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A BRIEF SURVEY: SARVĀSTIVĀDA SCHOOL IN BUDDHISM PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

The rise of the Sarvāstivāda-school in Buddhism Philosophy as a distinct group dates back to the 2nd to 1st centuries BCE. This school have been of major importance in the development of Śrāvākayāna (Hinayana) Buddhism, as well as for the origin of the Mahayana. It was one of the parent lines in the genealogic tree of the Eighteen Schools, consistently identified in traditional adoxography as one of the earlier Sthavira groups. It is known from the inscription that Sarvāstivāda's greatest strength is the Northwest, from Mathura to Afghanistan and the Central Asian desert. But they are also known in East and South India. Their influence extended to Indonesia, and, indirectly, to China. The Sarvastivadin canon is a Tripitaka only in the sense that it was conceived as having three parts (Sutra, Vinaya, and Abhidharma). According to Sarvāstivāda, although everything is impermanent, the basic building blocks of reality, including some attributes and relationships, are significant and real. These significant entities (Drainvyasat) are called dharmas. Dharmas's Sarvāstivāda philosophy is one of the central conceptions of Buddhist Philosophy. It is in the light of this conception that Buddhism discloses itself as a metaphysical theory developed out of one fundamental principle, viz. the idea that existence is an interplay of elements of Matter, Mind, and Forces, which are technically called the term: "Dharmas". The moral teaching of the path towards Nirvana is not something additional to this ontological doctrine; it is most intimately connected with it and identical with it.

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of the *Sarvāstivāda* school of Buddhism as a distinct group dates back to the 2nd to 1st centuries BCE. According to Buddhist historical literature, the *Sarvāstivādins* split from the *Sthaviravāda* school at a council held in *Pāṭaliputra* (present-day Patna). The name "*Sarvāstivāda*" suggests that the disagreement with the *Sthaviravādins* was a matter of doctrinal viewpoint: "*sarvāstivāda*" is derived from the Sanskrit *sarvam asti*, meaning essentially "everything exists/all is". The question that the school named its name is whether discrete entities (dharma) exist only in the present or whether they exist as such in the past and the future. In other words, the question is whether the past becomes manifest in the present or not and whether the future has the potential in the present. This focus on philosophical interpretation and debate explains why the *Sarvāstivāda* school predominantly is an *Abhidharma* school. Of their subsequent history until the occurrence of a famous council in *Kashmir* during the reign of the *Kuṣāṇa* king *Kaṇiṣka* (2nd century CE), our knowledge is only fragmentary. Most likely, this council in *Kaśmīra* was an exclusive reunion

of the *Vaibhāṣika* subgroup of the larger *Sarvāstivāda* community, not a general "synod" meant to discuss doctrinal disputes with other schools. Profiting from the territorial expansion of the *Kuṣāṇa* Empire, these *Vaibhāṣikas* became the most dominant *Sarvāstivāda* subgroup in the period extending from the 2nd to the 4th centuries CE. The *Vaibhāṣikas* have to be differentiated from the original *Sarvāstivādins*, originating from *Mathurā*. Other small groups of *Sarvāstivāda* are the Western masters of *Gandhāra* and *Bactria*, who are also known as *Bahirdeśaka*, *Aparāntaka* and *Pāścattya*; and *Mūlasarvāstivādins*. *Sautrāntikas*'s relationship with *Sarvāstivādins*, and the question of whether *Sautrāntikas* have the same subgroup with *Dārṣāntikas* are, in their turn, unresolved with the Western masters of *Gandhāra* and *Bactria*. The *Sarvāstivādins* have been of major importance in the development of *Śrāvākayāna* (*Hinayana*) Buddhism, as well as for the origin of the *Mahayana*. For the latter, the contacts of the *Sarvāstivādins* with the Hellenistic world have been of great importance. As the famous Silk Route went through Central Asian *Sarvāstivāda* territory, their philosophical ideas

became very influential in China. The *Sarvāstivādins* remained influential to about the 7th century CE.

The Origin Historical and Development: Although it is customary to refer to the *Sarvāstivāda* as a *Hinayana* “sect”, it seems evident that it was primarily a monastic and intellectual movement, thus the term *sect* might be inappropriate. The term *Hinayana* is equally problematic, and in this case it must be taken to establish only a definition by exclusion “that which is not *Mahayana*”.ⁱ The *Sarvāstivāda* was one of the parent lines in the genealogic tree of the Eighteen Schools, consistently identified in traditional adoxography as one of the earlier *Sthavira* groups. From the *Sarvāstivāda* arose in turn, according to most accounts, the schools of the *Sautrantika* and the *MulaSarvāstivāda*, and perhaps that of the *Dharmaguptaka*. Existing knowledge of the history and teachings of the early schools is based on late sources, and there is little agreement among scholars as to the true affiliation of the sects mentioned in these sources. It is not clear, for instance, whether the *Mahisasaka* School should be classified under the *Sarvāstivāda* or under “mainline” *Sthaviras*. There is, nevertheless, an agreement among the classical sources on the derivation of the *Sarvāstivāda* from a main *Sthavira* trunk, most probably alter the great schism that separated the early *Sthavira* from the *Mahasamghika*. The separation of *Sarvāstivāda* from its trunk of origin is supposed to have taken place at the Third Buddhist Council, held under King *Asoka*. They separated from the *Sthaviras* according to some accounts, from the *Mahisasaka*, according to others.ⁱⁱ It is known from the inscription that *Sarvāstivāda*'s greatest strength is the Northwest, from Mathura to Afghanistan and the Central Asian desert. But they are also known in East and South India. Their influence extended to Indonesia, and, indirectly, to China.

Sarvastivadin received the patronage of the Kaniska royal family (second century CE). Traditionally, the *Tripitaka* of this school was finally closed during his reign. But it is unclear whether this legend is due to a confusion between their *Abhidharma* spelling and the incorporation of the scriptures. It is likely that most of the *Sarvastivadin* *Tripitaka* has been revised earlier, and in the second century, *Sarvastivadin* scholars were engaged in exegetical work. This is the time for the main system works, and the beginning of the synthesis work will develop into *Mahāvibhāsa*. As a school of philosophy, *Sarvāstivāda* was gradually attracted to *Sautrantika* and *Mahayana*. But it remained a strong monastic institution, especially in the Northwest. *Sarvāstivāda* survived at least into the ninth century C.E through the *MulaSarvāstivāda* sub-school. By counting *Mulasarvastivadin* texts as works of *Sarvastivadin* imprint, one can form an approximate idea of the greater part of the *Tripitaka* of this school. The combined material of both groups almost constitutes a complete canon, preserved primarily in Chinese and Tibetan translations, but also in some Sanskrit passages from Central Asia. This literary institution is an important source for the study of the so-called *Hinayana* school, eclipsed in this respect only by the *Theravada* tradition.

The Literature of Sarvāstivāda: The *Sarvastivadin* canon is a *Tripitaka* only in the sense that it was conceived as having three parts. But it is characteristic of this canon that in addition to the three traditional *Pitakas* (*Sutra*, *Vinaya*, and *Abhidharma*), it eventually developed a *Ksudra Pitaka* to accommodate miscellaneous works of late origin.ⁱⁱⁱ Also

characteristic of this canon was the exclusion of texts such as the *Dharmapada* (considered paracanonical) and the composition of extensive commentaries on the *Abhidharma Pitaka*. A good part of canon *Sarvastivadin* exists in Chinese translation. *Madhyama Agama* found in the Chinese sutta is certainly *Sarvastivadin*; some scholars also refer to the Chinese translation of the book *Stimjukugama* as the *Sarvāstivāda* origin, although this collection is probably a work of *MulaSarvāstivāda*. The *Dharmaguptaka Dirghagama* may be quite similar to the corresponding *Sarvāstivāda* collection, now lost. The *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* is also preserved in Chinese in several versions, including a short, early version, and an expanded version accompanied by a commentary, the *Vinaya-vibhāsa*. This last text became the *Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya*, which is also preserved in Tibetan. Another recension has been recovered in Sanskrit manuscripts from Gilgit and Afghanistan. The *Abhidharma* of the *Sarvasvada* is preserved in its entirety in the Chinese canon (some books in more than one translation). Only fragments remain in the original Sanskrit.^{iv}

Fragments of canon *Sarvastivadin* have been found in Central Asia (Tarim basin). These Sanskrit manuscripts include parts of *Vinaya*. *Bhiksu-* and *Bhiksuni-pratimoksa*, and *Suttas*. The same area has yielded several manuscripts of *Udanavarga* (a collage similar to *Pali Dhammapada*). One of the seven books of *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, *Abhidharmasamgītiparyāya*, was found in Afghanistan (Bamiyan). A Sanskrit manuscript of a post-volcanic work of *Sarvastivadin* *Abhidharma*, *Abhidharmadīpa*, was restored in Tibet. It is believed to be the work of *Samghabhadra* (fourth century) or one of his disciples. Most of the school's remaining Sanskrit works belong to *avādāna* literature and are for most late works or distributions. For example, *Lalitavistara*, a biography of the life of the Buddha (until enlightenment), shows the strong *Mahayana* influence. Two other important works of this genre, *Avadanasataka* and *Divyāvādāna*, are probably associated with the *Mulasarvāstivadin* appendage. This same group belongs to *Vinaya* discovered in Gilgit and some fragments from Turfan (e.g. the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*). The *Sarvastivadin Abhidharma Pitaka* is divided into six treatises and a seventh work of synthesis (“the six feet and the body” of *Abhidharma*): (1) *Prakaranapada*, (2) *Vijnānakaya*, (3) *Dharmaskandha*, (4) *Prajñaptisastra*, (5) *Dhatukaya*, (6) *Samgītiparyāya*, and (7) *Jñāprasthāna*. Each of the works has a putative author, but sources vary on their attribution (e.g. *Mahakausthila* or *Sariputra* for the *Samgītiparyāya*. *Sariputra* or *Maudgalyayana* for the *Dharmaskandha*). However, the last (and latest) of these seven books, *Jñāprasthāna*, is continuously attributed to *Katyayaniputra*; His copyrights are generally accepted as factual, although *Mahāvibhāsa* declares that he is merely a corrector of the text and that its real author is Buddha. Three of the works in *Sarvastivadin* *Abhidharma* reflect the style and content of the previous catechism (*mātrkā*) and cosmology, found in the sutras of other schools. In all likelihood, this is *Abhidharma*'s original core and explains *Sarvastivadin* claiming that *Abhidharma* is also the word of Buddha (*Buddhism*). The university's most influential text is the fruit of its dedication to the study of *Abhidharma*, a collective work of exegesis, *Mahāvibhāsa* (150-200 CE), attempting to become a commentary to *Jñānaprastna*'s *Kātyāyanīputra*. But this work is more than a commentary; it provides invaluable information on the previous traditions of *Abhidharma* (for example, the doctrines of the “four great masters”, *Vasumitra*, *Dharmatrāta*, *Ghosa* and *Buddhaadeva*), and on philosophical schools that

are not Buddhism (for example, Samkhya). In addition to its value as a major source of information on Buddhist tradition, this work also affects the development of other schools, including the Mahayana. Even when criticized (as in the *Abhidharmakosa* of the philosopher Sautrantika Vasubandhu, or in *Mahaprajñāparamitā-upadeśa Sastra* of Mahseist pseudo-Nagarjuna), *Mahāvibhāsā* continues to provide the spiritual model. Moreover, the two important works mentioned above are related to the dissemination of Sarvastivādin ideas in East Asia. Because of the central role of this text in defining Sarvastivādin orthodoxy, mainline Sarvastivādins are sometimes known as Vaibhasikas, that is, followers of the (*Maha*) *Vibhāsā*.

The Major Philosophy Standpoints of Sarvastivāda School:

A characteristic doctrine of this school, the one from which the school derives its name, is the theory of time. According to this doctrine summarized in the phrase *sarvam asti* “everything exists” all of the three dimensions of time (past, present, future) exist; that is, the present continues to exist when it becomes the past, and so forth.^v This and the consequent ideals arising from it have been expressed in different terms by various scholars. For instance, Murti says that the *Vaibhasika* system is a radical pluralism erected on the denial of Substance (soul) and the acceptance of this discreet momentary entities.^{vi} This doctrine seems to have been developed as a way to protect the laws of causality (especially as they apply to karmic or moral retribution) from the potentially undermining effect of the doctrine of impermanence. Another means of ensuring continuity and order in the philosophical world of Sarvastivāda is the doctrine of dhammas. According to Sarvastivāda, although everything is impermanent, the basic building blocks of reality, including some attributes and relationships, are significant and real. These significant entities (*Drainvyasat*) are called dharmas. Except for the three elements of reality, everything is a compound of dharmas; they can be divided into their constituent parts and in the sense that they are impermanent. Some compounds and compounds, making them pure, others impure. Only nirvana is both pure and permanent (and unaffected). However, there are two other, unconstrained measures: the termination without conscious and spatial discrimination.

As expounded in the *Abhidharmakosa* the Sarvastivāda cosmology is essentially fivefold, being divided into:

Matter (*rupa*), which is eleven-fold: five types of sense-object. Five types of sense-organ, and a type of subtle form. Mind (*citta*), which is the basic awareness brought to any cognitive situation. Forty-six types of mental factor (*caitta*), which are our various mental dispositions and qualities. Fourteen formations unassociated with either mind or matter (*rupacittaviprayuktasam-skaras*), including the phases through which entities pass in arising and ceasing and a glue-like obtained that assures karmic continuity, and Unconditioned (*asamskrta*) dharmas, which are three: space and non-analytical and analytical cessations (the latter include *nirvana*). These seventy-five dharmas into which reality may be analysed are said by Sarvastivāda all to be existents (*bhāva*) that are real (*sat*), substantially established (*dravyasiddha*) and possessed of their own defining nature (*svabhava*). Thus, a number of dharmas whose substantial existence was denied by other schools were admitted by the Sarvastivāda; the past and future, *nirvana* and negations, and the obtainer of karmic results. Conditioned dharmas were said ultimately and 'really'

to be atomic moments (*ksana*), which passed through phases of arising, subsisting, ceasing and non-existence. Sarvastivāda was realistic in epistemology, too, asserting that consciousness, whether mental or sensory, directly cognises its objects. Soteriologically, Sarvastivāda maintained the Hinayana emphasis on the achievement of arhat status. It articulated a framework consisting of five 'paths': accumulation, preparation, seeing, development and no-more-training; speculated on the possibility that the Buddha's *dharma* body (*dharmakaya*) might be an enduring principle beyond the mere 'body of texts' he left behind; and discussed the six 'perfections' (*paramita*: charity, morality, patience, zeal, concentration and wisdom) practiced by the *bodhisattva*. Reorientated, the five-path system, *dharma* body and six perfections would all become focal points in *Mahayana* literature.^{vii}

The Classification of Dharmas in Sarvastivāda School:

Dharmas's Sarvastivāda philosophy is one of the central conceptions of Buddhist Philosophy. It is in the light of this conception that Buddhism discloses itself as a metaphysical theory developed out of one fundamental principle, viz. the idea that existence is an interplay of elements of Matter, Mind, and Forces, which are technically called the term: “*Dharmas*”. In order to elucidate the important conception, there are, as it is found in Buddhism, various classifications of *dharmas*, which are rough of two kinds: Subjective and Objective. The subjective classification refers to the classification of *dharmas* into *skandha* (aggregates), *ayatana* (doors), and *dhatu* (places). This kind of classification is a persistent and universal feature of the early canons, and it can be attributed to the Buddha himself.

SKANDHA: consisting of five aggregates:

- *Rupa*: body and matter (or often called “forms”)
- *Vedana*: sensation, or feeling
- *Samajana*: perception
- *Samskara*: will and forces
- *Vijnana*: mind, or consciousness

AYATANA: Literally meaning a “door” for the emergence of consciousness and its factors. There are 12 *ayatana*, including six senses and six organs.

- Sense of vision
- Sense of auditory
- Sense of Smelling
- Sense of taste
- Sense of touch
- Faculty of consciousness
- Color and shape
- Sound
- Odor
- Taste
- Tangibles
- Non-sensuous objects.

DHATU: The elements, if viewed as a stream of components of life, are called dhatus. They consist of 18 elements: the above twelve and six consciousnesses. Six consciousnesses are:

- Visual consciousness
- Auditory consciousness

- Olfactory consciousness
- Gustatory consciousness
- Tactile consciousness
- Mind consciousness

The objective classification of dharmas refers to the classification worked out by the Sarvastivadins, who contended that all things (dharmas) exist. Dharmas in this classification are divided into 5 categories, consisting of 75 elements.

- Rupa: 11 elements
- Citta (mind): 1 element
- Cetasika (mental factors): 46 elements
- Citta-Viprayokta-samskrta (non-mental factors): 14 elements
- Asmskrta (unconditioned factors): 3 elements

Of the above five categories, the first four are those which co-operate to each other and are subject to impermanence, changing. The last category, asamskrta, co-operates to nothing and is immutable. It consists of the following three immutable elements:

- Akaca: space (empty)
- Pratisankhya-nirodha: The suppression of the manifestations of an element through wisdom, e.g. after having realized that the existence of personality is an illusion, a kind of eternal emptiness is substituted for this wrong idea.
- Apratisankhya-nirodha: The same cessation produced not through knowledge but in a natural way, through the extinction of the causes that produced a manifestation, e.g. the extinction of the fire when there is no more fuel.

Above are the different classifications of dharma s found in the first Buddhist stakes and in the philosophical system of Sarvastivadins. This is due to the recognition of the vast majority of the dharma that Buddhism, in turn, can be described as a radical pluralistic system: the single elements are real, and all their combinations are single names. The net consists of a large number of separate elements. The moral teaching of the path towards Nirvana is not something additional to this ontological doctrine; it is most intimately connected with it and identical with it.

Conclusion: The initial stage in the development of the Sarvāstivāda philosophy is marked by the appearance of the *Jñānaprasthāna Sastra*, the principal work among the seven texts of the *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma Pitaka*. Orthodox Kashmirian Sarvastivadins upheld this work, attributed to the authorship of Katyayaniputra, as the supreme authority of their Abhidharma system and gave it the status of the Buddha word itself.^{viii} To consolidate their positions the orthodox Kashmirian teachers compiled the *Maha Vibhāsa Sastra* purported to be a commentary of the *Jñānaprasthāna Sastra*. But the controversies within the school continued without abatement. Since the complication of the *Maha Vibhāsa*, the *Kashmirian* Sarvastivadins came to be designated Vaibhasikas which marked the second phase of the Sarvāstivāda / Vaibhasika school. The encyclopaedic *Maha Vibhāsa Sastra* being too unwieldy, many Sarvastivadins started to compose manuals of Abhidharma to convey their doctrines in a more concise, lucid and systematic manner. Some of them,

however, did not stick to the orthodox Vaibhasika views. Earliest of these was by one Ghosaka, whose work, the *Abhidharmamrtarasa- sastra* which is said to effectively serve as an introduction to the *Jñānaprasthāna Sastra* and the *Maha Vibhāsa Sastra*. However, it is believed, that although it derives its material from these two works and the *Abhidharma-prakarana- sastra*, another canonical work, it is basically inclined towards the latter and the Gandhara school of Sarvastivadins.^{ix} This also shows that the controversies within the school continued even during this phase as well.

ⁱ Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2005: 8117.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 8118.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nalinaksha Dutt, *Buddhist Sect in India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978: 136.

^{iv} Robert E. Buswell, Jr., ed., *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, vol. 2, Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2004: 750-751.

^v See W.G. Weeraratne, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, vol. 8, Sri Lanka: The Govt. Printing Dept., 2007: 475.

^{vi} Murti, T.R.V., *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960: 68.

^{vii} N.K. Singh, A.P. Mishra, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Oriental Philosophy and Religion a Continuing Series*, vol. 9, Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2007: 396.

^{viii} Dhammajoti, Bhikkhu Kuala Lumpur, *Sarvastivāda Abhidharma*, Center for Buddhist Studies, Sri Lanka, 2002: 50.

^{ix} Dhammajoti, Bhikkhu Kuala Lumpur, *Entrance into the Supreme Doctrine*, Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, 1998: 24.

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