



## Four Buddhist Councils and Buddhist Literature

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### Abstract

Four Buddhist Councils were conducted under the patronage of various kings like Ajatshatru, Kalashoka, Ashoka and Kanishka. Buddhist Councils were convened in order to preserve and maintain the teaching of Lord Buddha. These are considered as the four milestones in the history of Buddhism. The objective of this paper is to study the Four Buddhist Councils and Development of Buddhism. The methodology of the paper is, historical, descriptive, analytical as well as qualitative. This study focuses on the Four Buddhist Councils and their contribution to the Buddhism. This article also includes a detailed analysis of four Councils. The result shows that four Buddhist councils played an important role to build the Buddhist literature and to spread the Buddhism in India and other parts of Asian Countries.

**Keywords-** Buddhist Council

### Introduction

In the history of Indian religions, Buddhism occupies a unique place firstly, for throwing its portals open not only to the Indians of all strata of the society, but also to the foreigners like the Indo-Greeks and Indo Scythians, who settled in India, and secondly, for its propagation in foreign countries like Ceylon and Burma, Thailand and Cambodia, Central Asia and China, Nepal and Tibet, and the Indonesian countries, and ultimately, in Korea, Japan, and Mongolia. Along with the propagation of the religion were introduced in those countries the Buddhist art and architecture, language and literature and, above all, translation of the Buddhist scriptures and the subsidiary literature in the languages of the countries where the religion made its home. In short the cultural heritage of India was shared by most of the Asian through the grace of the religion.<sup>1</sup> This article attempts to analyze the history of four councils and those contributions to Buddhism.

### First Buddhist Council:

<sup>1</sup> Mahajan V. D. Ancient India [Journal]. - New Delhi : S. Chand & Company LTD, 1976, p. 144.

The first Buddhist Council was held at Rajgriha in 483 B. C. it was held sometime after the death of Lord Buddha. The discourse of Buddha was collated classified and adopted as authoritative canonical text by an assembly of 500 monks representing the various *sanghas*.<sup>2</sup> The council was conducted under the patronage of king Ajatastru of the Haryanka dynasty. It was presided by Mahakashyap, an outstanding student of the Buddha who became leader of the *sangha* after the Buddha's death Mahakasyapa had heard a monk's remark that the death of the Buddha meant for the monks that they could abandon the rules of discipline and can do whatever as they wished to. Therefore, the council's first order of business was to review the rules of discipline for monks and nuns.<sup>3</sup>

In this council, the teachings of Buddha were divided into two parts called the

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Pokharel, Tanka Prasad, Buddhist Councils: means and Ends for Clarity and revitalization, Journal of Philosophy, Cultural and Religion, Vol. 31, 2018, p. 41. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/234694961.pdf>.

*Vinaya Pitaka* and *Dhamma Pitaka*.<sup>1</sup> The main objectives of this council were preserve the Buddhas saying (*sutta*) and the monastic discipline or rules (*Vinaya*). Compilation were made for the Buddha's rules of vinaya (monastic discipline), under the direction of the elder Upali, and of the *Sutas* (instructive aphorisms), under the direction of the disciple Ananda. Upali and Ananda were authorities for the *vinaya* and *Sutta pitaka*. Significance of this council was that the entire assembly of 500 monks the approved texts, this council went on for nine months.<sup>2</sup>

### Second Buddhist Council

The second Buddhist Council is convened by king Kalashoka and held at Vaishali in 383 B. C. this council was held at *Vaishali* following a dispute that had arisen in *Sangha* over a relaxation by some monks of various points of discipline.<sup>3</sup> The disputes arose regarding the code of discipline as the monks of *Vaishali* wanted a relaxation of the rules in respect of ten points.<sup>4</sup> The specific ten points were; 1) Storing salt in a horn 2) eating after midday 3) Eating once and then going to a village for alms. 4) Holding the *Uposatha* ceremony with monks dwelling in the same locality. 5) Carrying out official acts when the assembly was incomplete. 6) Following a certain practice because it was done by one's tutor or teacher. 7) Drinking sour milk after one had his midday meal. 8) Consuming strong drink before it had been fermented. 9) Using a rug which was not of the proper size. 10) Using gold and silver. The main issue was

<sup>1</sup>के. सी. श्रीवास्तव, प्राचीन भारत का इतिहास तथा संस्कृति, २००९, यूनाइटेड बुक डिपो, इलाहाबाद, पृ. १२४.

<sup>2</sup> Pokharel, Op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Mahajan, Op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> Luniya, B. N., Life and Culture in Ancient India (from the earliest Times to 1000 A. D.), 2012-13, Lakshmi Narayan Agarwal, Agra, p.178.

the use of gold and silver; which is an Indic idiom that includes any kind of money.<sup>5</sup> The opinion was divided particularly as to whether the monks should not accept gold or silver from the people when offered.<sup>6</sup> A Second council, therefore, convened at *Vaishali* (Bihar) which condemned the ten heresies. As the *Vaishali* monks stuck to their views no agreement was arrived at and the council ended in a permanent schism of the Buddhist church into *sthaviras* and *mahasanghikas*. The former held the orthodox *Vinaya* and the latter were pro-changers.<sup>7</sup>

### Third Buddhist Council

Third Buddhist Council convened by Great Asoka. In Pāli sources, such as *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*, this Council is said to have been presided over by the Thera Moggaliputta Tissa with assemble of one thousand *Arhat* Monks. As we know, Moggaliputta Tissa is known as the fifth Thera and the Patriarch of the Pāli School.<sup>8</sup> This council was convened by Emperor Ashoka on the request of venerable Moggalliputta Tissa.<sup>9</sup> At the end of this council Moggaliputta Tissa composed a book, the *Kathavattu*, in which he set out to disprove the wrong opinions and theories of a number of sects. The teaching that was approved and accepted by this council, was known as Theravada.<sup>10</sup> The council accomplished two important results-firstly; it made a new classification of the Buddhist canonical texts by the addition of a third

<sup>5</sup> Pokharel, Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Luniya, B. N., Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kosambi, D. D., Ashoka as a Patron of Buddhism, Edited by Kanak Baran Barua, 2021, p. 161. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349302772\\_ASOKA\\_A\\_S\\_PATRON\\_OF\\_BUDDHISM\\_IV1\\_Ashoka\\_and\\_the\\_Reform\\_of\\_Buddhist\\_Sangha](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349302772_ASOKA_A_S_PATRON_OF_BUDDHISM_IV1_Ashoka_and_the_Reform_of_Buddhist_Sangha).

<sup>9</sup> Pokharel, Op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

*pitaka* called the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* which contained the philosophical interpretations of the doctrines of the existing two *pitakas*. As a result of this, the saying and discourses of the Buddha now came to be known as the *tripitaka*.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the canonical literature was definitely and authoritatively settled so as to eliminate all disruptive tendencies making all schism with the church punishable.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of Third Council, Emperor Ashoka sends the Buddhist missionaries to teach *Dhamma* to various places. The following are the names of the monks and the nine areas they went to teach the *Dhamma*: *Majjhantika*: Kasmira and Gandhara, Mahadeva: Mahisamandala (Mysore), Rakkhita: Vanavasi (North Kanara in South India), Yonaka Dhammarakkhita: Aparantaka (Modern North Gujarat Kathiawar, Kachch and Sindh), Mahadhamma Rakkita; Maharattha (parts of Maharashtra around the source of Godavari), *Maha Rakkhita*: Yonakaloka (Ancient Greece), Majjima: Himalayan region, Sona and Uttara: Suvarna Bhumi (Burma), Mahinda and others: *Tambapannidipa* (Sri Lanka) Ashoka also sent teachers to as far away as present day Syria and Egypt.<sup>3</sup> But the mission was succeeded only in Sri Lanka (original Buddhist- Original Buddhist, the council was dominated by *Thervadins*).

#### Fourth Buddhist Council

The fourth Council was summoned about A.D .1 00 (B.E.643) in the north of India under the auspices of the powerful King Kaniska.<sup>4</sup> According to one authority, the

place of the Assembly was Jalandhar, and according to another, Kashmir.<sup>5</sup> The Fourth Council of Kashmir is not recognized as authoritative in *Thervada*; reports of this council can be found scriptures which were kept in the Mahayana tradition.<sup>6</sup> Though there is not indisputable evidence of the date of his conversion, it is almost certain that the date of council held under his inspiration and patronage was about 100 AD. Vasumitra, the great Buddhist philosopher, was the President of the council while Aśvaghosha acted as the Vice-president.<sup>7</sup> At the request of the Buddhist philosopher, Pārśva or Pārśvika, Kaniška convoked a council which was attended by five hundred monks who were well versed in the Tri-Piṭaka and in the “five sciences”. They took active part in this council and made an effort for the reconciliation of the conflicting opinions of the different sects and for the settlement of the texts of the canonical literature. During the session of the council they composed 1, 00,000 stanzas of *Upadeśa śāstra* explanatory of the canonical *sūtras*; 1, 00,000 stanzas of *Vinaya Vibhāshāśāstra* explanatory of the *Vinaya*; and 1, 00,000 of *Abhidharma-Vibhāshāśāstra* explanatory of the Abhidharma. Thus, the main product of this council was an authentic commentary on *Tripitak* known as the ‘*Vibhasha Shastra*’.<sup>8</sup>

#### Conclusion

Four Buddhist councils mark important points in Buddhist history. In first Buddhist council, preserved the Buddha's sayings (*suttas*) and the monastic discipline or rules (*Vinaya*). The second Buddhist council was failure and *Buddhism* divided into two parts *i.e. thaviras* and *mahasanghikas* . In third Buddhist council, recited all the teachings of

<sup>1</sup> Luniya, B. N., Op. cit., pp. 178-79.

<sup>2</sup> Mahajan, Op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>3</sup> Pokharel, Op. cit., p. 43

<sup>4</sup> Busyakul, Visudh, The Buddhist Theravada Councils, And The Preservation Of The Buddha's Teachings, MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities, Special issue No.4 2002, p. 13.  
[https://brill.com/downloadpdf/journals/mnva/5/4/article-p7\\_2.pdf](https://brill.com/downloadpdf/journals/mnva/5/4/article-p7_2.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Nanda, Pon Nyar, Buddhist Councils A Historical Study (Ph.D. Thesis) ,Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, 2020, p. 206. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/299225>

<sup>6</sup> Pokharel, Op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Thai, L.V., Buddhism During the Time of Kanishka I Form and Changes (Ph.D. thesis), University of Allahabad, 2015, pp.84-85.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10603/258270>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

the Buddha and the final version of *Tripitakas* known as *Abhidhamma pitak* was completed. As a result of Third Council, Emperor Ashoka sent the Buddhist missionaries to teach *Dhamma* to various places in Asia. In fourth council, Buddhism was divided into two sects namely Mahayan and Hinayan. The main product of fourth council was an authentic commentary on Tripitak known as the 'Vibhasha Shastra. Thus, the literary contribution of Buddhist councils is remarkable in the history of Buddhism.

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