

“Discontented Categories¹: Theravāda and Mahāyāna in the History of Sri Lankan Buddhism

Dr. Sumudu Dharmarathna, Department of History, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

The Mahāyāna -Theravāda distinction is an important area of enquiry in historical studies of the Buddhist countries in the South Asian region.² On the basis of the details reflected in Buddhist canonical texts, both Pāli and Sanskrit, the ancient Buddhist world was divided into two major geographic regions.³ The first region, Sri Lanka and South East Asia belongs to the Sthaviravāda, Theravāda or Southern Buddhism (Hinayāna) and has been named as “The world of Theravāda Buddhism.”⁴ The second geographic region which corresponds to another major Buddhist tradition is North India and Central Asia up to China. The Buddhism that prevailed in all these countries was called Northern Buddhism. It represents a wide spectrum of Buddhist doctrine and practice within Mahāyāna Buddhism. They used Sanskrit as their religious language.⁵ So, it is traditionally believed that Sri Lankan Buddhism coming under the Theravāda tradition. In this article, the Theravāda - Mahāyāna distinction will be examined in order to show the inappropriateness of this categorization within the historical studies of Sri Lankan Buddhist culture.

Development of Buddhist Sects

¹ This term used by Richard S. Cohen, ‘Discontented Categories: Hinayāna and Mahāyāna In Indian Buddhist History’ *Journal of the Academy of Religion*, Vol. LXIII, No. 1, 1995, pp. 3-9.

² *Ibid.*

³ N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of Researches on Indian Buddhism*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal, 1981, pp. 1-18.

⁴ R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, ‘The World of Theravāda Buddhism in History,’ *Dhamma–Vinaya: Essays in Honour of Venerable Professor Dhammavihari (Jotiya Dhirasekara)*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Association for Buddhist Studies, 2005, pp.56-89.

⁵ Bhattacharyya, *op.cit*, 1981:1-18.

In the canon, the terms Dhamma and Vinaya were used to denote all the teachings of the Buddha.⁶ On the basis of different views regarding the Dhamma and Vinaya, diverse groups of disciples arose even during the time of the Buddha, i.e. the Vinayadharas and Dhammadharas. Among the two main groups of the *sāsana* the Sthaviravādins or Theravādins, considered that the lifespan of the Buddha *sāsana* depends on the Vinaya (*vinayo nāma Buddha sāsana āyu*). The suggestion to relax some Vinaya rules by a segment of the *saṅgha*, which should have been the immediate cause responsible for arising the first schism in the Community. Most of these members are representatives of young generation, and they belong to the Mahāsaṅghikas.⁷ After reciting the Dhamma and Vinaya at the First Buddhist Council, the theras divided themselves into three separate divisions.⁸ The description given by the author of the *Dīpavaṃsa* seems that the doctrine of the teacher, i.e. the Dhamma and Vinaya were divided into three main sections, Sutta, Vinaya and Abhidhamma.⁹ As stated in the *Vamsatthappakāsinī*, the Sutta and Abhidhamma were considered as the Dhamma.¹⁰ Also it is known that between the Second Council and the Third Council, various groups emerged, mostly after disputes involving matters of Vinaya as well as due to the individual opinions of different teachers. The eighteen major sects including the Mahāsaṅghikas and the Sthaviravādins and their sub groups came into existence and they developed as various sects.¹¹ Ho-Beop, attempted to identify distinctive stages of the evolution of vinaya piṭaka together with other two piṭakas relating to these various groups: 6th century BCE. - 3rd century BCE., 3rd century BCE. - 1st century BCE., 1st century BCE. - 1st century CE, 1st century CE. - 5th century CE. Further he pointed out different socio-political reasons that led to such evolution: problems arose in the community of the *saṅgha* enthusiasm of the rulers, natural catastrophes in different countries and regions, desire to make Buddhism known to the people outside India, foreign invasions and disasters befallen in civil society are some among them.¹² Today, only a few *piṭakas* remain with us belonging

⁶ Ho-Beop, "Some Sociological problems of Origin and Evolution of Vinayapitaka", *Festschrift for Professor S.B, Hettiaratchi*, ed. Preshanta Perera, Nugagoda, Sarasavi publisher, 2010, p. 252.

⁷ *Ibid*, 252.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Dīpavaṃsa*, cha. IV, V. 21

¹⁰ *Vamsatthappakāsinī*, Vol. I, pp. 148-149

¹¹ *Mahāvamsa*, cha. 1-13; N.N. Dutt, (1st edition 1978). *Buddhist Sects in India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1998, p. 49.

¹² Ho-Beop, *op.cit*, 2010, 254.

to some of these sects. For example parts of the Vinaya *Piṣaka* belonging to the “Mūlasarvāstivāda” are found in Sanskrit books and in Tibetan translations. A large number of Vinaya *piṣakas* belonging to the “Sarvāstivādi” sect are found in central Asia. Several Chinese Vinaya *Piṣaka* translations belonging to the “Mahīśāsakas, Dharmaguptikas”, “Mahāsaṅghikas”, “Caturvargavinaya” vinaya texts are found in China and Theravāda Vinaya *Piṣakas* are found in Sri Lanka.

Two Different dynamics of Buddhism: Theravāda and Mahāyāna

It is traditionally believed that the Sri Lankan Theravāda tradition was anxious to maintain a basic history of the Sthaviravādin (Pāli: Theravāda) tradition. This, having its origin in the words of the Buddha himself, codified at the First Council and re-affirmed in two subsequent Councils was transmitted by Arahat Mahinda to Sri Lanka.¹³ It is historically important to note that the oral transmission of Theravāda was later codified and written in Sri Lanka. All the commentaries and sub commentaries and other expository works were completed in Sri Lanka before they found their way to neighbouring Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia.

The term “Hinayāna” (Lesser Vehicle) is usually adopted for Sthaviravāda and it is also known as Srāvakayāna,¹⁴ i.e. getting *Arahantship* as *srāvaka* and the attainment of *nibbāna*. It is clear that the term Hinayāna is applied to Thēravāda. The pāli canon which represents early Buddhism mentions the term “Thēravāda” (doctrine of the Elders) in several of its texts. According to the *Majjhima Nikāya*, Thēravāda is the name of the doctrine of the ‘Theras’ or the original Buddhist doctrine.¹⁵ The term has been mentioned in the *Dīpavaṃsa* as follows:

*vibhajjanamhi Kaccāno, Koṭṭhiko paṭisambhidā,
aṅṅe p’atthi mahātherā agganikkhattakā bahū.
tehi c’ aṅṅehi therehi katakiccehi sādhuhi
pañcasatehi therehi dhammavinayo ca samgīto*

¹³ *Dīpavaṃsa*, cha. viii, v. 12; *Mahāvāṃsa*, cha. xii, v. 7.

¹⁴ Henz Bechert, ‘Notes on the formation of Buddhist sects and the origins of Mahāyāna’ *German scholars of India Contribution to Indian studies*, Wernasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit series, 1973, pp. 154.

¹⁵ *Majjhima Nikāya*, Vol. I, p. 164.

*therehi katasam 'gaho theravādo' ti vuccati.*¹⁶

... Elders numbering five hundred who performed their duties properly, the collection Dhamma and Vinaya was made. It is called the doctrine of the Elders because the collection was made by the Elders.

It is obvious that the Theravāda was well organized at the First and the Second Councils. Again the Theravāda was systematically arranged and organized at the Third Buddhist Council and was expanded thereafter.¹⁷

Many scholars have attempted to say that the Theravāda literary traditions, particularly the Pāli piṭakas and four *Nikāyas* preserved the original teachings of early Buddhism. It is also claimed that the three major centres of Buddhism in the Island represented by the Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri and Jetavana monasteries were the main centres which followed the Theravāda philosophy although with some changes. Our understanding of the doctrinal traditions of the ancient Sri Lankan schools were improved by many scholars as a result of their detailed investigations of the commentaries and sub commentaries on the Pāli Canon accepting that these three schools of Buddhism in Sri Lanka comes under one tradition, in spite of their doctrinal differences. In the handing down, preservation and propagation of the Theravāda tradition, Sri Lanka played a leading role. In addition to the details in the Pāli Chronicles dated to the fourth and fifth centuries CE, the term 'Theriya' or 'Theravāda' first appears in the epigraphic records of the 3rd century CE at Nagarjunakonda.¹⁸ The Chinese pilgrim, who came to South and Southeast Asia in the 7th century, speaks of the three divisions of the *saṅgha* without actually giving their names. Vinitadēva, the Indian Buddhist scholar who lived in the eighth century CE and worked on Indian Buddhism wrote the text named *Varṣāgr̥chāsūtra* which is translated into Tibetan

¹⁶ *Dīpavaṃsa*, cha. V, vs. 9-10.

¹⁷ S.B. Hettiaratchi, 'Buddhist Missionary Activities in Ancient Sri Lanka,' *Hammalava Saddhatissa Commemoration Volume*, 1992, ed. P. Soratha, Lakshman Perera et. al., London: Sri Saddhatissa International Buddhist Centre, 1996, pp. 141-156.

¹⁸ J. Ph. Vogel, 'Prākrit inscriptions from a Buddhist site at Nagarjunakonda,' *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XX, 1828-30, pp.22-23

in the eleventh century CE., refers to these three divisions, i.e. Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri and Jetavana of Sri Lankan Buddhism under the Theravāda tradition.¹⁹

It was the basic objective of the Theravādins to preserve the Pāli canon in its original form. Theravādins created additional texts consisting of commentaries on the Pāli canon and sub commentaries, etc. Hence for the clarification of some doctrinal matters, other commentarial texts like *Milindapañha*, *Visuddhimagga* etc. were composed later on. They tried to preserve the experience of the analytical, naturalistic characteristics of early Buddhism.²⁰

In his article on “The World of Theravāda Buddhism in History”, R.A.L.H. Gunawardana marked the territory of the Theravāda Buddhist world during the period, fourth to the eleventh century CE.²¹ His research establishes the fact that Nāgapaṭṭanam, Kāñci, Amarāvati, Nāgarjunakonda and Sri Lanka are the main regions representing South Asian Theravāda Buddhism. Prior to that, in 1944, S. Paranavitana,²² also discussed the presence of Theravāda Buddhism in Nāgapaṭṭanam based on literary and archaeological evidence. He has pointed out that those Buddhist activities at Nāgapaṭṭanam continued until about the fourteenth century CE.

R.A.L.H. Gunawardana investigated the way in which Sri Lankan Buddhism was influenced by non- Theravāda innovations during the period from the ninth to the thirteenth century CE.²³ On the other hand, Richard F Gombrich’s work on “Theravāda Buddhism” put forward a theory discussing South Asian Theravāda Buddhism giving a social anthropological point of view.²⁴ In conclusion, although not much attention has been paid to non-Theravāda Buddhism during this period, yet it is clear that the said form of Buddhism was actively present then.

¹⁹ RALH Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Mediaeval Sri Lanka*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979, pp. 7-8.

²⁰ Bechert, *op.cit*, 1973, pp. 154; Cohen, *op.cit*, 1995:, pp.1-25.

²¹ Gunawardana, *op.cit*, 2005, pp. 55-89.

²² S. Paranavitana, ‘Nagapattam and Theravāda Buddhism in South India,’ *Journal of the Greater India Society*, Calcutta, Vol. XI, 1944, pp. 17-25.

²³ Gunawardana, *op.cit*, 1979, pp. 212-241.

²⁴ Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988.

The appearance of Mahāyānism is associated with the name of the celebrated Buddhist philosopher and dialectician, Nāgarjuna. It is said that he was a native of the Āndhra country. Mahāyāna Buddhism was systematized by Nāgarjuna and his successors such as Āryadeva, (who was a native of Sri Lanka), Maitreyañātha, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu and many others.²⁵

Many scholars seem undecided as to which *Nikāya* or sect the origin of Mahāyāna belongs. Some accepted the view that the Mahāsāṅghika may have been in the forefront of Mahāyāna Buddhism and some others are of the view that the Sarvāstivāda sect would have contributed much to the growth of Mahāyāna Buddhism in one way or the other.²⁶ Also H. Bechert assumed that Mahāyāna came into existence with monks, nuns and lay persons observing many practices and beliefs drawn from many communities unifying around a common religious aspiration that is to attain Buddha-hood themselves eventually. This in essence is the chief distinguishing feature of the Mahāyāna.²⁷

Therefore, it is clear that the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism could not be assigned into the one sect. It is believed as in the Tibetan tradition all the written texts known as “A *alos (18) *Nikāyas*” were accepted as Buddha words at the Buddhist council²⁸ held under the royal patronage of king Kanīśka at Kundalamahā Vihāra in Kashmir about the second half of the first century CE.²⁹ However, unfortunately the dating of the Kuśān dynasty and hence of Kanīśka, is still controversial. Hence, some believed it took place in the second century CE.³⁰ It is evident that Mahāyāna rituals, beliefs and practices had spread all over the Buddhist sectors without being restricted to one group. However, Lal Mani Joshi is of the opinion that Mahāyānism was indeed ‘Great for various reasons; for its universal sympathy: it invited all to aspire for the highest goal of Buddha-hood; its outlook was broad and its aim was infinite emptiness and also of universal compassion; its capacity to accommodate various

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 3-6.

²⁶ N. Dutt, *op.cit*, 1998, pp. 242, 243.

²⁷ Bechert, *op.cit*, 1973, pp. 154.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ Lal Mani Joshi, *Studies in Buddhist Culture in India, (7th century and 8th century A.D.)*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2002, (1967 1st publication), p. 2

³⁰ Heinz Bechert and Richard .F. Gombrich, (ed.) *The World of Buddhism*, London: Thomes and Hudsonp, 1984, p. 77.

shades of religious beliefs and popular practices; and its uncompromising intellectualism, and so on.³¹ Consequently, Mahāyānism grew fast and became popular within the religious culture in and outside India from the early to the middle centuries of the first millennium CE. The rise of Mahāyānism affected a significant revolution in Buddhism both in thought and practice.³²

It should be noted here that though the precise reconstruction of early Buddhist history and the origin of Mahāyāna is not entirely feasible, a general comparison between particular ideas held by the Theravāda tradition and the rival Mahāyāna traditions is possible. Typically, these two are represented in stark opposition, ideologically. As stated by Richard S. Cohen:

... the Hinayāna champions the *arhat* ideal, the Mahāyāna, the bodhisattva ideal; the Hinayāna, centered on the *saṅgha*, the Mahāyāna on the Buddha; the Hinayāna, is rationalist in its metaphysics, the Mahāyāna, mystical; Hinayāna is ethical, Mahāyāna devotional; the Hinayāna, has closed its canon, the Mahāyāna allows for continuing ‘revelation.’³³

Thus, the differences between these two traditions were deeply based on the very manner in which the world and the spiritual quest leading beyond it ought to be normatively understood.³⁴ As stated by John Holt the cosmological relationship between *sansāra* and *nirvāna*, the question of whether the paradigmatic ideal of the Buddhist spiritual quest is best reflected in the models of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva (“enlightened being”) or the Sthaviravādin *arahat*, respectively and consequently how the nature of Buddha hood should be understood, each became issues that resulted in lively arguments and alternative understandings.³⁵

According to the traditional point of view Theravāda Buddhism is consistent with the oldest doctrine which has its origin in the words of Buddha himself. Mahāyāna Buddhism has been flourishing since the first century CE., onwards and paved a new path for all those who opt to follow Buddhism. It was soon spread all over the Buddhist world. The arrival of

³¹ Lal Mani Joshi, 2002, *op.cit*, p. 4.

³² Joshi, *op.cit*, 2002, p. 4; John Clifford Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist Tradition of Sri Lanka*, New York: Oxford University press, 1991, p, 27.

³³ Cohen, *op.cit*, 1995, p. 3.

³⁴ Holt, *op.cit*, p. 28.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

four major sub divisions named as Tantrayāna, Vajrayāna, Mantrayāna and Kālacakrayāna can be considered as a philosophical development of Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, Mahāyāna and Theravāda are recognized as the major sects of Buddhism. Though there are some philosophical barriers among these traditions, practically they may not have been recognized within the society.

Interaction between these Two Different dynamics

The Mahāyāna-Theravāda distinction is an important area of enquiry in historical studies.³⁶ Most of the discussions on the history of Buddhism in the South Asian region have been mainly restricted to this categorization. But interaction and mutual influences between these two traditions cannot be completely ruled out. It must also be recorded here that the classification of these two overlapping strands is the most valuable aspect which has not been adequately discussed.

When describing the introduction of the image cult into Indian Buddhism, A.K. Coomaraswamy made an important statement:

“ I believe that this worship had nothing to do with original Buddhism or Jainism that it did not originate with the monk, but with the lay community, when the people in general felt they want of a higher cult than that of their deities and demons, when the religious development of India found *Bhakti* the supreme means of salvation.”³⁷

Thus, it with the religious development of the people, various practices were adopted into the original religion. In other words, originally Buddhism or Jainism did not reject the new assimilations because the community of monks offered to serve the varied religious needs of the society.

Considering the nature of Sinhalese Buddhism, this has been critically inquired into by R.A.L.H. Gunawardana in the sixth chapter of his book *Robe and the Plough*,³⁸ where he says:

“ Buddhism offered a path to salvation through personal endeavour and, originally it had no cults to cater to the “specific plebeian religious needs” of society at large. Hence it did not demand that its follower’s completely reject non-Buddhist cultic practices. Even during the early years of history, Buddhism came to terms with

³⁶ Cohen, *op.cit*, 1995, p. 3-9.

³⁷ A.K. oomaraswamy, ‘The Origin of the Buddha Image,’ *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. IX, 1927, p. 297.

³⁸ Gunawardana, *op.cit*, 1979, p. 212.

popular cults like the propitiation of *Yakkhas* and *Nāgas* and the worship of Brāhmanical gods. Buddhist texts merely claim that the *Yakkhas*, *Nāgas* and the *Devas* accepted the supremacy of the Buddha. In Sri Lanka some of the pre-Buddhist cults had been appended to Buddhism by the beginning of the period under consideration, and this did not necessitate any change in its fundamental principles. In some cases “Buddhist” rites were introduced to perform the functions of pre-Buddhist practices. On the other hand, the contact with, Saiva and Vaisnava faiths stimulated the development of cultic practices and elaborated ceremonial in Sinhalese Buddhism. Together, these trends represent the development of Sinhalese Buddhism into a comprehensive religious system capable of serving the varied religious needs of society.”

In fact, in this description he clearly shows the two layers that consist of Sinhalese Buddhism. The original Buddhism offered a path to salvation through personal endeavour and also it did not completely reject pre-Buddhist, other cultic practices and ceremonial activities which served the varied religious needs of the society.

We may also pay attention to the statement made by Lamotte regarding the nature of Indian Buddhism. Lamotte says:

“Buddhism is not only a mystical philosophy practised by those who expect to attain Nirvana. It was also a religion that went out of the narrow scope of the mind to suit all layers of the widespread population. There is no doubt that based on certain points of the doctrine and cult, the negations were not essentially built with the aspirations of the lay people.... The growing success of propaganda was for the effect of transforming Buddhism, which was originally the mystic-philosophical message, to a real religion involving a Goal (more precisely a divinized Buddha), a pantheon, sounds, a mythology and a cult. This religion did not delay in penetrating into the monasteries and to influence, more or less, the scholarly doctors.”³⁹

Accordingly, on the one hand Buddhism is a mystical philosophy practiced by those who expect to attain *Nirvana*. On the other hand, it was also a religion capable of serving the varied religious needs of all layers of the widespread population.

The fact is that these two strands of religion have been discussed by many scholars on a conceptual basis. Gananath Obeyesekere⁴⁰ attempted to use Redfield’s concept⁴¹ for understanding the nature of Buddhist culture as “great tradition” and “little tradition.” Here,

³⁹ E. Lamotte, ‘Mahāyāna Buddhism,’ in Heinz Becart and Richard F Gombrich eds. *The World of Buddhism*, London: Thomas and Hudson, 1958, pp. 686-687.

⁴⁰ Gananath Obeyesekere, ‘The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism,’ *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXII, No. 2, 1963, Feb. Pp. 139-153.

⁴¹ Robert Redfield, *Present Society and Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1956.

while the great tradition has been identified with the Theravāda soteriology of the Pāli literary tradition, the little tradition has been identified with the ritual transactions with Mahāyāna and other local traditions. So, the two strands of religion represent Theravāda Buddhism on the one hand, and on the other hand, the verity of Mahāyāna and local rituals and magical practices. But, Gananath Obeyesekere clearly points out that these two layers historically link within the single religious culture as one interrelated religious system.⁴² With the contribution of Richard Gombrich, in 1990, Gananath Obeyesekere further developed this idea in the publication of *Buddhism Transformed; Religious Change in Sri Lanka*.⁴³ Though they attempted to study modern Sri Lankan religious culture, they also clearly pointed out the way that Buddhism historically assimilated various beliefs and practices for serving the varied religious needs of the society.

In 1991, John Clifford Holt made a remarkable contribution to classify the assimilation of the Mahāyānic cult - Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka. In his book, *Buddha in the Crown*, he applied the terms “*Laukika* and *Lokottara*” for the understanding of this complicated / complex structure of religious culture: the former means “of this world”, while the latter can mean “above” or “beyond this world”.⁴⁴ Buddhism is a mystical philosophy practised by those who expect to attain *Nirvāna*. It is *Lōkōttara* - oriented. On the other hand, lay people attempt religio - magical practices seeking salvation and freedom from their sorrow or *dukkha* of this world. That is *laukika*. By explaining this in a theoretical manner, Holt clearly suggests that these two crucial terms represent two overlapping orientations of a single dynamic whole: *laukika* and *lōkōttara*, while the *laukika* side represented the conditioned, temporal, and antecedent orientation, the *lōkōttara* represented the unconditioned, eternal, consummate orientation.⁴⁵ However, here attention may be paid to the argument regarding the real nature of Buddhism which is the “two overlapping orientations of a single dynamic whole”. The above discussion clearly shows that one strand (great tradition or ‘*lōkōttara*’) of Buddhism has been identified as traditional or original religion on the basis of the traditional literature but the other assimilated ideals (little tradition or ‘*laukika*’) cannot be identified with this traditional religious literature.

⁴² Obeyesekere, *op.cit*, 1963, p. 153.

⁴³ Richard F. Gombrich and Gaiñth Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Princeton: Princeton University press, 1988, Pp. 65-67.

⁴⁴ Holt, *op.cit*, 1991, pp. 19-24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 23.

As maintained earlier, Mahāyāna Buddhism was not active as a separate group or organization until the first or second centuries CE. Therefore, many scholars find it difficult to come to a conclusion about which *Nikāya* original Mahāyāna belongs to. Some accepted the view that the Mahāsaṅghikas may have been the forerunner of Mahāyāna Buddhism⁴⁶ and some others are of the view that the “Sarvāstivāda” sect would have contributed much to the growth of Mahāyāna Buddhism in one way or the other.⁴⁷

Some Japanese scholars expressed the view that Mahāyāna was originated from the layman who worshipped and protected the cult of thūpas,⁴⁸ because two sub sects of Mahāsaṅghika called Pubbaseliya and Aparaseliya emerged in association with the thūpa or *caitya* cult. There were special Sekhiyās in the Mahāsaṅghika vinaya which may lend support to their argument. On the other hand caityakas were off branches of Mahāsaṅghika bhikkhus. It is widely believed that Mahāsaṅghikas were the forerunners of the advent of Mahāyāna.

On the other hand some have clearly pointed out that Mahāyāna Buddhism itself is not to be conceived as a “sect” as stated by unambiguous textual evidence.⁴⁹ The formation of Mahāyāna is contrasted with the old doctrine of so-called Sravakayāna or Theravāda. O. H. Bechert assumed that Mahāyāna came into existence with monks, nuns and lay persons with many practices and beliefs drawn from many communities unifying around a common religious aspiration to attain Buddha-hood themselves eventually which in essence is the chief distinguishing feature from the Theravāda (Hinayāna).⁵⁰

Many scholars try to emphasize the similarities between the Theravāda doctrine and pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁵¹ Therefore, the discussion on the origin and development of Mahāyānism as a development of one *Nikāya* or sect cannot be accepted. According to the Theravāda tradition there had been monks who held Mahāyāna beliefs. Since Mahāyāna

⁴⁶ Ho-Beop, *op.cit*, 2010, p. 247.

⁴⁷ Dutt, *op.cit*, 1998, pp. 242, 243.

⁴⁸ Ho-Beop, *op.cit*, 2010, p. 255.

⁴⁹ Bechert, *op.cit*, 1973, p. 54

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 11

⁵¹ Dutt, *op.cit*, 1939; Bechert, *op.cit*, 1973, p. 154; Cohen, *op.cit*, 1995, p. 1-25; Beop, *op.cit*, 2010, pp. 247-262.

Buddhism structurally differs from other sects, it cannot be categorized under the various sectors of Theravāda schools.⁵²

The Mahāyāna or Theravāda ideological admixture of Buddhism was clearly discussed by Richard S. Cohen in his research which named “Discontented Categories: Hinayāna and Mahāyāna in Indian Buddhist History.”⁵³ By referring to the *Tathāgatabimbakārapāṇa sūtra* which was discovered at Gilgit, Richard S. Cohen has given us valuable details in this regard. According to his view, this text claims that anyone who makes an image of the Buddha, became intent upon awakening and will attain Buddhahood.⁵⁴ Though this statement is characterized by Mahāyāna ideas, the text ends with the statement that the author of this *sūtra* attains *Arahatship*. Thus, it is noteworthy that some authors use both Mahāyāna and Theravāda ideals without any distinction.

Ho-Beop also pointed out very clearly regarding the Theravāda - Mahāyāna admixture of Buddhism on the basis of the code of Discipline of the *saṅgha* – Sekhiyas.⁵⁵ The primary objective of the sekhiyas is to regulate the day to day living of monks with regards such basic needs such as dressing robes, eating, traveling, preaching, easing themselves and other behavioral patterns. Beop profoundly compared sekhiyas (Training) in the Suttavibhaṅga used by Theravāda *saṅgha* with the Caturvarga vinaya of Dharmagupta which is used by the Korean *saṅgha* and pointed out the way that the Theravāda code of Discipline was influenced by the new code of Discipline with regard to sacred objects which were in vogue by the advent of Mahāyāna. There is no evidence to prove that the Buddhist thūpās and the Buddha statues were in existence at the time of the Buddha. They were in vogue by the advent of Mahāyāna and the teachers added the corresponding sekhiyas to fit into the environment.

Even in the Theravāda Pāli chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*, and in measured contrast to the earlier Pāli *Nikāyas*, the Buddha is imagined in ever more spectacular ways, stressing his superabundant capabilities and character, accepting certain Mahāyāna ideas. Among the vast amount of indications, the practice of merit-transfer, various cult practices and even *Dhārani*, have been found in Theravāda Pāli chronicles.

⁵² Bechert, *op.cit*, 1973, p. 155.

⁵³ Cohen, *op.cit*, 1995, p. 1-25

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Ho-Beop, *op.cit*, 2010, pp. 253 - 256

The Pāli Chronicles such as the *Cūlavamsa*, *Nikāyasaṅgrahaya* and *Saddharmaratnākaraya* state that the commencement of the practice of honouring the *Dharmadhātu*, among the Sri Lankan Buddhists goes back to at least the sixth century CE., onwards. According to the *Cūlavamsa*, in the twelfth year of king Silākāla (530 CE), a merchant who visited the city of Kāsi (India) brought back the *Dharmadhātu* and presented it to the king.⁵⁶ The king honoured it and placed it in the *Vehera* Jetavana monastery and performed a festival once every year for its honour.⁵⁷ According to the description given in the *Saddharmāla rīkāraya* (13th century CE) a certain king named Kassapa enshrined the *dharmadhātu* in the Abhayagiri *stūpa* when he rebuilt it.⁵⁸ Also this text informs us that *dharma chaitya* was included among the five different classes of *stūpas*.⁵⁹

In this context, it is noteworthy, that the word *Dharanighara*, is also found in the Sri Lankan literary sources. The word ‘*Dharanighara*’ is used for the house for the performance of the practices for *dharma* and *dhārani* in honoring relics. According to the description given in the *Cūlavamsa* the building named *Dharanighara* was built for the performance of these incantations by king Parakramabahu I (1153-1186 CE.).⁶⁰ It is still impossible to find out whether the *Dharanighara* is indigenous to Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture or derived from elsewhere. It is interesting to note that an attempt has been made by Chandra Wikramagamage to identify the type of building which was used for the performance of *dharma* and *dhārani* relics, with the building named ‘*va *adāge*’ in Polonnaruwa, Tiriyaaya and Medirigiriya (Wikramagamage and Kusumoto, 2008: 22-23). The *stūpa* at Udayagiri in Orissa is very similar to this type of building but no comparative studies have been done so far.

However, it is of interest to note that the *Dīpavamsa* is the earliest source to refer to this which shows that *Dhamma-kāya* of the Trikāya concept was known to Sri Lanka soon after it came to being. The *Dīpavamsa* clearly mentioned that the teaching of the Buddha look like the *Dhamma-kāya*, after it arranged at the First Council.⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Cūlavamsa*, cha. XLI, vs. 37-41; *Nikāyasaṅgrahaya*, pp. 19-20)

⁵⁷ *Cūlavamsa*, cha. XLI, vs. 37-41

⁵⁸ *Saddharmāla rīkāraya*, p. 333

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 298, 333.

⁶⁰ *Cūlavamsa*, cha. LXXIII, v. 71

⁶¹ *Dīpavamsa*, cha. IV, v. 22

The author of the *Saddharmaratanākaraya*⁶² has drawn a certain amount of inspiration from his knowledge of Mahāyāna texts. It clearly shows his familiarity with the doctrine of Trikāya of the Mahāyānists referring to the Buddha as having a threefold body, i.e. *Rūpa-kāya*, *Dhamma-kāya*, *Nimitta-kāya*. The author further proceeds to explain these threefold bodies. *Rūpa-kāya* is said to be the human form of the Buddha which could be seen by all persons having the faculty of sight.

As described by Ho Beop:

“... the doctrine says that a Buddha has three *kāyas* or bodies: the *Nirmāṇa-kāya* or created body which manifests in time and space; the *Sambhoga-kāya* or body of mutual enjoyment which is a body of bliss or clear light manifestation; and the *Dharma-kāya* or Truth body which embodies the very principle of enlightenment and knows no limits or boundaries. The *Dharmakāya* symbolizes *Tipiṅka*.”⁶³

The Tri-kāya has been further described by Nandasena Mudiyanse as follows:

“... From the description of the *Dhamma-kāya* as given in this text, it may be conjectured that the reference is to the inner enlightened body or the *Dhamma* of the Buddha. The text says that to the ignorant it is formless, but to those who understand it, it has form. *Nimitta-kāya* is referred to as the state of *sopadisesa-nibbāna-dhātu*, which is visible only to the clairvoyant. It may be understood as the state of enjoying the bliss of Nirvāna in his living form. *Sunya-kāya* is described as his state in *anupadisesa-nibbāna-dhātu* i.e. bliss of Nirvāna after his passing away. It will be seen that the author was familiar with the doctrine of *Tri-kāya* of the Mahāyānists. *Rūpa-kāya* of his description appears to be identical with their *Nirmana-kāya*. The Mahāyānist theory of *Dharmma-kāya* may be compared with the description of *Dharmma-kāya* as given in this text. The remaining two *kāyas* seem to be an elaboration of the theory of the *Sambhoga-kāya*.”⁶⁴

This clearly shows that the Theravāda authors of Sri Lanka were familiar with the doctrine of *Tri-kāya* that were developed by the Mahāyānists.

⁶² *Saddharmaratanākaraya*: pp. 14-16

⁶³ Ho-Beop, *op.cit*, 2010, p. 252.

⁶⁴ Nandaseī Mudiyanse, *Mahāyāna Monuments in Ceylon*, Colombo: M. Gunasena & Company, 1967, pp. 22, 23.

The *Maṇimēkalai* is an important Tamil text revealing Buddhist influence. It has been assigned dates varying from the sixth to the ninth century CE.⁶⁵ Shu Hikosaka clearly pointed out that the author of this book *Cāttanār* has been influenced by both Mahāyāna and Theravāda ideals⁶⁶. There are many similarities in the structure, techniques and the religious practices between the *Maṇimēkalai* and Mahāyānist concepts and practices.⁶⁷

Pirit - chanting is a very popular ceremony among the Theravāda Buddhists of Sri Lanka and most of the South East Asian countries. As the term itself implies it means safety (*piritta*- protection), the ceremonial recital of which is regarded as capable of warding off all forms of evil and danger (*vipatti*), including disease, the evil influence of the planets, evil spirits etc.⁶⁸ These extracts are found collected and arranged in a particular order in the Book of Paritta or *pirit - pota*⁶⁹ and it contains 27 *sūtras* as Ratana-pirita, Maṅgala-pirita, Metta - piririta, Mōra - pirita, Jaya -pirita, Sivali - pirita etc. Most of these extracts clearly show the influences of Mahāyana and Tantric practices.

The Mahā – mayuri - dhārani is used by the Mahāyānist as a protection against infectious diseases and serpents.⁷⁰ It is one of the five protective charms (*dhāranis*) of the Mahāyānist. The Mōra-pirita⁷¹ used in Sri Lanka, is similar to the Mahā - mayuri-dhārani. The Gini-pirita,⁷² used in present day Sri Lanka is much like a *dhārani* of the Mahāyānist. The word “*dhārani*” occurs twice in the text. Jinapaṅ jaraya,⁷³ Jaya-pirita⁷⁴ *Sivali - yantraya* (*Ibid*, 274) and *Ratana - yantraya*,⁷⁵ they have been probably composed as a result of the influence of Tantric Buddhism. In the Jinapanjaraya occur the words “*etthantare*

⁶⁵ Gunawardana, *op.cit*, 2005, p. 72; Shu Hikosaka, *Buddhism in Tamilnadu: A new Perspective*, Madras: Institute of Asian Studies, 1989, pp. 62-72.

⁶⁶ Hikosaka, *op.cit*, 1989, pp. 62-72.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 71.

⁶⁸ A.G.S. Kariyawasam, *Buddhist Ceremonial and Rituals of Sri Lanka*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995, pp. 32-41.

⁶⁹ *Piruvana-pothvahanse*, 1994). ed. Attuduwe Siri Rahula Thero, Colombo: The Buddhist Research Foundation of Ithaiwan.

⁷⁰ Mudiyanse, *op.cit*, 1967, pp. 22, 23.

⁷¹ *Piruvana -pothvahanse*, *op.cit*, pp. 20-21.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 255

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 249

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 254

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 272

atthanatha bhavanti”. *Attha-nātha* is the eight Nāthas who may be the same eight forms of Nātha quoted in the *Sāriputra*. The prevalence of such practices may perhaps be due to the influence of Tantric Buddhism.

Conclusion

Finally, one cannot help admiring the manner in which monks, belonging to diverse *Nikāyas* and (sects), adherents of Theravāda schools as well as Mahāyānists foregathered at one place, under one roof, to discuss and study comparatively, harnessing a wide spectrum of intellectual attainments to arrive at conclusions in a totally studious atmosphere, thereby widening their horizons of knowledge. Within this exercise, it is obvious that narrow differences such as Theravāda or Mahāyāna had been ignored for, under such circumstances, such divisions must have appeared as trivial and irrelevant. Thus, it is significant that philosophically Theravāda and Mahāyāna or Tantrayāna traditions are represented in clear opposition but not in a practical sense. So, it can be clearly suggested that the Theravāda - Mahāyāna distinction of the studies of history of Sri Lankan Buddhist culture is irrelevant.