buddhism would never have become a world religion.

Already in Shakyamuni's lifetime, the monks, after they had received training under him, customarily dispersed to various localities to devote themselves to preaching activities there. For example, Purna, one of the Buddha's major disciples, who came from a town on the western coast of India, received permission from Shakyamuni to return to his native region, where he dedicated the remainder of his life to the spreading of the faith. For this reason, he was not able to be present at the death of the Buddha or the First Council. One source goes so far as to state that when he returned east to the city of Rajagriha at a later date and was pressed by the members of the Order there to give his sanction to the version of the canon as it had been fixed at the First Council, he refused to do so.

In this connection there is a very interesting legend reported by the Chinese monk Xuanzang, which he heard on his visit to India in the middle of the seventh century. According to this, there were actually two groups gathered at the time of the First Council. The first, consisting of five hundred elder monks headed by Mahakashyapa, met within the Cave of the Seven Leaves (*Saptaparna-guha*) and compiled one version of the canon. But there was also a second group of monks who gathered "outside the cave" and compiled their own version of the canon. The elder monks, as we have seen, concentrated their attention upon the rules of discipline, while the canon compiled by the

group outside the cave reflected dissatisfaction with this narrow focus of interest and served as the basis of what in later times was to become the Mahasamghika school of thought.

This suggests that the first canon, because it was drawn up primarily to meet the needs of the monastic community, was difficult to accept for those members of the Order who intended to live and work among the populace. Thus the conditions that were later to bring about the compilation of the Mahayana scriptures were already to some extent in existence at the time of the First Council.

Different standards and rules of discipline were obviously needed for different groups within the Buddhist community. It was the duty of the monks to preserve and hand on correctly the teachings of faith, and, in exchange for discharging this duty, they were supported by the alms of the laity. It was only natural, therefore, for lay believers to expect monks to observe strict rules of discipline and to devote all their energies to religious practice.

On the other hand, there was no need for lay believers to conform to such difficult codes of behavior. Of course, there were certain duties as Buddhist believers and members of society that they had to fulfill, but these were in no way as exacting as the elaborate precepts laid down for monks. This, too, was undoubtedly one of the factors leading to the subtle differences in outlook that characterized the Theravada school, which centered about the monastic community, and the Mahasamghika, which maintained close contact with the lay community.

Not only the rules of discipline to be observed but the manner in which the teachings of the Buddha were understood differed somewhat between the monks and the lay believers. The voice-hearers were those disciples who had the opportunity to listen in person to the Buddha's teachings and devoted themselves constantly to the perfecting of their own understanding and character. After the death of the Buddha, they presumably continued to study under those elder monks who had

received the dharma directly from the Buddha. For such men, the number of sutras and precepts they could recite from memory was an indication of how far they had progressed in their religious training.

For the general lay believer, a mere phrase or word of the Buddha might be the means to salvation. Even during Shakyamuni's lifetime, there must have been numerous lay believers who had never received instruction directly from the Buddha but who nevertheless made his teachings, as transmitted to them by others, the sole support of their lives. The question was not how many sutras they were familiar with but how well they preserved and perfected the spirit of the dharma in their daily lives.

Shakyamuni, knowing how grave the responsibility of the monastic Order would be in preserving and spreading his teachings after his death, no doubt made the rules of discipline for the monks purposely strict. But in the years following his death, those very monks seem to have lost sight of the fact that the rules of discipline were merely a means to ensure the health of the Order and not an end in themselves. Instead of going out among the masses to spread the message of Buddhism, they withdrew from society and concentrated entirely upon their own enlightenment and religious practice. It was this unfortunate situation that gave rise to the appearance of the Mahasanghika movement.

This movement may be described as an effort to return to the original meaning of Buddhism as Shakyamuni had expounded it. In Buddhism, and in religion in general, all reform movements have as their starting point this spirit of striving to return to the fundamentals of the faith. Such movements typically begin as a small minority within the religion as a whole, but if they are successful in their attempt to reestablish the fundamental principles of the doctrine, they will in time gain in force until they become the majority. The fate of Buddhism rests upon their ability to recapture these fundamentals and to apply them correctly in practice.