

3. The Fourth Council

Next, I am going to talk about the fourth Buddhist council. The fourth Buddhist council took place after quite a bit later, probably at the end of the 1st cen. C.E.

[Now, I don't think I have to tell you this. Most of you are familiar with Buddhism and the Buddhist usage. A lot of people use A.D. rather than the nomination C.E., which is the abbreviation of the word Common Era; we don't use the A.D., which you find in other tradition. A. D. stands for Latin word Anno Domini which means the year of the lord. And by the same token B.C.E. is used in the Buddhist context, which stands for Before Common Era, instead of B.C. meaning Before Christ. The Thais still continue to use the Buddhist year. For example the millennium, the 2000 C.E. was the Buddhist year 2543.]

The fourth council took place, probably, in 100 C.E. We dated it at that point of time, because it was held under the auspice of the King by the name of Kaniška who was a central Asian King. He was a Kuṣāṇa King, one of the central Asian people who ruled over the western India of Afghanistan and Kandahar. These were all Buddhist countries. They were part of the Buddhist world in the 1st cen. C.E. Unfortunately, they didn't stay that way. Kaniška ruled over this region of North-west of India.

We also have an interesting coincidence. It would appear that great Buddhist poet Aśvaghōṣa also belonged to this period during which Kaniška ruled over North-west of India. (Here, I am talking about the Sanskrit Buddhist literature and Mahāyāna Buddhism). Aśvaghōṣa was the author of the *Buddhacarita*, the life of the Buddha. This text was, roughly, translated by Edwin Arnold in the famous poem called 'The light of Asia', which was based on Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*. That poem had a great influence upon the interest and spread of Buddhism in the west. Anyway, Aśvaghōṣa was the author of that text and several others including one beautiful text praising the Buddha.

It seemed that Aśvaghōṣa was invited to attend the council by Kaniška. But he declined because of his advance age. He was too old to travel so far to attend the council. Instead, he wrote a letter to the King, which is called the *Kaniṣkalekha*. It is one of the whole classes of the Buddhist texts. We find Nāgārjuna writing a letter to a King (Goutamīputra Śātakarṇi) in *Suhr̥llekha*. Later still, we find Buddhist scholar like Atiśa writing letters to various kings. We also find *Chos-gyal-phags-pa*, a learned Buddhist monk writing a letter to Kublai Khan. Perhaps, this is the beginning of the letter writing to the kings. These were not ordinary letters. They contained teachings. *Kaniṣkalekha* is very beautiful. It contains many important Dharma teachings and specially, account of Aśvaghōṣa trying to persuade the King to give up hunting. He talks about how the king, the deer and so forth that he hunts are basically the same, they both love life and both fear death. He talks about how the eyes of the deer look when the king is about to shoot them, and how the king should generate pity on them instead of taking their lives. Anyway it helps to determine the date of Aśvaghōṣa and Kaniška, and to put the council sometime at the end of the 1st cen. CE.

This council was different from other councils in couple of ways. First of all, determining the location of this council is a difficult issue. We are not hundred percent sure where the council took place. It certainly took place in the North-western part of India, which may have been in Jalandhar in Punjab or may be in Kandahar or may be in some part of Pakistan. As you would expect, the North-western part of India become the strong hold of Sarvāstivāda. **The principal participants at the councils were Sarvāstivādins** and by that time we had a couple of schools of the Sarvāstivāda. We have Mūla-Sarvāstivāda, the Root Sarvāstivāda and the Kashmiri Sarvāstivāda Vaibhāṣika, with minor differences between the schools. In any case, in the fourth council we had the domination of the Sarvāstivādins. This proliferation of the schools, which began with the first eighteen schools, went on. The Buddhist schools tended to divide and sub-divide. This has been a characteristic of Buddhism. In fact, it is still the characteristic of Buddhism, Buddhist schools or Buddhist centers in the modern context as well.

[Buddhist organization tend to divide. When I was in California, some people encouraged me to direct, and to teach a group of students in a Dharma centre. So we formed the 'Chico Dharma Study Group.' That's the group that originally published "The Tree of Enlightenment." We were a non-sectarian group. We invited teachers from all traditions – Vipassana, Zen and Vajrayāna. I was the regular teacher of that group. My point is that within 3-4 years there were five different groups. When the Chico Dharma Study Group started that was the only Buddhist group in Chico but within 3-4 years there were five groups. Now Chico Dharma Study Group no longer exists, it only exists in cyber space, and it is still on the Internet. I still get e-mails. People wanted to come to the meeting. I have to tell them that it does not exist any more in real time and space. My point is Buddhist group always has the tendency to divide and sub-divide. Some people regard this as a weakness. I personally don't think so. I rather think, it is actually strength, because it continues to make room for different point of views and different interests. So what happen in Chico with the Dharma Study Group, we have Zen group evolved from the Chico Dharma Study Group, Vipassana group evolved from the Chico Dharma Study Group. We had different groups pursuing different Buddhist interest, which is fair enough.]

§ 1. Sarvāstivāda

Now, I should tell you little bit about the evolution of the Sarvāstivāda, because Sarvāstivāda was a very important school. (This is why), I said earlier the origin of the Mahāyāna was not a straight forwards, narrow and one directional evolution. Different schools contributed in their own way to the evolution of the Mahāyāna. Now, if you look at the Sarvāstivāda school from its philosophical point of view, it was a very *pluralistic* and *realistic* school. Sarvāstivāda multiplied and enforced the idea of the self-existing *dharma*, the self-existing factors. From that point of view, it was a Ābhidharmika school par excellence. It was the most extreme Ābhidharmika School.

Because of this tendency to regard factors of existence as real having their own *svabhāva* (self-existence) they (Sarvāstivādins) got into trouble in the third council. (We will talk about the term *svabhāva* a lot when we talk about the development of Emptiness doctrine in Mahāyāna). They believed in the existence of all *dharma*s i.e., '*sarvam astī*'. That is how they got their name Sarvāstivāda. According to them, among the *dharma*s that exist are the past and the future. So for the Sarvāstivāda, past exists and the future also exists in time just like the existence of the present. However, for the Vibhajjavāda only the present exists. (Now this is another issue. I am sure in course of your studies, sometime someone will discuss this in great length, but the fact is both positions are rather serious). It is argued in what sense past exists if it does not exist in the

same sense as present. Then again, how does the present exist without the past? If you don't have past and future, what is present? There is no present without past and future also because you only imagine of present in relation to past and future.

Sarvāstivāda also invented something to account for the preservation of Karma. It elaborates the factors that causes us to be reborn in certain condition, in certain circumstances. In Buddhism, it is believed that we are born in a particular situation because of our Karma. But how that happens since we are just a bunch of processes, just a collection of aggregates? That heap perish at the point of death. Then what is that and how is that combined with Karma? Where do I get that Karma?

Now, there are different answers to these questions. I am sure you know some of the answers. I know some of the answers. We won't go to all the answers now. But the Sarvāstivādins came up with a convenient solution. Everybody come with past factors, the factors, which are real factors, that exist, that have real nature. That factor is called '*prāpti*' which means 'attribution' or 'ownership'. It is like a promissory note or like a report card. When you die, at that level, according to the report card, you will be born as a dog or a king or whatever you are going to be reborn as. So they took this (what we may call in philosophical term) *realism* to quite an extreme length. Everything is real. Everything has its own independent existence, although they are, of course, inter-related. But all the factors that are variously interrelated are also factors that are real having their own nature, their own *svabhāva*. This is their philosophical aspect. Sarvāstivāda view is just about that. Diametrically, it is opposed to the Mahāyāna view with regard to the description of reality, the description of what actually exist. This is just about as far as you can go, as far as you can get away from the Mahāyāna view of *dharma*, which is '*dharmanaitātmya*', non-self, the insubstantiality of all factors.

§ 2. Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna Tendencies

So they (Sarvāstivādins) were very far away from the Mahāyāna on that count, but in other ways, they were also very Mahāyānists. In other ways, they had very strong Mahāyāna tendencies. How?

2.1. Close Relation with Laity

First of all, they had very close and continuous relation with the laity. Most of the Sarvāstivāda centers, the temples and the monasteries were in the cities, in urban areas. They had walkways where the population, the ordinary people can come and circumambulate the temple. The monks were living in the borders; they would carry out their monastic duties. The lay people used to come in the monasteries, circumambulate the temples and shrines. The monasteries were located in the cities and in the urban centers. The monks had continuous contact with the lay people. This is again the characteristic of the Mahāyāna to have the close connection with the lay people. Now, of course, these also exist in the Theravāda countries, but in those days, it was the characteristics of the Sarvāstivāda. For example, in Taxila, the great Buddhist center in the North-western sub continent of India, the monastery was situated in the city.

(I continue to refer Indian subcontinent, the political line that has drawn in the last fifty years)

2.2. Promote the Jātaka and Develop Perfections of the Bodhisattva Career

The other more important point is that the Sarvāstivādins became, extremely, interested in the previous lives of the Buddha. They focused on the Jātaka stories, on the various portrayals of the Jātaka stories. They fostered and promoted the cult of the Jātaka. They were fascinated by the previous lives of the Śākyamuni. Then they began to talk about the three Vehicles and the legitimacy, and the acceptability of the three Vehicles. (*Do you know what they are? We will see in the Lotus Sūtra how it deals with the question of the Three Vehicles*). So these were the Mahāyāna characteristics, which are noticeable in the Sarvāstivāda. Finally, they began to promote the idea that their great teacher, for example, one of the head of the Sarvāstivāda School, the monk by the name of Saṃghamitra was a Bodhisattva and he would become a future Buddha. So by the 1st cen. CE Sarvāstivāda had a conception whereby a whole row, a whole queue of their teachers lined up behind Maitreya waiting to become future Buddha. Of course, the first was Maitreya, then Saṃghamitra then so and so forth. This is also very Mahāyānic conception. So on one hand, philosophically, they were very conservative, a typical Hīnayāna school, having Realistic and Pluralistic view of reality. On the other hand, on the practical and the ethical side, they promoted close relationship with the laity. They foster and develop the cult of Jātaka based on the previous lives of the Buddha and they developed the conception of a long line of future Buddha, the long line of Bodhisattvas, the long line of the masters who were Bodhisattvas and would in course of time, become Buddhas. Thus they had a lot to contribute to the Mahāyāna.

The Mahāsaṃghikas concentrated on their conception of the Buddha emphasizing supra-mundane or super natural qualities of the Buddha. They did not talk a lot about the Bodhisattva Path or future Buddha and so forth. Sarvāstivādins, on the other hand, did not talk much about the Buddha's qualities but they did cultivate and develop perfections of the Bodhisattva career to become the Buddha.

The formative influences, which made up the Mahāyāna, came from various forces and not only from Mahāsaṃghikas. Even the Vātsīputriyas, according to the text (?), had contributed to the Mahāyāna. I will talk about it later. But these various schools all had something to contribute to the Mahāyāna conception. Mahāyāna conception was a product of multiple influences coming out of various schools that developed after the second council.

2.3. Sanskrit

It is also not merely accidental or coincidental that Sarvāstivādins used Sanskrit as their medium of instruction or as the medium of their texts. We know that the Mahāyāna language is Sanskrit. So the formation and the development of Mahāyāna also depended upon Sarvāstivāda contributions. It is also indebted to the contribution of Sarvāstivāda.

§ 3. Sautrāntika

The interesting issue that rose at the fourth council is that, by the fourth council, we have another school. There were two schools, which were most important schools. They debated on the orthodoxy, and the authenticity of their teachings at the fourth council. One was the Sarvāstivāda

that we were talking about and the other one was a relatively new, relatively ill-defined school. This school was called Sautrāntika. The Sautrāntika was the school that began to be critical of the *realism* and *pluralism* of the Sarvāstivāda. So many of the factors that Sarvāstivāda regarded as real, Sautrāntika regarded them as mentally created. They say those factors are product of mind or imagination (*vikalpa*). They are just mental formations and not real independent object. The meaning of the name Sautrāntika comes from the term 'Sūtra', that is, those who adhere to Sūtra.

When you look into the textbooks on the evolution of the Buddhist schools, there is a principal difference noticed between the Sautrāntika and the Sarvāstivāda. Sarvāstivāda was also called Vaibhāṣika, the followers of the Vibhāṣā or Commentaries. The principle difference, according to the most of the traditional text books, is that the Sarvāstivādins believed that the Abhidharma was the word of the Buddha whereas the Sautrāntikas did not accept that. Sautrāntikas say that they have to go back to the Sūtras; they have to go back to the words of the Buddha. For them, Abhidharma was not the words of the Buddha. Abhidharma was the commentary. This is the textual differences between the Sautrāntika, which was kind of upstart school, the reactive school. The Sautrāntika school burst in reaction in respond to the ultra pluralism, realism and multiplication of factors (*dharma*s) of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma. This is a very interesting, and very fruitful area of study.

Recently, we have books published on the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma translated from Chinese; the originals works in Sanskrit are being lost. These are few pieces of puzzles that came into the hand of scholars, who are putting some kind of picture together of what happened during the five hundred years, from the time of Buddha until the 1st century CE.

So the Sautrāntikas rejected the Abhidharma. This is also very interesting because they became very anti Mahāyāna. When the Theravāda or Hīnayānists¹ said to the Mahāyānists, "O look, we don't accept your scriptures, we don't accept the Mahāyāna Sūtras, the proponent of the Mahāyāna could always come back and say, "you people also don't agree upon the Sūtras, you also don't agree upon the text." This is because the Sautrāntikas do not accept the Abhidharma while the Vaibhāṣikas do. So this is one of the issues that rose at the fourth council. Is or is not the Abhidharma the word of the Buddha? I don't want to try to answer this question in the context of this course. You will come to the answer of this question elsewhere. Very briefly, I think, today most scholars agree that Abhidharma is not word-to-word '*buddhavacana*'. On the other hand, most scholars agree that Abhidharma to a large extent was inspired by the Buddha. In fact, we have discourses in the Sutta Pitaka are Ābhidharmika in their character. Anyway, at this council, the Vaibhāṣikas, the Sarvāstivādins, they were victorious, they won the debate at the council and the Sautrāntikas were disgraced.

Again, the Sautrāntikas did not go away and disappear. The Sautrāntikas, in a sense, disappeared but they remained very important because of their critical attitude, because they became, to

¹ I don't like to use the word Hīnayāna. It is a polemical term that was evolved, according to some, as a result of the division in the second council. The Sthavira, the elders called the dissenting party, (who carried the salt in horn and so forth), 'papa bhikkhus', the sinful monks. The sinful monks retaliated by calling the elders as the followers of Hīnayāna, i.e. Lesser Vehicle. I am not sure about the truth of the story, but it is the story that has come down to us for centuries.

some extent, anti-realistic. I want to make sure you understand what I mean by saying 'realistic' school as opposed to one that was critical. It is a very basic division in philosophy. What it means is that a Realistic school believe that things exist in their own right. They exist by themselves. The critical school tended to think that whether it really exists or not, it is just imagination of mind. In other words, it is just a product of mind. It is just something that exist by combination of circumstances. So this critical quality of Sautrāntika became extremely important and became one of the major characteristics of Mahāyāna, particularly of the Madhyamaka school, and even of the Yogācāra School (the Mind Only School), which maintained everything to be just mind. So in that sense, while Sautrāntikas were the losers at the fourth council, their idea, nonetheless, was filtered through in the Mahāyāna doctrine and remained important because of that.

Although the Sarvāstivāda school actually from that point did not disappear, it never really gained much more importance. The council composed a number of commentaries on the Abhidharma called Vibhāṣā. These were inscribed on the copper sheets. We have some literary production as the result of the views of the Kashmiri Vaibhāṣikas, the Vaibhāṣikas, who were at the council. We have, for example, Abhidharmakośa of Vasubandhu, which convey the point of view of the Vaibhāṣikas. This was the peak of the Sarvāstivāda contribution to the evolution of the Buddhist thought.

On one hand, they had very elaborate treatment of the *dharmas*, very realistic Abhidharma (incidentally, more realistic even than the Theravāda Abhidharma), on the other hand, they advocated the notion of Bodhisattva, the future Buddha and the cult of the Jātakas, the former lives of the Buddha. These were the contributions of the Sarvāstivāda. After that, they continued to remain for several hundred years but they never really made any important philosophical contribution. So we have come to the end of the stories of the councils. I tried to highlight some aspects that were important or significant for understanding the origin of the Mahāyāna.