CHAPTER III

THE ORIGIN OF THE SARVASTIVADA SCHOOL OF BUDDHISM

INTRODUCTION OF SARVASTIVADA SCHOOL OF BUDDHISM

Among the Buddhist schools, which adopted Sanskrit for their literary medium, the Sarvastivadins come closest to the Sthaviravadins. With the decline of the Sthaviravadins in India this school bore the brunt of the battle against the Mahayananist. Acarya Vasubandhu, the writer of the *Abhidharmakosa*, was a great champion of this school before he was converted to Mahayanaism under the influence of his brother Asanga. This school flourished in India in the Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province (now in Pakistan) and Kaniska (1st century CE) was its great patron. It was in his reign that a Council was held which became famous in the history of Buddhism. It is said that at this Council, held under Vasumitra’s guidance, the Buddhist texts of the *Sutra*, *the Vinaya* and the *Abhidharma* were ordered to be engraved on sheets of copper and deposited inside a stupa. However, these engraved sheets have not yet been traced.\(^1\)

The belief that all things exist, *sarvam asti*, advocated by this school perhaps goes back to the *Samyutta-nikaya* where the expression, *sabbham atthi*, occurs. It is this belief that has given the school its name. Like the Sthaviravadins, the Sarvastivadins were the realists among the Buddhists. They believed that it was not only the things in the present that existed, but also the things in the past and future, which were in continuity with the present. Like the Vatsiputriyas, the Sammitiyas and some of the Mahasanghikas, they revolted against the dominance of the Arhats who had attained a position of unsurpassed

eminence among the Sthaviravadins. They maintained that an Arhat was subject to fall or retrogression, while curiously enough, they maintained at the same time that a srotapanna, or an individual in the first stage, was not liable to such retrogression. They also said that a continuous flow of mind might amount to concentration (Samadhi) of mind. This school, like the Sthaviravadins, denied the transcendent powers ascribed to the Buddha and the Bodhisattva by the Mahasanghkis.

It was their faith that holy life was possible for gods and that even heretics could have supernatural powers. They believed in antara-bhava, an interim existence between this life and the next. They maintained that the Bodhisattvas were still ordinary people (prthag-jana) and that even the Arhats were not free from the effects of past actions and still had something to learn.

They believed in nairatmya, the absence of any permanent substance in an individual, though they admitted the permanent reality of all things. Like the Sthaviravadins, they believed in the plurality of elements in the universe. According to them, there were seventy-five elements, seventy-two of them samskra, compounded, and three asamskra, uncompounded, which were akasa or space, pratisankhyanirodha, or cessation through knowledge, and apratisankhya-nirodha, or cessation, not through knowledge, but through the natural process of the absence of required conditions. The seventy-two samskra dharmas were divided into four groups: rupa, or matter which was held to be of eleven kinds, including one called avijnapti-rupa, unmanifested action in the form of a mental impress; cita, mind, forty-six mental concomitants (citta-samprayukta dharmas) and fourteen dharmas which were not connected with mind (cittaviprayukta), the last being a new class of forces which were not classed as mental or material, although they could not be active without a mental or material basis. These seventy-five elements were
linked together by casual relations, six of which were dominant (*hetu*) and four subsidiaries (*pratyaya*). According to some, the followers of this school were also called the Hetuvadins.  

The Sarvastivada is an early school of Buddhism that advocated the theory of “the existence of all Dharmas in the past, present and future, the ‘three times’. The Abhidharma Kosa-bhasya, a later text, states: “He who affirms the existence of the Dharmas of the three time periods [past, present and future] is held to be a Sarvastivadin.”

**Nomenclature and Etymology**

Sarvastivada is a Sanskrit term, which holds the semantic field: “the theory of all exists”. The Pali equivalent is Sabbathivada.

Although there is some dispute over how the word “Sarvastivada” is to be analyzed, the general consensus is that it is to be paraphrased into three parts” *sarva* “all” or “every” + *asti* “exist” + *vada* “speak”, “say” or “theory”. This equates perfectly with the Chinese term, which is literally “the sect that speaks of the existence of everything”, as used by Hsuan Tsang, and other translators.

**PHILOSOPHY OF SARVASTIVADA SCHOOL OF BUDDHISM**

Though the Sarvastivadins would themselves claim that their teaching of ‘all exists’ (sarvasti) is a direct teaching of the Buddha himself, as shown by their attributing the earliest Abhidharma texts to direct disciples of the Buddha, notably to Sariputta and

---


constant reference to the sutras throughout, the school in its entirety is more rightly to be considered as part of the age of scholastic Buddhism. It was the most influential school in the whole of northwestern part of India. In a Chinese context, the word Abhidharma refers to the Sarvastivada Abhidharma, although Dharmaguptakas and Pudgalavadins also had an Abhidharma. During the first century BCE, in the Gandharan cultural area (consisting of Uddiyana/Udyana, Gandhara and Bactria, Tokharistan, across the Khyber Pass, the Sthaviriyas used Gandhari to write their literature in Kharosthi. During this time, the Sarvastivada Abhidharma primarily consisted of the Abhidharmahrdaya authored by Dharmashresthin, a native from Tokharistan and the Ashtagrantha authored/compiled by Katyayaniputra.

Both the texts were translated by Samghadeva in 391 C.E. and in 183 C.E. respectively, but they were not completed in Southern China. Although the Sarvastivada was the central thesis, there were different theories on how ‘sarvam’ and even ‘asti’ were actually to be explained and understood among the Gandharan diverse Sarvastivadins. Vasubandhu’s Koshabhasya, an elaborate yoga manual based on the Hrdaya, describes four main theses on sarvasti: ‘There are four types of Sarvastivadins accordingly as they teach a difference in existence (bhavanyathatva), a difference in characteristic (laksananyathatva), a difference in condition (avasthanyathatva), and mutual difference (anyonyathatva).

Later Sarvastivada takes a combination of the first and third theses as its model. It was on this basis, that the school’s doctrines were defended in the face of growing external, and sometimes even internal, criticism.

The doctrines of Sarvastivada were not confined to ‘all exists’, but also include the theory of momentariness (ksanika), conjoining (samprayukta) and simultaneity (sahabhu),
conditionality (hetu and pratyaya), the culmination of the spiritual path (marga), and others. These doctrines are all inter-connected and it is the principle of ‘all exist’ tat is the axial doctrine holding the larger movement together when the precise details of other doctrines are at stake. The Sarvastivada was also known by other names, particularly hetuvada and yuktivada. Hetuvada comes from hetu- ‘cause’, which indicates their emphasis on causation and conditionality. 4

Yuktivada comes from yukti-‘reason’ or even ‘logic’, which shown their use of rational argument and syllogism. When the Sarvastivada School held a synod in Kashmir during the reign of Kaniska, the Gandharan most important text, the Astagrantha of Katyayaniputra was rewritten in Sanskrit making necessary revisions. This revised text was now known as Jnanaprasthana, Course of knowledge. Though the Gandharan Astagrantha had many Vibhashas, the new Kashmira Astagrantha, i.e. the Jnanaprasthana had a Sanskrit Mahavibhasa, compiled by the Kashmira sarvastivada synod.

The Jnanaprasthana and its Mahavibhasas, which took more than a generation to complete, were then declared the Vaibhasika orthodoxy, said to be ‘The Buddha’s word’, Buddhhabhasita. This new Vaibhasika orthodoxy, however, was not readily accepted by the Gandharan Sarvastivadins, thought gradually they adapted their views to the new Kashmira orthodoxy. The Gandharan Sarvastivadins used the same Vinaya from Mathura. As a matter of fact, their Abhidharma was meant for meditational practices. They made use of the Hrdaya which is a manual for attaining Arhat. However, the long Gandharan Vinaya was abridged to a Sanskrit Dashabhanavara in the Kashmira synod by removing the Avadana and Jatakas, stories and illustrations.

After the declaration of the Vaibhasika orthodoxy, the Gandharan non-Vaibhasika Sarvastivadins, the majority, were called ‘Sautrantikas’ (those who uphold the sutras). Interestingly, the Kashmir orthodoxy, the Vaibhasikas disappeared in the later part of the 7th century. Subsequently, the old Gandharan Sarvastivadins, the non-Vaibhasikas Sautrantikas, were named ‘Mulasarvastivadins’, who then at a later went to Tibet. It has been suggested that the minority Vaibhasikas were absorbed into the majority Sautrantika sarvastivadins as a possible result of the latter’s adaptations. Moreover, Mishrakabhidharmahrdaya, a title which means that ‘Sautrantika views were mixed with Vaibhasika views’ was composed by Dharmatrata in the 4th century in Gandharan area. Vasubandhu (ca. 350-430), a native from Purusapura in Gandhara, composed his Kowa based on this text and the Astagrantha. While in Kashmir, he wrote his karikas which were well received there but he faced intense opposition, notably from Samghabhadra, a leading Sarvastivada pundit, when he composed his bhasya. By his bhasya, Vasubandhu made it clear to the Vaibhasikas that he was a Sautrantika, which is why he was fiercely opposed by the Sarvastivada, a leading sarvastivada pundit, when he composed his bhasya. By his bhasya, Vasubandhu made it clear to the Vaibhasikas that he was a Sautrantika, which is why he was fiercely opposed by the sarvastivada Vaibhasikas in Kashmir. In reply to Vasubhandu’s bhasya, Samghabhadra wrote a text, the Nyananusara ‘according to reason’. This work is presently only extant in Chinese (from Xuanzang’s translation and little is known of it in English).

**Texts of the Sarvastivada Abhidharma**

The Sarvastivada Abhidharma consists of seven texts. The texts of the Sarvastivadin Abhidharma are as follows:

---

Sangitiparyaya (‘Discourses on Gathering Together’)
Dharmaskandha (‘Aggregation of Dharmas’)
Prajinaptisastra (‘Treatise on Designations’)
Dhatukaya (‘Body of Elements’)
Vijnanakaya (‘Body of Consciousness’)
Prakaranapada (‘Exposition’)
Jnanaprasthana (‘Foundation of knowledge’)

In this way, these are the texts that become the authority of the Vaibhasikas, the Kasmiri Sarvastivada Orthodoxy.

**ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE SARVASTIVADA SCHOOL OF BUDDHISM**

Different Buddhist Councils were held from time to time to settle the disputes that arose among the monks after the demise of Buddha with regard to the interpretation of the principles of Dharma and Vinaya. These led to the origin of as many as twenty schools or more within a few hundred years of the Mahaparinarvana (passing away) of the Great Teacher, all claiming to have preserved His original teachings. The tenets of the different schools are recorded in the texts, such as the *Samayabhedavyuhacakra, Nikayabhedavibhangavyakhyana, Samayabhedaparacanacakrenikayabhedopadesanasamgrahanama, Kathavatthu, Milindapanha,* and the like. The exact date of the origin of these schools has not definitely been ascertained as yet, but in the prefatory notes of the Points of Controversy by Shwe Zan Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids, it has been suggested a probable date of which, however, there is no satisfactory corroboration.

Buddhism has two main branches, viz. Hinayana and Mahayana; the former is subdivided into Vaibhasika and Sautrantika, and the latter into Madhyamika and Yogacara. Hinayana and Mahayana designated by modern scholars as Southern and Northern
Buddhism respectively are untenable from the point of view of their geographical expansion. They are also known as Shravakayana or Pratyekabuddhayana and Bodhisattvayana respectively. In Hindu and Jaina philosophical works, only four schools are mentioned. In Buddhist traditions, the Vaibhasikas were so called on account of their dependence on Vibhasa (commentary), the Sautrantikas for recognizing the Sutras (original texts), the Madhyamikas for laying emphasis on *madhyama pratipad* (the middle course) only as authoritative. The Yogacaras were otherwise known as the Vijnanavadins on account of their holding Vijnanamatra as the ultimate reality.  

The Vaibhasika School was at first known as the Sarvastivada. The term Vibhasha that is to be remembered here-signifies a detailed explanation in accordance with the text as delivered by the Master Himself. It will not be out of place to mention here in passing that the doctrines of the Vaibhasikas were in direct opposition to those of the Sautrantikas who denied the existence of the past and future elements, but admitted the existence of the present only.

Yasomitra who very probably belonged to the Sautrantika School wrote a commentary on the *Abhidharmabhasya* of Vasubandhu, criticizing occasionally the Vaibhasika views. According to the Ceylonese tradition original Buddhism was divided into two primitive schools, Theravada and Mahasanghika; while according to the *Bhiksuvarsagrapeccha* and the Records of I-tsing there were four original schools, viz. (1) Aryamulasarvastivada, (2) Aryamahasanghika, (3) Aryasammitiya, and (4) Aryasthavira. The Chinese tradition also maintains that Sthaviravada and Mahasanghika are the two principal schools out of which branched off the rest of the schools.

---

6 Ibid: 56.
Traditions may differ with regard to the origin of the schools, but history tells us that almost all the schools, but history tells us that almost all the schools with the exception of the Vaibhasika, Sautrantika, Madhyamika and Yogacara mentioned above disappeared shortly after their appearance. We hear only of these four schools for a considerable period of time, having a large number of adherents to their credit. There is no room for doubt that the Sthaviravada is the most primitive school of Buddhism. All the accounts record unanimously that a schism arose about a century after Buddha’s Mahaparinirvana, because of the efforts of some monks for the relaxation of the stringent rules current at the time which the orthodox monks were not ready to allow. The monks who deviated from the orthodox rules were later on called the Mahasanghikas, while the orthodox monks were distinguished as the Sthaviravadins, Pali Theravadins. It was “a division between the conservative and the liberal, the hierarchic and the democratic,” Theravada being the most conservative school preserving its doctrines in Pali. Prof. Kern, Rhys Davids, and others also maintain that the Pali literature represents the doctrines of the Sthaviravada School. The Ceylonese tradition gives the alternative name of Vibhajjavada to Theravada. It is very likely that the term ‘Vibhajjavada’ implied that the adherents belonged to the main sect with some special views, for which they distinguished themselves as ‘Theravada-Vibhajjavada’ or ‘Sarvastivada-Vibhajjavada’. The Sarvastivada School, with which we propose to deal, branched off from the Theravada, the most orthodox school of Buddhism. It is the most widely spread group of schools in India. It is the school that continued to flourish widely long after the Pali school had been cut off from its Indian home. It is to be noted that the Sarvastivadin was also called the Hetuvadin and Muruntaka. The Mahavyutpatti gives two names of Sarvastivada, viz. Mulasarvastivada and Aryasarvastivada. According to a tradition, the Sarvastivadins were split up into four different schools, viz. i) the Mulasarvastivadins, (ii) The Dharmaguptas, (iii) the Mahisasakas, and (iv) the Kasyapiyas. It has been already pointed out that Taranatha
maintains that Vibhajjavadin sprang up out of this school (Sarvastivada). There is, however, another tradition which maintains that this school was divided into seven sects. They are as follows: (1) Mulasarvastivadins, (2) Kasyapiyas (3) Mahisasakas, (4) Dharmaguptas, (5) Bahusrutiyas, (6) Tamrasatiyas, and (7) Vibhajjavadins. 7

The Dipavamsa points out that the Sarvastivadins branched off from the Mahisasakas, a branch of the orthodox group, the Theravadins. It should, however, be remembered that the Vaibhasikas are identified with the Sarvastivadins. In the words of Yamakami Sogen, “In later times, the so-called Vaibhasikas came to be identified with the Sarvastivadins; and the No names became mutually interchangeable, although, properly speaking, the Sarvastivadins originally formed a section of the Vaibhasikas.

The Sarvastivadins, as well as the Theravadins, each has a literature of its own. The former claims the enormous Buddhist literature in Sanskrit to its credit, but it is a matter for deep regret that the works are preserved in Tibetan or Chinese translations. Many such lost valuable works are now being recovered and restored to Sanskrit from their Tibetan or Chinese translations. The number of books of real interest is still large enough and these are sure to yield valuable results if studied with care and industry. We are, however, told that these two schools, viz., the Theravada and the Sarvastivada, attained sufficient importance during the days of Kings Asoka and Kaniska. Both of them are of outstanding importance for the history of Buddhism in India and abroad.

It may be said that the adherents of the schools could produce such a vast literature and win over a large section of the populace to their side through their royal efforts and patronage only and thus bring Buddhism to the forefront of Indian religions. The

7 Ibid: 59.
geographical distribution – it is to be remembered here-of the schools also throws much light on their development. The Sarvastivadins were chiefly confined to Northern India-their chief seat being Kashmir – the Theravadins to Magadha and Kosala-the primitive sphere of Buddhism. Dr. N. Dutt says: “The latter (Sarvastivadins) had its sphere of activity in Northern India extending from Kashmir to Mathura and was responsible for the propagation of Hinayana Buddhism in Central Asia whence it was carried to China.” Thus we see that the most widely extended school was the Sarvastivada-the main branch of the Theravada school- which must have been closely connected with the Theravada for a long time, hence there is some agreement between the doctrines of the two schools.  

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