

*An Overview of Key Concepts of ‘Theravaada’ Buddhism*

*No doer is there does the deed  
Nor is there one who experiences its result;  
Constituent parts alone roll on;  
Only this view is orthodox.*

*And thus the deed, and thus the result  
Roll on and on, each from its cause;  
As of the round of tree and seed,  
No one can tell when they began.*

— *Visuddhimagga*

This paper will attempt an overview of the key concepts of the early phase of Buddhism, generally called ‘Theravāda’ (‘the way of the elders’) but also referred to as ‘Nikāya’<sup>1</sup> or ‘Hinayāna’ (‘the lesser vehicle’, as it was called by the second phase of Buddhism, the Mahāyāna [‘great vehicle’]). This multiplicity of names is due to the fact that the earliest phase had no distinct name for itself, there being no other kind of Buddhism for it to distinguish itself *from*. It generally referred to its own doctrine simply as the śāśana or teaching. (Gombrich) Scholars most commonly use the term Theravāda, which is problematic due to the fact that that term also refers to a narrower subset of early Buddhism, that of Śrī Laṅka.<sup>2</sup> Enumerating these three referents is a foreshadowing of the rest of the paper: one way to approach an understanding of the basic tenets of Buddhism is through its lists. Thus we shall enumerate further sets of fours, fives, eight, threes, and twelve.

*The Four Noble Truths*

Any discussion of early Buddhism necessarily begins with the doctrinal cornerstone of all Buddhism, the Four Noble (ārya) Truths. The First Noble Truth is that

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., by John Strong. Lit., ‘congregation’ and ‘assemblage’, but here referring to the collection of central canonical texts, *Dīghanikāyādi*.

<sup>2</sup> Theravāda is seen by some scholars as one of four subdivisions of the Vibhajyavādins (‘Distinctionists’), each flourishing in a different area (the other three being the Mahīśāsakas in the Deccan, the Dharmaguptakas in Central Asia, the Kāśyapīyas in North India). The Vibhajyavādins were a continuation of the earliest school, the Sthaviravādins of the First Council: they distinguished themselves from the heretical Pudgalavādins or ‘Personalists’ who asserted a kind of *ātmavāda* doctrine.

of *duḥkha*: 'suffering' or 'unsatisfactoriness'. In his first sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnāth, the Buddha declared:

Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; disassociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering—in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering. (*Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta* in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 61.11, trans. Rahula)

This seems to be the earliest and simplest formation of the doctrine. In later texts (e.g., the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Abhidharma-samuccaya*), *duḥkha* is subdivided into three types: ordinary suffering (*duḥkha-duḥkha*), suffering caused by change (*vipariṇāma-duḥkha*), and suffering as conditioned states (*saṃskāra-duḥkha*). The first two are self-explanatory; the third refers to the patterns of being and becoming that are ever in flux, and which can be described in terms of the *Five Aggregates* that compose what is, for the sake of convenience, called a 'human being'. These are the five referred to by the Buddha in the above quotation. They are Form, Sensation, Cognition, Mental Formations, and Consciousness (*rūpa-vedana-samjñā-saṃskāra-vijñāna-skandhas*). Form is simply the combinations of the elements (*mahābhūtas*) that compose our body; Sensation refers to our experience of stimuli (whether visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, or mental) as pleasurable, painful, or neutral; Cognition is that which recognises, classifies and interprets objects of the six senses; Mental Formations are affective or intellectual constructions (such as volition); Consciousness is the subjective faculty by which an object is known (and which only arises in conjunction with that object).<sup>3</sup> The fundamental source of suffering, then, declared by Buddhism from earliest times, is the Five Skandhas, insofar as we grasp at them as permanent when they are in fact impermanent, and see them as composing an essential Self or ego-identity that does not really exist. A being is nothing other than the fluctuating re-combination of these, and to think otherwise is delusion (*moha*) leading to all kinds of *duḥkha*.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that this doctrine was later imported into Hinduism with virtually no change: in

<sup>3</sup> This analysis is derived from Rahula (20-23) and Harvey (4).

<sup>4</sup> The only adventitious skandha is Form, which is temporarily lost at death, but reformed according to the karma of the aggregate of the other four skandhas when it takes birth once again. See Dependent Origination below.

the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna, 'all is suffering for a man of discrimination' (that is, all but the *mokṣa* that is *brahmanirvāṇa*, attained through *yoga*).

The Noble Truth is that of the arising or origin (*samudaya*) of suffering. Again, from the first sermon:

It is craving which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight now here and now there, namely, thirst for sense-pleasures; thirst for existence and becoming; and thirst for non-existence. (*ibid.*)

That is to say, desire is a cause of suffering in several senses. 'Not getting what we want is suffering' is the simplest. Also, desire gives rise to volitional action, which produces karma, which keeps us ever bound to the round of rebirth, which is fundamentally unsatisfactory. Desire is also the desire to seek a permanent, unchanging, essential, metaphysical self where there is only the Five Aggregates. Thus they come to be called the 'Five Aggregates subject to Grasping' (*pañcopādāna-skandhas*) both because we grasp at them seeking for a Self and because they grasp at sense-objects seeking happiness. Having said this, however, desire should not be taken as the fundamental problem in Buddhism. It would not be possible for us to have these kinds of desires if we were not ignorant of the true nature of reality. Thus we may regard ignorance as the prime enabler for desire. It is for this reason that ignorance (*avidyā*) stands at the beginning of the chain of Dependent Origination, as we shall see. When the Buddha alludes to his liberated state in the *Aggi-Vacchagotta-sutta* (*Digha-nikāya* 72), he does not mention desire, but rather refers to the skandhas, saying:

...all things material—all feelings—all perception—all plastic forces—all consciousness—everything by which the truth-finder (*tathāgata*) might be denoted has passed away for him...utterly and forever. (Rhys-Davids, trans., p. 344)

The third Noble Truth is the truth of the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering, simply that by giving up craving and its concomitant ignorance, *duḥkha* itself automatically ceases to be, 'leaving only the bare cleared site where once a palm-tree towered' (*ibid.*). This cessation is also known as *nirvāṇa*, the 'blowing out' or extinction of desire (*lobha*), hatred (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moha*).<sup>5</sup> The unconditioned (*asamkhata*) state that is then

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<sup>5</sup> As per Sāriputta in *Samyutta-nikāya* 4.

experienced is utterly indescribable in terms used to describe conditioned objects and states (i.e., all language). However, the Buddha alludes to it with metaphors that all refer to the state of mind of one freed from intense suffering. For example:

...just...as if a man were bound in a prison house, and after a time he should be set free from his bonds, safe and sound, and without any confiscation of his goods; when he realised his former and his present state, he would be of good cheer at that, he would be glad of heart at that... (*Śramaṇa-phala-sūtra*, Rhys-Davids, p. 83).

These metaphors occur in the text after the elimination of the Five Hindrances and before the four Formless Attainments, so it may be the case that they cannot be construed as referring to *nirvāṇa*. However, Rahula avers that the words that most closely approximate *nirvāṇa* are those of joy and transcendent happiness:

He who has realized the Truth, *nirvāṇa*, is the happiest being in the world. He is free from...the worries and troubles that torment others. His mental health is perfect. He does not repent the past, nor does he brood over the future. He lives fully in the present. [paraphrasing *Samyutta-nikāya* 1] Therefore he appreciates and enjoys things in the purest sense without self-projections. He is joyful, exultant, enjoying the pure life, his faculties pleased, free from anxiety, serene and peaceful. [paraphrasing *Majjhima-nikāya* 2] ...he is pure and gentle, full of universal love, compassion, kindness, sympathy, understanding, and tolerance. (Rahula 43)

The fourth Noble Truth is that of the path (*marga*) leading to the cessation of suffering, known as the Noble Eight-fold Path. The eight components of the path are: Right Views and Right Thought (in the category of wisdom); Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood (in the category of morality); and Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration (in the category of meditation). These three categories cover all that one practically need do or concern oneself with to attain *nirvāṇa*. Any issue that falls outside of them or the other three Noble Truths is dismissed as a 'question tending not toward edification (or dispassion, etc.).'<sup>6</sup>

#### *The Three Marks*

One of the 'right views' is the perceptive insight that all conditioned existence (i.e., everything except *nirvāṇa*) is characterised by three marks (*trilakṣaṇa*): suffering

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<sup>6</sup> Though one might imagine the category of Right Views to contain almost anything, in fact the only right view is that there are no right views, that what is valuable is that knowledge attained through direct insight. As the Buddha says in the *Aggi-vacchagotta-sutta*, 'The adoption of views is a term discarded for the truth-finder, who has had actual vision of the nature, origin, and cessation of [all] things...' p. 342.

(*duḥkha*), impermanence (*anitya*), and 'not-Self' (*anātmā*). That is to say, all the factors of existence are unsatisfactory (when viewed from the standpoint of *moha*), they are ever-changing, reconfiguring, and fluctuating, and none of them has any essential, enduring nature (*nīḥsvabhāva*) nor can they be identified as constituting an independent 'Self'. I take the three marks as corresponding to the three kinds of *duḥkha* mentioned above, *duḥkha-duḥkha*, *vipariṇāma-duḥkha*, and *saṁskāra-duḥkha* respectively. That is, painful things cause pain, the impermanence of things causes pain due to change, and the non-essentiality of things causes pain to the grasping after conditioned states as essentials. The only element or pattern (*dharma*) that does not possess all three marks is *nirvāṇa*, which has the third mark alone. (Harvey 23)

#### *The Twelve Causal Links of Dependent Origination*

Dependent Origination or Conditioned Co-arising (*pratitya-samutpāda*) is a key concept of Buddhism that subsumes and organises several of the concepts and categories already introduced. It may be understood as a chain or circle of causal links (*nidānas*), each of which gives rise to what follows. If any link is eradicated, that which follows it cannot arise, and the whole chain dissolves. Dependent Origination is a doctrine of 'relativity' in the sense that it argues that all things exist in an interdependent, interconnected network of cause and effect (each effect itself becoming a cause as well). There is nothing which can be considered independent or which did not arise as the result of a complex set of causes (material and efficient) and enabling factors. (Except *nirvāṇa*: it cannot be so conditioned, or it too would be impermanent and unsatisfactory, in direct opposition to its nature as experienced by all Arhats). The first link in the chain is Ignorance (*avidyā*): blindness, self-deception, persistent misperception of the nature of reality. Out of ignorance arises the constructing activities of Volitional Impulses and their concomitant subtle karmic effects (both aspects of *saṁskāra*, #2 in the chain and also the fourth skandha). That is, it is ignorance which prompts us to volitional impulses towards becoming, when unbeknownst to us those very impulses are dragging us further into suffering, exactly the thing that they seek to escape. The volitional impulses give rise to Consciousness (*viññāna*, #3), not an absolute

or essential quality of the subject here, but rather simply the subjective awareness of the mental formations of the Volitional Impulses. This form of consciousness or discernment (also the fifth skandha) is dependent on its object, and arises in consonance with it. Consciousness gives rise to mind and body (*nāma-rūpa*, lit., 'name and form', #4). The 'body' indicates the four elements of which it is composed, while the 'mind' includes primarily the third skandha of cognition, as well as other kinds of mental formations (i.e. *sarīskāras*). Mind and body must be understood as arising as necessary concomitants of consciousness. As Jaini explains, "...each individual consciousness (*vijñāna*) at the time of its 'death'...is invariably joined to a portion of the four material elements [in its rebirth], the varieties of which will be appropriate to the karmic forces generated through volition." (Jaini 512) Here we see the complexity of the interdependence of all twelve causal links.

Mind and body give rise to the Six Sense-spheres (*ṣaḍ-āyatana*s, #5). These are the six senses (with the cognitive mind as sixth), their respective sense-objects, and the respective six types of sensory awareness (i.e. visual awareness and so on). The link here is clear, with mind and body providing the physical and mental substrata for the six sense-spheres to manifest. These then necessarily give rise to stimulation or Contact (*sparśa*, #6), that is, the contact of the senses with their corresponding objects in the world. This contact automatically gives rise to a feeling response to the sensory affect that occupies a spectrum from pleasant to neutral to unpleasant. This is Sensation (*vedanā*, #7), also the second skandha. Sensation gives rise to Craving or 'thirst' (*aśṇa*, #8); that is, we instinctively desire those sensations which are pleasant, and are averse to those which are not. Aversion, of course, is just another form of desire, the desire for the negation of a thing. The fundamental forms of craving, perhaps, are for our own existence or annihilation.

Craving directly leads to Grasping or clinging (*upādāna*, #9), the mental attachment to objects and concepts or their negation. For example, a contact with a fresh-baked doughnut on one occasion might give rise to (gustatory) pleasure. That would lead to the temptation to have another doughnut later. In fact, when feeling low,

we might believe that a doughnut will make us feel better, creating a grasping after the doughnut-idea. This simplistic example can only allude to the much more subtle process by which we cling to conceptualisations about self and world and to roles and rituals. This clinging gives rise to Becoming (*bhava*, #10), the continued engaging and entanglement with all the factors mentioned so far, an endless dialectic of mental states and volitional actions. Becoming thus triggers and perpetuates Birth (*jāti*, #11), the round of incarnation and re-incarnation, each birth the direct result of actions taken in the previous birth and the desires with which it concluded. Births may be of six classes, dependent on one's karma: as hell-being (*naraka*), hungry ghost (*preta*), animal, human, titan (*asura*), or celestial (*deva*). The Buddha says in the *Avadāna-shataka*, "...the deeds done and accumulated by a person do not yield results in the external earth element...but only in the five aggregates subject to grasping and hence to rebirth. In those skandhas only, the karmas come to fruition..." (Jaini, *op.cit.*) This incidentally answers the naïve question, "If there is no Self, who receives the fruit of actions?" The answer is simply that Buddhism never denied the existence of an empirical self, consisting of the pañca-skandhas, which both acts and receives the fruit of actions. In fact it is this self, as a conditioned and ensnared entity, which one seeks to eradicate. (Rahula 42)

Finally, Birth gives rise to Decay and Death (*jara-maraṇam* etc., #12), as well as 'sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair...this whole mass of duḥkha' (Harvey 5) that are the concomitant factors of physical birth in this world. These are the *dharma*s that are most obviously unsatisfactory, and give rise to the quest for release in the first place. However, the chain does not end here, but continues: the mass of duḥkha creates mental confusion and bewilderment about the nature of reality, as if we are seeing through the red haze of pain, and leads us back to *avidyā* (#1) once again. The whole sequence is often depicted in the visual form of the *Bhava-cakra* illustration, a beautiful Tibetan and Nepali motif that depicts representations of the twelve *nidānas* in a circle, with another circle of the six classes of beings within it, and an axis that consists of animal symbols of greed, hatred, and delusion. The entire wheel is held in the grip of Māra, the 'tempter' or devil of Buddhism, while the Buddha stands on a cloud outside

the wheel, pointing the way to release from it.

Peter Harvey points out that “the weak points in this sequence [of pratitya-samutpāda] are ignorance and craving. [#1 & 8] Meditative calming (*samatha*), by the *jhānas*, is seen to weaken craving, and direct meditative insight (*vipassanā*), based on strong mindfulness, is seen to destroy both craving and ignorance.” (*ibid.*) I would change the last clause to “...destroy ignorance and thereby craving as well”. The meditative disciplines Harvey mentions are applications and refinements of #6, 7, and 8 (the mental disciplines) of the Eight-fold Path, and *vipassanā* also leads to the cultivation of #1 and 2 (wisdom).

#### *The Six Heretical Teachers*

The seminal *Śramaṇa-phala-sūtra* text includes several elements it will be instructive to touch upon. First there is an enumeration of the teachings of six śramaṇa *nāstikācāryas* of the time of the Buddha, so called because of their alleged assertion “it is not”, referring first and foremost to the authority of the Vedas and the value of the alleged fruit of Vedic sacrifice, and secondarily to various doctrines which they refuted, such as karma, free will, continuation after death, interdependence, and knowability. First is Pūraṇa Kassapa, who totally denies the doctrine of karma and its ideas of merit and demerit; next the fatalism of ājīvika leader Makkhali Gosāla, who accepts karma but totally denies our ability to alter or influence it in any way; then Ajita Kesakambali, a materialist (*carvaka*) who denies the fruition of karma, the possibility of liberation, and all metaphysical principles such as other worlds and the continuation of the soul after death; fourth is Pakudha Kaccāyana, an absolutist who asserts seven independent, never-changing, co-eternal principles (four elements, *sukham*, *duḥkham*, and soul); next is Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (identified as Jina Mahāvīra), who advocates the four-fold restraint regarding evil; finally, we hear about Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, an agnostic who refuses to assert or deny anything at all.<sup>7</sup> These teachers were grouped with the Buddha as being heterodox, but the Buddha strongly disagreed with all of them. It is interesting that these teachers take these stances; Jaini holds with most scholars that doctrines such as karma, rebirth, and release derive from heterodox śramaṇa

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<sup>7</sup> Rhys-Davids trans., pp. 69-75.



movements,<sup>8</sup> and yet the figures represented here in general refute those ideas. Furthermore, it seems that they all practiced asceticism, despite the fact that several of them hold all action to be utterly ineffective in producing a state of merit! Thus it seems we must conclude that the Buddhism presentation of these groups is based in fact but biased.

*The Five Hindrances, Four Absorptions, and Four Formless Attainments in the SPS*

In what is to me the more interesting part of the text, the Buddha lays out to King Ajātaśatru the path to final realisation in the context of discussing the many fruits in the life of a recluse (starting on p. 79 of the Rhys-Davids trans.). He describes the first stage as that of mastering the moral precepts: “He encompasses himself with good deeds in act and word. Pure are his means of livelihood, good is his conduct, guarded the door of his senses.” We see here #3, 4, and 5 of the Noble Eight-fold Path. The Buddha explains good conduct, referring to the *Ten Precepts* or vows of a Buddhist monk (*bhikṣu*). The first five precepts (to refrain from taking life; to refrain from stealing; celibacy; to refrain from lying; and to refrain from intoxicating substances) apply to monks and laity who have taken Refuge. If a monk breaks any of these five, it warrants immediate expulsion (*parāṇikā*) from the monastery. The next three precepts apply to monks and novices, and the final two to full monks only.<sup>9</sup>

This stage also includes becoming guarded with respect to the senses so that “he is not entranced in the general appearance or the details” of any sense-object (p. 80). Then the *bhikṣu* masters mindfulness, becoming totally present and aware in all the simple daily actions of life, and never forgetting what they “really mean”. (81; I take this last clause to mean that he is aware that all actions and states are characterised by the three marks. These teachings are much expanded both within the canon and in later literature like the Visuddhi-magga). Finally, the *bhikṣu* cultivates a state of

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<sup>8</sup> Jaini 1970:43.

<sup>9</sup> These rules are all detailed in the Vinaya-piṭaka (‘Discipline Basket’) and the Prātimokṣa compilation. There we also learn that the laity, four days out of every month, could practice ‘uposatha’, a purificatory one-day retreat at the local monastery. For that day, the layperson would follow all ten precepts, and confess their infractions to monks. Monks had a similar separate ceremony for themselves as well. (Lecture notes, Professor Jaini, Spring 2002)

contentment with simply having enough to eat and wear. (*ibid.*) Then he is ready for the discipline of meditation.

The Buddha recommends finding a location far from people, whether a cave, glen, or cremation ground, and sitting with an upright posture for meditation. The first stage of meditation is overcoming the Five Hindrances of sensuous craving towards the world, ill-will, torpor and sloth, distraction and regret ('flurry and worry'), and doubt/perplexity. (82) The results of overcoming these five are, respectively: a heart free of lusts; a mind free of malevolence; being mindful and self-possessed; being free from fretfulness and with a heart serene; and knowledge as to what is good. He is joyful, glad, easeful, and peaceful. (84)

Then the *bhikṣu* enters into the First Absorption (*dhyāna*), which accompanied by reasoning and discursive thinking. In this state he is detached from sense desires and unwholesome *dharma*s, joyful, and easeful. In the first *dhyāna*, five factors arise within him, as a direct result of overcoming the five hindrances. Respectively, they are: one-pointedness of mind (*ekāgratā-citta*), zest (*prīti*), applied thought (*vitarka*), ease (*sukham*), and accurate discursive thought (*vitarka*). The Second *Dhyāna* comes about as a result of vetting the reasoning and discursive thinking of the first; thus it is born of non-discursive concentration. It is also joyful, easeful, and elevated (*ekodibhāva*). (85) One-pointedness of mind, zest, and ease—all concomitants of concentration—are retained, while applied and discursive thought drop away. Here the Buddha offers a metaphor of a spring fed from a single source of water, which is enough to suffuse it with cool water.

The Third *Dhyāna* arises from the discarding of joy and the attainment of equipoise. This state is easeful, mindful, clearly conscious, and totally even-minded. (85) Here one-pointedness and ease are retained, and zest falls away. By letting go of both *sukham* and *duḥkham* and all other pairs of opposites, the *bhikṣu* attains the Fourth *Dhyāna*, "a state of pure self-possession and equanimity". (86)<sup>10</sup> Only one-pointedness of mind persists.

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<sup>10</sup> It seems difficult to distinguish clearly between the third and fourth *dhyānas* on the basis of my sources; both primarily consist of equanimity.

Having attained all four dhyānas, the aspirant receives a number of powers and attainments (*siddhis* and *ṛddhis*) from his lucidity and purity of awareness. These are enumerated with the refrain, “With his heart thus serene, made pure, translucent, cultured, devoid of evil, supple, ready to act, firm, imperturbable, he applies and bends down his mind to...” that insight that comes from knowledge of the impermanence of the body and the interdependence of the skandhas (86); the calling up of a mental image of one’s own body (87); magical powers (88); the heavenly ear (89); the knowledge that penetrates the heart of others and discerns their state (*ibid.*); the knowledge of the memory of his past lives (90); the heavenly eye that gives knowledge of the fall and rise of all beings (91); and the knowledge of the destruction of the afflictions of desire, becoming, and ignorance (92-3), the elimination of which is the attainment of nirvāṇa.

Other texts (e.g. the *Dhātu-vibhaṅga-sutta*) give another sequence of meditative progression following the four dhyānas. These are the four Formless Attainments (*arūpya-samāpattis*). The first is beyond all perception of form, called the ‘station of endless space’, beyond all notions of resistance and multiplicity, and a contemplation of the infinity. Realising that perception of sphere is a mental creation (*samkhata*), one moves on to the ‘station of the infinity of consciousness’ in which the meditator passes beyond the sphere of the infinity of space, contemplates the endlessness of consciousness, and resides in the sphere thereof. Beyond this is the ‘station of nothing whatever’, in which the meditator passes beyond the realms of the infinity of consciousness, contemplates that nothing exists, and dwells in the realm in which nothing exists. Beyond this is the fourth Formless Attainment, the station of neither perception nor non-perception’, in which the meditator passes beyond the realm in which nothing exists and enters the realm of neither consciousness nor non-consciousness. Beyond this there is only nirvāṇa.<sup>11</sup>

*The Three Baskets and the Abhidharma*

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<sup>11</sup> This discussion of the arūpya-samāpattis derives partially from an unpublished article by Paul Muller-Ortega, “Jhānic (Dhyānic) Meditation in the Pāli Canon”.

The Pāli<sup>12</sup> Canon—which together with its commentarial literature constitutes the scriptural corpus of Theravāda Buddhism—is divisible into three parts. The first is the ‘Sayings Basket’ (*sūtra-piṭaka*), consisting of the anecdotes of the Buddha’s teachings to particular people in particular places. These stories were memorised by Ānanda and usually begin “Thus have I [Ānanda] heard...” The *śramaṇa-phala-sūtra* that we have been examining at length is one of these texts. The second is the Rules Basket (*vinaya-piṭaka*), consisting of all the various disciplinary injunctions laid down for monks and (less frequently) for laypeople. The Prātimokṣa is a compilation of the rules themselves that was recited at regular fortnightly intervals at every monastery to give monks an opportunity to confess any wrongdoings and receive proper retribution for them. The third is the Abhidharma Basket. As Pruden has shown, the *abhidharma* consisted at first of simply an organisation, systemisation, and codification of the more philosophical teachings of the Buddha in the sūtras. This organisation into endless lists then became the basis for an explanation of and expansion on these doctrines, leading to the use of the word *abhidharma* as meaning ‘higher or further dharma’ as opposed to original, basic meaning of ‘concerning the dharma’. (Pruden xxxi-xxxvi) Much of this literature, then, was the exposition of monks after the Buddha’s death, but couched in the words of the Buddha. Later commentarial texts like the *Abhidharm-adīpa*, *Abhidharma-hṛdaya*, and the *Abhidharma-kośa* analysed and critiqued the Abhidharma Basket from the perspective of the various schools. The *Abhidharma-kośa*, a key text and probably the one most assiduously studied in later centuries, was composed by Vasubandhu in perhaps the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. A work in approximately 600 verses, with the author’s own commentary (*bhāṣya*), it describes itself as “a presentation of the *Abhidharma* as taught by the Vaibhāṣikas of Kāśhmīr”. (Pruden 3) While presenting the systematic philosophical understanding the Sarvāstivādin/Vaibhāṣikas brought to the Abhidharma, his own sympathies lay with the Sautrāntikas. The latter were those who believed that ‘we should get back to the original sūtras of the Buddha’ and refuted the idea that the entire Abhidharma Basket went back to the historical Buddha. It might seem odd, then,

<sup>12</sup> ‘Pāli’ is a word that literally referred to lines of text or the physical texts themselves; almost by default it came to refer to the Prākṛt language of the texts that seems to not have had any previous name of its own. Norman explains this latter fact by proposing that Pāli was not really a spoken tongue but a composite literary Prākṛt.

for a Sautrāntika to take such a profound interest in Abhidharma philosophy. However, the Vaibhāṣika views were a strong force to be reckoned with in Vasubandhu's world, and the force of their arguments deserved to be addressed. This Vasubandhu did, in his *bhāṣya* sections, arguing against the errors that he saw. His work was highly influential, and was itself critiqued and argued against in turn by the Vaibhāṣikas. A later commentator who supported Vasubandhu was Yaśomitra, who wrote a *Commentary whose Purpose is to Make Clear* (*sphuṭārtha-vyākhyā*). I include here a translation of the first seven verses of his commentary.

1. I bow, with my head, to that elephant of teachers (i.e. the Buddha) who, his power great and possessing two tusks of knowledge and absorption (*samādhi*), having broken open the cage consisting of birth, entered the peaceful forest of liberation.
2. They say he (i.e. Vasubandhu) is a second Buddha, at the foremost of those possessed of intellect, who performs the task of a teacher in the world by composing a text regarding the highest goal.
3. The (text) named *Abhidharma-kośa*, a close study of the Abhidharma, was made by he who is named Vasubandhu, a future 'friend (who leads) to the highest goal of the world'.<sup>13</sup>
4. This commentary on that jewel of treatises, lifted up from the ocean of commentaries on the Abhidharma, was made by me and named in accordance with its subject, 'Having the Purpose of Clarification'.
5. The exposition of the meanings of the words (i.e. the gloss) by the commentators Guṇamati, Vasumitra,<sup>14</sup> and so on, is well done and highly regarded; and this text was written by me in the same way.
6. But the commentary made by them deviated here and there from established doctrine; having raised it (out of error), a commentary was here properly put together by me in another way (i.e. according to the rules).

<sup>13</sup> *paramārthabandhu*, i.e. a bodhisattva, and also a pun on Vasubandhu's name, which could be translated as 'friend of the world'.

<sup>14</sup> The first commentator on the *Abhidharmakośa* and his disciple are here named.

7. Whether the commentary is correct or not must be determined by those who have made great effort in (understanding) the Abhidharma commentaries and the *Abhidharma-kośa*.

### *Conclusion*

We have reviewed the basic tenets of Buddhist doctrine, including the Four Noble Truths, the Five Aggregates, the Three Marks, Twelve Links in the Chain of Dependent Origination, and Six Heretical Teachers; of Buddhist practice, including the Five Hindrances, Four Absorptions, Three Afflictions, and Four Formless Attainments; and of the Buddhist canon, including the Three Baskets, with special reference to the Abhidharma. Though this paper is merely a humble beginning for a student for a student of Buddhism, it attempts to accurately summarise some of the most salient points necessary for the understanding of early Buddhism. While a well-seasoned teacher will find nothing new in it, it is to be hoped that those wishing a brief introduction to Buddhism may read it with profit.

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