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THE CHINESE ĀGAMAS VIS-À-VIS THE SARVĀSTIVĀDA TRADITION

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(Nava Nālandā Mahāvihāra)

It is commonly held that the Chinese Āgamas belong to the Sarvāstivāda tradition. Do they really do so? My modest attempt here is to present my findings and leave the decision to speak for itself.

Not unlike the Nikāyas, the Āgamas are collections of doctrinal discourses (i.e. suttas/sūtras), traditionally attributed to the Buddha. During his life-time, no attempt was ever made to put on record all that he preached to various people on various occasions and at various places for nearly four decades. However, soon after his demise his arahat disciples, under the leadership of Mahākassapa, collected and recited, for the first time, his teachings at the First Council of Rājagaha/Rājagṛha. Of the disciples, Ānanda in particular had the credit of conveying the discourses to the Council. As such, each and every discourse begins with the expression, *evaṃ me sutam / Ru shih êrh wên / Thus I heard*. The teachings, as collected by Mahākassapa and the other theras, were naturally the common inheritance of all schools which started to develop when the Sangha fragmented into manifold groups and sub-groups some hundred years after the Master's passing away and the holding of the First Council. Literary accounts, however, tell us that some of these schools such as the Sarvāstivāda, Mahāsāṃghika, Dharmagupta, Mahīśāsaka, Sammitiya, Kāśyapīya and, of course,

Theravāda, had their own collections of discourses¹.

The Theravāda school, whose tradition has come down to us uninterrupted, is believed to have preserved the Buddha's teachings collected by Mahākassapa and others faithfully and intact. The traditions of other schools could not survive the ravages of time and their collections were lost beyond recovery except for some fragmentary sūtras in Sanskrit². However, parallel to the collections of the Theravāda, known as Nikāyas, there have come down to us other collections in Chinese. For these collections and others, the term *A-han*, a transliteration of Āgama, has invariably been used in place of Nikāya in Chinese. The earliest use of the term *A-han* is found in the name of a sūtra, *A-han-chêng-hsing-ching*, translated by An-shih-kao in the later part of the second century C.E.³.

1 Lū Cheng and Shōzen Kumoi, 'Āgama', *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (Ency. Bud.) I, 2, Colombo 1963, pp.241 and 248. Quoting the Ta ts'u-ên-shih-pan-tsa-fa-shih (the bibliography of the Tripiṭaka master of the great Ts'u-ên temple), fasc.6, Lū Cheng informs us that as late as the seventh century C.E. there still existed the above seven divergent texts. Shōzen Kumoi replaces Sammatīya by Vatsīputrīya. See also M. Anesaki, 'The Four Buddhist Āgamas in Chinese', *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 35, pt.3, Yokohama 1908, pp.7-8.

2 No complete Āgama text in Sanskrit is extant now. The fragments in Central Asia constitute little more than a dozen. Of them, seven were edited by A.F. Rudolf Hoernle in *Manuscript Remains of Buddhist Literature Found in Eastern Turkestan*, Oxford 1916, repr. Amsterdam 1970 and Delhi 1988; R. Pischel, S. Lévi, L. de La Vallée Poussin, E. Waldschmidt et al. are also credited with the editing of fragments (M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature* II, Calcutta 1933; repr. New Delhi 1972, pp.232 and 234, n.3). See also R. Yamada, 'Agon Rui', *Bongobuten no Shobunken*, Tokyo 1959, pp.33ff.

3 *Ency. Bud.*, op. cit., p.245.

Āgamas in Chinese — In the Taishō edition of the Chinese Buddhist Canon, the first two volumes, entitled *A-han-ching*, contain a set of four Āgamas which are recorded with their translators and dates of translation as follows:

Ch'ang-a-han-ching / Dīrghāgama, Buddhayasas and Cho-fo-nien, 412-13 C.E.;

Chung-a-han-ching / Madhyamāgama, Gautama Sanghadeva, 397-8 C.E.;

Tsa-a-han-ching / Saṃyuktāgama, Guṇabhadra, 435-43 C.E.;

Tsêng-i-a-han-ching / Ekottarāgama, Dharmanandī, 384-5 C.E.

In addition to these Āgamas, the volumes include two incomplete translations of the Saṃyuktāgama — the *Pieh-i-tsa-a-han-ching* (No.100, 16 fasc., 364 sūtras) translated by an unknown hand during the reign of the Three Ch'in (351-431 C.E.) and the *Tsa-a-han-ching* (No.101, 1 fasc., 27 sūtras) also by an unknown translator during the time of the Three Kingdoms (220-80 C.E.). An-shih-kao's 'Mixed Sūtras in Forty-four Chapters' (No.150, 1 fasc., 44 sūtras) contains some sūtras of the Ekottarāgama. A large number of detached sūtras, whose translation spread over the later Han down to the Northern Sung (148-1058 C.E.), form almost half of the *A-han-ching* collections⁴. There is no fifth Āgama, Kṣudraka, in these volumes, though there are a few sūtras included in another

4 B. Nanjio, 'Agama Class', *A Catalogue of the Chinese Translation of the Buddhist Tripitaka*, Oxford 1883 (repr. Delhi 1980), pp.127ff; Lewis R. Lancaster, *The Korean Buddhist Canon: A Descriptive Catalogue*, Berkeley 1979: The Āgamas are wanting in this Canon which is based on the Northern Sung version of the Chinese Buddhist Canon; C. Akanuma, *The Comparative Catalogue of Chinese Āgamas and Pāli Nikāyas*, Nagoya 1929, repr. Tokyo 1958; *Ency. Bud.*, op. cit., p.242; Anesaki, op. cit., pp.28-34.

volume which correspond to some of the texts of the Khuddaka Nikāya, such as the Dhammapada, Udāna, Aṭṭhavagga of the Suttanipāṭa, and also to the Udānavarga of the Sarvastivāda tradition⁵.

The four Chinese Āgamas do not contain any information about their originals. It was a general practice among translators of Buddhist texts to name the school to which a particular text belonged. The absence of such information in this case could not just have been an oversight on the part of the translators. How could all of them commit the same mistake? In case they did so, it would not have escaped the eagle eyes of later scholars who thoroughly scrutinised the translations before they accepted them as genuine. The whole process gives the appearance of a conspiracy, a wilful suppression of information in order to present the materials as the original doctrinal discourses of the Buddha. Commenting on this, N. Dutt says that 'the various schools were at one in their acceptance of the texts of the Āgamas'⁶.

The four Chinese Āgamas form a set, but the same cannot

be said about their originals. As their comparison with the Nikāyas has shown, they are similar but not identical, and they are certainly not mere translations of the Nikāyas⁷. The Sarvastivāda tradition adopted Sanskrit as its medium and some fragmentary Sanskrit Āgama sūtras have come down to us. The close affinity of these texts with their counterparts in the Chinese Āgamas led some scholars (earlier) to believe that the latter belonged to the Sarvastivāda tradition⁸. On the contrary, the differences between them led P.V. Bapat to suggest a set of Prakrit Āgamas as the original⁹. However, as the accounts/records say, the complete set of the Āgamas of a particular school or tradition was not taken up for translation. Each Āgama was carried to China separately by different individuals from different places and at different times. Each translation was made by a different individual and his collaborators. Apart from the Dīrghāgama, the other three Āgamas were also translated more than once, by different translators and not from the same originals. The fragmentary portions of the Saṃyuktāgama and the Ekottarāgama, as well as some quotations from the Āgamas in other Chinese and Tibetan texts, convincingly lead us to this conclusion¹⁰.

5 Anesaki, *op. cit.*, pp.9-13; Winternitz, *op. cit.*, p.236; Yamada, *op. cit.*, pp.48-55. Space precludes an exhaustive bibliography of individual text studies but the following surveys can be usefully referred to: G.M. Bongard-Levin and M.I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, *Indian Texts from Central Asia*, Tokyo 1986; P. Poucha, 'Indian Literature in Central Asia', *Archiv Orientalni* II, Prague 1930, pp.27-38; L. Sander, 'Buddhist Literature in Central Asia', *Ency. Bud.* IV, 1, 1979, pp.52-75; E. Waldschmidt, 'Central Asian Sūtra Fragments and their Relation to the Chinese Āgamas', *The Language of the Earliest Buddhist Tradition*, ed. H. Bechert, Göttingen 1980, pp.136-74.

6 *Early History of the Spread of Buddhism and the Buddhist Schools*, 1st Indian ed., New Delhi 1980, p.153.

7 Anesaki, 'The Four Buddhist Āgamas . . .', *op. cit.*, p.1.

8 Sir Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism* III, London 1921, repr. 1971 (and Delhi 1988), p.297; A.C. Banerjee, *Sarvastivāda Literature*, Calcutta 1957, repr. 1979, pp.23 and 28.

9 *Arthapada Sūtra*, *op. cit.*, p.19; *2500 Years of Buddhism*, Delhi 1956, repr. New Delhi 1987, p.125; also Thich Minh Chau, *The Chinese Madhyama Āgama and the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya: A Comparative Study*, Saigon 1964 (repr. Delhi 1991), p.20.

10 H. Sakurabe, 'On the Madhyamāgama as Quoted by Samathadeva in his Abhidharmakośa Commentary', *Studies in Indology and Buddhology*, ed. G.M. Nagao and J. Nozawa, Kyoto 1955; Minh Chau, *op. cit.*, pp.22-5; *Ency. Bud.*, *op.*

However, on the basis of materials found in the Āgamas themselves and also from external evidence, scholars have identified the different schools which inspired the Āgamas. Regarding the school of the Dīrghāgama, H. Ui thinks that it belongs to the Dharmagupta school. In support he argues that the translator, Buddhayasas, was a propagator and also a translator of the Dharmagupta's Vinaya¹¹. K. Watanabe brings in the same argument and further notes that the absence of the Ātānā-tiyasūtra negates the possibility of its relationship with the Sarvāstivāda school, which includes the same in its Vinaya¹². H. Ui has also pointed out the great significance attributed to the offerings to the Buddha's stūpa, which is in conformity with the teachings of the school¹³. K. Ishikawa, however, cautions us in attributing it to the Dharmagupta alone because it had assimilated the influence of other schools as well, particularly the Sarvāstivāda of Gandhāra¹⁴.

Although the fragmentary Sanskrit sūtras do not agree word for word with the corresponding portions of the Madhyamāgama, scholars accept (with a fair degree of certainty) that the latter has come from the Sarvāstivāda tradition¹⁵. Minh Chau, in his comparative study, has also reached the same conclusion and produced some convincing evidence in support¹⁶. He has

quoted H. Sakurabe's finding that the portions quoted from the Sarvāstivāda's Madhyamāgama are strikingly similar to their parallels in the Chinese Madhyamāgama¹⁷. It will not be out of place to caution the reader that what applies to one may also apply to others. For instance, the total omission of any mention of meat and fish in the Madhyamāgama has brought Minh Chau to support his view that the text belongs to the Sarvāstivāda school¹⁸. However, the omission extends to all the Āgamas which are acknowledged as belonging to other traditions¹⁹. Moreover, the Vinaya of the Sarvāstivāda school and also of other schools contains the Buddha's admonition to monks to eat meat and fish blamelessly in three ways — not seen, not heard, and not suspected²⁰.

The Saṃyuktāgama is considered to be a work of the Sarvāstivāda tradition or of a school related to it. According to Lü Cheng, it is evidently of the Mūlasarvāstivāda, because its system agrees well with that of the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya-kṣu-drakavastu, and the order of the text of the basic portion is in perfect accord with that described in the Saṃyuktāgamamātrikā, quoted in the Yogācārabhūmi (fascs 85-98)²¹. To this it may be added that the omission of the Niruttīyāpatha Sutta (Saṃyutta Nikāya III 71-2), which denounces the existence of a part of the

cit., p.242; Anesaki, 'The Four Buddhist Āgamas ...', *op. cit.*, p.3.

11 H. Ui (*Studies in Indian Philosophy* II, pp.134-5), as quoted in *Ency. Bud.*, *op. cit.*, p.242; E. Mayeda, 'A History of the Formation of Original Buddhist Texts' (in Japanese), Tokyo 1964, p.619.

12 See Hoernle, *Manuscript Remains* ... , p.18.

13 Same as n.11.

14 Introduction, *Kokuyaku Issai Kyō*, Vol. VII, 1933; repr. 1969, p.6.

15 *Ency. Bud.*, *op. cit.*, pp.242 and 248; Mayeda, *op. cit.*, p.638.

16 *Op. cit.*, pp.18-27.

17 *Ibid.*, pp.24-5.

18 *Ibid.*, p.31.

19 C.S. Prasad, 'Some Reflections on the Relation between the Āgamas and the Nikāyas', *Proceedings and Papers of the Second Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies [Nalanda 1980]*, ed. C.S. Prasad, Nalanda 1985, p.136.

20 C.S. Prasad, 'Meat-eating and the Rule of the Tikoṭipariśuddha', *Studies in Pali and Buddhism*, ed. A.K. Narain, Delhi 1979, pp.290ff.

21 *Ency. Bud.*, *op. cit.*, pp.242 and 248; Mayeda, *op. cit.*, p.649.

past and future, negatively makes it more akin to the Sarvāstivāda with the doctrine of *sarvamasti* — everything exists in all three divisions of time: past, present and future.

Regarding the Ekottarāgama, H. Ui and also others are of the opinion that it probably belongs to the Mahāsāṃghika tradition. It shows some Mahāyāna influence and some of the theories are akin to those of the Mahāsāṃghika²².

The Chinese Āgamas are translations of the Indian originals. Should we come across the originals, the former may not tally exactly with the latter as is the case with the fragmentary Sanskrit sūtras and their corresponding portions in the Āgamas in Chinese. The Chinese translations do not appear to be identical with the originals because most of the translators, as Sir Charles Bell observed, fell short of our standards of accuracy²³. The contents have been amplified and transposed in the originals; the translations also underwent scrutiny and severe editing before being included in the Canon. The translators of the Āgamas were no exception and their versions were subject to omissions, commissions and editorial retouching²⁴.

Common Source of the Āgamas and Nikāyas — On the relation between the Chinese Āgamas and Pāli Nikāyas, M. Anesaki has observed that they show 'both agreement to a considerable ex-

22 *Ibid.*, pp.242 and 248; *ibid.*, p.665.

23 *Op. cit.*, p.294; see also L. Lahiri, 'Interpretation of Buddhist Terminology at the Background of Chinese Traditional Thought', *Buddhist Studies*, Univ. of Delhi 1974, pp.57ff.

24 C.S. Prasad, *Proceedings*, *op. cit.*, pp.137ff.

tent, and notable divergences²⁵. There is agreement between the materials which are pretty much the same in both, whereas the divergences are limited to the arrangement of the materials²⁶. Anesaki further added, 'the deviations in matter, though usually inconsiderable, are sometimes interesting²⁷'. Bapat is of the opinion that the Chinese version is nearer to the Pāli texts than the Sanskrit ones²⁸. Hoernle, who edited fragments of the Sanskrit sūtras, reached the conclusion that 'the Sanskrit text of our fragments differs not inconsiderably from the Pāli²⁹'. Taking the case of a particular sūtra, he further adds that 'the Sanskrit version agrees neither with the Pāli, nor with the Chinese, though there is more agreement with the former than the latter³⁰'. In a comparative study of the Madhyamāgama and the Majjhima Nikāya, Minh Chau has further verified the correctness of earlier observations by scholars and has added that 'the high percentage of similarities . . . show that there existed a basic stock, not only of doctrines, but also of texts, agreeing in all essentials with both the Chinese and the Pāli versions³¹'.

Not only similarities but also divergences point to the fact that they are based on a common stock of materials³². In the

25 Winternitz, *op. cit.*, pp.234-5.

26 JRAS 1901, pp.895ff.

27 *Ibid.*, p.897.

28 Minh Chau, *op. cit.*, p.20.

29 *Op. cit.*, p.16.

30 *Ibid.*, p.18.

31 *Op. cit.*, p.14.

32 Anesaki, 'The Four Buddhist Āgamas . . .', *op. cit.*, p.2; Winternitz, *op. cit.*, p.235; Banerjee, *op. cit.*, p.25; G.C. Pande, *Studies in the Origin of Buddhism*, Allahabad 1957, repr. Delhi 1983, p.6; E.J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, London 1933, repr. 1971, pp.38-9; see also H. Kern's observations in the

diverging portions of the Āgamas and the Nikāyas, there are comparatively older materials. Where did they come from? Certainly from the common stock of the Buddha's teachings to which the Āgamas and Nikāyas both owe their origin. Listening to the recitation of the Dhamma and Vinaya by Mahākassapa and other arahats, an elderly monk, Purāṇa by name, expressed his satisfaction with their work but he himself chose to go his own way. Like him, there might have been a number of persons who had gained something personal from the Buddha, but had no chance to have them included in the deliberations of the First Council. Their discourses which remained unrecorded, in a floating state as it were, found their way into the Āgamas and Nikāyas of different schools. With the splitting of the Sangha into small groups, called schools, the opportunity for monks to have their own way in their own affairs increased. This facilitated the tapping and exploitation of the aforesaid floating materials.

Both the similarities and differences help us to form an idea of the common stock of the Buddha's teachings. The differences are due to independent handling of orally transmitted teachings. Sectarian developments certainly took place, but their scope was confined to certain omissions and insertions, and not much to the fabrication of materials³³. The nature of the similarities points to the fact that the teachings at some stage were given a well-organised form. Their divisions into Dīrgha, Madhyama, Saṃyukta and Ekottara were fixed once and for all; the sections and subsections of each were worked out and the

Introduction to his translation of the *Saddharmapundarika*, Oxford 1884, repr. New York 1963, pp.xiv ff.

33 Prasad, *Proceedings*, op. cit., pp.137ff.

sūtras meant to be preserved were sorted out, though not rigidly. All these might have been the work of the theras of the First Council³⁴. Later, among the schools, the framework was retained, but the sūtras, particularly the short ones because of their flexible character and great number, were interchanged, replaced, or dropped at will.

Āgamas as Authentic as Nikāyas — Some of the schools adopted different languages for their scriptures³⁵. The Āgamas, too, did not remain unaffected. As these languages were of the same family, with a common vocabulary, this dubbing does not imply more than a change in grammatical forms; and this does not reduce their authenticity. The teachings had mnemonic value for the Buddha's disciples and the latter preserved them as faithfully as they could. Again, the Āgamas were rendered into Chinese and the translations were checked and rechecked in all seriousness. Even in their present form, they present the teachings of the Buddha as authentically as the Nikāyas do. 'What's in a name, a rose by any other name smells just as sweet'.

34 Thomas, op. cit., p.157: the arrangements of the four Nikāyas and Āgamas must have originated before sectarian differences became acute.

35 The Buddha allowed his disciples to learn his teachings in their own tongue (*Sakkāya niruttīyā buddhavacanāṃ pariyāpūṇitaṃ* — Cullavagga, Nālandā ed., p.229). True to his instructions, some of the prominent schools adopted different languages as their medium in order to cater for the aspirations of their followers and to give a distinctive feature to their schools. Vinītadeva (eighth century C.E.) informs us that the Sarvāstivādins used Sanskrit, and the Mahāsāṃghikas, Sammitīyas and Sthaviravādins used Prakrit, Apabhraṃśa and Pāṣāci respectively (R. Kimura, 'Introduction to the History of Early Buddhist Schools', *Sir Asutosh Mookerjee Silver Jubilee Volumes III*, Orient, p.3, Calcutta 1927, p.125; see also E. Obermiller (tr.), *History of Buddhism by Bu-ston*, Heidelberg 1932, repr. Delhi 1986, p.96).

However, observations such as 'The Pali Tripiṭaka represents the earliest available and most complete collection of Buddhist sacred literature'³⁶ have led the younger generation of Pāli scholars in India to believe that the Nikāyas are the only authentic version of the Buddha's teachings. They should not forget that the Nikāyas are not all that came directly from the Buddha's lips and that the texts took quite a long time to reach their present form. Strata in subject-matter and language are conspicuous. The Āgamas in their Indian original were synchronous with the Nikāyas in their composition. Hence, more reasonably we subscribe to Anesaki's view that 'it can hardly be said that the present Pali canon was the only version of the Buddha's discourses and that others are mere derivations from it'³⁷.

To conclude, we may say that to whatever school or schools these Chinese Āgamas will finally be attributed, they are primary sources for early Buddhist teachings. Any kind of study in this field remains incomplete unless the materials of the Chinese Āgamas are tapped and utilised. However, the difficulty is that, being in Chinese, they are *terra incognita* to most of us. It is, therefore, imperative that they should be made available in English translation to scholars and students³⁸. The task is extremely difficult, but not impossible. We may even have them restored in Sanskrit, Prakrit or Pāli.

36 B.V. Bapat in *2500 Years of Buddhism*, p.138.

37 'The Four Buddhist Āgamas. . .', p.1.

38 [Ed.] See BSR 2, 1-2 (1985), pp.71-2, on the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai's plan to translate the entire Chinese Buddhist Canon into English (we have received no progress report on this project).

THE EARLY SPREAD AND INFLUENCE OF BUDDHISM IN WESTERN ASIA¹

Russell Webb

Although earlier historians of Orientalism have reviewed the first Western contacts, few, if any, have defined the geographical boundaries of the Occident or delineated its eastern extent.

Strictly speaking, the eastern limits of the West are bounded by the Bosphorus and the Urals, but these divide the modern states of Turkey and Russia; politically, the former is considered as part of the 'West' whilst the latter until recently led the 'Eastern bloc' albeit not of the Orient in cultural terms. Possibly as a logical consequence and culmination of the Diaspora, the modern state of Israel is invariably considered, politically, culturally and even ethnically, as a 'Western' country, whereas its half Christian neighbour to the north, Lebanon, is not.

An important consideration to bear in mind is common religious or spiritual aspirations or tendencies. Thus, with the establishment of Zoroastrianism as the state religion at the beginning of the Sassanian era (226-651 CE), Persia became, with its dualistic and theistic eschatology having influenced Judaism and Christianity, the embodiment of the cultural divide

1 A shortened version of the introductory chapter to the author's projected book on *Buddhism in the West*.