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Theravāda in History

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I. RECONNAISSANCE

"Theravāda Buddhism" seems to be a transparent and straightforward term. It is taken for granted as an integral feature of the religious landscape not only of South and Southeast Asia, but also of contemporary Buddhism in the West. The term is regularly used without any attempt at definition, and without asking to what degree "Theravāda Buddhism" is a valid or useful category. A chapter entitled "Theravāda Buddhism" in one recent book uses the word "Theravāda" and cognate forms forty-one times in about seven pages of text (not counting captions and side-bars). Is there anything surprising in this? Perhaps not; but when we consider that the term Theravāda is rare in Pali literature, and that for nearly a millennium it was rarely used in the Pali or vernacular inscriptions, chronicles, or other premodern texts of Southeast Asia, this might give us pause.

This essay is written on the premise that we—historians of Buddhism—do not adequately understand, and have not adequately attempted to understand, the term "Theravāda." Nonetheless, we have imposed it in our studies to create, in many cases, artificial and ahistorical entities. I believe that we need to reexamine the evidence, to see how the complex of historical movements within Theravāda define and refer to themselves, and to see how they define and refer to others, both Buddhist nikāyas and other religions. I take it as axiomatic that the history of Theravāda cannot be written on the basis of Pali sources alone. We must exploit the full range of sources, including not only the vernaculars of the cultures in which Theravāda has developed from a
monastic aggregation into distinctive social complexes, but also the classical Buddhist languages—Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese—and other vernaculars used by Buddhist traditions. We must take epigraphic, literary, archaeological, iconographical, and anthropological evidence into account.

As a working hypothesis, I suggest that “Theravāda Buddhism” came to be distinguished as a kind of Buddhism or as a “religion”—remembering that “Buddhism” is a modern term and that “religion” is a vexed concept—only in the late colonial and early globalized periods, that is, in the twentieth century. In the pre-colonial and early colonial periods, Europeans grouped non-Christian religions in several ways, and Buddhism was subsumed with Indian, Mongolian, Chinese, and Japanese religions under the categories of “ idolaters” or “heathens.” Eventually European savants, for the most part working in milieux that were deeply charged by Christian beliefs and presuppositions, realized that the religious life of certain groups or societies was centered on “Buddha.” Gradually they saw that this religion, which they eventually came to call Buddhism, had different forms or schools. Exactly when “Theravāda Buddhism” gained currency as a discrete category, and how this category in due course entered the consciousness of “Theravādin societies” themselves, is a good question, but it seems that it was rather late in the game—that is, only by the middle of the twentieth century. We need to bear these points in mind if we are to understand the history of Theravāda.

Theravāda has now become a standard and authoritative term, defined (or mis-defined) even in computer dictionaries. It is a ready-made label that gives us “Theravādin meditation,” “Theravādin philosophy,” “Theravādin psychology,” “Theravādin art,” “Theravādin iconography,” and so on. As a type of Buddhism, the very idea of Theravāda is a by-product of globalization. With increased international migration in the second half of the twentieth century, Sinhalese, Burmese, Khmer, Lao, and Thai communities have had to construct identities in a multicultural world, and so have become “Theravāda Buddhists.” Beyond this, we live in an age in which packaging and labeling are essential to the social constitution of both the individual and the group. Ambiguity is not tolerated. Today Theravāda is a self-conscious identity for many, although not necessarily in the societies that have nurtured it for centuries. For most Thai, for example, the primary marker of identity remains to be “Buddhist” (pen phut, pen chao phut, nāpīthī phra phutthasāsanā). To say “to believe in Theravāda” (nāpīthī therawāthī) is unnatural.

The evolution of Theravāda as a modern religion is not the concern of this paper. My concern is the use of Theravāda as a historical category. The problem is this: the word “Theravāda” and cognate forms or near-synonyms “Theriya” and “Theravamsa” are infrequent in Pali texts. Their use is limited to some of the commentaries and to the historical (vamsa) literature—literature specifically concerned with school formation and legitimation. But in the pre-modern period, what we call the Theravāda Buddhists of Southeast Asia did not seem to use the term at all. It was neither a marker of identity nor a standard of authority in the inscriptions or chronicles of the region. Nor does the term occur in the early European accounts of the religion and society of the region, whether Portuguese, Dutch, French, or English. Simply put, the term was not part of the self-consciousness of the Buddhists of the region.

The overuse of the term Theravāda in historical studies has led to several misconceptions. One is the idea that there existed some sort of monolithic religion, or institutional entity, called “Theravāda,” that spread throughout the region. This obscures the fact that the Southeast Asian sanghas that renewed their ordination lineages in Sri Lanka were, as soon as they returned to their own lands, autonomous or rather independent entities. They invoked their Lankan credentials as a claim to ritual purity, but they did not maintain binding institutional links with Lanka. The new lineages established their own identities; more often than not within one or two generations they fell into dispute and split into further independent lines.

This state of affairs arises from the nature of ordination, of the independent system of self-reproduction of Buddhist monastic communities. Higher ordination (upasampadā) can be performed without reference to any outside authority (except, depending on circumstances, temporal authority, which made efforts to control sanghas for political and economic reasons). The only conditions were the presence of a monk qualified to act as preceptor (upajīhāya, who must have a minimum ten years’ ordination) and a quorum of monks to perform higher ordination. It is, precisely, our task to understand how ordination lineages spread, how they defined themselves, how they related to other lineages in the region, and how they contended with each other and with temporal powers for recognition and patronage.
The history of "Theravāda" is, then, a history of ordination lineages. It is not a history of "sects" in the sense of broad-based lay groups, as in Reformation Europe. Monks, rulers, and lay supporters were concerned with establishing or restoring pure ordination lineages in order to sustain the life of the sāsana by activating pure "fields of merit" and ensuring the continuity of ritual. The records show little concern for ideas or philosophy. It is this spread of monastic ideals and lineages that we must try to understand, usually through indirect evidence, since despite the importance of claimed descent, lineage records were not maintained or constructed.

Our study must maintain an awareness of the monastic/lay distinction. How should we understand relations between laity and lineage? Even if the monastics were Theravādin, or better (see below) belonged to a Sihalavāma or some other lineage, can we say this of the laity? To what degree did the laity participate in the distinctions and contentions of monastic lineages? What range of ideas or activities do monastic lineages embrace? How far are they relevant to the social and religious lives of the laity? Traditionally, could categories like Theravāda or Sihala-pakkha apply to laypeople at all? What are the boundaries in terms of individual or society?

The preservation, transmission, and study of the Pali canon and the use of Pāli as a liturgical language—by monastics and laity—is one distinctive and unifying feature of the Theravādin lineages. But the use of Pāli should not overshadow vernacular literature and practice. If Pāli was a resource, a database, that offered stability and continuity to a congeries of constantly evolving traditions, it was the vernacular transformations of the Pāli—through sermon, gloss, bilingual recitation, and the plastic arts—that enabled what Steven Collins has called "the Pāli imaginaire" to function as a vital agent in the religious life of mainland Southeast Asia.

Defining Theravāda

What is Theravāda? If we describe it as a system, what do we mean? A system of thought? A system of ethics? A monastic infrastructure, an economic institution, or a soteriological framework? If it is several or all of these, how does it differ from other Buddhist systems? Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide defines Theravāda as follows: "Of the many distinctive schools of Buddhism that formed in the first centuries after the death of the Buddha, only one has survived into the present day—the Theravāda or 'Doctrine of the Elders.' The followers of this tradition trace its origins back to Gautama Buddha himself. They maintain that the Buddha's teaching has been handed down in an unbroken succession within the Sangha or monastic community, hence the reference to 'elders' or venerable members of the Sangha who have protected the tradition's integrity. Unfortunately, the definition misses the point. The term "thera" does not refer to a lineal succession of "elders," but to a specific "historical" or foundational group: the five hundred arhats who recited and collected the teachings of the Buddha at Rājagṛha after the first rains-retreat following the death of the Buddha. This is stated, for example, in the Dīpanakara: "because the collection was made by the theras, therefore it is called the Theravāda." For a more accurate definition, we may turn to Ven. Payutto (Prayudh Payutto, Phra Brahmagnābharana, 1938–). After describing the events of the First Rehearsal, he writes: "The teachings thus agreed upon that have been handed down to us are called Theravāda or 'the teachings laid down as principles of the Elders.' The word Elders in this context refers to those 500 Arhat elders participating in this First Rehearsal. The Buddhism that is based on the First Rehearsal mentioned above is called Theravāda Buddhism. In other words, the Buddha's teachings, namely the Doctrine and Discipline, both in letter and in spirit, that were thus rehearsed were to be remembered as such and strictly adhered to."

One problem with this traditional definition is that all of the eighteen Buddhist schools trace their origins back to the First Council, which is their common heritage. Each of the surviving Vinayas and other records preserved in several languages presents its own version of the "Council of the Five-Hundred." How then, do the Ceylon theras differ?

Indo-Tibetan Perspectives

There are several Pāli terms for what we call "Theravāda," including "Theriyā" and "Theravāma." Before examining them, however, we will turn to India, to see how the later north Indian Buddhists described the "Theravāda."

What did the Indian Buddhist schools call what we call "Theravāda," and how did they present it? To start with, they did not call it "Sthaviravāda." "Sthaviravāda" and "Sthaviravādin" are ghost words. They are Sanskrit neologisms coined on the analogy of Pāli "Theravāda," and they have not been found in any Sanskrit text. The word "sthavira" does occur, but as a technical Vinaya term for a senior
monk, defined as one who has been ordained as a bhikṣu for ten years or more (in Pali thera, in Hybrid Sanskrit also sthēra). The term is used by all Buddhist schools, and is not a marker of “Theravāda.” It occurs in compounds like sangha-sthavira and rāja-sthavira, or as a prefix to a proper name, as—taking examples from Indian inscriptions—in Sthavira Pūrṇadāsa, Sthavira Mahānāma, or Sthavira Acala. The compound “Sīmghala-sthavira,” found in an inscription from Bodh-Gayā, is ambiguous, although my own interpretation is that it refers to a “Sīhalese senior monk.”

The Sthāvira lineage is regularly referred to in Indian doxographic works that were translated into Tibetan and Chinese, but no Sanskrit versions survive. Therefore we cannot say with certainty what Sanskrit terms lie behind the translations. The few available references in Sanskrit suggest a vrddhi form: Sthāvira,7 Sthāvīriya,8 or Sthāvāri.9 These are Sanskrit counterparts of “Theriya,” a common Pali and Prakrit counterpart to “Theravāda.” In this essay, I tentatively adopt the form Sthāvira.

In his History of the Dharma, Bu-ston Rin-chen-grub (1290–1364) defines the Sthāviras as follows:

gnas brtan ‘phags pa’i rigs yin par smra bas gnas brtan pa.20

Because they assert that they belong to the noble lineage (āryavāṃsa) of the Sthaviras they are “Sthāviras.”

I am not certain this tells us much—the ārya-vāṃsa seems to be, again, a shared quality of Buddhist monastic heritage.21

The Four Vinaya Schools and the Four Philosophical Schools

A persistent problem in the modern historiography of Buddhism in India is a denial of tradition—a refusal to try to understand how Indian Buddhism looked at itself. This strikes me as odd. To believe in or to accept tradition is one thing; but to achieve historical understanding, one must first try to see how Buddhism presented itself, whether or not one believes it or accepts it as historically accurate or viable. A priori rejection because the information goes against received opinions or because a source is preserved only in Tibetan amounts to ideologically motivated blindness.

In India, classifications of Buddhism depended on context. In terms of Vinaya, there were the “four nikāyas”: Sarvāstivāda, Sthāvira, Sāmmitīya, and Mahāsāṃghika. This classification subsumed the traditional lists of the (conventionally enumerated) eighteen nikāyas. The fourfold classification was widespread in north India by the seventh century, if not earlier, and is reported by Yiijing (635–713) in his “Record of the Inner Law Sent Home from the South Seas” and in other sources.22 The four schools are mentioned in tantras and tantra commentaries such as the Hevajra-tantra and the Yogaratnamālā on the Hevajra-tantra.23

When the four schools are explained in detail, three branches are listed under Sthāvira.24 These are given in Indian sources from the eighth century on preserved in Tibetan, such as Vinitadeva’s Nikāyabheda, Subhūtighoṣa’s Sarvavānālokakārā-vaiśhāsya, the Śrāmaṇera-prchā, and the Bhikṣuvaṃsāra-prchā,25 as well as in the great Sanskrit–Tibetan lexicon of the late eighth century, the Mahāvyutpatti. The names of the three schools derive from the monasteries in Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka, at which their sanghas were based:

- Mahāvihāravāsins: Residents of the Great Monastery
- Abhayagiri-vāsins: Residents of the Abhayagiri Monastery
- Jetavanīya: Residents of the Jetavana Monastery.

North Indian accounts agree with the indigenous tradition of Sri Lanka. The Mahāvamsa refers to the three schools in several places as “the three nikāyas” (nikāyattaya); in the twelfth century they were unified by King Parākramabāhu.26 Even if the nature of the unification and the role of the Mahāvihāra vis-à-vis the other schools are debated, we can safely say that before the twelfth century, the Mahāvihāra was not the sole representative of “Theravāda,” and that after the twelfth century the surviving “Theravāda” was only one branch of the earlier Lankan school. The idea of “Theravāda” as an unchanging and perennial lineage contradicts the school’s own history (as well as common sense).

North Indian tradition as preserved in Tibet defines each of the four schools in terms of a fixed set of categories. Gorampa (1429–1489) explains that “among the four root Śrāvaka schools there are four different Vinayas, four different languages, four different preceptors, four different numbers of panels of the monk’s robe, and four different insignia on the edge of the robe.”27 In his “Sun of the Land of Samantabhadrā,” published in 1699, Jam-dbyangs Bzad-pa’i-rdo-rje (Nag-dban-brtson-grus, 1648–1721/2) describes the Sthāviras as follows:
The Four Philosophical Schools

North Indian tradition grouped Buddhist philosophy under four main schools: Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Cittamātra/Vijñānavādin, and Mādhyamika. This classification was sufficiently current to be adopted in the classical Indian doxography, the Sarvāstivānasamgraha, and in other non-Buddhist texts, and to be discussed in tantric and Kālacakra literature. Mimaki suggests that the classification was developed by the end of the eighth century; it was widely adopted in Tibet where it became standard in any number of doxographic manuals. Jam-dbyangs Bzad-pa’s rdz-rdo-rje is somewhat dogmatic about the number of philosophical schools:

rah sde bye smra mdo sems dbu ma ba, bał Nes ’dir ni grub mtha’ inar min gsun.

Regarding the tenets of our own [that is, the Buddhist] schools, our own schools are limited to the four: Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Cittamātra, and Mādhyamika, for it is said that here there are not five systems of tenets.

This statement reflects Tibetan scholastic politics rather than the situation in India. Earlier Tibetan works in the genre listed the schools in several ways, one of which names five schools, adding the Sāṃmitīyas. Despite the fact that it is equally valid in terms of the historical evolution of Buddhist thought, the fivefold classification did not find favor in Tibetan scholasticism.

The association of the four philosophical schools with the four Vinaya lineages is problematic. The Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas are usually considered to be philosophical movements within the Sarvāstivādin lineage. The fundamental Yogācāra works rely on Sarvāstivādin texts, while Mādhyamika is not associated with any particular Vinaya tradition. The tenets laid down in the doxographic literature, particularly those of the Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas, may well have existed largely in the textbooks by the time the later manuals were composed. In any case, the Sthāvira tradition is conspicuous by its absence. How do we explain this? Why did north Indian tradition not recognize the Sthāvira as a philosophical school, even when it knew it as a Vinaya lineage?

In the absence of evidence, no certain answer can be given. The fourschool classification appears to be a curriculum list and may reflect the interests of the professors of Nālandā or other monastic universities.
of northeastern India: it is possible that, quite simply, the Sthāvira philosophy was not on the curriculum. The classification also shows a Sarvāstivādin bias, and the Sarvāstivādin texts that we know pay very little attention to the Sthāvira. From the writings of Tāranātha Kun-dga’-sniṅ-po (1575–1635), which are based on Indian sources, we do know that the Sthāvira were active as an ordination lineage in India; but perhaps they were not strong players in the field of philosophy. However, their texts and ideas were known to a degree, as extensive citations from the *Vimuttimagga* are given by Daśabalaśrimitra in his *Samskṛtasaṃskṛtaviniścaya*, which was apparently composed in north India in the twelfth century. It is also possible that the Sthāvira texts did not address the interests of late north Indian scholasticism, with its penchant for epistemology and logic. Although later Pali texts, such as the *ṭikās*, borrow and adapt Vaibhāṣika categories in their exegesis, and show the development of epistemological ideas, these do not seem to have taken a foothold in the curricula to have developed into a strong, independent tradition that could enter into dialogue and debate with the north Indian Buddhist and indeed non-Buddhist schools.

Part of the problem may lie with the lacuna sources for the history of Buddhism of south India. The Theravāda that we know today had an important presence in south India, at least in several coastal centers, and the evidence suggests that the Mahāvihāra philosophical and hermeneutical heritage is a south Indian–Sri Lankan phenomenon rather than, as presented in later periods after the eclipse of south Indian Buddhism, exclusively Lankan. But almost no literary records of the once thriving Buddhist traditions of the region—evidenced by rich and unique archaeological remains—survive. Our reconstruction of Indian Buddhism is very much a Buddhism of the north, based on surviving Gandhari, Buddhist Sanskrit, and Sanskrit sources, as well as those preserved in Chinese and Tibetan. Very few, if any, southern texts were translated into those languages, although here too more research is needed.

**Theriya and Mahāvihāra**

I am not confident that a convincing narrative history of “Theravāda” is possible. The historical development of the school before the time of Buddhaghosa is, to put it mildly, obscure, and I do not doubt that its origins were complex. I wonder whether the celebrated “Pali canon,” or at least the Khuddakanikāya, did not start out as a practical didactic and recitative collection rather than an official or exclusive dogmatic corpus. It is possible that the school drew on Vibhajjavādin traditions; certainly at a later, uncertain point the Mahāvihāra identified with that tradition. A colophon to a section of the *Vinaya Cullavagga*, at the end of the *Samuccayakhandhaka*, represents the textual tradition as:

> acarīyaṇāṁ vibhajjavādanāṁ tambapaṇṇidipopasādaṁ kānaṁ mahāvihāra-vāsīnaṁ vuccanā saddhammaṁ caṃhiya.

This is the text of the Vibhajjavādin teachers, who brought faith to the island of Tambapāṇi, the residents of the Great Monastery, for the perpetuation of the true dharma.

The phrasing may be compared with that of several inscriptions from Andhra Pradesh in south India, such as a copper-plate charter from Kallacheruvu, Dist. West Godavari, which mentions the “Mahāvihara of Tamraparnī,” and the verse preambles and colophons of the works of Buddhaghosa, especially his commentaries on the four Āgamas or Nikāyas and his *Visuddhimagga*. Of the three Theravāda schools, it seems to have been mainly the Mahāvihāra that established the South Asian connections in what the late R. A. L. H. Gunawardana (1938–2010) called “the world of Theravādin Buddhism,” although Abhayagiri vihāra had its own overseas network, in Southeast Asia if not in India as well. “Mahāvihāra” or “Great Monastery” itself has several referents, and more research is needed into the scope of the term. In India there were many Mahāvihāras, some of which belonged to Sarvāstivādin or other sanghas, and are known from inscriptions, monastic sealings, and textual references. The term was carried to China and Japan. It is usually assumed that within the Theravādin lineage, and in most Ceylonese documents, the term refers to the ancient institution of the Mahāvihāra at Anurādhapura. But this is not always the case, and there were other Mahāvihāras in later periods. The relevance and significance of the term in the post-Polonaruwa period, when the three Theravādin lineages were merged, remains to be clarified. They were replaced by a system of eight mūlas, fraternities or groups, which flourished from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, the Polonnaruwa period. The āraṇīkas maintained their identity, and “beginning in the twelfth century, the distinction between the ‘village monks’ (gānavāsīn) and ‘forest monks’ (āraṇīvāsīn) became more salient.” These two
categories became basic to the Thai hierarchy by the Ayutthaya period, as we shall see.

**Theravāda in History**

Modern definitions of Theravāda tend to situate themselves outside history, and choose to ignore the complexity and relative lateness of the tradition.\(^{24}\) The fact that the Theravādin lineage transmits an ancient collection of scriptures—the justly renowned “Pali canon”—has obscured the fact that what defines the tradition is the fifth-century commentaries and the later sub-commentaries and manuals. As a system of thought and code of practice it is disseminated through manuals and digest—e.g., the Suttasāṅgāha or the all-important Abhidhammatthasāṅgāha of Anuruddha (date uncertain: tenth/eleventh century?), and through vernacular texts and sermons. The centering of “Theravāda” in the Pali canon, above all in the “four main Nikāyas,” is a child of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. It has grown up to become what we might call a “new Theravāda,” largely anglophonic but increasingly international in influence and outreach.\(^{25}\) This new trend should be respected and recognized as one of the Buddhism active today. But should it be read back into the past? The prominence given to an essentialized and ahistorical Theravāda inhibits the study of the history of ideas and the history of social expressions of South and Southeast Asian Buddhism. Theravāda is not an unchanging entity: to assume so would contradict the law of impermanence. It is a “tradition in progress”—and are not all traditions?—one that has responded and adapted to changing circumstances and environments and for more than two thousand years. This has given Theravāda its endurance, vitality, and relevance.

The definitions of Theravāda given above are ideal definitions: they emphasize the pure lineage of the dharma and Vinaya. This lineage is a monastic or Vinaya lineage, a vaṃsa or paramparā. But Vinaya lineages—communities of monks and nuns—developed in the world, in society. Monasteries became social and economic institutions; for centuries they were grand estates with land, fields, and serfs. Nikāyas came to be defined not by shared allegiance to ideas or to Vinaya lineage but as legal entities and as landholders. Gunawardana writes of early medieval Sri Lanka that “[T]he main monastery of the nikāya closely supervised the administration of the property of hermitages belonging to the nikāyas; these hermitages had to submit their annual statements of accounts for approval by the monks of the main monastery. Hence, in the ninth and tenth centuries, the nikāya was not merely a fraternity of monks subscribing to a particular school of thought; it was also a body which owned a vast extent of land and had supervisory control over these lands through institutions representing the nikāya which were spread over many parts of the island.\(^{26}\) To an extent bookkeeping may have been more significant in the development of monasticism than spiritual practice or ideas. The economic history of the nikāyas can be gleaned from inscriptions and chronicles. According to the Mahāvamsa, for example, Aggabodhi I granted a village to the ascetics of the Thera tradition.\(^{26}\) Mahāvamsa states that King Kassapa V restored and donated a vihāra to “monks belonging to the lineage of the Theras” (theravamsajabhikkhu).\(^{27}\) Mahinda IV had a “betel-mandapa” built, and dedicated the revenue that it would generate to monks of the Theravamsa for the purchase of medicines.\(^{28}\) He constructed a residence named Mahāmallaka and donated it to nuns (bhikkhuni) belonging to the Theravamsa.\(^{29}\)

As a monastic order, Theravāda is further defined by its rituals—the performance of upasampadā and kammavācā, and the recitation of paritta, in Pali. Ritual demarcates physical boundaries (temples, monastic residences, and within them special sanctuaries). Ritual delinates social boundaries and identities—“Buddhist,” monk, nun, novice monk, novice nun, upāsaka, upāsikā, donor, supporter. Ritual orders time—daily, weekly, monthly, annual rites. Ritual dictates economic imperatives—royal expenditures and the import of precious commodities such as aromatics and precious substances.

**II. TOWARDS A HISTORY OF BUDDHISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

For the early history of Buddhism in Southeast Asia we have no ancient indigenous chronicles. There are scattered Chinese accounts of Buddhism in states that are usually difficult to pinpoint on the modern map. There are inscriptions, generally fragmentary and mostly removed from their original contexts. These include many Pali citation inscriptions from the sixth to the eighth centuries in the Irrawaddy Delta in lower Burma and across central Thailand. There are images of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and there are architectural remains. In Thailand we face a collection of epigraphic riddles: a Pali-Khmer inscription and massive pair of footprints in Prachinburi; a reference to Anurādhapura in a brief Mon inscription in a cave in Saraburi; the
bhikṣu-mahāyāna-sāhāvīra ordered to maintain ascetic and ritual practice for King Śrī Sūryavarmadeva in a Khmer inscription from Lopburi; and a mention of Abhayagiri—a mountain rather than a vihāra—in a bilingual Sanskrit-Khmer inscription from Nakhon Ratchasima. No continuous narrative emerges from these fragments of the written records of the past. All that can be said is that a school that used Pali as its scriptural language was prominent in the Chao Phraya Basin and in lower Burma, and that the school, or more probably schools, were likely to have descended from the Theravāda lineage. It is simplistic to say that this Buddhism “came from Ceylon.” Trade and political relations were complex; the many communication routes from India and Lanka to Southeast Asia allowed diverse cultural contacts. Given the (I believe) complete silence of extant Mahāvihāra literature on relations with Southeast Asia before the Polonnaruwa period, it does not seem likely that the dominant Vinaya lineage in the Chao Phraya basin was that of the Mahāvihāra. Nor is there compelling evidence (at least for the mainland) for an affiliation with the Abhayagiri. I tentatively conclude that a Theriyâ lineage, or Theriyâ lineages, were introduced at an early date, that is, in the early centuries CE, from India—at several times and in several places, and that these lineages developed into a regional lineage or regional lineages in its or their own right, with their own architecture, iconography, and (now lost) literature.

For later periods—starting with the second millennium of the Christian era—we have more sources. Here again they are often fragmentary, or they were composed or edited centuries after the events that they purport to describe. These sources include inscriptions in Mon, Thai, Khmer, and Pali from Haripunchai, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Lanna, and Lanchang, and chronicles in the same languages. Despite the availability of these sources, the study of the history of religion in Southeast Asia remains undeveloped compared, for example, to that of Tibet, China, or Japan. Current and widely distributed books give unreliable and dated accounts. Harvey, for example, writes of Burma that “In northern Burma, Sarvāstivada and Mahāyāna Buddhism, along with Hinduism, were present from the third century AD, with Tantric Buddhism arriving by the ninth century. A change came about when a northern king, Anawratī (1044–1077) unified the country and gave his allegiance to the Theravāda of the Mons; for he was impressed by the simplicity of its doctrines.” Anawratī’s adherence to Theravāda was questioned forty years ago by Luce, whose arguments were summarized by D.G.E. Hall in his influential History of South-East Asia. Since, as Hall notes, “not a single authentic inscription dates from his reign, save for votive tablets briefly inscribed,” how are we to know that King Anawratī was “impressed by the simplicity” of Theravāda? Harvey’s section on Thailand reads as follows: “In the region of modern Thailand, a mix of Mahāyāna and Śāivism was present from the tenth century. In the thirteenth century, the Tai people, driven south from China by the Mongolians, entered the area and drove out its Khmer rulers. Theravāda missions, sent from Burma from the eleventh century, found a response from the ruler of the Taes, once followers of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism. Theravāda then became the dominant religious tradition.” This is outdated and inaccurate on every count. It could be reasonably recast as:

In the region of what is today modern Thailand, a tradition or school that used Pali and must be related to the Theriyā tradition—perhaps from India more than from Sri Lanka—seems to have been predominant in the first millennium of the Christian Era. Cults of bodhisatvas like Avalokiteśvara and of brahmanical deities like Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Śūrya were also active. In the thirteenth century, as the power of the Khmer waned, the Tai people became ascendant, establishing states in the area of Chiangmai, Sukhothai, Suphanburi, and Ayutthaya. Not much can be said about the religious protohistory of the Tai in terms of the Buddhism that we know today (except that they were never “followers of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism” and were not driven south from China by the Mongolians, and there were never any “Theravāda missions” from Burma). It is, however, evident that there was continuity between the earlier traditions of the Mon Theravāda lineage, both in the central plains (through so-called Dvāravati) and in the north (through Haripunchai) and the traditions of the Tai. Brahmanical cults, a legacy of the central plains tradition and of the previously predominant Khmer civilization, continued to be maintained, both at the court and popular level, well into the Ayutthaya and indeed the Bangkok periods. Local Brahmans and Brahmanical rites have played a significant ritual role up to the present.

Skilton, in his A Concise History of Buddhism, writes that “Though later to be universally dominated by the Theravāda form of Buddhism, the early history of the Dharma in South-east Asia is more piecemeal and eclectic. The later history of Buddhism in the region is characterized by a strong correlation of religion and national identity, and the promulgation of an ultra-orthodoxy derived from the works of Buddhaghosa,
on the model of developments in Sri Lanka and the Mahāvihāra. One can agree that the early history of the dharma in Southeast Asia is “piecemeal and eclectic” —indeed, no master narrative can be written—but one wonders what this abstract “Theravāda form of Buddhism” which “universally dominated” Southeast Asia might be. It seems as if Sri Lanka was a kind of Rome or Constantinople, and that Southeast Asian sanghas had no autonomous or local histories or development. It more likely that “Theravāda,” including that of Lanka, was a constant exchange and adaptation in response to the realities of patronage, economics, and social change. The idea of “the promulgation of an ultrao- thodoxy derived from the works of Buddhaghosa” is decidedly odd and cannot be justified, or even located, in Thai religious, social, or political history.

As mentioned above, the categories “Buddhism” and “religion” raise their own problems. The most common word used by Buddhists for what today we call “Buddhism” is sāsana, “the teaching or dispensation,” a term used by all Indian Buddhist schools. In Siam, the inscriptions of Sukhothai use several combined forms:

- buddhaśāsanā: Inscriptions 49-14, 69-1-6
- phra buddhaśāsanā: Inscription 1-2-12
- sāsanā phra buddha: Inscription 3-1-54, 57
- sāsanā phra buddha pen chao: Inscription 3-1-46
- sāsanā phra chao: Inscription 9-1-32; Inscription 14-2-14
- sāsanā phra pen chao: Inscription 3-1-31, 43, 59; Inscription 14-1-37, 2-18

Sāsanā most frequently refers to the dispensation of Gotama or Śākyamuni. In inscriptions or aspirations it may also refer to the dispensation of the next Buddha, Maitreya.

If the term “Theravāda” was not used in Southeast Asian records, there is no dearth of alternate terms. I give below a few examples.

**Śihala-sāsanā**

In the Thai principalities, and throughout Southeast Asia, the monastic lineage of Sri Lanka had enormous prestige. Monks went to Lanka to be reordained and returned to start new monastic lines. As a result, lineage is frequently phrased in terms that show its Lankan pedigree.

An inscription from Chiang Rai, for example, records that in BE 2041 (= CE 1498) “twenty-five senior monks (mahāthera chao) went to bring the sāsanā of Phra Buddha Chao in Lankādīpa to Muang Hariphunchai.” Chapters of the northern Thai Pali chronicle jinakālamālīni (completed 1527 CE) bear the titles “Sīhalaśāsanāgamanaṇakāla”—the “period of the arrival of the sāsanā from Ceylon”—and “Sīhalaśāsanajotanaṇakāla.” The body of the text uses the terms Sīhala-sāsanā and Sīhala-sārṇgha. The fifteenth-century Thai literary classic The Defeat of the Yuan (Yuan Phai) relates that when King Paramattra-lokanātha decided to enter the monkhood, he sent his son to Ceylon (Lankādīpa) to invite pure monks, free of defilement, to assist in the ordination ceremony.

**Gāmavāsī and Araṇīvāsī**

As mentioned above, important division of the sangha in Lanka from the twelfth century on was that of “town-dwellers” (gāma-vāsi) and “forest-dwellers” (araṇī-vāsi). These are ancient Vinaya terms, shared by the Vinayas and texts of all Buddhist schools. Sukhothai inscriptions refer to both, and suggest that they maintained separate ordination lineages. In the Ayutthaya Buddhism of central Siam, the sangha was administered as a well-organized bureaucracy. Broad administrative divisions paralleled old civil divisions into Right, Center, and the Left. They included:

- Forest-dwelling groups (fāy araṇīvāsi), the Center
- Fraternity of town-dwellers (gana ġamavāsi), the Left
- Town-dwellers (gāmavāsi), the Right, under Phra Vanaratna of Wat Pā Kaew.

Within these were further stratifications, with a Phra Khru at appointed temples. The Phra Khru (phra khru [hybrid Pali, garū]) was a subordinate but powerful office in the monastic hierarchy, itself divided into several ranks. Under the Araṇīvāsī were:

- Phra Khru of the section of insight meditation (phra khru fāy vipassanā)
- Phra Khru, head of the Mon fraternity (gana rāmaṇ)
- Phra Khru, head of the Lao fraternity (gana lao).

Under the Right Gāmavāsī were the gana or fraternities of the southern principalities.

The Southeast Asian orders transmitted scriptures in different scripts and languages. In Thailand alone Pali, initially written in
the so-called Pallava script, came to be written in the Mon, Lanna, Tham, Khom, and Burmese alphabets; as a liturgical language it was pronounced and recited differently in different cadences. When King Râma I of Bangkok sponsored a recitation-redaction of the Pali texts, manuscripts in Thai, Mon, and Lao were consulted, with some manuscripts brought from Nakhon Si Thammarat in the South. Further, each vernacular had its own script or scripts, and interacted with Pali or Sanskrit in multiple ways. There was no single, standard or uniform interface between the “Pali database” and the living ritual repertoires and narrative imaginaire.

The “Four [Lân]kâ Lineages” in Nakhon Si Thammarat

At an uncertain date, certainly in the Ayutthaya period, in Nakhon Si Thammarat and and Phatthalung, the sangha was described in terms of “four kâ.” Local oral tradition explained that, from the beginning, the relics at Nakhon Si Thammarat were protected by four flocks of crows (kâ) of four colors in the four cardinal directions. When legendary king Prâyâ Śrî Dharrmâsoka built a stûpa for the relics, the names and colors of the four flocks of crows became the titles of the four Phra Khru who oversaw the stûpa. In fact, the “four kâ” are four monastic lineages believed to have come from Lânkâ:

- Kâ Kaew: Pa Kaew (Vananatana) lineage white
- Kâ Râm: Râmânîa (Mon) lineage yellow
- Kâ Jâta: Pa Daeng lineage red
- Kâ Dóm: Former lineage black

The origins and evolution of these orders are obscure, but most are ancient, and their lineage networks extended to Sukhothai, Chiangmai, and the Shan principalities. In the South, the lineages were enduring, and the terms continued to be used until the Bangkok period. With the constant travel to and fro there were many locally or chronologically differentiated lineages within the Sinhala traditions. At the time jinakâlanâlinî was compiled (beginning of the sixteenth century), there were three lineages in the north: the Nagarâvâsî, the Puphâvâsî, and the Sihâlabhâkhkhus (i.e., the City-Dwellers, the Suan Dork monks, and the Wat Pa Daeng monks).

The Four Nikâyas of Present-Day Siam

Since the late nineteenth century four monastic traditions have been officially recognized in Siam:

- Mahânîkâya: The “Great or Majority Nikâya”
- Dhammayuttika: The “Nikâya Devoted to the Dhamma,” founded by King Mongkut
- Cîna-nikâya: The “Chinese Nikâya,” brought to Siam by southern Chinese immigrants
- Annam-nikâya: The “Annamite Nikâya,” brought to Siam by immigrants from Vietnam

Mahânîkâya and Dhammayuttika are not necessarily exclusive. The twentieth-century northeastern master Ajahn Chah (Bodhiñâka, 1918-1992), for example, studied under Ajahn Mun Bhûriddatto (1870-1942) and other Dhammayuttika masters, but maintained his Mahânîkâya lineage. Laypeople are neither Dhammayuttika nor Mahânîkâya, though some may prefer to support monks of one or the other lineage. Representatives of all four traditions are invited to important royal or state ceremonies (although the status of the Cîna- and Annam-nikâyas is inferior to that of the two Theravâda lineages). At funerals both Theravâdin and Chinese or Annamite monks may be invited to chant and conduct rites, depending on the ethnicity and wishes of the sponsors. The Chinese and Annamite monks perform rituals and recite dhâranîs in southern Chinese or Annamite styles that were imported in the nineteenth century or earlier.

Ahistorical Inventions: Ariya Buddhism and Other Chimera

Modern scholarship has compounded the confusion by coinining new terms for the Buddhism of Southeast Asia. These late twentieth century neologisms include “Lopburi Hînâyâna” and “Ariya Buddhism,” “Tantric Theravâda,” “Siamvamsa school,” and “Sukhavati school.” This is not the place to address the problem of these curious inventions, and I will briefly take up only one example, Tantric Theravâda. Neither Thai nor Khmer Buddhism, as seen above, represents itself as “Theravadin”—let alone “Tantric.” In India itself the word “tantra” is contested—there is no agreement as to what the long-lived, diverse, multicultural, multireligious term “tantra” means. It is noted in the Encyclopedia of Buddhism that “Tantra in Western nomenclature has achieved forms of signification independent from its Sanskritic use and
has become a somewhat promiscuous category applied to various rituals not easily classified.” The word “tantra” is not used in Southeast Asian Buddhism to describe either texts or practices (and the adjective tántrika is equally unknown). There is no problem in drawing parallels (if there are any): that is our job. But when we place Khmer or Southeast Asian practice within a category alien to it, then, inevitably, everything else about tantra is associated with it, and confusion reigns.

III. INCONCLUSION

At the end of this rather desultory excursion into history, I remain with more questions than conclusions. One is whether a precise terminology is possible or even desirable. It is inevitable that terminology be ad hoc, and that it changes as questions and data change. I do not propose that we abandon the use of the term Theravāda—that would be absurd—but I do suggest that we do our best to understand its historical context, and that we keep it in rein. It is inevitable that there are imbalances and inconsistencies in our terms for the complex phenomena of Buddhism. It is common to delimit Buddhism by geographic, ethnic, or national names, without, perhaps, addressing questions of significance and appropriateness. Thus we have Indian, Sinhalese, Tamil, Newar/Nepalese, Tibetan/Himalayan, Mongolian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese Buddhisms. In some case we refine these with names of reigns or capitals: Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing Buddhism; Nara, Heian, Kamakura, Edo Buddhism; Koryŏ, Silla, Paekche Buddhism; Kandyan Buddhism; and so on. We delimit the range by a period/place in a straightforward way, without imposing preconceptions (although there is certainly room for debate about center and periphery, elitism, and so on, but they are not really precluded by the terms). Perhaps we need to experiment further in our descriptions of the Buddhisms of Southeast Asia.

NOTES

1. This is a considerably revised recension of a paper presented under the title “Ubiquitous and Elusive: In Quest of Theravāda” at the conference “Exploring Theravāda Studies: Intellectual Trends and the Future of a Field of Study,” hosted by the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore, August 12–14, 2004, and organized by Guillaume Rozenberg and Jason Carbine. I am grateful to the organizers of the conference for inviting me to speak, to the participants for their comments, and to colleagues too many to mention for discussions in the intervening years. I especially thank Giuliana Martini for her comments on and corrections to the final draft.

   Note: “Sanskrit” and “Prakrit,” rather than “Śaṃskṛta” or “Prākṛta,” have been widely accepted in indological writing for decades. I see no reason to persist with the use of “Pāli” and “Gāndhārī,” and I therefore use “Pali” and “Gandhari” throughout. In addition, taking into account the compelling evidence presented by Gouriswar Bhattacharya, I write “bodhisattva” rather than “bodhisattva”: see Gouriswar Bhattacharya, “How to Justify the Spelling of the Buddha Hybrid Sanskrit Term Bodhisattva?” in From Turfan to Ajanta: Festschrift für Dieter Schlingloff on the Occasion of his Eighteenth Birthday, ed. Eli Franco and Monika Zin (Rupandehi: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2010), 35–50.

2. See, for example, John Clifford Holt, Jacob N. Kinnard, and Jonathan S. Walters, eds., Constituting Communities: Theravāda Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South and Southeast Asia, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). The standard monograph remains Richard F. Gombrich, Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benanes to Modern Colombo (1988; 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2006). The title is problematic insofar as it implies that “Theravāda” began in “ancient Benares,” that is, the Deer Park at Sarnath; however, the sermon at Sarnath is the foundation of all that later became Buddhism—not only Theravāda, but all schools.


4. Other nīkāyas seem to be grouped under the general name ācariyavāda, a term not used, as far as I know, in other Buddhist schools. Another term met with in Pali is nīkāyāntara, which is also used in Sanskrit texts. Further research is needed to determine how “Theravāda” has viewed the “Other” through its long history, during which it has been in constant interaction with other religions and practices.

5. I refer to the research paper of Todd Pereira presented at the XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, June 2006), to be included in Jason Carbine and Peter Skilling, eds., How Theravāda Is Theravāda? (Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corp., forthcoming). Guruge states that “Resulting from the reaction of Buddhists of South and Southeast Asia to the use of the rather pejorative term Hīnayāna to designate the form of Buddhism practiced in the region, the term ‘Theravāda’ came to be applied to it around mid-twentieth century.” See Ananda W. P. Guruge, “Does the Theravāda Tradition of Buddhism Exist Today?” in Buddhist and Pali Studies in Honour of the Venerable Professor Kakkapalliye Amrutha, ed. K.L. Dhammajoji and Y. Karunadasa (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, 2009), 97.


9. Note that it is not true that the Theravāda is the only school that has “survived into the present day,” since up to the present a Sarvastivāda monastic lineage is followed in Tibet and a Dharmaguptaka lineage is followed in East Asia.

10. Dīpavaṃsa 4:6, thera he katasaṃgha theravāda ti vaccattā.

11. P. A. Payutto, Phra traipitdole sing thi chao phut teng ru / The Pali Canon: What a Buddhist Must Know (Bangkok: privately printed, BE 2546 = CE 2003), 17. I prefer, however, to translate “thera” as “senior” or “senior monks” rather than “elder.”

12. One significant distinction is that the Theravāda tradition maintained that it preserves the original redaction, while in north India it was admitted that the original redaction (mūlasaṃghītī) was no longer extant: see Peter Skilling, “Scriptural Authenticity and the Śrāvakā Schools: An Essay towards an Indian Perspective,” The Eastern Buddhist 41, no. 2 (2010): 1ff.


14. I am not certain when or by whom the term Sthāvira-vāda was coined. It is already used by Lamotte, and might have been given currency by A.K. Warder in his Indian Buddhism (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), passim. There is no equivalent—“Gnas brtan smra ba’i sde?”—in Tibetan. Sometimes “Sthāvira-vāda” is reconstructed in European translations from the Chinese, but on investigation the Chinese turns out to be something like *Sthāvira-nikāyā*. The key point is the absence of the suffix -vāda.


22. Śrāmaṇa Yijing, Buddhist Monastic Traditions of Southern Asia: A Record of the Inner Law Sent Home from the South Seas, translated from the Chinese (Taishō Volume 54, Number 2125) by Li Rongxi (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research [BDK English Tripitaka 93-1], 2000), 11. The four-school model is vouchsafed by Indian sources for, at any rate, the seventh century on. Chinese sources also know a five-school model which seems to reflect the situation in the Northwest. This model deserves further attention, given that it includes the Dharmaguptakas, with whom many of the recently discovered Gandhari manuscripts are believed to be associated. For sources and for the historiography of the study of the four- and five-school models in European scholarship up to about 1945, see Lin Li-Kouang,


‘di la gnas brtan pa’i sde pa’i rtsa bar ‘dod pa dañ thams cad yod smra rtsa bar ‘dod pa sogs bṣad lags man du yod kyaṅ gsaṅ snags su agyes rdor dañ samntha rtsa ‘khor du bzhin la sde pa’i miṅ nub gsal ts ‘khor du žal bzhin las sde pa’i bzi spros pa sogs yod pos rtsa ba’i sde bzi khor na ’chad pa yin no.

Herein, because the Sthaviras want [their school] alone to be the root nikiya, the Sarvástivādā want [their school alone] to be the root nikiya, there are many methods of explanation [of the emergence and relations of the schools]; in the Mantra [system] the Hevajra and Sampaṭṭa [tantras] apply the names of the four main nikiyas to the cakras, while the Kālacakra [system] applies them to the four faces, only the four main nikiyas are accepted.

24. Many of these sources are preserved in Tibetan translation, which uses gnas brtan for sthavira, and gnas brtan sde for *Sthāvira-nikīya or, perhaps, *Sthāvarya-etc.


28. Jam-dbyaus Bṣad-pa’i-rdo-rje, Grub mtha’i rnam bṣad kun btsan žin gi nī ma (Kan su’u mi rigs dpe skrun kha, 1992), 267, penult.

29. This means that it is the same as that of the Sāṃśītyas, described as snam phran tshur ge’g nas lhav buyan chad. According to Bu-ston (Bu ston chos ’byun, 133.14), both number of panels and insignia are shared with the Sāṃśītyas (snam phran dañ braggs ma pos bkur ba dañ mthun par grag go). The phrase snam phran has been misunderstood in previous translations (Obermiller uses “fringe” of the “mantle” in Bu-ston Rin-chen-grub, *History of Buddhism* [Chos-hbyung] by Bu-ston, trans. E. Obermiller [Heidelberg: In Kommission bei O. Harrassowitz, 1931–1932], II, 99–100; Vogel, “strips” of the “waist-cloth” in Claus Vogel, “Bu-ston on the Schism of the Buddhist Church and on the Doctrinal Tendencies of Buddhist Scriptures,” in *Zur Schulzugehörigkeit von Werken der Hinayāna-Literatur, Erster Teil,* ed. Heinz Bechert, Symposien zur Buddhismusforschung, III, 1 (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 105–108). The Sanskrit terminology may be gleaned from the Vinaya-sūtra: khaṇḍasarṅghāyaṁ nava prabhṛtya paṭavāṁśater yugavarjāṃ = snam sbyar gyi snam phran dag ni dgyen chad ni sūrtas la ma chad de zhum ma stogs so (reference from J. S. Negi, *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary,* vol. 7 [Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 2001], 3243b). These are the dimensions given for the Sarvāstivādā by Bu-ston and Jam-dbyaus Bṣad-pa. For Thai tradition see Somdet Phra Mahā Samaṇa Chao Krom Pīrayā Vajirajñavararosa, *The Entrance to the Vinaya, Vinayamukha,* vol. 2 (Bangkok: Māhāmat kut Rājavīdityalaya Press, BE 2516 = CE 1973), 13–18, esp. 15: “A cūvara must have not less than five khaṇḍa, but more than this can be used provided that the numbers of them are irregular—seven, nine, eleven. Many khaṇḍa may be used when a bhikkhu cannot find large pieces of cloth.”


32. See Katsumi Mimaki, *La réfutation bouddhique de la permanence des choses (sthirāsniddhiṣaṇa) et la preuve de la momentanéité des choses (ksanabhāṅgasiddhi),* Publications de l’Institut de Civilisation Indienne, Fascicule 41 (Paris: Institut

34. Mimaki, La réfutation bouddhique, 69.


36. ‘Jam dbya’is bzhad pa’i rdo rje, Grub mtha’i rnam bshad kun bzaṅ zin igs igs ma, root-text, 8.8, commentary, 446–448; translation from Daniel Cozort and Craig Preston, Buddhist Philosophy: Losang Gönchen’s Short Commentary to Jamyang Shayba’s Root Text on Tenets (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2003), 143 v. 1.

37. I doubt whether Sautrāntika in particular ever represented a historical body or even an ideology. It represented, perhaps, a hermeneutic stance. Can we compare the term to, for example, “Marxist”? Some historians identify their approach as Marxist; others criticize or condemn Marxist historiography: that is, the term can be positive, negative, or neutral. Marxist historiography has evolved and changed considerably with time. Historians who consider themselves Marxist may disagree on fundamental points, they do not belong to any formal school, and they may be professionally associated with a variety of unrelated institutes. For Sautrāntika see the collection of essays devoted to the school in the special issue of the Journal of the International Association of

Buddhist Studies 26, no. 2 (2003), and Collett Cox, Disputed Dhammas: Early Buddhist Theories on Existence: An Annotated Translation of the Section on Factors Dissociated from Thought from Saṅghabhadra’s Nyāyānusāra, Studia Philologica Buddhica Monograph Series XI (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1995), 37ff.


41. This is, however, something that warrants further investigation. My description of pramāṇa as a concern of North Indian Buddhists may be an overstatement, given the epistemological material in the Tamil Maṇimekhalaḷa and the importance of epistemology in Indian thought in general, including the noteworthy Jaina contributions.

42. Fortunately recent research reconstructs at least some of the scope of Buddhism in the south: see for example Anne E. Monius, Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil-speaking South India (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

(Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975), § XVII, 25.

44. Vinaya (Pali Text Society edition) II 72.27.

45. I follow the Sāyānāṭha edition (vol. 6, 298) in reading -vadānam. The Pali Text Society and Chaṭṭhasangīti editions read -paddānam: Chaṭṭhasangīti, Cullavagga-pāḷi, 187.10 with footnote that Siṃhala editions read vibhujjāvadānaṃ.

46. This is a rare example of an explicit statement of school affiliation in a colophon. As far as I know it is the only case in the Pali scriptures. The only North Indian texts that identify their school affiliation are those of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādins.

47. For a brief report see Indian Archaeology 1997–98: A Review (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2003), 206–207. The inscriptions were published in B.S.L. Hanumantha Rao et al., Buddhist Inscriptions of Andhradesa (Secunderabad: Ananda Buddha Vihara Trust, 1998), copper plates of Sīri Ēvāla Chāntamāla, 191–193 and Pl. VI (c); also, and better, Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India 25 (1999): 114–121, copper plates of Mādhavavarma, 207 foll. Another inscription also mentions mahāvihāra, but this seems to be a local monastery.

48. For examples see Cousins, “On the Vibhujjavādins.”


51. Stephen C. Berkowitz, South Asian Buddhism: A History (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 147–148. One of the curiosities of Buddhist studies is that Ceylon is often located in Southeast Asia—presumably because of its putative Theravādin status (for which we turn to Dipavamsa, Mahāvamsa, and the Pali texts, rather than to the distinctive archeological record, which has its own trajectory, not adequately integrated into current “Sri Lankan history”). This logical anomaly is rather like situating the Philippines in Southern Europe because it is predominantly Roman Catholic. See, for example, the “Timeline of Buddhist History” for Southeast Asia in Encyclopedia of Buddhism, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 2935–936, which in its general unreliability undoes the good done by the better entries in the Encyclopedia. One is grateful to Berkowitz for relocating Sri Lanka in South Asia, and for putting the category of “South Asian Buddhism” back on the table.

52. For the lateness of Theravāda in relation to Mahāyāna see, for example, Peter Skilling, “Mahāyāna and Bodhisattva: An Essay towards Historical Understanding,” in Phothisatava parami kap sangkhom thai noi sohtsawat mai [Bodhisattvaparami and Thai Society in the New Millennium], ed. Pakorn Limpanusorn and Chalermon Iampakdee, Chinese Studies Centre, Institute of East Asia, Thammasat University (proceedings of a seminar in celebration of the fourth birthday of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn held at Thammasat University, 21 January 2003) (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, BE 2547 = CE 2004), 139–156.

53. Note the recent establishment of Association of Theravāda Buddhist Universities (ATBU).

54. I doubt that in any nīkāya the monks and nuns as a whole subscribed to the “particular school of thought” of their nīkāya: the relations between ordination, belief, and thought is another point that needs serious consideration.


57. Ibid., 52:46.

58. Ibid., 54:46.


60. Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 143. Every sentence in the paragraph contains errors, most of them major.


62. Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism, 144.


65. Skilling, “King, Saṅgha, and Brahman.”


74. Yuon Phai v. 76, in Phothachenakram sap wannakhati tai samai ayuthaya: khlong yuan phai (Bangkok: Rajabanditayasathan [The Royal Academy], BE 2544 = CE 2001), 100; A. B. Griswold and Praesert na Nagara, “A Fifteenth-Century Siamese Historical Poem,” in Southeast Asian History and Historiography: Essays Presented to D. G. E. Hall, ed. C. D. Cowan and O. W. Wollers (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976), 144. Griswold and Prasert translate the phrase choen chaoy song phu phaew kalerkhai as “to invite a saintly monk,” but given that Thai nouns have no plural form, and that an ordination requires a chapter of five to ten monks, I prefer to interpret song (- Pali saṅgha) as plural here. It seems more logical that, in order to lend authority to the ordination, a number of revered Lankan monks would have been invited to conduct the ceremony together with local monks.

75. Other monastic categories from Ceylon, such as pamsukālikika, do not seem to have been introduced to Siam, although there was a brief pamsūkālikika lineage in Tibet.

76. G. Coedès, in Recueil des Inscriptions du Siam, Première partie, Inscriptions de Sukhothaya (Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1924), takes the liberty of adding the word “sect” where the Thai has simply upasampada nai gāmavāsī, upasampada nai araṇāvāsī: Inscr. 9, Wat Pa Daeng, p. 136: “[i]l eut reçu l’ordination dans la secte des Gāmavāsī en sakkārāja 705... il reçut l’ordination dans la secte des Araṇāvāsī en sakkārāja 710...”
77. In this context, “lao” refers to a wide cultural and linguistic zone from Chiang Mai in Thailand to Luang Prabang and northern Laos, once a band of Tai principalities—it does not refer to the modern state of Laos.


79. Phrayā Śrī Dharmānāsoka, to judge from inscriptions, was a historical title or figure (ca. twelfth century CE?), but we know more about him from local legends from several regions of Thailand.


82. Given the many significances of “dhamma,” I leave the word untranslated. It is simplistic to call Dhammayuttika a “reformed nikāya,” both in its inception and in its evolution.

83. Note that the name is commonly romanized as “Mun,” but is pronounced “Man” with a short “a” as in “fun.”

