



# **The Buddhist Councils: The Movement to Great Schism**

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## **Abstract**

During the history of Buddhism, from the parinibbana of the Lord Buddha up until the current sanghas of today's societies, There has always been quarrell in regards to interpretations of teachings, in particular in regards the Vinaya. This paper looks to explore the 4 council meetings that were held in order to find cohesiveness in the viewpoints between differing Buddhist texts. The researcher looks to present the notion that these council meetings did more harm than good and they were in fact the cause of new Buddhist sects to emerge. This paper takes a historical analysis of the circumstances surrounding these council's meetings and the outcomes from them.

*Keywords:* Buddhism, Council Meeting, Quarrell, Buddhist Sects

## Introduction

Buddhism is unlike the other religions since the founder, the Buddha, was born as a human being. Thus, the Buddha cannot exist eternal and He is mortal as other human beings. After the demise of the Buddha, he did not left any authoritative person instead of Him but His Teaching, Dhamma and Vinaya, would be in the place of Him as a teacher of all Buddhists.<sup>1</sup> In the light of Buddha's remark, the collective recitation to purify doctrine or Buddhist council plays crucial role in the history of Buddhism. The four Buddhist councils are the important turning points in early Buddhism. Despite having counted various number of Buddhist councils held by different schools, the four are highlighted in the World Buddhist history. First, it should be known what Buddhist council is: what it really means. In Pāli, the council is termed as 'saṅgāyana' in the sense of 'reciting together'<sup>2</sup> (in Sanskrit, *saṃgāyanā* which is meant for 'singing or praising together')<sup>3</sup>. It is also known as 'saṅgīti' (rehearsal; a convocation of the Buddhist clergy in order to settle question of doctrine)<sup>4</sup> in Pāli, 'saṃgīti' in Sanskrit. According to this term, the purpose of the council is to make a unique of all Teachings of the Buddha after *parinirvana*. Behind the purpose, there should be a cause why it was necessary to held. It is clear that different interpretation and various assumptions on the original doctrine arose at that period.

As the consequence, what the councils solved out was that schism happened and new sects emerged after the councils. After passing away of the Lord Buddha, during 500 years, many sectarian clashes appeared in Buddhism. It was noticeable link between the Buddhist councils and schisms. 'Schism', in Pāli 'Saṅghabheda', is meant for 'breaking community' which is one of five major crimes (*Pañcānantariya kamma*)<sup>5</sup> in Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> The essential factor in Saṅghabheda are\_ (1) belief in a dissentient religious view regarding either one or more points of faith or discipline; (2) acceptance of the dissenting view by eight or more fully ordained monks; (3) the division taken among the aforesaid eight monks must show a

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<sup>1</sup>D II, p.171

<sup>2</sup>U Hoke Sein Pāli-Myanmar Dictionary, p. 946 : 'saṅgāyanā' is derived from 'saṃ √gā + ya' in the meaning of to chant or to recite

<sup>3</sup>Monier William Sanskrit- English Dictionary, p. 1129

<sup>4</sup>Concise Pāli Dictionary, p.271

<sup>5</sup>Ibid: the five acts that have immediately retribution, viz: matricide, patricide, murdering of a holy person, wounding a Buddha, and making a schism in the community of monks

<sup>6</sup>Andre Bareau, 'The Buddhist Sects of the Small Vehicle', p. 3

majority on the side of the dissenters.<sup>7</sup> Moreover only the insider of saṅgha order can cause schism not because of laity, that is clearly described in the Cullavagga.<sup>8</sup>

In the first council, the issue about the Vinaya arose even though there was no schism. A great schism was caused the two main sects: Sthaviravada and the Mahasanghikas after the second Buddhist council. The third council led the divergent of Sthaviravāda into two schools: Vibhajyavādins and Sarvāstivādins. Then, a new school of Sarvāstivādins, Sautrāntikas spring off. Thus, there should be a question whether councils reconcile or make schism. In this essay, the historical backgrounds of the councils are not highlighted much but a few distinct points. What it stresses on is the inconsistency of the purpose of the council and its result. Apart from it, it is also interesting to analyze the cause of schism was gradually generated before the councils and then completely diverged after the councils. There may be considered how much accuracy of the evidence which mentioned about the place and time in which held the four Buddhist Councils. Different traditions describe in very different ways when they recorded about the Buddhist Councils. There might be some arguments whether these councils took place in truth or these were just fictions. However, they could give us a lot of knowledge about how Buddhist traditions gradually changed.

## **The First Buddhist Council**

The First Council was sponsored by King Ajatasatru. It was convened in Rājagṛha three months after the Buddha's parinivarna. On account of Subhadra who wanted to relax the vinaya rule, the Elder Kāśyapa decided to recite all Dhamma and Vinaya collectively. However, scholars' view on this first council is that it was not a historical event, but recognized as a cult festival,<sup>9</sup> the first council was the earliest attempt to preserve the original of the Buddha words. During the Council, five hundred arhants adopted the Vinaya and Sutra as the accurate teaching of the Buddha. There are some noticeable points about Ānanda that (1) he became an arhant at the night before the council but Kāśyapa left a room for him in the group of five hundred arhants; (2) he was criticized because of the failure to request the extension of the Buddha's life span; (3) he was condemned since he did not ask the Buddha what the lesser and minor precepts are.

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<sup>7</sup>Nalinaksha Dutt, 'Buddhist Sects in India', p.38

<sup>8</sup>Cullavagga VII, p.108

<sup>9</sup>Charles S. Prebish, A Review on Scholarship on the Buddhist Council, p. 242

Related to the first point, Ānanda, as the attendant of the Buddha, might not focus and practice the doctrine full time, thus, it is possible that he was not an arhant before council. As he was regarded as the one who memorized all the Buddha's Teaching, he should be most appropriate to recite the Teaching in council. To be consistent with the occasion, he must enter to the council as an arhant. There is a question that Kāśyapa chose only 499 participants and made a blank for him in purpose. According to Cūllavagga, the bhikṣus pointed out,

“Honoured Sir, this Ānanda, although he is still a learner (sekho), could not be one to follow a wrong course through desire, anger, delusion, fear; and he has mastered much shamma and discipline under the Lord. Well now, honoured Sir, let the elder select the venerable Ānanda as well”<sup>10</sup>

It is clearly mentioned that the participants of the council should be lack of four prejudices (*agati*): desire, anger, delusion and fear. At the time of event, venerable Ānanda had also been an arhant so that there was no more prejudice in council. Besides, it also means that the recitation in council was identified as pure doctrine. On the other hand, it is doubtful that all Dhamma what the Buddha taught during 45 years might not be only the memory of Ānanda. There might be other version like Puraṇa without any record. It may considerable whether there is any other version. If other memory is exclusive, the Teaching of the Buddha what we learn today would be incomplete. Concerning with lesser precept, the question arose in Saṃgha community was why Ānanda did not ask which are the lesser. Later, that became dispute in Saṃgha community. On my standpoint, this issue generated the emergence of sectarians in Buddhism. The community could abolish the minor precept if they saw fit as the Buddha said but no one can identify the lesser and minor precepts (*khuddānukhuddaka sikkhāpada*).<sup>11</sup>

As the consequence, the recitation of Dhamma and Vinaya was accomplished, and the council decided the penalty to Channa, but they could not reach the agreement in the case of minor precept and Ānanda could not solve out the reproaches by the bhikṣus. Herein, I would like to point out three facts related to commencing the Schism although there was nothing to schism after the first Buddhist Council.

1) Complaint to abolish the lesser and minor precepts (it proceeded to the second council in which Vajjian monks broke ten minor precepts)

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<sup>10</sup>Cūllavagga XI, p.394

<sup>11</sup>D II, p. 171

- 2) Think about the exclusive memory of the Buddha's teaching
- 3) Consequence of the above two ideas, the new doctrine might come out and there also have hair-splitting interpretations derived from the oral tradition.

## The Second Buddhist Council-I

The Second Council is generally regarded as a real historical event. It was held at Vaisali, an ancient city in northern India. King Kalasoka was the Second Council's patron. This Council probably was held between 100 and 110 years after Parinirvana, or about 386 BCE. The meeting took place due to the breach of Vinaya rules by Buddhist monks from Vajjiputtaks sect in Vaiśālī and to examine the validity of the ten practices (*dasa vatthuni*)

1. *Singilonakappa*—the practice of carrying salt in a horn, i.e. storing articles of food;
2. *Dvangulakappa*—the practice of taking meals when the shadow is two fingers broad, i. e. taking meals after midday ;
3. *Gamantarakappa* - the practice of going to an adjacent village and taking meals there the same day for the second time;
4. *Avasakappa*—the observance of the Uposatha ceremonies in various places in the same sima ;
5. *Anuma-tikappa* — doing something and obtaining its sanction later;
6. *Acinnakappa*—the customary practices as precedent;
7. *Amathitakappa*—drinking of butter-milk after meals;
8. *Jalogimpatum*—drinking of toddy;
9. *Adasakam nisidanam*—use of a rug without a fringe and
10. *Jataruparajatam*— acceptance of gold and silver.

A group of monks had decided these rule were impractical and had suspended. These monks also had been accused of breaches in monastic disciplines. By knowing about this, Yasa, son of Kālanḍaka, organized the bhikṣhus from Pāṭhheyya, Avanti and Deccan in order to complaint the bad behaviours of Vaśālian monks. Then, the seven hundred saṃgha under the leadership of Revata assembled at Vālikārāma in Vaiśālī. Sarvagāmin,<sup>12</sup> the elder monk of Vaśālian was questioned about these ten points. The council criticized those are blameful and then concluded with the recitation of Vinaya rules. In the review of Charles Prebish,

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<sup>12</sup>His upādhyāya was Ananda.

‘Traditionally, Buddhologists have assigned that origin of the Vaiśāli conflict to the ten points mentioned previously, and some scholars have ever gone as far as to surmise that the ten points were responsible for the first great schism of the sect’.<sup>13</sup>

From the scholastic views, apart from this Vinaya violation, Nalinaksha Dutt claimed that there were a few doctrinal disputes. (Dutt, 1978, p.13) On account of five prepositions of Mahādeva are: The Arhats

1. are subject to temptation
2. may have residue of ignorance
3. may have doubts regarding certain matters
4. gain knowledge through other’s help
5. The Path is attained by an exclamation. (Dutt, 1978, p.23)

Mahādeva has taken up these five points and reformulated them for his own purpose. It is reformulation of Kathāvatthu.<sup>14</sup> It also involved as a great part in the first schism and the origin of Mahāsaṅghikas sect, “the great community”. The Mahāvamsa describes that the unorthodox bhikkhus who subdued by Theravādas founded Mahāsaṅghika sect. Some scholars said that certain tilt happened between Mahāsaṅghikas and Mahāyāna even though Mahāsaṅghikas is the fore founder of Mahāyāna. Later on, many different schools of Buddhism emerged.

The council discussed that matter at length, but could not reach an agreement. The result of council differs in two assumptions. First, the ancient text like Sinhalese Chronicles express that a great schism within the Order after the council which led to the formation of the two divergent sects in Buddhism. The first one adhered to the old traditions of Buddhism and compliance with the original teachings of the Buddha. They were orthodoxy, called The Sthaviravādins. The second group did not find a problem in having a moderate attitude towards the rules prescribed in the Pitakas and the deviations followed by the monks of Vaisali. They became known as the Mahāsaṅghikas. Two or three centuries after Mahādeva, Mahāsaṅghikas reformulated their own scriptures and they formed a school which later became the Mahāyāna. The schism subsequently led to the formal division of Buddhism into Sthaviravāda and the Mahāsaṅghikas sects. Thus, the second Buddhist council was a turning point of the Buddhism. Second, modern scholars like Charles Prebish remarked that schism did not occur at Vaiśāli council. It happened in another council in Pāṭaliputra.

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<sup>13</sup>Charles S. Prebish, ‘A Review of Scholarship on the Buddhist Council’, p.248

<sup>14</sup>L.S Cousin, The Buddhist Forum 1988-90, p.45

## The Second Buddhist Council-II

The different tradition of second council was held in Pāṭaliputra, 116 years after the Buddha's death, during the reign of Asoka (perhaps Kālāsoka).<sup>15</sup> Bāṣpa was the president of the council; arhants and non-arhants took part in this council; and the king served as the mediator, although he was disqualified in religious judgment. The five theses of Mahādeva was the origin of schism that was accepted by all traditions except Mahāsaṅghika.<sup>16</sup> The controversy of five theses among the monks was decided by voting. The rigorous monks who against the five these founded the Sthviravāda shool and the lax monks established Mahāsaṅghika school after the council.

On scrutinizing these events, the Vaiśali council took account for Viaya while the Pāṭaliputra council was related to non-vinaya dispute. The original rules and regulations promulgated by the Lord Buddha were reinterpreted and redacted by the monks with lax practices in accordance with their own assumptions. On the other hand, the elders supposed that it was important to retain even minute rules for the long live of the saṃgha community. The Lord laid down these discipline because He certainly knew these are necessitated for sangha community and the consequences. But, why the Buddha also said to Ānanda that monks could abolish the minor precepts if they saw fit? Why the Buddha did not explain what the minor precepts are? There is no definite answer. This is confusion in Vinaya rule to the present day.

## The Third Buddhist Council

The Third Buddhist Council was held at Pataliputra, about 236 years after the death of the Buddha, during the reign of Asoka. According to Sri Lanka chronicles and tradition, many schisms occurred during the second century after the Buddha's parinirvana and the diverse sects up to eighteen were established during Asoka's time.<sup>17</sup> In order to rid the Sangha of corruption and bogus monks who held heretical views, the historic meeting was presided over by Moggaliputta Tissa and one thousand monks under the patronage of the Emperor Asoka. It was an assembly of the same sects, Sthaviravāda. The Council also made some

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<sup>15</sup>Nalinaksha Dutt, 'Buddhist Sects in India, p. 23

<sup>16</sup>Charles Prebish, A Review of Scholarship on the Buddhist Council', Journal of Asian Studies Vol. XXXIII No.2, p.252

<sup>17</sup>Bibhuti Baruah, 'Buddhist Sects and Sectarianism', 2000, p. 16-17

additions and alterations to the existing Buddhist Pali Canon by bringing together the Vinaya Pitaka and Dhamma Pitaka with the Kathavaththu of Abhidammam Pitaka.

In this council, the debate occurred between two schools of Sthaviravāda. The Sthaviravadins established themselves as the orthodox school of Buddhism, firmly adhering to the original teachings of the Buddha and unwilling to make any compromises. One of them was known as Vibhajyavādins, the Distinctionalist or the Analytical school. They claimed the Buddha Himself as a Vibhajyavādin in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. The other was Sarvāstivādins, All-is-ist. They asserted that everything in future, past and present exists. The Vibhajyavādins opposed to the existence of the three time periods.<sup>18</sup> The council decided in the favour of the Vibhajyavādins. The members of this Council also gave a royal seal of approval to the doctrine of the Buddha, naming it the Vibhajyavāda, the Doctrine of Analysis. It is identical with the approved Theravada doctrine.

The council decided that the teachings of the Sarvāstivādins were unorthodox and so the Sarvāstivādins migrated to Kashmir. The Sarvāstivādins became very popular there. They were very well poised there in Kashmir influencing the whole newly Buddhist countries in Central Asia like Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. So, at the third council, the Vibhajyavādins were declared orthodox and they won the debate. As a result, the new sect, Sarvāstivāda thrived and survived in the other place, Kashmir. It is a remarkable observation about the councils that a defeated group did not disappear after every council and they all become popular as a new sects of Buddhism.

By the third century BCE, the time of King Asoka, at least 18 different schools were in existence. The Theravadins had broken into eleven sub-sects whilst the remaining seven were a part of the Mahasanghikas. The divisions into these sects were on minor points of doctrine or on interpretations of the monastic discipline. The Asokan inscriptions do not mention any schools or any schism. The edicts said that the Sangha has been 'made unified'. This can be supposed that there has been some conflict, but it falls short of establishing that a schism had occurred. In any case, even if there had been a schism, the edicts assert that it had been resolved.

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<sup>18</sup>Etienne Lamotte, 'History of Indian Buddhism', p.274



## **The Fourth Buddhist Council in Sri Lanka**

The fourth Buddhist council in Sri Lanka was only for Theravāda tradition. In the first century BCE, during the reign of the King Vattagāmani, the council was held for the sake of preserving the whole Tipiṭaka bearing in memories through oral tradition. The Elder Mahārakkhita and five hundred monks recited all Teachings of the Buddha and then writing down on palm leaves. This was very first time for the art of writing of Piṭaka record in Buddhism. This council was nothing to say distinct like others because there was no split in reciting Dhamma and Vinaya in the line with Theravāda tradition. Here, it is stated as a historical record.

## **The Fourth Buddhist Council in India**

The Fourth Buddhist Council was held in Kashmir by the patronage of Kanishka in Kashmir or Jalandhar, India about 72-78 AD. The famous Kushana King who ruled large parts of central Asia and the north western India in the early Christian era. He organized the fourth Buddhist Council. It was presided over by Vasumitra and Asvaghosha and had to deal with a serious conflict between the Sarvasthivada teachers of Kashmir and Gandhara. During this meeting the Sarvasthavadin doctrines were organized into a Mahavibhasa containing three large commentaries on the Pitakas.

In the fourth council, the Sarvāstivādins were dominant. They debated on the orthodoxy and the authenticity of their teachings at this council. One was the Sarvāstivāda and the Sautrāntika. The Sautrāntika was the school that began to be critical of the realism and pluralism of the Sarvāstivāda. The Sarvāstivāda regarded as real while the Sautrāntika regarded them as mentally created. The meaning of the name Sautrāntika comes from the term 'Sūtra', that is, those who adhere to Sūtra. There is a principal difference noticed between the Sautrāntika and the Sarvāstivāda. The Sarvāstivāda was also called Vaibhāṣika, the followers of the Vibhāṣā or Commentaries. The Sarvāstivādins believed that the Abhidharma was the word of the Buddha whereas the Sautrāntikas did not accept that. At this council, the Vaibhāṣikas, the Sarvāstivādins won the debate and the Sautrāntikas were disgraced.

## Conclusion

This essay highlighted about the schisms after the Buddhist Councils. It does not mean that every historic meeting tended to schism. But schism happened and new sects emerged after the councils. The relation between schism and the councils proved that the incoherent with the purpose and the result of the councils. The four Buddhist councils recorded are doubtful among scholars in the case of venue, date and time because some are lack of archaeological evidences. Historical record such as Sinhalese chronicle, Dipavamsa, Chinese traditions can give the proximate data to trace the period. On the account of Vinaya rule, the clash between the samgha grew up and then first schism happened. But also the doctrinal propositions were regarded as a cause. The questions about the discipline arose in the first council, even though there was no schism, was inexplicable issue about Vinaya which is the starting point of the following schisms. Every council consists of two parties: one is opponent to other; one points out the other's fault. Each side firmly uphold its perspective. Thus, there was no consensus in final stage. One party who was honoured by the political authority was probably more favourable in judgement. For instance, in the second council of Pāṭaliputra, it is irrational to assign the king as a judge in religious affairs. Despite of regarding as a fiction or legend, the first council might be pure at most because all the participants and president or judge of the council were Arhants who are free from prejudices. Except it, the other councils carried out by both arhants and non-arhants.

Dispute on ten rules by Vajjan monks was supposed as minor except the tenth rule: the acceptance of gold and silver. Besides, Mahādeva's assumption on Arhant is totally deviated from the real meaning of Arhant. By these two events, deviation from discipline and misinterpretation of doctrine made a great schism into the two main sects: Sthaviravada and the Mahasanghikas. The third council led the divergent of Sthaviravāda into two schools: Vibhajyavādins and Sarvāstivādins. In this case, the diverse interpretation was a problem as well. The Sāvāstivādins' ontological understanding was another way so that they were condemned. A new school of Sarvāstivādins, Sautrāntikas was defeated in the fourth Buddhist council for the sake of favouring Sutra and Abhidharma. The table below roughly shows the emergence of new sects linking with the councils.

**Table 1:** The division of the early schools and the Buddhist councils

First Council	No schism		
Second Council (Vaiśali)	Sthaviravada		Mahasanghikas
	According to Chronicle, two sects emerged		
	According to modern scholars, no schism		
Second Council (Pāṭaliputra)	Sthaviravada		Mahasanghikas
Third Council	Vibhajyavādins	Sarvāstivādins	
Fourth Council	Theravāda (11 Sects)	Sarvāstivādins	Sautrāntikas
			Vaibhasika Sautrantika Madhyamaka Yogacara

Eventually Theravāda and Mahāyāna came to be regarded as two distinct divisions of Buddhism. A third emerged, known as the Vajrayana, the Diamond or Thunderbolt Vehicle by the 8th and 9th centuries C.E. Vajrayana Buddhism had spread into much of East Asia, Tibet, Japan and Korean. Vajrayana is based on Tantras, texts that describe esoteric teachings and practices. The divisions within the Buddhist Order did not weaken the development of Buddhism, though they caused a lot of confusion and disorder. Since the followers of Buddhism came from different social, geographical and cultural backgrounds, there might be multiplicity. They were able to choose the best path according to their inclinations and inner aspirations and the peculiarities of their own environment.

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