CHAPTER VI
A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE AGAMA LITERATURE OF SARVASTIVADA

Language and Literature

The Tibetan traditions corroborated by the recent finds of manuscripts in Eastern Turkestan and Gilgit leave no room for doubt about the fact that the Sarvastivadins adopted grammatical Sanskrit (and not mixed Sanskrit) as the medium of their literature and that they possessed a complete canon of their own in three divisions Sutra, Vinaya and Abhidharma. The sub-divisions of these three Pitakas were also substantially the same as those in Pali. ¹

Our main source of information regarding the literature of this school is Chinese and, occasionally, Tibetan versions of the Tripitaka, supplemented by the find of manuscripts in Central Asia, Eastern Turkestan, Gilgit and Nepal, and by quotations found in works like the Lalitavistara, Mahavastu, Madhyamika-vrtti, Sutralankara of Asanga, Divyavadana, Abhidharmakosa with its Bhasya and Vyakhya. It may be questioned whether the information available about the literature of this school are of the Sarvastivadins or of the Mulasarvastivadins. For the present it is not possible to distinguish between the two, but it seems that the agamas were common to both, so also were the Abhidharma texts. It is only in regard to Vinaya and few Avadana texts that there might have been some differences.

Agama

In Buddhism, an agama (Sanskrit and Pali for “sacred work” or “scripture”) is a collection of Early Buddhist scriptures, of which there are five, which together comprise the various recessions of the Sutra Pitika of the Sanskritic early schools. The various schools had

different recensions of each agama, and the five agamas parallel the first five collections (Nikayas) of the Sutta Pitika of the Theravadin school’s Pali Canon. Agamas of various schools, primarily the Sarvastivada, are preserved in their entirety in Chinese translation, and portions also survive in Sanskrit and in Tibetan translation.

Meaning

In Buddhism, the term agama is used to refer to a collection of discourses (Sanskrit: sutra; Pali: sutta) of the early Buddhist schools, which were preserved primarily in Chinese translation, with substantial material also surviving in Sanskrit and lesser but still significant amounts surviving in Gandhari and in Tibetan translation. These sutras correspond to the first four Nikayas (and parts of the fifth) of the Sutta-Pitaka of the UPali Canon, which are also occasionally called agamas. In this sense, agama is a synonym for one of the meaning of nikaya. Many of the agama sutras belong to the Sarvastivada cano

Sometimes the word agama is used to refer not to a specific scripture, but to a class of scripture. In this case, its meaning can also encompass the sutta-pitaka, which the Theravada tradition holds to the oldest and most historically accurate representation of the teachings of Gautama Buddha, together with the Vinaya-pitaka.

History

According to tradition, the Buddha’s discourses were already collected by the time of the first council, held shortly after the Buddha’s death. Scholars, however, see the texts as continually growing in number and size from an unknown nucleus, thereby undergoing various changes in language and content. 

It is clear that, among the early schools, at a minimum the Sarvastivada, Kasyapiya, Mahasanghika, and Dharmaguptaka had recensions of four of the five agamas that differed at least somewhat. The agamas have been compared to the Pali Canon’s nikayas by
contemporary scholars in an attempt to identify possible changes and root phrasings. The agamas’ existence and similarity to the Sutta Pitaka are sometimes used by scholars to assess to what degree these teachings are a historically authentic representation of the Canon of Early Buddhism. Sometimes also the differences between them are used to suggest an alternative meaning to the accepted meaning of a sutta in either of the two recensions.

**Doctrines**

According to some interpretations in the Theravada school, it is not possible for there to be two fully-enlightened Buddhas at the same time. However, in Mahayana traditions, the concept of contemporaneous Buddhas is common. According to Mahayana Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra, which is associated with the Vaibhasika Sarvastivadins, in the “Sravaka Dharma” (agamas and related teachings), “the Buddha did not say whether or not there are contemporaneous Buddhas in the ten directions”. In the agamas preserved in Chinese, the concept of contemporaneous Buddhas does indeed exist. This is found in the extant Dirgha Agama, the Samyukta Agama, and the Ekottara Agama, in which the doctrine of contemporaneous buddhas is mentioned many times.

**The Various Agamas**

There are four extant collections of agamas, and one for which we have only references and fragments (the Ksudrakagama). The four extant collections are preserved in their entirety only in Chinese translation (agama), although small portions of all four have recently been discovered in Sanskrit, and portions of four of the five agamas are preserved in Tibetan. The five Agamas are:

---

Dirgha Agama

The Dirgha Agama ("Long Discourses," Chang Ahanjing Taisho 1) corresponds to the Digha Nikaya to the Theravada school. A complete version of the Dirgha Agama of the Dharmaguptaka school was done Buddhayasas and Zhu Fonian in the Late Qin dynasty, dated to 413 CE. It contains 30 sutras in contrast to the 34 sutras of the Theravadin Digha Nikaya. A “very substantial” portion of the sarvastivadin Dirgha Agama survives in Sanskrit and portions survive in Tibetan translation. 3

Madhyama Agama

The Madhyama Agama ("Middle-length Discourses," Zhong Ahanjing Taisho 26) corresponds to the Majjhima Nikaya of the Theravada school. A complete translation of the Madhyama Agama of the Sarvastivada school was done by Samghadeva in the Eastern Jin dynasty in 397-398 CE. The Madhyama Agama of the Sarvastivada school contains 222 sutras, in contrast to the 152 sutras in the Pali Majjhima Nikaya. Portions of the Sarvastivada Madhyama Agama also survive in Tibetan translation. 4

Samyukta Agama

The Samyukta Agama (Connected Discourses", Za Ahanjing Taisho 99) corresponds to the Samyutta Nikaya of the Theravada school. A Chinese translation of the complete Samyukta Agama of the Sarvastivada school was done by Gunabhadra in the Song State, dated to 435-443 CEW. Portions of the Sarvastivada Samyukta Agama also survive in Tibetan translation. 5

3 Ibid: 20.
5 Ibid: 25.
There are also an incomplete Chinese translation of the Samyukta Agama (Taisho 100) of the Kasyapiya school by an unknown translator, from around the Three Qin period, 352-431 CE. A comparison of the Sarvastivadin, Kasyapiya and Theravadin texts reveals a considerable consistency of content, although each recension contains texts not found in the others.

Ekottara Agama

Main article: Ekottara Agama, The ekottara Agama (“Numbered Discourses,” Zengyi ahanjing, Taisho 25) corresponds to the Anguttara Nikaya of the Theravada school. A complete version of the Ekottara Agama was translated by dharmanandi of the Fu Qin State and edited by Gautama Samghadeva in 397-398 CE. Some believed that it came from the Sarvastivada school, but more recently the Mahasamghika branch has been proposed as well. According to a.K. Warder, the Ekottara Agama references 250 Pratimoksa rules for monks, which agrees only with the Dharmaguptaka vinaya, which is also located in the Chinese Buddhist canon. He also views of the doctrine as contradicting tenets of the Mahasamghika school, and states that they agree with Dharmaguptaka views currently known. He therefore concludes that the extant Ekottara Agama is that of the Dharmaguptaka School. 6

Ksudraka Agama

The Ksudraka Agama (“Minor collection”) corresponds to the Khuddaka Nikaya and existed in some schools. The dharmaguptaka in particular, had a Ksudraka Agama. The Chinese translation of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya provides a table of contents for the Dharmaguptaka recension of the Ksudraka Agama, and fragments in Gandhari appear to have been found. Items from this Agama also survive in Tibetan and Chinese translation -

fourteen texts, in the later case. Some schools, notably the Sarvastivada, recognised only four Agama—they had a “Ksudraka” which they did not consider to be an “Agama” Problem: another Dharmaguptaka, according to some contemporary scholars—preferred to term it a” “Ksudraka Pitaka”. As with its Pali counterpart, the Ksudraka Agama appears to have been a miscellany, and was perhaps never definitively established among many early schools.  

Vinaya

Vinaya texts: Our information about the Vinaya texts of the Sarvastivadins is derived solely from the catalogues of Chinese Canonical literature. In Nanjio’s Catalogue, appear the following titles:


Dasadhyaya-vinaya-nidana, translated by Vimalaksa (being the preface to the Dasadhyaya-vinaya), Nanjio 1144.

Dasadhyaya-vinaya-bhikṣu-pratimoksa, translated by Kumarajiva (404 A.D): Taishō xxiii, 1436; Nanjio 1160.

Dasadhyaya-vinaya-bhiksuni-pratimoksa, compiled by Fayin (420-479 A.D): Taishō xxiii, 1437; Nanjio 1161.

Ibid:27.
Dasadhyaya-vinaya or the Sarvastivada Vinaya, translated by Punmyatara together with Kumarajiva (404 A.D): Taisho xxiii, 1435; Nanjio 1115.

The principal text of the Sarvastivadins was the Dasadhyayavinaya. Fa-hien writes that he came across a Sarvastivada-vinaya in verses, but the Chinese translation of the Dasadhyaya-vinaya attributed to the Sarvastivadins is in prose. The Dasadhyaya (Taisho ed., xxiii, 1435) is divided into 14 sections. It opens with the eight sections of the Pratimoksa-sutra. The ninth section deals with “seven dharmas”, viz., siksapada, posadha, papadesana, varsavasa. The tenth section contains “eight dharmas,” viz., Kathina, Kausambi, Campa Pandulohitaka, Sanghavasesa-parivasa, Paticchadana, Sayanasana and Asamudacarika-dharma (rules re. making of Kathina-robes, dispute at Kausambi, events at Campa, deeds of Pandulohitaka monks, atonement for Sanghavasesa-offences, concealment of irreligious acts, rules regarding bed and seat and proper conduct of monks). The eleventh section entitled “samyutta, “i.e., miscellaneous rules, deals with dhutta and other extraordinary precepts observed by some monks. The twelfth section is devoted to Bhiksuni pratimoksa containing, as it does, 8 Parajika, 17 Sanghavasesa, 30 Naihsargika, 78 Payantika, 8 Pratidesaniya and Asta-dharma. The thirteenth section re-arranges the preceding rules in the Ekottara style, from one to eleven dharmas. The concluding section, the fourteenth, contains Upali-pariprccha, a well-known text on disciplinary rules.

The text contains almost all the chapters of the Vinaya of the Theravadins and the Mulasarvastivadins, and appears to be a much shorter version of the text of the latter. From the title, one expects ten chapters, but actually there are fourteen, and so we have to assume that four of the fourteen chapters were later additions or were originally treated as supplements. The 11th, 13th and 14th chapters are no doubt later additions, but it is difficult to ascertain the fourth additional chapter. A close study of the Chinese translation along with Sanskrit text of the Mulasarvastivadins will reveal the actual position.
Mulasarvastivada Vinaya

As stated above, we rely on the Chinese versions of the Sarvastivada literature including the Vinaya Pitalka. In this connection, it may be mentioned that a large portion of the original Mulasarvastivada Vinaya was discovered at Gilgit and edited by me after collating it with its Tibetan version. It may be assumed that the Vinaya texts of Sarvastivada and Mulasarvastivada were not very different from each other. From the Mulasarvastivada text, it appears that the Mulasarvastivadins also, like the Lokottarvadins, whose first Vinaya text is the Mahavastu, introduced many episodes relating to the past and present lives of Gautama Buddha. The chapters of this Pitaka that have been published (Gilgit Manuscripts, Vol. III) are as follows:—

Pravrajya-vastu (fragmentary)

Posadha-vastu (do)
Pravarana-vastu (do)
Varsa-vastu (do)

Carma-vastu (including the Srona-Kotikarna avadana)

Bhaïsajya-vastu (also in fragments)

Civara-vastu (Complete)
Kathina-vastu (do)
Kosambaka-vastu (do)
Karma-vastu (do)
Pandulohitaka-vastu (do)
Pudgala-vastu (do)
Parivasika-vastu (do)
Posadhasthapanavastu (do)

Ibid: 79-89.
Abhidharma

The Abhidharma literature of the Sarvastivadins is fairly extensive. Apart from the well-known seven texts and the famous Vibhasa sastras of the Vaibhasikas, this school had to its credit a few other philosophical works written by Vasubandhu, Samghabhadra, Dharmatrata and Dharmottara. None of these valuable works are available in original Sanskrit except the Abhidharmakosa, its bhasya and vyakhya of Yasomitra. The Vyakhya is no doubt a mine of information and contains most of the philosophical topics discussed in the Abhidharma literature of the Sarvastivadins. It may also be regarded as a quintessence of the seven Abhidharma texts. For a general idea of the several texts at the present moment, we shall have to depend on the valuable analysis of the Chinese translations of the texts made by Prof. Takakusu in the JPTS, 1904-05, and the notes given by Prof. Louis de la Vallee Poussin in his introduction to the French translation of the Abhidharmakosa. With the publication of the Vyakhya it has become possible to comprehend the terms and nomenclatures suggested by Takakusu on the basis of the Chinese renderings and form a better idea of the contents of the texts. The seven texts claimed by the Sarvastivadins as constituting their original Abhidharmapitaka are as follows:—

The Jnanaprasthana-sutra is attributed to Arya Katyayaniputra. In the Kosa it is stated that the actual author of the work was Buddha but the arrangement of chapters and topics were made by Katyayaniputra and so its authorship is attributed to him. It was translated twice into Chinese, by Gotama Samghadeva of Kashmir and Chu Fo-nien, in the 4th century CE and by Huien-tsang in the 7th century. It is divided into eight sections. The first section contains exposition of laukikagradharmas, jnana, pudgala, sraddha, ahrikata, rupa and its laksana, anarthaka (?), and caitasika (= best mundane topics, knowledge, individuality, faith

and reverence, lack of modesty, material constituents of the body and their characteristics, anarthaka (?) and mental states). The second section details the samyojanas or defilements, which hinder the spiritual progress of an adept, and the causes of defilements. The third section is devoted to the acquisition of knowledge (jnana) (a) of doctrinal matters by which a sekha becomes an asekha, (b) of right and wrong views, (c) of the means of attaining six abhijnas, (d) of the four truths and of the acquisitions to be made in the four stages of sanctification. The fourth section details what may be called evil works and acts with their consequences and also explains vijnapti and avijnapti. The fifth section gives an exposition of rupaskandha, i.e. the four constituents, and of those originating out of them, both internal and external. The sixth section analyses the 22 indriyas (predominant faculties) and the three spheres of existence viz., Kama, rupa and arupa, and explains in detail the sparsendriya, mula-citta, etc. The seventh section is devoted to the mental states developed by an adept while he is in Samadhi, and gradually advances from Sakadagami to Anagami stage. The last, the eighth section explains the four smrtypasthanas, the various wrong views, and similar other matters.

The alternative title of the Jnana-prasthana-sutra is Astagrantha, as it contains eight chapters, relating to Laukikagradharma (=mind and mental states) which are considered to be the best of worldly (Kama and rupa dhatu) matters. It seems that this book corresponds to the Dhammasangani in Pali. It contains eight chapters: These are:-

Laukikagradharma = the best world-conditions; Jnanam = knowledge of the nature of all worldly objects. Pudgalah = of individualities; Sneha-gauravam = Sraddha = Regard and firm faith in the Triratna, i.e. Buddha, Dharma and Sangha; Ahrikyam = immodesty; Laksanam = characteristics of the body, i.e., anityata (=impermanence, i.e., birth, old age and death); Cetana, samcetana, adhicetana = idea, thinking and deep thinking. Anarthakam = Perhaps, it means “indifferent, i.e., neither good nor evil”. The second chapter deals with:-
Akusala (evil actions and thoughts in general); Samyojanani = fetters of human life. These are the same as Samyojanani in Pali. Sahacaritam = fetters relating to the beings of the three dhatus: Kama, Rupa and Arupa; Sattvah = the ways and methods to be adopted by the denizens of the three dhatus to get rid of the samyojanas (fetters). Dasa Dvarani = it enumerates all the conceivable impurities of the denizens of the three dhatus. The remaining six chapters have not yet been published by Santi Bhiksu Sastri.

Dr. Barua suggests that the work (Jnanaprasthana-sutra) may be paralleled to the Pali text Patisambhidamagga. There may be a verbal resemblance between the two texts, but the Jnanaprasthana is written more on the lines of Dhamma – sangani than on those of Patisambhidamagga. The title also suggests that the work is expected to contain topics leading to the highest knowledge, which, in other words, is purity or emancipation.

The second book is entitled Prakaranapada. Its authorship is attributed to Sthavira Vasumitra, who, according to the Chinese tradition, composed it in a monastery at Puskalavati. It was translated into Chinese by Gunabhadra and Bodhiyasas of central India (435-443 CE) and also be Hiuen-tsang (659 CE). The work is divided into eight chapters. The first defines rupa, citta, caitasikas, cittaviprayuktas and asamskrtas (material constituents, mind, mental states, non – mental states, and the unconstituted). The second deals with the same topics as those discussed in the last two chapters of the fourth section of the Jnanaprasthanasutra. The third explains the sense-organs and their spheres of action, while the fourth defines several terms, such as dhatu, ayatana, skandha, mahabhumika (cf. Kosa, II, 23; III, 32), etc. the firth chapter analyses the anusayas (dormant passions), while the sixth explains vijneya, anumeya and anasrava dharmas (things to be known, to be inferred, and pure dharmas). The concluding chapter, the seventh, appears to be an index, containing all the technical terms with their meanings in short.

The third book, Vijnana-kaya is attributed to Devasarma, who, according to Hiuen-tsang, compiled it at Visoka near Sravasti, about a century after Buddha’s death. It was
translated into Chinese by Hiuen-tsang (649 CE). It is divided into six chapters. It contains an exposition of pudgala, indriya, citta, klesa, vijnana, etc. as given by Maudgalyayana, enumerates the different classes of beings, persons etc. defines the function of mental states as hetu (Cause) and alambana (basis) of spiritual progress and also of mental states of a perfect (i.e. Arhat) and an imperfect adept. Prof. Poussin remarks in his Etudes Asiatiques, 1925, (i. 343-76) that the first two chapters contain the controversies relating to the existence of past and future, and of pudgala (soul).

The fourth book is entitled Dharmaskandha. Its authorship is attributed to Sariputra. It was translated into Chinese by Hiuen-tsang (659 CE), in the colophon of the Chinese translation this text is described as “the most important of the Abhidharma works, and the fountain-head of the Sarvastivada system.” This book, it seems, appealed to the Chinese not for its subtlety and depth of philosophical discussions as for its comprehensiveness outlining the general course of spiritual training prescribed for a Buddhist monk. This work can also be paralleled to the Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosa. Its 21 sections are as follows: Siksapadas or Silas; attainments leading to Srotapatti; development of faith in the Triratna; the fruits of the four stages of sanctification, four arya-pudgalas samyak-samkalpa of the eightfold path; attainment of rddhipadas; practice or smrtyupasthanas: exposition of the aryasatyas; four dhyanas; four apramanas; four higher samapattis (arupyas), practice of bhavana; exposition of bodhyangas, and then an exposition of indriyas, ayatanas, skandhas and dhatus. Its concluding chapter explains the twelve terms of the formula of causation (pratityasamutpada).

The fifth book, Dhatukaya, is attributed to Purna in the Sanskrit and Tibetan texts and to Vasumitra by the Chinese writers. Prof. Takakusa remarks that the original Sanskrit had probably more than one recension. It was translated into Chinese by Hiuen-tsang (663 CE). The object of the treatise is to enumerate the dharmas, considered as ‘reals’ by the Sarvastivadins. The dharmas are classified under the heads: 10 mahabhumikas, 10 klesa-
mahabhumikas, 10 parittaklesas, 5 klesas, 5 drstis, etc. This classification differs slightly from that found in Pali texts and the Abhidharmakosa. Prof. La Valee Poussin thinks that this must be a very old text, which may be regarded as the source of the Pali Dhatukatha also, as it discusses the sampayutta and vippayutta relations of the dharmas as has been done in the Dhatukatha.

The sixth book Prajnaptastra is attributed to Maudgalyayana. It was translated into Chinese at a very late date (1004-1055 CE) by Fa-nu (=Dharmapala) of Magadha. The Chinese text is incomplete. In the Tibetan version this treatise is divided into three parts, viz., lokaprajnapti, karana-prajnapti and Karmaprajnapti. The lokaprajnapti appears in a well-digested form in the Abhidharmakosa (III). Prof. La Vallee Poussin has analysed the first two Prajnaptis in the Cosmologie bouddhique (pp. 275-350). In the lokaprajnapti the cosmological ideas of the Buddhists are given, in the Karanaprajnapti the characteristics that make a Bodhisattva are discussed, while in the Karmaprajnapti there are enumeration and classification of different kinds of deeds.

The seventh book Sangitiparyaya is attributed to Mahakausthila by Yasomitra and Bu-ston and to Sariputra by the Chinese writers. It was translated into Chinese by Hiuen-tsong (660-663 CE). This text was compiled, according to the introductory remarks, immediately after Buddha’s death to avert disputes among the disciples regarding the Buddhist teachings and disciplinary rules. The scene of this text is laid at Pava, where dissensions among the Nigantha Nataputtas started after the death of their teacher. It arranges the dharmas, both doctrinal and disciplinary, numerically in the Ekottra style, i.e. gradually increasing the number of dharmas from one to ten. The contents of this text agree to a large extent with those of the Sangiti and Dasuttaa suttatas of the Dighanikaya. Besides these seven recognized texts of the Sarvastivadin Abhidharmapitaka, there were a few other digests and commentaries dealing with the topics of the Abhidharma. The exhaustive
commentary on the Jnanaprasthana-sutra was, of course, the Mahavibhasa, compiled, according to Paramartha, by Katyayaniputra himself with the assistance of Asvaghosa os Saketa. Among the digests, the most important work is vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakosa, which has got a bhasya written by Vasubandhu himself and a vyakhya written by Yasomitra. Then there are two other texts, viz., Abhidharma-nyanusara and Abhidharmasamaya-pradipika, attributed to Samghabhadra, an opponent of Vasubandhu. Samghabhadra wrote these works to refute some of the theses of Vasubandhu, especially those which were in support of Sautrantika views.

There was an earlier digest called the Abhidharmasara written by Dharmasri. It contained eight chapters, viz., dhatu, samskara, anusaya, arya, jnana, Samadhi, miscellaneous sastravarga or vada-varga. 10

Among other works of note belonging to this school, we may mention Sariputrabhadharma, Abhidharmamrtasastra of Ghosa, Abhidharmahrdaya of Dharmottara and Lokaprajnapti-abhidharmasastra of an unknown author. 1

Additional Literature

In Hinduism, the Agamas are an enormous collection of Sanskrit scriptures which, are revered as smriti (remembered scriptures). The Agamas are the primary source and authority for ritual, yoga, and temple construction. The Shaiva Agamas revere the Ultimate Reality as Lord Shiva (Shaivism). The Vaishnava-Agamas (Pancharatra and Vaikhanasas Samhitas) adore the Ultimate Reality as Vishnu (Vaishnavism). The Shakta-Agamas (Tantras) venerate the Ultimate Reality as Shakti the consort of Shiva and Divine Mother of the universe (Shaktism). Each set of texts expands on the central theological and philosophical teachings of that denomination.

10 Ibid: 68.
The two main schools in the Vaishnava Agama are Pancharatra and Vaikanasa Agama. The Saiva Agama has led to the Saiva Siddhanta 1philosophy in South India and to the Pratyabhijna system of Kashmir Saivism. Smartas recognize the Agamas, but don’t necessarily adhere to them, relying mainly on the smriti texts. In the Malay languages the word Agama literally means religion. The Agamas are also sometimes known as Tantras. Agamas deal with the philosophy and spiritual knowledge behind the worship of the deity, the yoga and mental discipline required for this worship, and the specifies of worship offered to the deity. Each Agama consists of four parts. The first part includes the philosophical and spiritual knowledge. The second part covers the yoga and the mental discipline. The third part specifies rules for the construction of temples and for sculpting and carving the figures of deities for worship in the temples. The fourth part of the Agamas includes rules pertaining to the observances of religious rites, rituals, and festivals.

Elaborate rules are laid out in the Agamas for Silpa (the science of sculpture) describing the quality requirements of the places where temples are to be built, the kind of images to be installed, the materials from which they are to be made, their dimensions, proportions, air circulation, lighting in the temple complex etc. The Manasara and Silpasara are some of the works dealing with these rules. The rituals followed in worship services each day at the temple also follow rules laid out in the Agamas.

The Agamas state three essential requirements for a place of pilgrimage-Sthala, Teertham and Murthy. Sthala refers to the temple, Teertham, to the temple tank and Murthy to the deity (ies) worshipped. A temple may also be associated with a tree, called the Sthala Vriksham. For instance, the Kadamba tree at the Madurai Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple is the Sthala Vriksham. A lone banyan tree that adorns the spacious courtyard of the Ratnasabha at Tiruvalankadu is the Sthala Vriksham. The entire area is believed to have been a forest of banyan trees once.
According to Charles Muller, four collections of agamas appear in the East Asian Mahayana Canon: the Chang Ahanjing, the Zhong Ahanjing, the Za Ahanjing, and the Ekottara Agama or Zengyi Ahanjing. These correspond to the Digha Nikaya, the Majjhima Nikaya, the Samyutta Nikaya, and the Anguttara Nikaya of the Pali Canon, respectively.

The agamas were translated from their original language to Sanskrit, and were later also converted into a version of Sanskrit that used Chinese characters. This version is currently available in the Mahayana Canon. The agamas are commonly compared to the Suttapitaka, and their existence and similarity is sometimes used by scholars to validate the teachings composed in them as a historically authentic representation of the Canon of the First Buddhist Council.

**Linguistic Medium of the Literature**

From the Chinese and the Tibetan translations as also from the manuscript fragments discovered in Central Asia, Nepal and at Gilgit (now in Pakistan), and from quotations found in the Lalitavistara, Divyavadana, Mahavastu, Abhidharmakosa, Madhyamakavrtti and such other texts, it appears that the Sarvastivadins as well as the Mulasarvastivadins employed Sanskrit as their literary medium and possessed a Canon of their own in Sanskrit. Prof. Winternitz’s view is substantially to the same effect. He adds further that the Sarvastivadins who had their sphere of activity extending from Kashmir to Mathura and were responsible for the introduction of Buddhism into Central Asia, Tibet and China, had Canons of their own, although no complete set is available up till now. The Theravadins, the followers of the orthodox school, assert that the Pali Canon preserves the original words of Buddha. This traditional belief is, however, not accepted by the present day scholars, particularly on account of the discovery of Sanskrit manuscripts or fragments in Nepal, Eastern Turkestan and the neighbouring regions. The manuscripts discovered in Central Asia up to this day are fragments of the texts belonging to the Sarvastivada and later Mahayana schools. From the
finds to manuscripts and also from the quotations in the various Buddhist Sanskrit texts like the Mahavastu, Divyavadana and the Lalitavistara, it appears that the Sarvastivadins divided their Canon like the Theravadins into three Pitakas. They replaced the term Nikaya by Agama.

The existence of the Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts was unknown to the Buddhist scholars in India and abroad before 1824. The credit for the discovery of the manuscripts goes to Brian Houghton Hodgson. It was he who first discovered Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts, amounting to 381 bundles, in Nepal. This new find of manuscripts brought to light that there were Buddhist Canons preserved in a language other than Pali and created a stir in the world of Buddhist scholarship—the traditional belief that all the Buddhist Canons are preserved only in Pali was first shaken thereby.

The Canon of the Sarvastivadins was no doubt written in Sanskrit. But the texts such as the Pratimoksasutra, the Lalitavistarg and other manuscript fragments of Agamas prove that their Canon is a revised version of an older Canon and composed in a language not always conforming to the rules of the Sanskrit grammar, and hence called Mixed Sanskrit by the late savant Senart.

Thus we see that the Sarvastivadins had a Sanskrit Canon of their own and adopted Sanskrit as their literary medium. But the Tibetan and the Chinese versions of the Tripitaka testify to the above fact. It is akin to the Pali Pitakas in contents but the lists of Nikaya Sutras and Vinaya chapters are different. This is probably because both the versions, Pali and Sanskrit, sprang from a still older Canon, the Canon in the Magadhi dialect which was very likely employed by Buddha in his religious discourses. Further, the Sarvastivadins, it will be observed, had their sphere of activities in Mathura, Gandhara and Kashmir, where Sanskrit was prevalent, which extended later on to Central Asia, Tibet and China.
As regards this language it may be observed here that there was a class of Buddhist writers of Sanskrit who paid more attention to meaning than to correct form. “It regards as well as disregards the elementary canons of grammar, metre and even vocabulary. A sweet melody seems to be its chief aim, and for this it is ready to sacrifice every other essential condition of a language”. And the consequence was that their writings abounded in grammatical and other irregularities.

As already mentioned, the language employed was Buddhist Sanskrit or Mixed Sanskrit. The Buddhist Sanskrit texts usually contain both prose and verse (gatha). The prose portions sometimes either serve as an introduction to the verses or reiterate the contents of the verse. The language employed in the prose portions is usually correct Sanskrit while in the verses (gatha) it is mixed Sanskrit, i.e. partly Sanskrit and partly Prakrit. Prof Bloch’s remarks on the language are: Ce sont là, non des tentatives infructueuses pour écrire le Sanskrit, mais plutôt des efforts mal réglés pour donner une forme littéraire à une langue locale. We differ here from Sournouf’s suggestion that it is an intermediate stage between Pali and Sanskrit. Dr Bareth observes that Sanskrit is in Buddhist texts only an interloper.

An analysis of the history of Sanskrit Buddhism reveals that the prevalence of Prakrit in this literature is due mainly to the fact that Prakrit was the literary medium for a long period. Buddha discarded Sanskrit as a medium for the propagation of religion and the consequence was that Sanskrit came to the background for the time being. King Asoka, too, whose enthusiasm for the cause of Buddhism is well-known caused edicts to be incised in his vast empire. These edicts extol the ideal life and the fruit of meritorious acts and they are all written in Prakrit. In the pre-Buddhist days, Sanskrit was the literary medium of the people in North-Western India. In the Asokan and post-Asokan periods, Prakrit became popular, and was a medium for literary writings, Sanskrit, although for the time being had receded to the background, recovered its importance and with the revival of Brahmanism
under the Gupta dynasty, regained its lost position. With the revival of Sanskrit as a literary medium in the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, the Buddhist writers also started writing their works in correct Paninian Sanskrit. The later texts now available of the Sarvastivada school such as the Divyavadana, Avadanasataka, Abhidharmakosavyakhya and the like, are all written in pure Sanskrit.

It is stated that the Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang brought 657 Sanskrit books to China while returning from India after the completion of his travel and translated them into Chinese under orders of the then emperor. Thus the Sarvastivadins have the largest number of texts of the Tripitaka preserved in Chinese. Fragments of the sutras such as the Samgiti sutra and the Atanatiyasutra of the Disghagama, the Upalisutra and the Sukasutra of the Madhyamagama, the Pravaranasutra, the Candrogamasutra and the Saktisutra of the Samyuktagama and Ekattaragama have been discovered in Central Asia. A brief account of those sutras is given below:

1. The Samgiti sutra is an explanation of the Buddhist Dharmas –topics numerically grouped on the lines of the Anguttara Nikaya. It is the thirty-third sutra of the Digha Nikaya (P.T.S. Vol. III, pp 207-71). The Sanskrit fragments of this sutra are not in close agreement with the corresponding Pali or Chinese texts. The Samgiti sutra translated by Buddhaya is the 9th book of the Chinese Dirghagama. There is also a separate text translated by Danapala. It is, however, a later translation.

2. The Atanatiyasutra contains charms averting the evil influence of the spirits such as gandharvas, yaksas, etc. It is a charm (raksamantra) for protection from evils. This sutra does not closely agree with the Pali text and is altogether absent from the Chinese Dirghagama.

3. The Upalisutra is a dialogue between Buddha and Upali, a follower of Nigantha Nataputta. It is the 56th Sutra of the Majjhima Nikaya (P.T.S, Vol. I, pp. 371-87) and the
133rd book in Nanjio’s Catalogue (No. 542, Col. 131). The Sanskrit version differs considerably from the Pali but there is a fair amount of agreement with the Chinese.

4. The Sukasutra deals with the doctrine of Karma. It is the 135th sutra called the Gulaskammavibhanga in the Majjhima Nikaya (P.T.S, Vol. II, pp. 202-6) and the 170th sutra of the Chinese Madhyamagama. The Sanskrit version agrees fairly with the Pali but the wording is widely different, in Chinese, however, there is an agreement is wording too.

5. The Pravaranasutra deals with confession. It is a ceremony in which one makes confession of the offences committed by him during a Varsavasa. The procedure of the ceremony has been laid down in the Vinaya Pitaka (P.T.S, Vol. I, pp. 157-78). It is the 7th paragraph of the VIIIth book called the Vangisa Thera Samyuttam in Feer’s edition of the Pali Text Society.

6. The Candropamasutra deals with contentment. It is the third sutra of the Kassapa section of the Samyutta Nikaya (P.T.S., Vol. II, pp. 197-200). The Sanskrit version is larger than the Pali but the Chinese agrees closely with the Pali Nanjio’s Catalogue mentions nothing about this sutra.

7. The Saktisutra deals with the friendly heart. It is the fifth of the Opamma section of the Samyutta Nikaya (P.T.S, Vol. II, p. 255). The Sanskrit version of the sutra differs from the Pali. Nothing can be known of this sutra from Manjio’s Catalogue.

Thus, the fragments of the sutras discovered in Central Asia differ from the corresponding Pali texts, there is much agreement is substance.

Nanjio’s Catalogue under caption, ‘Sutras of the Hinayan mentions besides the four Agamas a few other works, in all about which appear to be distinct translations of the different sutras of the various Agamas. It is, however, to be noted that the four Agamas and
other Chinese works included in the Catalogue under the heading, ‘Sutras of Hinayana’, almost all belong to the Sarvastivada or the Vaibhasika School. The Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons too does not throw much light on the Sarvastivada texts.

The Chinese Dirghagama consists of 30 sutras only as against 34 in Pali. The following six sutras included in the Chinese Dirghagama, viz., (i) on the four castes, (ii) on the Ekottara (dharma), (iii) on the Trirasi (dharma) (iv) on (the city) o-tho-I (?), (v) on the pureness (of practice), and (vi) on the record of the world-are either wanting or found in different names in the Pali Digha Nikaya. Further, it is to be noted that the following ten sutras are wanting in the Chinese Dirghagama, viz., (i) Mahalisuttanta, (ii) Jaliyasuttanta, (iii) Subhasutta, (iv) Mahasudassanasutta, (v) Mahasatipatthana-sutta, (vi) Patikasutta, (vii) Agganasuttants, (viii) Pasadikasutta, (ix) Lakhhanasuttanta, and (ix) Atanatiyasutta – fragments of the last sutra have, however, been found in Central Asia. Prof. Nanjio observes: “It is, however, possible that if No. 545. (Dirghagama Sutra) is compared with the pali text minutely, some of these sutras may still be found”. 11

The Madhyamagama contains 222 sutras as against 152 of the Pali text, and 19 of them are not in the Chinese.

The Samyuktagama contains sutras, ‘half of which is the same as or similar to’ the Madhyamagama and the Ekottaragama. The Pali text consist of 5 samyuttas or vaggas, while the Chinese Samyuktagama is divided into 50 chapters.

Lastly, the Ekottaragama contains 52 chapters while the Pali text contains 11 nipatas (ekadasakanipata) consisting of 169 chapters.

Prof. Nanjio has given the contents of the first two and the last Agamas, except the third, viz., the Samyuktagama. We know much of them from their contents. A comparison of

11 Ibid.
the four Agamas with the corresponding Pali Nikayas reveals many points of agreement and
divergence too. Prof. Anesaki has compared the four Agamas of the Sarvastivadins with the
corresponding Palis Nikayas and Prof. C. Akanuma too has done it in greater detail – the
result being a close agreement in the case of the Digha Nikaya and notable divergence in the
other two. The other of the sutras is different from that in the pali Nikayas. Thus the sutra
No. 10 (on the Dasottaradharma) in the Chinese Dirghagama comes last being No. 34
(Dasuttarasuttanta) in the Pali Digha Nikaya, Sutra No. 2 (Mahaparinirvana Sutra) in
Chinese is No. 16 (Mahaparinibbana) in Pali, sutra No. 1 (Sutra on the first great- original-
nidana is No. 14 (Mahapadanasutta) and so on. This is also the case with the
Madhyamagama. The sutras Nos. 190 and 191 (on emptiness in short and on emptiness in
detail) correspond to No. 121 (Culasunnatasutta and Mahasunnatasutta) and the sutra No.
133 (Upali-sutra) to No. 56 (Upalisutta) of the Pali Majjhima Nikaya. In the Madhyamagama
the material varies more than in the Dirghagama. Many sutras of the Madhyamagama such
as Nos 97, and 135 occur in the Pali Digha Nikaya. Similarly, many sutras are also to be
found in the Pali Samyutta and Anguttara Nikaya and Vice versa. In the Chinese
Samyuktagama too the Samyuktas or groups are quite different. There are some samyuktas
or groups in the Chinese Samyuktagama which are wanting in Pali and vice-versa. Thus the
Sagathavarga of the Samyuktagama consist of 318 sutras but 244 only are in agreement with
the Pali text.

It may be pointed out that almost half of the sutras of the Samyuktagama agrees with
those of the Madhyamagama and Ekottaragama. But the disagreement is the most notable in
the last two, viz., the Ekottaragama and Anguttara Nikaya. As already mentioned, the
Ekottaragama contains 52 chapters while the Anguttara Nikaya consists of 11 nipatas or
groups containing 169 chapters. Thus, the great agreement and the divergence between the
Sarvastivada Agamas and the Theravada Nikayas prove clearly that the two schools while
compiling the Canons, utilized a common stock of materials, but the sutras were differently
classified by the different schools. Anesaki observes: The materials of both are much the same but the agreement is different. It is, however, to be noted that the Chinese Canon contains different translations of the one and the same text included in it—such as those of the Brahmajala Sutra and the Mahaparinirvanasutra of the Dirghagama, the Brahmacaryasutta and the sutra on Anupa (ta?) and other sutras of the Madhyamagama, Sarptagama and Ekottaragama, too numerous to mention here. There are ten independent translations of the Mahaparinirvanasutra; three of them belong to the Hinayana and seven to the Mahayana school. Thus we see that the Chinese translators translated only the important sutras comprised in the four Agamas.

The Chinese Agamas

The Chinese Agamas are contained in the first two volume of the great Taisho Tripitaka (Tokyo, 1924-1929, 55 Vols. Quarto). The technical terms and titles of the suttas are written on the bottom in Pali in Roman character. Bunyiu Nanjio’s Catalogue of the Chinese translation of the Buddhist Tripitaka gives us a list of books which the Chinese Agamas contain. The division of the sutras is identical with that of the Tibetan, but in the Chinese there are no Tantra texts. It has fully preserved the Hinayana sutras as also the Vinaya and Abhidharma of the older schools. Le Canon Bouddhique a chise of P.C. Bagchi is a valuable contribution on this subject. There is no complete copy of the Agamas preserved in Tibetan like that of the Chinese, but only a few sutras are found translated in the Tibetan Bkah-hgyur (Kanjur).

In Nanjio’s Catalogue it will be seen that the Chinese translators mention the school to which the texts belong in the case of the Vinaya and Abhidharma literature but not in the case of the Agama.
It may be mentioned that a colophon of the Chinese translation of the Abhiniskramanasutra mentions that the five schools had five different titles of the similar work, viz.: 12

1) Mahavastu of the Mahasanghikas,
2) Mahavyuha or Lalitavistara of the Sarvastivadins,
3) Buddha’s former Nidana or Avadana of the Kasyapiyas,
4) Buddhacarita of the Dharmaguptas, and
5) Vinayapitakamula of the Mahisasakas.

From the above it seems that the texts of the Agamas were all accepted by the different schools but they differed only in the number of sutras. This is probable because the different schools accepted only those sutras which were in consonance with the doctrines of their schools. Thus the Sanskrit versions of the Dharmapada and Udanavarga, although differing in number and arrangement, had an original source of verses in common with the corresponding Pali texts. Lastly, fragments of the Pratimoksa Sutra of the Sarvastivadins, as well as other texts of the Vinayapitaka and the manuscript fragments of the different Agamas recently explored in Central Asia are substantially similar.1

-----------------------------