

## Theriya Networks and the Circulation of the Pali Canon in South Asia: The Vibhajjavādins Reconsidered

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This article offers further support for Lance Cousins' thesis that the Pāli canon, written down in the first century BCE in Sri Lanka, was based largely on a Theriya manuscript tradition from South India. Attention is also given to some of Cousins' related arguments, in particular, that this textual transmission occurred within a Vibhajjavādin framework; that it occurred in a form of 'proto-Pāli' close to the Standard Epigraphical Prakrit of the first century BCE; and that that distinct Sinhalese *nikāyas* emerged perhaps as late as the third century CE.

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### Introduction

In more or less all the recent research on early Buddhism, and on Indian Buddhism more generally, very little has been said about the formation of the Pali canon, the only complete Tipiṭaka to have survived in an Indic language. The state of knowledge has hardly changed since K. R. Norman's *Pali Literature* was published over thirty years ago:

The tradition recorded in the Sinhalese chronicles states that the Theravadin canon was written down during the first century B.C. as a result of threats to the *Saṅgha* from famine, war, and the growing power of the Abhayagiri *vihāra*, to which the king was more favourably disposed. There is no reason to reject this tradition, because there are indications that texts were already being written down before this date. It seems probable that the Sanskritisation of Pali was virtually fixed at the stage it had reached by the time of the commission to writing ... (Norman 1983, 5)

Apart from his comments on Sanskritisation, Norman here restates what is found in the Pali chronicles. But these works do not inspire much historical confidence. This is especially the case with the *Mahāvamsa*, which presents a simplistic account that can hardly be taken seriously: in a short series of verses (XXIII.80ff.), it tells of the foundation of the Abhayagiri-vihāra, its schism from the Mahāvihāra and the

writing down of the Tipiṭaka and commentaries. This sixth century CE text is also remote from the events it describes, and differs from the *Dīpavaṃsa*, the simpler account of which probably dates to early fourth century CE.<sup>1</sup> But the *Dīpavaṃsa* is also a difficult work, whose verses on the writing down of the Tipiṭaka (XX.20–21) tell us very little indeed. This means that Norman's assumptions are historically dubious at best; if so it would seem that no progress has been made in understanding a central problem in the study of Indian Buddhism.

It is most fortunate, therefore, that in a recent series of articles (2001, 2012, 2013), Lance Cousins formulated a more compelling account of the early Pali tradition. Cousins has argued that the Pali Tipiṭaka was written down in South India before being transmitted to Sri Lanka in the first century BCE; that Sanskritisation occurred gradually and slowly, in the centuries following the origin of a written canon; that the process of canonical formation occurred among the Vibhajjavādin Theriyyas, an old monastic grouping dating to the Mauryan period; and that the schism between Mahāvihāra and Abhayagiri occurred in the third century CE, not the first century BCE.<sup>2</sup> These claims, even if only partially true, would transform the general understanding of early Theravādin history, and hence deserve a detailed examination.

### 1. The formation of a written Tipiṭaka

The notion that the Tipiṭaka was written down in the first century BCE is based on Dīp XX.20–21, verses associated with events that occurred in the period of Vattagāmani (late first century BCE):

Monks previously handed down the text of the three baskets and its commentary by word of mouth (20). Upon seeing the decline in people, the monks held a gathering and had (it) written down in books, in order to preserve the Dhamma (21).<sup>3</sup>

These couplets were probably added to the old account of Sinhalese regnal history contained in Dīp XX. But this does not detract from their general historical value, given the patchwork nature of the *Dīpavaṃsa* (Cousins 2013, 108–109). Importantly, the claim that oral traditions were endangered by a 'decline in people' (*hāniṃ disvāna sattānaṃ*) is credible, for the Pali commentaries contain a number of passages on the 'danger' or 'terror' (*bhaya*) which afflicted the island at this time.<sup>4</sup> Cousins (2013, 110) has drawn attention to one such account in the *Manorathapūraṇī* (*Aṅguttaranikāya-aṭṭhakathā*), which seems to situate a nascent manuscript tradition within a redaction of Sinhalese and South Indian versions of the Tipiṭaka:

1. According to von Hinüber (1996, 89, 91), the *Dīpavaṃsa* dates 'not long after 350 CE' and the *Mahāvaṃsa* to 'the end of the fifth century CE'. Cousins (2012, 76) dates the *Dīpavaṃsa* to the early fourth century CE and the *Mahāvaṃsa* to 'two or three centuries later' (2012, 77).
2. I use the term Theravādin, Theriya and Thera(-vaṃsa) loosely and interchangeably; these terms occur variously in Pali commentaries and subcommentaries, and in Indian inscriptions, but have the same referent, i.e. monastic lineages belonging to the non-Mahāsāṃghika branch of Indian Buddhism. On these terms see Gethin 2012, 5ff.
3. Dīp XX.20–21: *piṭakattayapālīṇ ca tassā aṭṭhakatham pi ca, mukhapāṭhena ānesuṃ pubbe bhikkhu mahāmati* (20). *hāniṃ disvā sattānaṃ tadā bhikkhu samāgatā, ciraṭṭhitatthaṃ dhammassa potthakesu likhāpayuṃ* (21).
4. On the terror, generally attributed to the Caṇḍāla or Brahmin Tissa, see Cousins 2013, 110, n.45.

*Manorathapūraṇī I (Ekakanipāta-aṭṭhakathā, X.42): 91.22–93.25<sup>5</sup>*

The disappearance of scriptural learning is the root cause of this fivefold disappearance.<sup>6</sup> For with the disappearance of scriptural learning, practice disappears, but when learning remains, (practice) endures. It is because of just this that on this island, during the great terror of Caṇḍāla Tissa, Sakka, king of the gods, had a great raft built and informed the monks: ‘There will be a great terror, the rains will fail; lacking the requisites, *bhikkhus* will not be able to maintain scriptural learning. The Noble Ones must go to the yonder shore, to save their lives. Get on to this great raft and go, venerable sirs. For whom there is not enough room for sitting, they should rest their chests on pieces of wood and go; the terror will affect none of them.’

Then, upon reaching the ocean shore, sixty *bhikkhus* agreed: ‘There is no need for us, now, to go; we will stay right here and preserve the Tipiṭaka.’ Turning back from there they went to the Southern Malaya country, and kept themselves alive on tubers, roots and leaves. When able to keep their bodies going, they sat down and recited individually; when unable, they piled up sand all around, and keeping their heads in a single position, they mastered the scriptures. By this method they preserved the whole Tipiṭaka, along with the commentaries, perfectly, for twelve years.

When the terror had dissipated, seven hundred *bhikkhus*, who had not lost even a single character or phoneme of the Tipiṭaka and commentaries, in the place they had gone to, returned to this very island and took up residence in the Maṇḍalārāma monastery in Kallagāma country. Upon hearing the news that the Therāsa had returned, the sixty monks who had been left behind on the island decided to go and see them. When collating the Tipiṭaka with the Therāsa they did not find even a single character or phoneme in disagreement.

During that meeting a discussion arose among the Therāsa: ‘Is scriptural learning or practice the root of the Dispensation?’. The Therāsa who wore rubbish rags said practice is the root, while the Dhamma-preachers said it is scriptural learning. But then the Therāsa said to them: ‘We will not act on the mere word of you two groups: recite a Sutta spoken by the Jina.’ Thinking it no difficulty to recite a Sutta, (the rubbish-rag wearers) recited these Suttas:

‘And should these almsmen live correctly, Subhadda, the world would not be devoid of Arahants’;<sup>7</sup> ‘The dispensation of the teacher, great king, is rooted in practice, its essence is practice: it endures when practice is upheld’.<sup>8</sup>

Upon hearing this Sutta the Dhamma-preachers, in order to establish their own position, recited this Sutta:

‘As long as the Suttantas endure, and as long as the Vinaya shines forth, so long will (people) see light, just like when the sun has risen.

If the Suttantas do not exist, and if the Vinaya is forgotten, there will be darkness in the world, just like when the sun has set.

5. See appendix for Pali.

6. For the fivefold disappearance see Mp I 87 3: *tattha pañca antaradhānāni nāma: adhigama-antaradhānaṃ paṭipatti-antaradhānaṃ, pariyatti-antaradhānaṃ liṅgantaradhānaṃ dhātu-antaradhānaṃ ti.*

7. D II 151: *ime ca subhadda bhikkhū sammā vihareyyuṃ asuñño loko arantehi assa.*

8. Mil 133: *paṭipattimūlakaṃ mahārāja satthusāsanaṃ paṭipattisāraṃ paṭipattiyā anantarahitāya tiṭṭhatī ti.* The citation from D II 151 (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*) is also found at Mil 133.

When the Suttanta is protected, practice is protected; the wise man established in practice does not fail to reach the release from bondage.’

When this Sutta had been recited, the rubbish-rag wearers fell silent, and the position of the Dhamma-preaching Theras alone predominated. Just as, when there is no milch-cow to protect the lineage within a herd of a hundred or a thousand cows, that lineage or tradition is not continued, even so when there are as many as a hundred or a thousand *bhikkhus* who have undertaken insight meditation, but without scriptural learning, they cannot penetrate the Noble Path. Just as, when characters are inscribed<sup>9</sup> on the surface of a stone, to identify a treasure trove, as long as the characters survive that treasure trove is not lost, even so if scriptural learning is upheld the dispensation does not disappear.

This account is the only attempt to explain in any detail the Sinhalese Saṅgha’s response to the troubled period of Vattagāmaṇi. The motive for leaving the island, and the account of what happened upon the monks’ return, are both believable; the numbers involved are plausibly small (Cousins 2013, 111). The claim for complete agreement between the two groups (‘they did not find even a single character or phoneme in disagreement’) should not be taken at face value, for by using the language of collation (‘purifying’, *sodhentā*), the account suggests that redaction took place. As Cousins has pointed out, there must have been ‘some kind of official acceptance of the new written texts, perhaps with a measure of reconciliation with any divergent local traditions’ (2013, 111). The account thus implies that a Sinhalese ‘proto-canon’, consisting of texts transmitted in the Mauryan period, was harmonised with a Theriya canon that had developed on the Indian mainland subsequent to the Aśokan missions;<sup>10</sup> this took place at the Maṇḍalārāma monastery of Kallagāma, apparently a major centre of Sinhalese Buddhism in the first century BCE.<sup>11</sup>

The similes occurring at the end of the account suggest writing was involved in the redactional process. The first simile is not particularly convincing: the image of a ‘milch-cow’ maintaining a herd of cows suggests that persons — *bhikkhus* — are the best means of ensuring the transmission of Dhamma. But the simile of a stone inscription which records the identity of a treasure trove (*nidhikumbhiyā jānanatthāya pāsāṇapiṭṭhe akkharesu upanibaddhesu*) is more revealing: it suggests that the ‘treasure’ of the Dhamma can best be preserved through the written word.

The use of writing also makes sense if, as seems likely, the returning Sinhalese *bhikkhus* brought an expanded canon which required a transmission in manuscript

9. *upanibaddhesu* (Be *ṭhapitesu*); the Ee reading should be emended to *upanibaddhesu*, ‘written, composed, arranged’ (Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v.; this meaning is not noted in CPD, Cone or Rhys Davids & Stede).

10. Cousin’s conclusion (2013, 113) is more cautious: ‘the four *Nikāyas* ... were accepted at some kind of assembly of the Saṅgha in a district (*janapada*) whose Sinhala name is Palicized as Kallagāma(ka) or Kālakagāma, but we do not know if any additions or amendments were made.’

11. On the Maṇḍalārāma, Malalasekera notes (1997, 429): ‘A monastery in Ceylon, probably near the village of Bhokkanta. It was the residence of the Elder Mahā Tissa, reciter of the Dhammapada ... According to the Vibhanga Commentary the monastery was in the village of Kālakagāma, and, in the time of Vattagāmaṇi, it was the residence of many monks, at the head of whom was Tissabhūta.’ On the tradition that the Pali canon was written down in the Alu-vihāra, see Norman 1983, 11.

form. Texts such as the *Milindapañha*, the *Nettipakaraṇa*, the *Peṭakopadesa*, the *Niddesa*, the *Apadāna* and even much of the canonical Abhidhamma were probably composed in post-Aśokan India.<sup>12</sup> In this connection, it is important to note that the citations offered in support of practice (*paṭipatti*), by the *paṃsukūlika* Theras, are both found in the opening, and probably original, section of the *Milindapañha*.<sup>13</sup> A canon of this extent would have required the redirection of resources towards the development of scribes and scholasticism. The *bhikkhus* who resisted this move perhaps feared the greater demands on monastic time and effort would come at the expense of practice. But after a lengthy period of disruption and danger, it is not surprising that the practical benefit of writing was recognized.

Cousins has commented at length on the extent of the canon at this time and its language, in particular the development of Pali in the new scribal tradition. He has argued that the language of the canon was ‘Old Pali’, a local version of the ‘Common Epigraphical Prakrit’ which resembles the older, more archaic, Aśokan dialect found at Gīrnār and Bombay-Sopārā, and which replaced Aśokan Prakrit in the post-Mauryan period (Cousins 2013, 120–122; Salomon 1998, 76–77). Standard Pali developed along the lines suggested by the epigraphic record, with an increasingly Sanskritised orthography reflecting the rise of Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit and then pure Sanskrit between the first century BCE and fourth century CE (Cousins 2013, 125–127; Salomon 1998, 81ff.). Salomon has pointed out that the influence of Sanskrit emerges in the early centuries CE:<sup>14</sup> Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit became predominant in this period, its influence probably emanating from Mathurā,<sup>15</sup> eventually culminating in ‘the final triumph of classical Sanskrit in the Gupta era’ (Salomon 1998, 84).<sup>16</sup>

## 2. A Vibhajjavādin canon?

Apart from the argument that the extant Pali canon was produced within a Theravādin network reaching from South India to Sri Lanka, Cousins also claimed that this network can be identified as the Vibhajjavādin wing of the Theriya/Sthavira Sangha. Apart from André Bareau’s *Les Sectes Bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule* (1955), little attention has been paid to the Vibhajjavādins. Nothing is said of them in Erich Frauwallner’s seminal *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature* (1956); Etienne Lamotte’s monumental *Histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1958) largely ignores the group. Focusing on the reasons for the schism between Sthavira and Mahāsāṃghika, Lamotte bypasses most of the various denominations he lists.

12. See Frauwallner (1995, 42), von Hinüber (1996, 61, 79–86), Norman (1983, 86–87, 91–92).

13. See n. 7–8, and von Hinüber’s remarks on the composition of the *Milindapañha* (1996, 85).

14. Salomon (1998, 81): ‘From about the first to the fourth century of the Christian era, a large number of inscriptions were written in a peculiar language which is neither fully Sanskrit nor fully Prakrit’.

15. Salomon (1998, 82): ‘EHS ... was definitely the predominant language overall for the first three centuries of the Christian era ... the pattern of distribution of EHS inscriptions gives the impression that they radiate out from Mathurā toward the northeast and southwest’.

16. Norman’s argument places Sanskritisation too early: he claims (1983, 5) that ‘the progressive Sanskritization of the Mathurā inscriptions’ begins ‘around the end of Asoka’s reign.’

And since the Vibhajjavādins hardly feature in Lamotte's lists (1988, 534–36: 'List I of Bhavya', 'the Saṃmatīya List = List III of Bhavya', 'Mahāsāṃghika List'; p.545: 'Sarvāstivādin List by Vinītadeva'), Lamotte gives the impression that the group are yet another of the doxographic literature's 'pseudo-historical elucubrations' (p.547).

Cousins has attempted to rebalance Lamotte's account by noting (2001, 146) that the latter tends 'to confuse by setting out many different accounts, as if they are all independent sources of evidence of equal value.' But five of the seven sources in Lamotte's section on lists with two subdivisions (1988, 529 ff.) are 'simply versions derived from the sixth — the treatise of Vasumitra' (Cousins 2001, 151). Cousins thus claims (2001, 155) that the only genuinely different account of the sects is to be found in 'List II of Bhavya' (Lamotte 1988, 536), which is 'probably earlier than the fifth century CE'. Cousins argues that Bhavya II was probably derived from a 'mainland Vibhajjavādin account', since it 'emphasizes the separateness of the Vibhajjavādins: they are treated as one of three roots with the Theriyas and Mahāsāṃghikas' (Cousins 2001, 158), which then separated into the Mahīśāsakas, Kāśyāpiyas, Dharmaguptakas as well as the Sinhalese Theriyas (Tāmraśaṭṭiyas).

Cousins is surely correct to point out that Vasumitra's account of the sects has proliferated within the doxographic literature. Balancing this north-western, Sarvāstivādin/Mahāyānist account with List II of Bhavya instead suggests a different perspective, one in which the Vibhajjavādins had a more significant role in the sectarian development of Indian Buddhism. It is tempting, indeed, to hypothesise that the first century BCE transmission of Pali literature, from South India to Sri Lanka, took place within a general Vibhajjavādin framework. This is Cousins' conclusion (2013, 113): the 'written texts of the four *Nikāyas* at least' originated 'immediately from some Vibhajjavādin tradition located in the Karnataka-Andhra region ... in the first century B.C.' Direct evidence for this thesis is contained in a few *Dīpavaṃsa* verses (Cousins 2001, 135–136):

*Dīpavaṃsa* XVIII.1

'Nowadays there are also other senior, middling and young (*bhikkhus*), Vibhajjavādas who protect the tradition of the Vinaya (and) the Dispensation.'

*idāni atthi aññe pi therā ca majjhimā navā, vibhajjavādā vinaye sāsane paveṇipālakā.*

*Dīpavaṃsa* XVIII.41

'... and the acclaimed Samuddā, skilled in the lineage of the true teaching; [Samuddā and the *bhikkhunī* Dīpanayā], they were both Vibhajjavādins, transmitters of the Vinaya, beautifications of the Sangha.'

*abhiññātā ca samuddā saddhammavaṃsakovidā, vibhajjavādī vinayadharā ubho tā saṃghasobhaṇā.*

*Dīpavaṃsa* XVIII.44

'Nowadays there are other senior, middling and young (*bhikkhunis*), Vibhajjavādins, transmitters of the Vinaya, protectors of the tradition of the Dispensation, extremely learned, endowed with virtue, illuminating this earth.'

*idāni atthi aññāyo therikā majjhimā navā, vibhajjavādī vinayadharā sāsane paveṇipālakā, bahussutā silasampannā obhāsentī mahiṃ iman ti.*

It is striking that the terms *vibhajjavādā*, *vibhajjavādi* and *vibhajjavādī* are followed by the terms *vinaye* and *vinayadharā*. This suggests a close connection between the Vibhajjavādin identity and Vinaya observance, one which could be strengthened by reading the terms as compounds; this would provide direct evidence for a Vibhajjavādin Vinaya, and hence a Vibhajjavādin Tipiṭaka. But this is not very likely. The term *vibhajjavādi* (v.41) should not be understood as a stem form within a compound, for the variation in vowel strength (*i/ī*) is common and insignificant in the Pali manuscript tradition. Furthermore, the expression *vinayadhara* hardly ever appears at the end of an extended compound in post-canonical Pali literature.<sup>17</sup>

The syntax of XVIII.1 is more open to interpretation. While the direct object of ‘protecting’ (*pālakā*) is clear (*paveṇi-pālakā*), it is odd that there are two indirect objects in the locative case (*vinaye sāsane*): ‘protecting the tradition, with regard to the Vinaya, with regard to the Dispensation’ is odd, and it might be preferable to read *vibhajjavāda* (rather than *vibhajjavādā*) and take the compound *vibhajjavāda-vinaye* as an adjective qualifying *sāsane*: ‘with regard to the Dispensation, in the (tradition of) the Vibhajjavāda-Vinaya’. The reading of the Sinhalese edition is different: *vibhajjavādā vinaye sāsanavaṃsapālakā*, meaning either ‘Vibhajjavādas, protectors of the lineage of the Dispensation rooted in the Vinaya’ or ‘Protecting the lineage of the Dispensation rooted in the Vibhajjavāda Vinaya’.<sup>18</sup>

None of this is conclusive. But it is important to note that Dīp XVIII is overwhelmingly concerned with Vinaya and the heritage of the Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka, suggesting that early monastic and literary transmission in Sri Lanka occurred within a Vibhajjavādin tradition. Indeed, Cousins has noted (2001, 136) that since ‘the specific context concerns nuns ordained on the island of Ceylon, the expression can only refer to an ancestor of the Pali Vinaya which I take to be the Vinaya as it was before the separation of the Ceylon school from some of its mainland counterparts.’

The use of the term *vibhajjavāda* in the *Kathāvatthu* commentary probably has a similar heritage to these *Dīpavaṃsa* verses. In its account of the third council of Pāṭaliputta, and in response to Asoka’s question about what the Buddha taught (*kiṃvādī bhante sammāsambuddho*), Moggaliputtatissa states that the Buddha was a Vibhajjavādin (*vibhajjavādī mahārājā*).<sup>19</sup> Cousins has argued that this account ‘can only have been composed at a time when the word was already known as the name of a school’ (Cousins 2001, 138). At the least, the resonance of the term *vibhajjavādī* in this account would have been obvious in the commentarial period, for the old sections of the *Kathāvatthu* exemplify the *vibhajjavāda* approach to Buddhist teaching, that is to say, a metaphysically conservative approach which aims to hone insight

17. E.g. *tepiṭakābhidhammikavinayadharānaṃ* (Ja IV 219); *dharmadharavinayadharavibhāgato* (Spk-ṭ I.86, Be); *dharmavinayadharā* (Ps-ṭ II.241, Be).

18. Se *vibhajjavādī vinayadharā sāsanapālakā* (v.44cd); The term *paveṇi* is also unusual in the *Dīpavaṃsa*, and if so the verse as printed in the Sinhalese edition might make better sense, even if the Sinhalese edition of the text is less reliable. Cousins has noted (2001, 135 n.11) that *vibhajjavādā* (Dīp XVIII.1) could simply mean ‘followers of the Vibhajjavāda’.

19. Kv-a I.7: *ath’ aññe bhikkhū pakkosāpetvā pucchi: kiṃvādī bhante sammāsambuddho ti? vibhajjavādī mahārājā ti. evaṃ vutte rājā therāṃ pucchi: vibhajjavādī bhante sammāsambuddho ti? āma mahārājā ti.*

without going beyond the bounds of Suttanta teaching (especially by falling into its *sabbatthivāda* and *puggalavāda* interpretations).<sup>20</sup> The combined evidence of the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Kathāvatthu* commentary suggests that the Vibhajjavādins understood themselves to be a Vinaya-Abhidhamma school with roots in the Asokārāma of Pāṭaliputta.

If a Vibhajjavādin identity predominated during the formation of the written Tipiṭaka in the first century BCE, the formation of separate Mahāvihāra and Abhayagirivihāra Nikāyas would have been some way off. But the notion of an early schism has been accepted by some, based on the account in the *Mahāvamsa*. This brief account (Mhv XXXIII.80ff.) relates the schism to the expulsion of Tissa for ‘the frequenting of lay-families’ (v.95: *kulasamsaggadosena*).<sup>21</sup> There seems little to choose between this and the reasons given for schism in the *Dīpavaṃsa* (quarrels about the age of ordination and the use of ivory).<sup>22</sup> The traditions of both chronicles are equally plausible. But the account in the *Mahāvamsa* is condensed: it is possible, but hardly likely, that canonical formation, the establishment of the Abhayagirivihāra and then schism all happened in the troubled period of Vaṭṭagāmaṇi.<sup>23</sup> The *Dīpavaṃsa* places the schism significantly later, in its brief section on Mahāsena’s rule in the third century CE. As such, it seems to cohere with the idea of a gradual emergence of local traditions starting from Vibhajjavādin origins in the first century BCE.

The picture of the Vibhajjavādins which emerges from Cousins’ work is of a post-Mauryan Buddhist network, connected by monastic lineage as well as by the Abhidhamma perspective of the *Kathāvatthu*. Literature was shared throughout this network — texts such as the *Milindapañha* were received from Northern Vibhajjavādins — even if the Sinhalese canon was formed among the Vibhajjavādins of the South. This took place at the point when the Northern and Southern Vibhajjavādin lineages had started to separate into distinct schools, a process which soon led to the emergence of the Mahīṃsāsaka and Tambapaṇṇiya/Mahāvihāra traditions and so the gradual loss of Vibhajjavādin identity.

### 3. The demise of the Vibhajjavādins

The Vibhajjavādins are rarely mentioned in the Pali commentaries. The term is mostly avoided in the colophons (*nigamana-kathā*) to Buddhaghosa’s commentarial works, the important parts of which focus on a different form of Theriya identity:

20. See Cousins’ discussion (2005, 57–58) of the early sections of the *Kathāvatthu*, which is concerned especially with the *sabbatthivāda* and *puggalavāda*.

21. Mhv XXXIII.95: *theraṃ kulehi saṃsaṭṭhaṃ mahātisso ti vissutaṃ, kulasamsaggadosena saṃgho taṃ nīharī ito*.

22. Dīp XXII.72–74: *ubhosamaggabhāviṣsaṃ anuññātaṃ kumārakassape, akappiyan ti dīpesuṃ dussilā mohapārutā* (72). *chabbaggiyānaṃ vatthusmiṃ ananuññātaṃ dantavattakaṃ, anuññātan ti dīpesuṃ alajjī dantaṇṇikā* (73). *imañ c’ aññaṃ bhikkhū atthaṃ aññe bahu akarane, adhammo iti dīpesuṃ alajjī lābhahetukaṃ* (74). Oldenberg (1879, 112) has conjectured *upasampadaṃ gabbhaviṣsaṃ* for *ubhosamaggabhāviṣsaṃ* (72a) based on the *Mahāvamsa* Tika.

23. According to Cousins (2012, 80f), parts of the account (Mhv XXXIII.95ff.) are also corrupt and probably interpolated.

This commentary on the Dīgha Nikāya, called ‘Splendidly Unfolding the Most Auspicious’ (*sumaṅgala-vilāsini*), has been prepared by the Thera whose name is understood by revered teachers to be ‘Buddhaghosa’, who is adorned with supremely purified faith, intelligence and endeavour; who is endowed with a multitude of qualities, such as virtue, good conduct, quick-wittedness and gentility; who is capable of plunging the inner depths of his own and (other) traditions; who is endowed with a distinction of understanding in the dispensation of the teacher, with the divisions of scriptural learning contained in the Tipiṭaka along with its commentary; the might of whose knowledge is unobstructed; a great exegete; endowed with charming expressions, sweet and lofty, emanating from the bliss produced through his accomplishment in articulation; whose utterances are appropriate and devoid (of fault), the best of speakers, a great seer; whose intelligence is expansive and pure, (and) who is an adornment to the lineage of the Mahāvihāravāsīn Theras, those illuminators of the Thera lineage whose understanding is well established in (that dispensation) which is encompassed by a profusion of discriminating knowledge, is adorned with the qualities found in such categories (of the Dhamma) as the six higher knowledges, and which transcends human phenomena.<sup>24</sup>

This standard ‘conclusion’ formula, found widely in the colophons of the commentaries attributed to Buddhaghosa, does not refer to the Vibhajjavādins, and nor do the colophons of the commentaries attributed to Dhammapāla or Mahānāma.<sup>25</sup> Since the colophons attributed to Buddhaghosa were probably not composed by Buddhaghosa himself, it would seem that the term *vibhajjavādin* was not an important form of identification in the post-Buddhaghosa era (Gethin 2012, 16). But a few occurrences within the commentaries and *Visuddhimagga* suggest that the term was still somewhat meaningful to Buddhaghosa himself. For example, toward the end of the *Visuddhimagga*, just before the standard conclusion formula, Buddhaghosa refers to the Mahāvihāravāsīn as Vibhajjavādins:

Accepting the request of venerable Saṅghapāla — a wise member of the lineage of the Mahāvihāravāsīn, illustrious Theriyas, the best of Vibhajjavādins, (who) practises purity and penance, is devoted to observing the moral discipline of the Vinaya, committed to practice, (and) whose mind is adorned with qualities such as forbearance, gentleness, and compassion — desiring the endurance of the true Dhamma, whatever heap of merit I have attained while making this (work), through its lustre

24. Sv III.250 (Be): *paramavisuddhasaddhābuddhivīriya-paṭimaṇḍitena silācārājjavamaddavādiguṇa-samudayasamuditena sakasamayasaṃyantaragahanajjhogāhaṇasamatthena paññāveyyattiya-samannāgatena tipīṭakapariyattippabhede sātthakathe satthusāsane appaṭihatañāṇappabhāvena mahāveyyākaraṇena karaṇasampattijanitasukhaviniggaṭamatadhurodāravacanālāvaṇmayuttana yuttamuttavādinā vādivarena mahākaṇinā pabhinnaṭṭisambhidāparivāre chaḷabhiññādiṭṭipabh edaḡuṇapaṭimaṇḍite uttarimanussadhamme suppaṭiṭṭhita-buddhinā theravaṃsappadīpānaṃ therānaṃ mahāvihāravāsīnaṃ vaṃsālaṅkārabhūtena vipulavisuddhabuddhinā buddhaghoso ti garūhi gahitaṇāmadheyena therena katā ayaṃ sumaṅgalavilāsini nāma dighanikāyattakathā.*

Buddhaghosa’s commentarial introductions (*ganthārambha-kathā*) similarly refer to ‘the tradition of Theras who dwell in the Mahāvihāra (and) illuminate the Thera lineage’ (e.g. Sv-a I.1: *samayaṃ ... therānaṃ theravaṃsappadīpānaṃ ... mahāvihāre nivāsīnaṃ*; see Gethin 2012, 15–16).

25. Sp VII.1416, Ps V.110, Spk III.308, Mp V.99, Pj I.253, Dh-p-a IV.235, Pj II.608, As 430, Vibh-a 523 and the *Paṭṭhānapakaraṇaṭṭhakathā* (Be 498). The work of Dhammapāla is identified with the Mahāvihāravāsīn, and of Mahānāma with Theras and the Theravāda (Gethin 2012, 16–17).

may all creatures prosper in bliss.<sup>26</sup>

It is significant that Buddhaghosa's personal testimony refers to the Mahāvihāravāsins as the 'best of Vibhajjavādins', whereas the anonymous conclusions to the commentaries (and to the *Visuddhimagga*) do not. Might this imply that Buddhaghosa was aware of an ancient identity which the then incumbents of the Mahāvihāra had largely left behind? Perhaps this old identity was not important to the Mahāvihāravāsins of the fourth century CE,<sup>27</sup> who had by now ceased to refer to themselves as Vibhajjavādins, whereas Buddhaghosa, an incomer from South India, wished to draw attention to a former identity shared by the Mahāvihāravāsins and the Theriya Buddhists of South India. Another reference to the Vibhajjavādins, in the conclusion of the commentary on the *Paṭṭhāna*, lends support to this notion:

The commentary, which I have undertaken out of faith — without deviating from the teaching of the (*Paṭṭhāna*'s) masters, pupils of the Vibhajjavādins — being without obstruction in the world, the obstructions of which are excessive and manifold, that (commentary) has today been made thus, in fourteen recitation sections, illuminating the meaning of the entire, choice, *Paṭṭhāna*. Just as (I have) reached the conclusion (of the commentary), thus, for the many, may every good intention quickly come to perfection.<sup>28</sup>

If the 'pupils' are taken as the present generation of Mahāvihāravāsins, it is tempting to understand their Vibhajjavādin predecessors as previous generations of Theriya masters, who maintained an old identity now largely surpassed with the rise of the scholarly tradition of the Mahāvihāra. A further passage from the commentary on the *Vibhaṅga*, found also in the *Visuddhimagga*, comments on the interpretation of Dependent Arising and lends further support to the idea of an older, shared, Vibhajjavādin identity:

Now, directly related to that (analysis of the sense faculties) is the analysis of Dependent Arising. With regard to this, the one making the commentary on the meaning of the teaching (*tanti*) laid down in the method beginning 'from the cause of ignorance (arise) constructions', (he ought to proceed as follows): entering the circle of Vibhajjavādins, without criticising (its) masters or rejecting one's own tradition, without pursuing (*anārihantena*; Be: *anāyūhantena*) another tradition, without excluding Sutta [and] remaining in concord with Vinaya, considering (*olokentena*) the 'great authorities' (*mahāpadese*), illuminating the Dhamma, gathering together (*saṅgahantena*) the meaning, (and) repeatedly reverting to that very meaning (he should) give instruction even by means of other methods, since this is (how) a com-

26. *vibhajjavādisetthānaṃ theriyānaṃ yasassinaṃ, mahāvihāravāsinaṃ vamsajassa vibhāvino. bhadantasāṅghapālassa sucisallekhavuttino, vinayācārayuttassa yuttassa paṭipattiyaṃ. khantisoracca mettādiguṇabhūsitacetaso, ajjhesanaṃ gahetvāna karontena imaṃ mayā. saddhammaṭṭhitikāmena yo patto puññasācayo, tassa tejena sabbe pi sukham edhantu pāṇino.*

27. According to von Hinüber (1996, 102–03) Buddhaghosa dates to the late fourth/early fifth century CE.

28. *Paṭṭhānappakaraṇaṭṭhakathā* Be 497: *saddhāya samāradadhā yā aṭṭhakathā mayā, tassa ācariyānaṃ vādaṃ avihāya vibhajjavādi-sissānaṃ, atibahuvidhantarāye lokamhi anantarāyena, sā evaṃ aṭṭha katā cuddasamattehi bhāṇavārehi atthaṃ pakāsayanti paṭṭhānavarassa sakalassa. sannaṭṭhānaṃ pattā yath'eva niṭṭhaṃ tathā bahujanassa, sampāpuṇantu sīghaṃ kalyāṇaṃ sabbasaṅkappā.*

mentary on the meaning ought to be made.<sup>29</sup>

The doctrinal context suggests that the expression ‘the circle of Vibhajjavādins’ (*vibhajjavādi-maṇḍalam*) refers to a tradition of exegesis, rather than a monastic lineage as such, and perhaps of a rather informal nature: the terms *maṇḍala* (‘circle’) and *samaya* (‘concord’, ‘agreement’, ‘tradition’) indicate vaguer forms of identity than ‘lineage’ (*vaṃsa*) or ‘(monastic) tradition’ (*paveṇi*). If so, the passage gives no more than a general impression of a loose network of like-minded scholars, perhaps stretching across an extended area of South Asia.

These limited occurrences of the term *vibhajjavāda* in the commentaries indicate that an old and seemingly important identity had been largely surpassed by the fourth or fifth century CE. The gradual obsolescence of the Vibhajjavāda community through regional fragmentation is further suggested by the even less frequent use of the term in the sub-commentaries, on which Cousins (2001, 138) has commented as follows: ‘It is clear that the original basis for the adoption of the name Vibhajjavādin ... becomes to a large extent forgotten, especially in later Pali sources.’ This process would seem to have been well underway when Buddhaghosa prepared his commentarial works.

### Conclusion: From Anurādhapura to Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and beyond

In many respects the history of Buddhism in the post-Mauryan period is more difficult to understand than the pre-Aśokan age. The SuttaPiṭaka is a vast, sprawling, document which paints a realistic picture of Indian society and the place of Buddhism within it; rather surprisingly, for a document of such scale constructed from multiple oral sources, it contains very few inconsistencies.<sup>30</sup> This lends credibility to its authenticity. Within a decentralised ascetic culture, and in an age of oral composition, it would have been difficult — perhaps almost impossible — to fabricate a coherent version of the Buddhist past. The significant disagreements to be expected of a multi-authored imagination of the past are more or less completely absent, a fact which rules against large-scale invention.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the serious challenges to understanding Indian Buddhism in the post-canonical period (Skilling 2012, xiv),<sup>32</sup> Lance Cousins’ recent research has shown that significant progress can be made with a careful and judicious use of sources.

29. Vibh-a 130: *idāni tadanantare paṭiccasamuppādavibhaṅge yā ayaṃ avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā ti ādinā nayena tanti nikkhiṭṭā, tassā atthasaṃvaṇṇanaṃ karontena, vibhajjavādi-maṇḍalam otaritvā, ācariye anabbhācikkhantena sakasamayaṃ avokkamantena, parasamayaṃ anārūhantena, suttaṃ appaṭibāhantena vinayaṃ anulomentena mahāpadese olokontena, dhammaṃ dīpentena atthaṃ saṅgahantena, tam ev’ atthaṃ puna āvattetvā aparehi pi pariyāyehi niddisantena ca, yasmā atthasaṃvaṇṇanaṃ kātabbā hoti.* (Nāṇamoli’s translation (1991, 531) omits the problematic *yasmā*)

30. The most important inconsistency concerns the position of the so-called ‘formless meditations’, although this problem is not beyond historical reconstruction (see Wynne, 2007).

31. Sujato and Brahmali (2015, 25–26) have noted that the portrayal of ‘political geography’ in the early Buddhist world is consistent and pre-Aśokan. This observation can be generalised to the religious and social content of the Tipiṭaka.

32. ‘We know very little about the history of these early communities, and much of it depends on Pali chronicles composed some centuries later in Lanka itself’.

References to the Vibhajjavādins are scarce in Pali commentaries and chronicles, and in the Indian doxographies; but they can be used to reconstruct a more plausible history. The writing down of the Pali canon can thus be attributed to the ongoing interactions within a post-Mauryan Theriya network, in South India and Sri Lanka, the old identity of which which gradually faded away.

If the dissolution of Vibhajjavādin identity was well advanced by the third or fourth century CE, we should expect Mahāvihāra and Abhayagiri identities to have emerged no later than the third century CE. There is direct evidence for this. A donative inscription in the Sinhalese monastery at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, dating to the second half of the third century CE, contains important information on monastic identity and textual transmission in the period immediately prior to Buddhaghosa:<sup>33</sup>

Success. The pair of feet of the Blessed one has been established for the benefit and happiness of all beings, in the monastery of the Theriya teachers, Vibhajjavādins, inspirers of faith in Kashmir, Gandhāra, Bactria, Vanavāsa and the island of Tambapaṇṇa, Mahāvihāravāsins, transmitters of the noble lineage and tradition, skilled in determining the meaning and letter of the nine-limbed dispensation of the Teacher.

The sequence *theriyānaṃ vibhajjavādānaṃ ... mahāvihāra-vāsinaṃ* places the Mahāvihāra identity within two wider and overlapping notions of Buddhist identity: first within the Theriya/Theravādin branch of the the Sangha, and then within its Vibhajjavādin wing. The emergence of a purely Sinhalese *nikāya* within these broader frames of reference suggests that, even if the older Vibhajjavādin identity had not yet been lost, individual monastic identities had started to supplant it on the island. The inscription fits well with the evidence of the *Dīpavaṃsa*, both in its remarks on the Vibhajjavādin monastic lineage (Dīp XVIII) and in its brief account of schism (Dīp XXII).

Perhaps sectarian rivalry was one of the reasons that prompted Mahāvihāra missionary activity in the third century CE. Whatever the case, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa was a key centre of Theravāda interaction in South India. An inscription places the Mahimsāsakas there (Vogel 1929–1930, 24–25), and literary contact between the Mahimsāsakas and Mahāvihāravāsins is attested by the introduction to the *Jātaka* commentary;<sup>34</sup> the Mahāvihāravāsins perhaps also acquired their knowledge of the *Andhaṭṭhakathā* on the *Vinaya* here (see Cousins 2001, 142). This means that Nāgārjunakoṇḍa was not just a major Mahāsāṃghika site: it was also an important centre of Theravāda Buddhism, at which monastic lineages derived from the Vibhajjavādins came together and shared literature. It was probably from here that the Mahāvihāravāsins subsequently spread elsewhere, to North India and South East Asia (see von Hinüber 1991, Falk 1997).

33. Sircar and Lahiri (1959–1960, 250): 1. sidhaṃ [/] ācariyānaṃ theriyānaṃ vibhajjavādānaṃ kasmira-gaṃdhāra-yavana-vanavāsa-tambapaṇṇidipa-pasādakanaṃ 2. mahāvihāra-vāsinaṃ nava[m]ga-sathu-sasana-atha-vyajana-vinichaya-visaradanaṃ ariya-va[m]sa-paveni-dharanaṃ 3. vihāre bhagavato pāda-saṃghāḍā nipatiṭṭhapito sava-satānaṃ hita-sukhathanāya ti /

34. Ja I v.9: *mahimsāsakavaṃsaṃhi sambhūtena nayaññunā, buddhadevena ca tathā bhikkhunā suddhabuddhinā*. On this verse see Gethin 2012, 18.

For clarifying these obscure events in the history of Buddhism in South Asia, and for much else besides, we are, indeed, greatly indebted to the work of Lance Cousins.

## Appendix

### *Manorathapūraṇī, Ekakanipāta-aṭṭhakathā X (Ee I.91.22–93.25)*

*imassa pañca-vidhassa antaradhānassa pariyatti-antaradhānam eva mūlaṃ. pariyattiyā hi antarahitāya paṭipatti antaradhāyati, pariyattiyā tñitāya tiṭṭhati. ten' eva imasmim' dīpe caṇḍālatisa-mahābhaye sakko devarājā mahā-uḷumpaṃ māpetvā bhikkhūnaṃ ārocāpesi: mahantaṃ bhayaṃ bhavissati, na sammā devo vassissati, bhikkhū paccayehi kilamantā pariyattim' sandhāretum na sakkhissanti. paratīraṃ gantvā ayyehi jīvitaṃ rakkhitum vaṭṭati, imaṃ mahā-uḷumpaṃ āruya gacchatha bhante. yesaṃ ettha nisajjana-tṭhānaṃ na ppahoti, te kaṭṭha-kaṇḍe pi uraṃ tṭhapetvā gacchantu, sabbesaṃ bhayaṃ na bhavissati ti.*

*tadā samudda-tīraṃ patvā saṭṭhi bhikkhū katikaṃ katvā, amhākaṃ ettha gamana-kiccaṃ n' atthi, mayaṃ idh' eva hutvā tepīṭakaṃ rakkhissāma ti. tato nivattitvā dakkhiṇa-malaya-janapadaṃ gantvā kanda-mūla-paṇṇehi jīvikaṃ kappentā vasiṃsu. kāye vahante nisīditvā sajjhāyaṃ karonti, avahante vālikaṃ ussāpetvā parivāretvā sīsāni eka-tṭhāne katvā pariyattim' sammasanti. iminā niyāmena dvādasa saṃvaccharāni sātṭhakathaṃ tepīṭakaṃ paripuṇṇaṃ katvā dhārayiṃsu.*

*bhaye vūpasante satta-satā bhikkhū attano gata-tṭhāne sātṭhakathe tepīṭake ekakkharam pi eka-vyañjanam pi anāsetvā, imam eva dīpam āgama kallagāma-janapade maṇḍalārāma-vihāraṃ pavasiṃsu. therānaṃ āgata-pavattim' sutvā imasmim' dīpe ohinā saṭṭhi bhikkhū, there passissāma ti gantvā, therehi saddhim' tepīṭakaṃ sodhentā ekakkharam pi eka-vyañjanam pi asamentaṃ nāma na passiṃsu.*

*tasmim' tṭhāne therānaṃ ayaṃ kathā udapādi: pariyatti nu kho sāsanassa mūlaṃ udāhu paṭipatti ti. paṃsukūlika-ttherā paṭipatti mūlan ti āhaṃsu, dhamma-kathikā pariyatti ti. atha ne therā, tumhākaṃ dvinnaṃ pi janānaṃ vacana-matten' eva na karoma, jina-bhāsitaṃ suttaṃ āharathā ti āhaṃsu. suttaṃ āharitum na bhāro ti, ime ca subhadda bhikkhū sammā vihareyyum, asuñño loko arahantehi assā ti; paṭipatti-mūlakaṃ mahārāja satthu-sāsaṇaṃ paṭipatti-sārakaṃ, paṭipattiyāṃ dharantaṃ<sup>35</sup> tiṭṭhati ti suttaṃ āharim'su.*

*imaṃ suttaṃ sutvā dhamma-kathikā attano vāda-tṭhapanatthāya imaṃ suttaṃ āharim'su: yāva tiṭṭhanti suttantā, vinayo yāva dīppati; tāva dakkhinti ālokaṃ, suriye abbhutṭhite yathā. suttantesu asantesu, pammuṭṭhe vinayamhi ca; tamo bhavissati loke, suriye atthaṅgate yathā. suttante rakkhite sante, paṭipatti hoti rakkhitā. paṭipattiyāṃ tñito dhīro, yoga-kkhemā na dhamsati ti.*

*imasmim' sutte āhaṇe paṃsukūlika-ttherā tunhī ahesum, dhamma-kathika-therānaṃ yeva vacanaṃ purato ahoṣi. yathā hi gava-satassa vā gava-sahassassa vā antare paveni-pālikāya dhenuyā asati so vaṃso sā paveni na ghaṭiyati, evam eva āradhā-vipassakānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ sate pi sahase pi saṃvijjamāne pariyattiyā asati ariya-magga-paṭivedho nāma na hoti. yathā ca nidhi-kumbhiyā jānanatthāya pāsāṇa-piṭṭhe akkharesu upanibaddhesu<sup>36</sup> yāva akkharā dharanti, tāva nidhi-kumbhi natṭhā nāma na hoti, evam eva pariyattiyā dharamānāya sāsaṇaṃ antarahitaṃ nāma na hoti ti.*

35. Mil 133 (Ee) reads *paṭipattiyā anantarahitāya* instead of *paṭipattiyāṃ dharantaṃ*.

36. Emended Ee: *upanibandhesu* (Be: *tṭhapitesu*)

## Abbreviations

As	<i>Atthasālinī</i>
D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
Dhp-a	<i>Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Dīp	<i>Dīpavaṃsa</i>
Ja	<i>The Jātaka together with its commentary</i>
Kv-a	<i>Kathāvutthu Commentary</i>
Mhv	<i>Mahāvaṃsa</i>
Mil	<i>Milindapañho</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī (Aṅuttara-nikāya-aṭṭhakathā)</i>
Pj I	<i>Paramatthajotikā I (Khuddaka-pāṭha-aṭṭhakathā)</i>
Pj II	<i>Paramatthajotikā II (Sutta-nipāta- aṭṭhakathā)</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī (Majjhima-nikāya- aṭṭhakathā)</i>
Ps-ṭ	<i>Ṭīkā on Ps</i>
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā (Vinaya- aṭṭhakathā)</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī (Saṃyutta-nikāya-aṭṭhakathā)</i>
Spk-ṭ	<i>Ṭīkā on Spk</i>
Sv	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī (Dīgha-nikāya- aṭṭhakathā)</i>
Vibh-a	<i>Sammohavinodanī (Vibhaṅga- aṭṭhakathā)</i>

All Pali citations are from the editions published by the Pali Text Society.

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