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Theravada Buddhism

I. INTRODUCTION

Theravada Buddhism, along with Mahayana Buddhism, one of the two principal branches of Buddhist belief. It is most widespread in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. Like Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada (Pali for "School of the Elders") claims to perpetuate the true teachings and practices of the Buddha.

The Theravada school traces its descent from the original *sangha*, or monastic community, that first followed the Buddha. Its canon of scripture consists of the Tipitaka (Three Baskets), the first great compendium of Buddhist writings, composed in the Pali language. Theravada tends toward doctrinal conservatism, exemplified in a cautious interpretation of its canon. Because of this, it has been given the pejorative name *Hinayana* (Sanskrit for "Lesser Vehicle") by its rivals, who call their own tradition *Mahayana* ("Greater Vehicle"). The goal of the *Theravadin*, or devotee of Theravada, is to become an *arhat*, a sage who has achieved *nirvana* (enlightenment) and will never be reborn. Mahayana traditionally prefers the figure of the *bodhisattva*—who, out of compassion, helps others toward salvation—to the arhat, who is concerned chiefly with his own salvation.

II. ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

Theravada was the only tradition among the so-called Eighteen Schools of early Buddhism to survive the first centuries after the Buddha's death in the 5th century BC. Some authorities trace its origins to the events following the second great council of Buddhism at Vaishali, India, in 383 BC, in which novel interpretations of doctrine were condemned by conservatives—the *Theras* (Elders)—who thereby became the originators of Theravada orthodoxy. The reformers, in turn, accused the conservatives of being too self-absorbed and dogmatic. The ideological split was confirmed at the third council, convened by King Ashoka at Pātaliputra (now Patna, India) in about 250 BC. After that, according to tradition, the orthodox school is said to have been spread to Sri Lanka by Ashoka's son, the monk Mahinda. There it became a national creed, centered at the great monastery of Mahavihara and closely associated with the Sri Lankan monarchy. Ashoka's missionaries also spread Theravada Buddhism to Myanmar and Thailand. For much of the 1st millennium AD, Theravada existed alongside Mahayana and esoteric Buddhism in all these areas.

While other early sects died out or were absorbed into Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada retained its identity. Similarly, when Buddhism died out in India after the 12th century AD, Theravada kept its hold in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. In about the 10th century, a Theravada reform movement began in Sri Lanka that consolidated the kingdom as a Theravada monarchy. The reform movement spread to Burma and Thailand, where it revitalized the Theravada tradition and ensured its supremacy over other Buddhist sects. Reformers also carried the creed into Cambodia and Laos, where the geographical limits of Theravada predominance were reached. Despite some Theravada followers in Vietnam and elsewhere, Mahayana Buddhism became the dominant tradition in the rest of the Buddhist world.

Despite the European colonialism that began in the early 19th century, Theravada continued in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, in some areas becoming identified with nascent nationalist movements. In Sri Lanka, during the 18th and 19th centuries, Theravada split into factions, mostly over questions regarding the caste of worshipers. Thailand began reform of its Theravada tradition in the 19th century as part of the general national reform initiated in response to European colonialism, and the country has remained a fertile source of Theravada reform movements. In the 1980s and 1990s, Theravada became an important factor in civil strife between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority of Sri Lanka, with some militant Buddhists

promoting a vigorous Sinhalese nationalism. In Myanmar, Theravada has become one element of the rigidly conservative political and social policies of the country's military rulers. Theravada in Laos and Cambodia suffered a setback during the Vietnam War (1959-1975) and the subsequent Communist domination but appeared to be reviving in the 1990s. Theravada has been reestablished in India in the modern era by the mass conversion to Theravada Buddhism of *Harijans* (the so-called Untouchables, who fall outside the traditional class divisions of Hindu society), who are attracted by Buddhism's indifference to Hindu concepts of caste.

III. ORGANIZATION

Theravada organization is in principle based on the original instructions of the Buddha as laid down in the Vinaya Pitaka, the compendium of 227 rules for monastic discipline that forms part of the Tipitaka. Since the sangha is the core institution of Buddhism, its structure is the basis of Theravada organization. Theravada monks were traditionally criticized by Mahayana believers for being too concerned with their own salvation and for indifference to the lay community. Theravada doctrine holds that only a monk can attain nirvana and that the laity can only aspire to be reborn as a monk after many reincarnations spent discharging the burden of *karma* (intentional action that determines one's future destiny). However, in some countries, especially Myanmar and Thailand, young men are placed in monasteries temporarily as part of their education, thus fostering lay involvement in the sangha.

Most countries with large numbers of Theravada adherents exhibit strong historical ties between the Buddhist hierarchy and the government. In such countries, Ashoka's beneficent propagation of Buddhism has been accepted as the exemplar of wise and legitimate government and as a precedent for state involvement in religious affairs. The state and the sangha are often seen as complementary and mutually supportive, ministering respectively to the secular and religious needs of the people. The temples themselves are loosely coordinated in most Southeast Asian countries, with little in the way of formal hierarchy between them. In early Sri Lankan Buddhism, a short-lived and limited practice of clerical marriage developed, and charge of particular temples was passed from father to son.

Theravada has a notable tradition of forest-dwelling hermits who exist outside the monastic organizations. In contrast to Mahayana Buddhism, since about AD 500, Theravada has had no orders of Buddhist nuns. There is limited participation in the sangha by women and lay people, who generally wear white robes and take up *asceticism* (self-denial) without entering a monastic order.

IV. DOCTRINE

Theravada claims to abide by the original teachings of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. Theravada doctrine reveres the Buddha as a single supremely gifted, yet mortal, teacher, in contrast to the succession of transcendent beings postulated by Mahayana. Some Theravada scriptures list other Buddhas, but in general the emphasis is on the one historical Buddha, on the grounds that no universe can bear more than one Buddha without shattering.

The *dharma*, or teachings, of the historical Buddha are usually regarded as being contained in the Tipitaka. Unlike Mahayana, which has generated a vast number of additional *sutras* (scriptural texts), Theravada confines itself to this core dharma. The Theravada canon is recorded in Pali, a dialect popular during the Buddha's lifetime. Other works highly esteemed in Theravada—particularly the dialogues in the *Milindapanha* (2nd century AD; translated as *Questions of King Milinda*, 1963), and the *Visuddhimagga* (5th century AD; *Path of Purification*, 1964) by the great Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa—are regarded by most scholars as authoritative collections rather than as the fruit of further revelations of dharma (although the *Milindapanha* is considered canonical by the Myanmar).

The dharma of Theravada regards human existence as a complex of various transient aspects, also called dharmas. These dharmas are grouped in overlapping categories of 5 components (*skandhas*), 12 bases

(*ayatana*), and 18 perceptual elements (*dhatu*). The 5 components are the physical body (*rupa*), feelings (*vedana*), cognitive perception (*sanna*), mental predispositions (*sankhara*), and consciousness (*vijñana*). The 12 bases are the 5 sensory organs with their 5 sensory fields, plus the mind and the object of mental perception. The 18 elements are the 5 sensory organs plus the mind, their 6 associated objects, and the 6 so-called consciousnesses of ear, eye, nose, mouth, body, and mind. These dharmas create a composite being not united by any enduring soul (*atman*) or identity: There is no self in the strict sense. The Theravadin endeavors to manipulate the dharmas so as to suspend the action of karma and thereby to achieve nirvana. Theravada is therefore less a philosophical doctrine than an almost scientific discipline, although it depends on a complex cosmology of cyclical, multiple worlds and an involved scheme of reincarnation.
